

Part A: Thesis

Alien Crosstalk

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“I am some kind of agent from another planet, but I haven’t got my orders decoded yet.”
William S. Burroughs

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Prehistorika

So there is the land of the lizards. That roamed the earth. Catching and crushing in sweet profusion. Their leathery hides. Were there any ancestral humans that were all the way attractive to us pink apes? ABSOLUTELY. Just not pink attractive. Raw attractive. Their freedom is what was attractive. Their ability to roam in nature. Do some hard work and raise some children. These things are attractive in the lizard kingdom. Flying beasts the size of by-planes. Leathery wings beating in the air. Jumping off of rocks to soar terribly above the water. Looking for fish the size of motorboats. To spear with their snouts. Boggles the noodle to think that these things were real.

That the corner store is only as real as these terrible thunder lizards that you might read about in a little book with painted pages discussing the Greek etymology of the word. Which has been revised. No brontosaurus. Pluto isn't a planet. Still – the glossy fashion museum on the shelves full of money and skeletal tits is just as real as the triceratops on some level. Same planet housed both. Three pronged vegetable pork belly. Hard things to reconcile. The endless mirror-vision of the internet and ravenous carnivorous reptiles. Viviparous. Rising out of the gloom. To run around each other's legs. Snapping and ripping the flesh off of each other. This is as real as the fruit in the supermarket. These things happened on the same earth. The tar pits. The 'cartoony dragon' artist impressions. The now-extinct woolly mammoths. Same playing field as we are on.

They lived in the same way we live. They are a part of us. The thrashing natural world that has nothing to do with numbers or figures has been sludging forwards like a green river. It moves forwards. The lights prick behind your eyes. The seen is the object. The object and the subject have an atomic gravity between them. Kellogg's Corn Flakes are as real as a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Frogs

I will show you fear in a handful of mud. Squelching out of my fist between fingers. Sprouting like worms dark and moist falling down near my feet. I giggled excitedly and threw what was left to splat against the skin of the nearest feet I could target. We had ripped our shirts off and run towards the mud which allowed us about knee deep and in there found creatures that had sprouted and begun to live. We commandeered some pollywogs, little tadpoles, that we corralled into the bucket and hoiked them back home. Having had our fill of an experience in the mud of the past and the future amongst the fossils that could be found sometimes etched into rock faces worn smooth through years of sometimes attrition and heat we went back home.

Back we went with tadpoles in hand or in in the buckets and pored over them from the relative comfort of the front porch or stoep, which was cracked and breaking, but still good because things made out of stone stayed up longer than bricks if the basics were done right. We sat around the bucket and looked at the little critters wiggling around in the water and we watched, mesmerized, as they circled each other wriggling their tails in fervour that allowed for propagation from one spot to the next, this electric squirming in the water, shaking their length from a singular node. Some almost had the smallest beginnings of legs and markings on their backs maybe signalling them as the beginnings of the Karoo Caco or common river frog. They used the crevices in rocks to hide away, during the dry season, to get deeper between these hard places, where it was always cool, because the sun couldn't get there. And one of them had particular pep and for this reason I called him Vesuvius.

He was the fastest and biggest of these tadpoles and later when they got a bit bigger, after a few days of bucket life, we would release them into the swimming pool, which was an ad hoc swimming pool, in that it was not paved or tiled or anything like this, but still a wonderful place to swim when it was hot and had a pump and everything. But it would not be chlorinated unless needed and really not filled when we were not there because it was the Karroo and water was always short, but at this stage it seemed the perfect place for Vesuvius to make a day of things. This is where all of the tadpoles were deposited when one or two of them stopped wiggling and died in the bucket. A childhood ploy to try and save what was left of our amphibian race. We dropped in the frog-leg conglomerate into the bigger pool and it wriggled downwards away from us and I got my last glimpses of Vesuvius before he burrowed under the thin layer of sediment at the bottom of the pool.

I never forgot him and he became the platonic Vesuvius for me and when I saw other frogs I would think of him. When I looked at the reservoir we had hiked out to amongst the dead trees and twisted branches, I would witness these little frogs pulsing from one end to the other, if we disturbed the mud with a willow branch. I thought it may be Vesuvius or one of his cousins or something along these lines. One of the other Anura that marked a genus of amphibious life in various stages maybe in torpor or estivating under the surface of the dry land waiting patiently for the rains to fall and then well up on the surface but for now, not like this, but rather at the bottom. He was embedded in the mud, slumbering, with only a glazed layer of mosquito larvae on the surface all squiggling mad. The little worms flick-flacked in star patterns across the surface of the water, providing take-away fast food for Vesuvius when he deemed it safe enough to come out of his long sleep. He lay there in stasis under the mud.

Many years later, when I was more grown up attending parties and talking to people and drinking alcohol and speaking about things that were of current concern like rocknroll or what I was studying at university when I would sleep late in the morning or the afternoon, if I had filled my mind with ideas for the day, when I would crawl under the covers, then I thought of myself like Vesuvius in the mud under those covers.

Then to become completely inert, sticking to the depths of the earth but on occasion when I transferred my consciousness into another space and began to dream I would be blessed with the faculty of flight on more than one occasion, on many occasions, on so many occasions that I got used to the feeling of flight in dreams where all that I needed was to imagine myself moving forwards, upwards or outwards, propelled with thought and it was very seamless and I could achieve movement in any direction, I could soar and swoop through sheer will alone or yearn upwards, and this made up for everything else in life and it was liberating swimming through space and reality and this made me think of Vesuvius again pulsing through the emptiness of the water moving forwards and it was like being underwater in a strong current. In a strong current where the water just carries you and you witness everything skim by beneath you flying above the fish, only needing to make minor adjustments to steer your body, a body that had become near weightless and more a single unit than a mess of appendages and coordination.

Lifting off, so to speak, and leaving the world behind and watching as everything below me shrinks until quite insignificant and there was nothing but peace and space all around me, all earthly concerns were easily solved by leaving them right down there, and getting away from everything where nothing could follow me and I discovered all of this heavenly space above in clouds and shapes and winds and lonesome vantage points, but there was always a point where I would panic and fear that I was going too high up and I would not be able to get back down, that I would travel too deep into space and forget what was down there, or how to get back down there, or how to exist again on the surface in the mud.

This made me fear sleeping sometimes because I worried that I may not wake up but only be lost in the dream or space at sea and never return to whatever this world was from the sleeping one, and so I did not go to sleep but there was something that irked me about these fears and despite my better judgements of caution I resolved to not stop when ascending and only completely keep willing myself higher and higher with nothing to stop me moving smoothly into the cosmos.

A single idea that I needed to focus on absolutely which was only to keep climbing, pushing higher and higher without any distraction of fear or worry that where these worries of being lost would manifest themselves as minor demons and inevitably come to dance around my small single purpose, to leer and jeer at my ascent, lewd and dancing inanely, egging me on to fall, to fail, but only the one thought keeps propelling me forwards and these fears and distractions cake and dry and fall away and are left behind with still a single focus on upward thrust.

My nose raised outwards into the encroaching universe, it stiffens at aerodynamic angles, hardens and becomes steel and my skull transforms into a helmet and arms by my sides, by degrees, join the hull of my body and feet become a tail. A ridge has formed of polished steel from the base of my neck down the length of my spine.

I still have thoughts after this transformation has taken place, solar sails billow from my back battered by particles of light, my interior expands mechanically and my mind has become hallways of computers channelling energy and continuous calculation. I am now the complete

rocket ship meditating on my polished metal surfaces and dynamics of flight, through the overlap of space with my consciousness, these thoughts are like space, vast, not in their nature but in their desolation. I am remote and coursing through the cosmos. My final image bleeds out into the milky blue of another atmosphere on another earth-distant planet, same galaxy, different solar system. I am flying past the crescent sliver of a moon, an arrow in its bow, leaving behind a boiling sky-trail of powdery white.

Child's Play

A small girl plays on the carpet. Plays on the towel. Plays on lots of things. But it has a nice pattern. It is a purple sleeping bag. With tartan stripes down the back of it. Shiny side down. These are the things. She plays. Maybe she could learn to code in Python. Maybe she could find a python. There, out there, where they live. The pythons. All of them. There is a python but it is beneath her. Encircling the bag. It is a Python pattern. That is all. On the bag. She plays with things. Magical things. Levitation. Telekinesis. Lift up these things in pools of light. She does it when you are not looking. With the skills she has learned. From the netherworld. Those blocks with letters on them. She spins them upwards. In globes of bursting golden light.

Poofartstinkbreath

Poofartstinkbreath. He called me this. Aaron's brother. He would say to me: you are such a poofartstinkbreath. You poofartstinkbreath what do you think you will do poofartstinkbreath? You not gonna take that tower you gonna die poofartstinkbreath. Because that is all you will ever be. A poofartstinkbreath you poofartstinkbreath. Just go and sit in your room and rub yourself then sit in your stink poofartstinkbreath. Collapse you stinker. Choke. Too bad you're just a poofartstinkbreath. Poofartstinkbreath.

He would say this to me. I never paid it too much attention. I was a kid who was prone to distraction but during the time when he was chanting it at me it did put me off a little. While we played 8-bit video games in the den. Sitting on beanbags. He would talk about Mario farting on the little shell people's heads. He would call the minions of the enemy poofartstinkbreaths too. Sometimes at night when I was in the bath I would listen to the water running in. It was pretty relaxing. I felt like a fish in a bowl, or an embryo in an egg or a science experiment floating in a beaker. The water sounded a bit like it was talking or playing music. The old babbling brook. But occasionally poofartstinkbreath would be contained in the noise of the splashing water. Not clearly. Just a little in the pattern of the sound. It was then that I would wonder if maybe I was a poofartstinkbreath.

It didn't take me long to get over this either. Normally, by the time the water had cooled, or I had towelled off, I would have forgotten it again. Definitely by the time I was in my pyjamas it would be long gone. The left over poofartstinkbreath would have drifted away. Then I would hunker down and prepare myself for a good long sleep. That special sleep you can get as a kid.

I didn't really hold it against Aaron's brother. He was a little different. Quite a few years older than us. Early on his parents told us solemnly that he was on the spectrum. I didn't know what a spectrum was. Then they said something that sounded like ass and this only made me giggle. It made Aaron's brother pretty prone to antisocial behaviour though. Like, I was in his territory maybe. So whenever I saw him he would point at me and say poofartstinkbreath. There was no question he had to be allowed to play with us though. His parents would look at Aaron seriously and gravely tell him the bejesus would be beaten out of him if he tried to exclude his brother. That they had talked about this and there were no two ways about it. Aaron whined a little but always respected their wishes. He would apologise to me out the side of his mouth as we skulked away from them.

I said it was okay. He mainly apologised because he knew that it would be me who was the poofartstinkbreath. That he would not have to be poofartstinkbreath – in every context and setting. He would just be Aaron. It would be me. Over and over again. Poofartstinkbreath move out the way. Poofartstinkbreath sit over there. Poofartstinkbreath it is my turn to play. I considered trying to take his brother on physically in the times that it started to annoy me. Being poofartstinkbreath every time. But Aaron's brother was a lot bigger than us. There was nothing that was going to stop him. He was only egged on by any evidence that he was getting to me. He was also unpredictable. One time he was caught trying to hit a cat in a bag with a hammer. He stabbed a kid with a pencil once. He had to change schools when that happened.

We played a lot of video games growing up. Aaron and I were really into it. It kept us out of trouble for the most part. It was a pretty good set-up if you could forget poofartstinkbreath. This was half the challenge. Because every time I was trying to get through a tricky part of the stage, one that required skill to avoid death by snakes, his brother would start to chant it under his breath. Then some sarcasm. Look at poofartstinkbreath go. What a little poofartstinkbreath he is. Or one of his favourites: poofartstinkbreath-poofartstinkbreath-poofartsinkbreath.

The harder I tried to concentrate the more persistent his brother became. Poofartsinkbreath gonna die. Gonna fall poofartstinkbreath. Watch out poofartstinkbreath there's a snake over there. Jump poofartsinkbreath jump. I could see the snake. It was right there. Then the inevitable chance to rub it in. The fake poofartstinkbreath consolation: oh dear poofartstinkbreath. Well what did we expect from a poofartstinkbreath? There goes poofartstinkbreath. Haha poofartstinkbreath you didn't see that coming did you? My turn poofartsinkbreath.

Still I did not struggle to shake this off. I would forget about poofartsinkbreath pretty much as soon as we stopped playing to eat lunch. One time that was hard to forget, though, was when we all went to the park. It was one of those times that Aaron's parents thought we should get out of the house. The park was next to a church and had the usual park stuff. Roundabouts, merry-go-rounds and slides. It was rumoured that Aaron's brother had peed down the slide once when other little kids were trying to use it. They couldn't escape sloshing in his pee at the bottom. There was quite a ruckus about it.

I think Aaron's brother was almost the most scared of being left out. He would always charge in and take the thing that was of interest to us. Whether it was a Transformer or Dino-Rider figurine. He would come in and grab it directly. It made me a little wary of him. Even more so when we went to the park. I remember trying to use the shaky horse thing. All parks had them. Sort of like a rocking horse had sex with a see-saw and made a baby. It had a couple of seats in a row and you sat on it and it rocked forwards and backwards. The whole thing sat on big springs. A log shape. I had never really managed to master it. I hoped to work it out on my own while the rest of the party and Aaron's brother were playing on the roundabout.

I climbed up on the thing slowly. It was still quite high for me to get up. I suppose it was most like a mechanical bull. One of those things like they have at parks and fairs. That would spin around and rock forwards and backwards faster and faster until you were thrown from its back. This thing wasn't as fancy. It could only shake forwards and backwards and had no motor driving it. Only the weight of the rider I soon discovered. So despite my best attempts to shift it by thrusting in the saddle I only got a little movement. It needed more people. I felt satisfied that I had made some headway and was preparing to slowly climb down when I noticed Aaron's brother behind me.

He started in with a poofartstinkbreath. The kind of poofartsinkbreath that sounded like a discovery. A spotted ship on the horizon. Aaah: poofartstinkbreath. It got me a little on edge.

'I'm just getting off,' I said to Aaron's brother.

'You not done yet poofarstinkbreath'.

Like I say, he was a couple of years my senior. It was hard to work out with his mental thing but he should have been more than half-way through high school at this stage. He began to push the rocking horse slowly at first. Getting to grips with the mechanics. I was bucked forwards and backwards.

'I'm done with this one,' I said to him.

'Oh no, no, no, no, poofartstinkbreath'.

I am not sure if Aaron's brother wanted to get back at me for being one of his brother's better friends. I am not sure if he had just rediscovered his strength and size. I am not sure if he just wanted to see how completely he could dominate me. But what ensued stayed with me. He pushed the thing faster and faster, really leaning into it, despite my shouting no. The horse began to hit me hard in the butt. Slugging into me like a falling log. Cramping my butt muscle like a dead-leg but a dead-butt. I leant forward to avoid these whacks and became unstable and bumped into the iron holding bars with my mouth. What was worse was the fear that I would be thrown off completely and dash my brains out on the concrete below. Nobody heard my screams though and Aaron's brother just pushed harder. My sobs and crying just seemed to egg him on.

He kept shouting: 'Let's go poofartsinkbreath let's go!'

'Come on poofartstinkbreath come on!' while he pushed away at the mechanical horse.

Finally an adult came over and broke us up. My butt hurt and I was bleeding a little from my lip. Aaron's brother was led away.

'It's not my fault' he complained 'I just wanted to poofarstinkbreath the poofarstinkbreath,' he sniffed a little to himself. This wasn't the first time this had happened to him.

I was just happy that the whole thing was over.

A couple of months later Aaron's brother died from falling out of a tree he shouldn't have been climbing. He hit his head and died from internal bleeding. He was not meant to be unattended but had escaped and climbed a tree. It was a sad day for Aaron and his family. I attended the funeral dressed in a black suit and tie that didn't fit very well and listened to the priest speak but I didn't really know how to feel besides feeling sorry for Aaron. The top button and tie caught at my neck a little.

Aaron and I stayed friends and kept playing video games. Though the games had changed a bit. We played more advanced games on computers. We played them online. It was how we kept in touch. We chatted while we directed our units and heroes. Warlocks, faeries and wizards did battle with each other. We were nearing the end of high school. I still liked Aaron but I had a few other friends and so did he.

Sometimes I thought about Aaron's brother. What a strange force he had been. Some kind of pattern. A different kind of brain. A few clicks away from normal. Sometimes when I had had a beer and maybe a toke on something and I found myself playing games with no one else around I would occasionally refer to myself as poofartstinkbreath. I would hold dialogues with myself like the ones I had growing up:

Do you think that is a good idea, poofarstinkbreath?

Hmm, really, you are going to get the shrine-lord-dart-punch upgrade?

Are you sure, poofartstinkbreath?

Well, yes I am.

Well then, yes, yes you are, poofartstinkbreath.

And when I won my first tournament many years later – a small one that didn't offer too much in the way of prize money but still it was something – I remember jumping to my feet and raising both fists in the air whispering: Poofarstinkbreath! Poofartstinkbreath! Poofartstinkbreath!

The Perfect Run

You did a striptease every Saturday morning before K-T.V. cartoon programming started. Edged bits of your pyjamas off. They weren't made of much. Elasticated draw strings revealing pasty flesh. There wasn't much to reveal. We were only kids. You sensed a need for entertainment. Laughing uncontrollably as you did it. Until you were naked and jumping from sofa to sofa like a pixie. We needed our cartoons. These were adventures in delayed gratification and time. The thing would switch on and we could dig in. Let the colours flourish. The kooky explosions returned clothing to their correct positions.

The thing for me was the Reggie's Rush. This show where these kids got to run around a toy store and fill a trolley with as much gear as they could find. You had, like, sixty seconds to get what you wanted and get out. It made me tear my hair out to think about the dumb things other people put in their trolleys. Plastic spades and buckets or piles and piles of green slime. So many of the kids out there wanted slime. It bamboozled me. Why don't they head to the electronics section? Load up on all of the heavy gear. Snag themselves all of the video game titles. They could clean that whole section out, but no, they got stuck wasting time with soft toys and massive Malibu mansions.

I'd lie there on my front and twitch and squirm at the excruciating dramatic irony of it all. We tried dialling in a few times but never made the cut. One of us once had a go at the Grabba Gameshow. Shouted commands of forward and grab. Maybe it was the Wimpy Grabba Gameshow. Forward, forward, forward, grab, grab! Forward was run. Grab was jump. Curse you Sonic. The anthropomorphic hedgehog with speeding feet and spikey hair. He would become far more powerful than any of these other memories could ever imagine. That sweet, sweet release of the sidescrolling speed blurring faster, faster, faster, out of control then blam. All Sonic's collected rings cascade out of him smattering in a haze all over the screen. You had to win Grabba Gameshow to gain entry to the Reggie's Rush.

I imagined myself as sonic behind the trolley flying through side scrolling corridors of injection moulded colourful plastic shit. GI-Joes and Barbie dolls. Death and anorexia. I was looking for the consoles. Oh if only I could get my hands on all of that loot. My young child body squirmed lying on my front voyeuristically consuming the cathode ray images of those, more fortunate than I, helping themselves to everything they wanted.

Years later the mall doors swish and we stride through hand in hand. She looks at me chewing bubble gum and winks. Her hair is dyed violet and she's wearing a choker. Thick purple lipstick and eyeliner. There we went strolling through the halls of commerce. The sweet time warp that was the mall. I cocked my head and listened to the music. Always a faraway sound. Always on an endless loop. This was nothing, if you really wanted the classic tunes you needed to go to a book shop. That is where you get the real soothing sounds. Sometimes I would go in there and do nothing but sit and listen to the rhythms of sophisticated taste.

Not today though. We had other ideas. She squeezed my hand and pulled me through the milieu of screaming babies and dead-eyed shopping-zombies marching in a circuit. They held some

token item to give this whole perpetual waste of time some kind of meek validation. On repeat. She pulled me towards a lingerie store and raised an eyebrow. I shook my head and we wandered on. I didn't know which one it may be. That was half the fun. The whole place was like Forrest Gump's chocolates. Any one could be right. But it needed to be right. I needed to feel the stirring.

Cardies, Jucy Lucy and Milky Lane later and we'd begun our browsing. All of this looking-through-Musica-CDs-like-we-cared was tiring. Feeling the proprietary plastic sent little shivers up my fingers. All of that music trapped on there and waiting to get out. We bantered through this. Made a day of it. Didn't get to do this as much as we used to. All of those years ago. I am not sure if I loved you then in front of the television. Being a pixie. But I did now.

I felt that surge of adrenaline. Picked up paperclips and an eraser and slipped them in my pocket. You watched me from across the store and couldn't keep a smile from your lips. I needed more so grabbed a small box of ring binders and elastic bands. The security guard was in snoozeville and we waltzed out. There was that kick I was looking for. That knifing feeling in my heart. Suck in my breath and catch. Feel a bit of this life. Smiley-face stickers weren't too hard to get into the sleeve. That tight sticky feeling of the plastic against my wrist. I bit my lip slightly. There you were still watching. Your hands behind your back. Breasts pressed through your t-Shirt.

Bright lights are catching at my eyes. We go further down into the intestines of Stationery World. Find a few sticky notes and slip them into the waist band of my jeans where they nestle and their wrapping begins to stick. There is something like momentum now. A rhythm to our run. I can feel your eyes on my shoulders. These shivers seem edible to you. A small plastic stapler I can sneak this past the custodian. She's distracted by the paying kind.

Beads of sweat on my brow. Breathing becomes a little ragged. Oh god how I missed this. Trailing through this mess. The cosmos of shoppers. Heady like poppers my little legs start kicking in a circle. Sonic sounds start to pump in the back of my mind. Forwards and grab at those circling rings. Back there in the morning watch that magnificent hedgehog fly. The rows of merchandise have it in for me. I'm in trouble. They are crooning siren sounds from their packaging. But I am storming the castle. I am looking for the secret room. The cavern. Moist cave of dragon treasure. Love the way all these items are lined up. Run my fingers over all of them.

You follow behind me like Tails. We are a single unit. Our code is airtight. Subtle gestures for forward. Others for grab. Scratch the eyebrow for a tactical stop. Let the sentinel pass. Stretch these black Magpie wings. My pants are starting to bulge. Maybe my centre piece was a disposable camera. Slotted neatly in the pocket after smelling the fresh perfume of glossy printed surfaces. Fuji-film Pentax Photo-First. Then thread our way on. We look at each other as we pass another guard. Speaking into his walky-talky. I look deep into your eyes and we sail silently past. His eyes follow us and we say nothing. If they don't chase you after the first ten steps they don't chase you. We hold our breath.

The pinnacle was the cosmetics section embedded in the two levels of Woolworths. Such a

masterpiece of open-planning. Merchandise explosion. Crafted lovingly by all of these statistics. Optimize this space. Make it perfect for me. A wonderland of potentials. Finally you step in for our assisted coup-de-grace. Dance in to make our last steps of a tango by distracting the sales girl to allow me to fold my hands over the counter and grip a small bottle of Tommy Hilfiger. Fondle it hard and glassy. I am making it part of me. This little vial. Crushed flowers and promised lifestyles. Because it don't mean shit. You lean in when I think it's over. Flick me a glance to go deeper. Flash your buyer's smile. My cue to snag two bottles of cherry red and sapphire blue nail polish when I thought I couldn't get any more. I close my eyes and feel it all roll backwards. We're running through the parking lot.

I blow on your toes and layer kisses on your trembling thighs. Move up to softness past black tangle and smiley sticker pasted on your belly. Lower weight into your indulgent hips. Spray nipples with perfume and shudder into the willowy shape of your slender arms. Elastic bands festoon your wrists. A rainbow of paperclips ties back your hair. Sticky notes shed like bright fallen leaves. Hear the rasp of the disposable camera wind and click as you smile and gasp. Stapler, eraser and ring binders in a pile. I crow. Both eyes close and we remember this our cleanest run. Faster and faster Sonic and Tails blur together in movement lines. Forward, forward, forward. Grab.

Swimming

A swim is a good thing. Working through the water. Different parts of the body begin to ache. You can really lash out at the water. Just a little. To play with the dynamic. I only do so to try and get myself to kick. To slap the water with my toes when doing overarm. It is a token slap that dwindles as I tire three quarters of the way down. Then I worry that I am out of time. In truth, I begin opening up more as I get to the end of the swim and maybe I could keep going forever. There are constraints. Where I feel that maybe I should be doing something else. Rather than working my way to a lazy zenith. Working into a fervour. A spin of water and arms. Trying to get it perfect. To glide through the water. To stress my body in the right way. All to no real effect. Is it self-indulgent? It is self-wonderful. I reckon: make hay while the sun shines. Before some oligarch comes by to shout at me. Telling me to get back to whatever relevant grindstone. Make hay while the sun-shines.

The best comes at the end. Where I do my lung-busters. Lengths under water. The first one doesn't go so well. I get about three quarters of the way and I come up for air. Telling myself I cannot make it. My mind makes the call. Not my body. It says you can't make it. And moves me to the surface. The second one is pure bliss. My body pushes off and immediately descends down to the bottom. This is perfect for lengths underwater. Because you can see the bottom and it flies by as you pull. I try to get the most acceleration with the least effort to limit oxygen burn. It is more about technique than lung strength. I get to the other side. My head pulsating to burst. And climb out — like a new born fish.

Chicken Shit

Fletcher and his friend had been taken to watch the Little Mermaid by his mother when he was about ten. Fletcher had made a point of bragging to his friends that he watched heaps of violent movies. Science fictional psychopathic robots were served for breakfast on a VHS plate growing up. He knew the words to some of the films he had watched them so many times. Skynet and Schwarzenegger were Fletcher's bread and butter. This mermaid however caught him off guard. He was unprepared for the Disney classic.

Who knows what it was? Sitting there and watching the beautiful mermaid unable to talk. All of the colours of the screen began to darken. Ursula and her undulating tentacles spread out. Spinning hypnotically, slimy and sucking. Big sharks were circling her looking like mean low-down dirty dogs. Permanent toothy grins on their faces. Little Ariel was in the middle of this. Her red hair and hula-dancing seashell bikini. Colourful swirling innocent fish hips. Primal and free. Flickering with the pencil of the artist. But Ursula had her dead to rights. The mermaid had made a deal with the devil. She was so innocent pure and friendly. Now she was totally fucked. There was nothing Fletcher could do. That woman would have her way with her and the dog sharks would tear apart whatever was left.

So Fletcher decided to get the hell out of there. He told his mother that he needed to go to the bathroom but had been so thoroughly scared that he didn't want to go back in. It was a pitiful reality but it stuck. He hung out at the arcades trying to redeem himself by watching the gory images of ninjas tearing each other apart. These were no problem as he was not emotionally attached to them. A pixelated fighter in a pair of speedy red tracksuit bottoms pulled the spinal column from his vanquished foe. This was fine. Fletcher watched the high scores roll in an infinite loop.

Gary Recurring Point One

Call me Gary. I am not Gary but it seems important that you think of me as Gary anyway. I am a signal plugging other signals in. This space in the early hours of the morning is a dungeon. The pit I have descended into. With torch and rusty blade I will make my way out. A *Rogue*-like dungeon, maybe, where you start in the dark and have to work your way out.

That's where I am. Pixelated and in place next to the data cabinets. In a 45-degree isometric view. Pixel art blocks in up to 256 different colours. There is a dialogue box above my head that says: Talk to Gary. But when you hit the arrow next to: Talk to Gary, the dialogue box disappears and there is a split second pause before up pops: Talk to Gary again. This will happen again and again no matter how many times you hit: Talk to Gary. You will only be met with the same dialogue box that says: Talk to Gary.

Discomfortable

So much of the time I am trying to compensate for the fact that I feel this really deep sense of cowardice and discomfort. Some kind of despair that is threatening to overwhelm me where I am irrationally willing to pack it all in and just be done with it. Switch off the machine and push the car into the ocean. Roll it off of a cliff. I have had this feeling before while trying to fix a car. Trying to make my hands fit around the hard metal bolts combining finger strength and dexterity clawing into the dark recesses of an oily vehicle while a more knowledgeable father enabled me to save a buck or two and learn lessons about hard work. I recall smoking a cigarette afterwards in a state of rage feeling like I had just gotten out of the ring with it. But that mechanical beast was the only thing keeping me mobile and employed. I would never roll it into the ocean no matter how angry I got.

It is always there, though, that feeling. That acute feeling generated by the end of Orwell's *1984*. Where they have broken the lone dissident by forcing him to betray his lover by leveraging his fear of rats. He consoles himself over the clear liquid gin knowing that he had thrown it all away and the world had broken him. I identify with this. This was one of the instances where an author had written me into existence. Perhaps he felt it too. The author. My question circles around the sneaking suspicion that this may well be the truth.

The feeling is there if I want it. It is there if I don't want it too. That feeling that there is no way out for you. That you have the tools but you can't find the door that will let you out into some space where you will not be plagued by the same sort of feelings. There are still aspects of this despair preventing me from going for anything that I want. I recall some old guy at an outdoor rave telling me to go for it. He had these glasses on and looked like a wise-dad type but must have been a little alternative and he was telling me that I need to go for it.

My body language must have been speaking the despondent youth thing. That I was waiting for something. I asked him what he meant by it? The go for it 'it'. He said whatever 'it' was 'it' for me and I should just do it and stop wasting time. I guess I was wasting time listening to electronic music that sounded like a chorus of alien ships out in the wilderness reconnecting with the primal aspects of being human and stamping my feet to a bass line. There was an element of avoiding what it was he meant I should be doing. But also he didn't have a clue what the 'it' was either. He could have offered a more linguistically pleasing solution as to what he was trying to say to me. That would have been nice. It's the thought that counts I guess.

There is something to be said about that sense of powerlessness. In some ways it is just about switching drugs. I used to drink a lot when I was growing up to try and rage against the system. Because I was dumb enough to think that school was a prison. There were convenient elements of truth to this but the prison had to be in my head. That is where the sink-hole lives anyway. Alcohol just made me act like a jackass. Yes, I was entertaining sometimes, but mainly like a jackass. Though if alcohol brought me clumsily out of myself then spliff could put me firmly back in. In some ways I thought of alcohol and cannabis as great gods that control the world and us people as mere vessels to be filled with these things. We were passive receptacles. Status symbols and ways of life are imbued in both of these substances. Religious connections to both cut through all of this social fabric.

Maybe I thought about this when I was banished to the world of non-speak in my early experimentation with strong grass. This was what was handed down to me. These were the delights that awaited me. There was an acute loneliness that came with my experience of adulthood. There was no one to talk to and good conversations only went so far when there was. There was always something that did not really go through in good conversation. Like we were just humouring each other and at the end you were exhausted. This is kinda how I felt. Always trying to work out where I stood with people. There was the paranoia problem as well.

This is what I was working out when I was around the table. There was a girl who lived at the house that I was fairly enamoured with. Or I thought I was but who could really tell? Maybe she was just my friend. I remember waking up one night and she was crying on the phone to her boyfriend who was living in England. She was completely beside herself and I went to try and console her. I think that maybe I should not have gone out to talk to her. That she did not want me to see her in that state. That she did not really want me to console her. Since I could not really do much. My hugs were unconvincing. Maybe like a dad-type telling me to go for it. But I did want to make sure that she was okay.

This was another question about who we do things for. Was I getting up to try and make myself feel better about being traumatised about her being on the phone to her boyfriend who was probably breaking up with her? This experience of something that was deeply private for her. That I should not have heard at all but I couldn't ignore the loud sobs I heard through the door. Or did I do it because I really wanted to console her? That thing that is really selfless. Supposed selflessness. I don't know. But I thought it the right thing to do.

Some months later she would begin to flirt with me around the table. We had all been smoking a lot of spliff and she started acting all goofy. It was fun. We were all having fun. Our friend was laughing too. It was natural. It had come out that I was lonely. That I was looking for someone out there. I had made a spectacle of myself. Then I wondered if this was an act on her part with this flirting. That some kind of intimacy charity was being thrown my way. This was pride perhaps. But it all came to head around a stuffed animal. It was someone else's stuffed bear. We had no right to be playing with it. But we ended up wrestling with it.

This was a textbook case. Seen in many popular film forms. Physical contact that starts with play and ends up with intimacy. A million times I have seen this. But when it came time for the second part. The cross-over. I suddenly choked. It became impossible to determine whether this was what she wished for at all. Perfectly plausible that she did not want me to lean over and kiss her. She was happy just playing. I lost all contact with what I was doing. I choked. I left shortly after this and went back to my room across town.

I sat in my room smoking cigarettes miserably. Playing it all over in my head. She had been reverted to a childlike innocence in her flirtation. Romping about. Initiating contact. Did this mean she wanted more from me? I couldn't know. I felt I had failed myself in some way by not knowing. This feeling buzzed like the lacerations of an electric knife. The excruciating self-awareness was supreme discomfort. An intrusive vulnerability. I squirmed there eternally. Trapped in her power. So completely helpless in this moment. This was what I felt. Lighting one cigarette after another. The only thing I could control were these cigarettes. This was what life would be. A series of chokes. Or one long choke. Right down there. Where it can never get out.

House of Pain

Tseeyootsee! This is the noise that is made at the gate. The whistle. Someone is whistling at it downstairs.

They want to get in. Into the Paper Street Soap Company. *Fight Club* Reference. Flash Back Humour. I prefer to just call it the *House of Pain*.

Like the Irish American Musical outfit. Jump Around. Jump Around. That's them. *House of Pain*. School of the hard knocks.

There is no revolution. Even though we may want one. Things tend to stay the same. Even while they're changing.

'Aaaah Ayaaaah!' Sakz greets whoever I let in. 'Heroan Boy where you been? In your room again?' This is directed at me. I am Heroan Boy. I sleep a lot because it's free. It's free and inviting. So I sleep all the time.

Tseeyootsee woke me up. I am on the ground floor. I sit down at the big coffee table in the middle of the room. *Dragon Ball Z* is coming on. A bong is handed to Cheslin.

He was the newcomer I let in.

'Cumaliiive' Sakz says and gives him the bong and lighter combination. Cheslin gets down to business. I fish around for a cigarette.

'Incheekop' says the white Rasta next to me.

Paulee. Paulee has dreadlocks and only eats fruit. He's on another level. I look at him.

'You're like a parrot' he says to me.

'You sit on your perch and repeat things.'

I feel shocked. People are always seeing into me. *Can't beat that* I think. *He's got me.*

I light up.

'Incheekop' he says again.

Paulee doesn't smoke tobacco.

'Cumaliiive!'

Tseeyootsee!

I go down stairs to the gate. Mmbritish is there. He's got red hair. Drives a bitchin mini. His hair is always in a mohawk. He used to live in this house. So they tell me.

'Wassup man' he mumbles.

He's dismissive. I'm not the one who he is here to see. I follow him up stairs.

'Mmmmbritttishhhh.'

He does hand slaps with the others. Sits down.

‘Cumaliiive!’

Bong and lighter. I get up and go to my room. Lie on the bed. Read a book for a while. Smoke a cigarette. Wander back to the living room.

Paulee is sitting next to Sakz. They are doing left hand fist bumps before sucking on the bong.

Sakz lets out an enormous plume of smoke.

‘Mofaaya!’

He’s wearing a wife beater vest and capoeira pants combo. He wears this a lot. They’re watching *The Predator* on TV.

‘It’s just a guy in a suit!’ shouts Mmbritish.

I guess it is. Smoke another cigarette. Get up and go back to my room for a while. I’d like to drift off. Dream of a woman. Dream of you.

Read a few more pages instead. Go back out.

Paullee and Sakz are on the couch wrestling. Clash of the Titans. I stand and stare out the window. Lion’s Head is out there. Table Mountain. There’s the cable car. The mountain’s up there.

I am down here. Are we in communication? Can a monument talk? It’s a giant rock face quantum computer. Glistening as it catches the light. It’s calculating the great questions.

Sakz and Paullee are still wrestling. *Primal Rage* styles. Paullee gets a hold of Sakz’ foot. Grips a big toe. Levers it outwards and makes it do a U-turn.

Sakz yelps and shouts. He is okay to submit. Paullee is an acceptable one to submit to. He’s got the chops. He only eats vegetables. He’s on another level.

‘Cumalaive!’

Cheslin packs the bong. Paulee and Sakz talk about surfing. Sakz jumps up pretending he’s on the board. Arms out to his sides like on a tightrope.

I go back to my room. Play a computer game. I am a vampire assassin. When I come back Paullee is gone. Off on his bicycle.

Mmbritishhh is teasing Sakz. Saying Paullee got him pawned. Owned his ass. And he’s pretty old so he shouldn’t be able to. Sakz started this fight though. Called Mmbritish a sweet cakes. Wet-back. General disses. Tryna make Mmbritish feel small. Like he’s from easy street.

‘Heroan Boy what you think?’

I have been sitting next to the wall of mirrors. Feeling myself watch myself. ‘Whatever’ I say, but Sakz won’t let it go.

Tells Mmbritishhh to ‘watch his mouth.’

Sakz gets up and puffs out his chest.

‘Mmmmmbrittishhhh!’ He spits at him.

Mmmbrittish says: ‘no Sakz stop.’

He looks away like he is about to be hit by a wave of water. Purses his mouth. Sakz jumps him and they wrestle. It is much closer than I think.

Mmmbrittish must have been doing his star jumps. Eating up his Wheatty Bix. Because Sakz is generally the winner round these parts. He’s got the strongest abs and shaved head in the house.

‘Mofaaya!’ Fred shouts.

Fred has tattoos and wears black. He has a pentagram in his room and likes death metal.

But he still says ‘Mofaaya!’

Reggae Death Metal.

Sakz has gained the upper hand on Mmbritish. He forces his knees apart and slams his hand into his crotch with a pincer-like movement. Gets a full handful of Mmbritish’s junk. Mmbritish goes berserk.

Sakz looks up at him and says ‘submit.’

‘Let go of my tottie!’

He’s bucking like an animal. Sakz holds steady. Forcing Mmbritish to accept that someone has decidedly grabbed a hold of his cock and balls combination. That this is happening. He submits.

Then says ‘fuck’ and leaves.

‘Cumalalive!’ Sakz says ‘That little cunt needs to watch himself’ about Mmbritish.

‘Whatever’ I say.

Go to my room. Read something on my bed and fall asleep.

The next day we’re skateboarding. Or Sakz and Fred and Mmbritish are. They’re jamming up and down the cul-de-sac and popping tricks. Sakz is arguably the best. He can pop shove-it. I am sitting and watching them. I can’t do shit.

They tell me they’re going down the road. To Mmbritish’s pad. I say whatever and follow. They skate down to Long Street and I traipse behind. We get to his apartment with a red door.

Inside is his weird roommate. Mmbritish hates his roommate because he is always having weird rich-person sex with women. He wears a bathrobe when he does it like the creep from *Lolita*. He also brought Colin Farrel back to their apartment once.

They smoked crack or speed or something. He was shooting a movie. I was suitably impressed. Stardust was in my eyes.

‘Heroan Boy sit down.’

‘Okay’ I say and sit.

We smoke and watch TV. There was a girl there. Friend of a friend. The TV was on a prison show.

One guy is forced to suck another guy's dick. I was horrified. The girl next to me says:

'It looks like this has affected you the most.'

My eyes were bulging. I felt great sympathy for the guy in the show. A sudden grave sadness at the world.

Probably biased sympathy though. Like I should be the same horrified by all injustice.

The others seemed unconcerned.

'Cumaliiive!'

Mmbritish had crept up behind Sakz. He gave him a choke-a-hold. Got low and really tight. Wrapped the right arm bicep right up in there. Around the wind pipe. The left arm snapped shut. Looked like Mmbritish had some practice on this. Had worked on it good.

'Mofaya!' shouts Fred.

Sakz twists and writhes in his seat. Flips and flops with body power tryna get out of the hold. Mmbritish is in position though.

'Submit' he says to Sakz.

Sakz shouts he can't breathe. Mmbritish chokes a bit harder. Sakz' face is going bright red.

Whatever.

Sakz submits and Mmbritish lets go. Sakz gets up and calls Mmbritish a cunt. Pushes him down and towers over him. Gives him a slap.

'I would never choke you like that.'

This is not true.

'Never choke you, for real!'

This is also not true.

Mmbritish mumbles '*fuck you*'. Sakz gives him a punch and a slap. Mmbritish is red faced and teary. Dejected on the couch.

'You little poes!'

Sakz storms out the pad. Fred leans over to me.

'Hey Heroan Boy' he says.

'Mmbritish just had Sakz.'

And has a long laugh to himself.

'He *had* him.'

I Cultivate Nothing

The thing unfurls further into the midst of the hillside water-works and sniffy air. Bits of bacteria and allergic flora intersperse the mouth gulps I make to tickle my sinuses with the abusing sneezy paroxysms that stop my slumber and leak up my headspace with tailor-made force-field gravitational cannons of exploding breath.

Beautiful lukewarm pool water afternoon where memories of city backstrokes and underwater re-enactments of movie-time let the industry come steaming in. Carry me out into the middle of nowhere where I will cultivate nothing. No one is coming to save me. Only the drippy drip, drip, of cave blood on the wall. Paint marks left in forgotten corners of the hills. Where the woozy afternoon is like my childhood swimming bath connected to the real bath where I loved the mechanised water warming me.

Clock-Worked

The metal of the bath feels slippery under the spine rib-cage. It is where I find myself. The tub has thick water in it. I wallow. Feel the remnants of everything floating around me. The click of the chopsticks on the ceramic bowl. A game controller is temporarily discarded at the side of the tub. I am really hungry. Eating a bowl of noodles and soy sauce in the tub. There is a fried egg on top. There was a fried egg on top. I chomped it up already. It had that crispy gristle around its edges. Felt particularly good between my incisors. It was like I was biting through a butter flavoured film. Then into the noodles with the salty splash of soy behind them. The soy-sauce enforcer.

‘Soy Sorce-Enforcer!’ I crow to myself. From where I am lying in the tub. I am pretty blitzed out. It has been a long week. I was in a play. The Clock-Work Orange. Always makes me think of clock-work. ‘Runs like clock-work. Coo-coo clock-work. German Precision. FANCY cars!’ I mutter slurping another line of noodles. Right up in my face. The play was fine. I had no real business being in a play. Adorable when you're young. Convincing even. University is pushing it. Now, I suck. I am totally extra. But it was the *Orange*. Antony Burgess. So I had to have a go. I could not let Stanley Kubrick down. They were counting on me.

So I auditioned and got put into the background. Gave me some white tights to wear like the movie. Out there in Johannesburg. I was part of the furniture. ‘Haw-haw.’ Slurp noodles. No. We were literally the furniture. Literal art-pieces. Antiques. Art-sticks. Bauhaus. Very drama. Props. That was us. Props-Were-Us. Half-price! I was a chair. I had to put my feet against someone else. They sat on us. This was acting. High art. I looked hard and long at Sibongile's feet. He was the other half of the chair. His feet were bigger than mine. Had cracked heels. Why? Why was I in a play? With Sibongile's feet against mine? Somebody's ass on my knees. Surprisingly sturdy. My knees held up: easy. Two times knees. One times ass. No problem.

This was an invention of the director. He had more credit than I can give him. Recruited us as ‘actaws’ when we were at school. He moulded us. Shaped our skills. Then he became the HONCHO at the university. The UNI loved him. He struggled to go pro in the mainstream. Struggled to break the academic gravitational pull. Tenure plus benefits. I say: OKAY. He came up with the ‘white-tights furniture’ idea. Or he saw it somewhere and wanted to use it and so now I was on my back on a stage. Someone's ass squashing down on my knees.

The director was the life of the party. A perk of doing a play is that there is often an after party. People to get drunk. Drinks to drink. Commiserate with themselves. About being University Actors. Cheap booze and paper cups. Someone's unlucky household. Descended upon by all-sorts of *play people*. Chatting in the night. Autumn leaves. A cold garden and dog shit. This is the party.

The kitchen's a popular place. The party nexus. Actors know to hang out near the booze. Strategic. They can entertain the thoroughfare. Have a tippie. So install yourself there and drink slow. Notice the kitchen condiments. Porcelain salt cellars in the shape of the Pillsbury Doughboy. Pastoral landscape painting of cows from the Eastern Cape hung above the stainless steel fridge. A beaded doll stood next to a stack of cooking books. I stood there not thinking anything. Amidst the boxes of Benson & Hedges, corkscrews and green bottles of cheap white wine. Now that I had cLoCkWoRkEd this orange. My mind was re-wiped.

The director had a party trick. This trick was pretty amazing. Well. It had pull with a particular crowd. He could pull Macbeth. He could pull Macbeth right out of the hat. He would be the Scottish King. Our director. An actor in his own right. Suddenly in character. That THESBIAN electricity. His hair would stand on end. Kubla-Khan Style. The poem. Where his hair stands on end at the end. When they have drunk of mortal dread. Weave the circle. Then Zang! *He is Macbeth*. Eyes bulging out of his skull. Marlon Brando, Ian McKellan, Sean Connery: Macbeth. Intense. Looking at this thing that does not exist: the dagger.

The dagger is right there and he stares at it. It is not there. There is nothing there. That's entertainment folks. That's the ticket. Shakespeare. Nothing more effective than pretending something is there. Draw that crowd in. All the while the dagger *is* there in front of him. I am standing there in my anorak. Because it is cold. It's puffy. I am thinking about smoking another cigarette. But the director is MACBETH. So we keep looking. He's staring at the dagger. All of the energy lines pulsing off of it. *The* dagger. The fuckin' destiny's compass.

He says 'Is ... This ... A ... DAHGGAR ... I see before me ...?' In the trademark strained choked voice. Clutching at his throat. 'Or ... or... A GNU! A GNU! an most beautiful GNU for you!!??' He has spun his hands up for antlers at the sides of his head and bops from side to side. 'A GNU! A GNU! A GNNOOO!' He's adopted a sing-song voice. Does a moose-like mosey dance around the kitchen. The turn-around was moving. Such character switching he had shown. Very crafty. Laughter erupted. I poured more vodka and lime in a cup and went outside. I was getting pretty shit-faced.

Night Work

He looks like your dad. Or, he looks like my dad. Or maybe he looks like a quintessential dad. He stands there in front of all of us where we have been gathered at the offices of the cable company. He is telling us all of the things about the cables we are going to lay. I am a cable layer. I lay cable. Really I have not even started laying cable. I *will* lay cable. Cable I will lay.

His teeth are super white and he has that youthful Kevin Klein look. The look of puppyish harmlessness. He has this look and I envy him for it. I feel like he belongs to a world I am not a part of. But he wants me to be a part of it. That is why he beckons with his smile and tawny hair. Beckons me to be a part of his team. This is the thing they do when you join a company. It is called induction.

He has a nice toothy smile. His comfy looks are born of wealth. It is also just being young and at the height of his powers. Like a dad. He is also a connection. It is all about connections. He is the husband of the sister of a guy I was at school with. This is how I got this job. It is how I got the interview. I had to beat a friend in the interview to get it. They interviewed both of us. It was a tough call. I think I won because I had been working as a furniture mover for a month before this. It gave me an added sense of presence. I am not a big or tough guy but, you know, like, I could be. Or how would you know that I'm not and really full of childish jelly? From the outside it may look plausible.

The furniture moving helped with this. Physical labour can build confidence. It can also break you down. I was so afraid of doing more furniture moving because of the pain. This gave me the edge. A bit of desperation, maybe even determination. I got it from moving washing machines, bookcases and pianos up stairwells.

He was still talking to us. The guy who was like a dad in his beige chinos and fresh corporate-wear. The sleeveless logoed anorak hugged him while he demonstrated things with his healthy-but-a-little-grizzly-dad-hands. Solid fingers held the cable. Its shielding had been stripped back. The CAT-5 cable was standard, he told us. It had been stripped back to reveal the little fibres inside. The colourful ones that looked like scooby-doo wire were all twizzed up together.

I had scooby-doo wire flashbacks. It was a thing to play with as a kid. Green and yellow wires burst in my brain. A huge tangle of all of these colours all bundled up was how we got it. Then you could tease it out and make a bangle. Felt like infinity, all of those wires.

He was explaining what each of the CAT-5 ones did. How to terminate them. That if you were good you could become a terminator. I raised an eyebrow inside my head and vowed to myself to become a terminator as soon as possible. A T1000 destructo-beast terminator sent from the future. He held up the special terminator tool in his healthy dad-hands. It looked magnificent when held aloft in dad-hands. He gave me a slight nod. Like it *could* be me. I could be the next terminator.

Then he turned to the data projector and showed us a picture of cable in the field. An image flashed up of fibrous strings. I thought of plants. When you ripped them up. Beating them with sticks and pulling them apart as a kid in the wild. Opening their insides up out of curiosity and fanning them outwards. If you boiled them up these fibres would come apart.

The mix of RGB light from the projector showed a bunch of purple CAT-5 cables on the floor. It was a functional picture. It wasn't pretty. Like a crime scene snap maybe, with the cables all splayed out. They could be like intestines. They could also be the tendrils of a virus under a microscope looking like a knot, where the biologist would point to one of them and say: this one over here is the real trouble maker. Really they were just cables flopping on the floor of some office building. He was telling us about the virtues of loose lay. Which is when you don't bunch them all up.

Turns out that if you bunch all the cables into a bunch to make it look all neat and tidy, they turn a bit schizophrenic. The cables, if they are all trunked up (trunking is the professional term for well-bunched cables) they start to talk to each other. They exchange packets of data they aren't supposed to. Packets of data jump from one to the other due to their proximity. Like you could be thinking about a butterfly and its wings and this thought could just pop into someone else's head on the train next to you. It was pretty insane. My mind was being blown all the time at this induction. First terminators and now this. In the cable world your thoughts could turn up anywhere. They called it alien crosstalk.

To avoid it you needed loose lay. That is to lay the cables like strings of spaghetti rather than all braided up nice and tight. To avoid alien crosstalk. He showed us a nice scientific diagram of alien crosstalk on the screen with the combos of red green and blue pumping out of the data projector overhead. I was smirking and nodding as the dad-man did a weather forecast thing with his arms. He had convinced me. It was self-evident. If you had Kevin-Kline-teeth-and-hair and such youthful dad-energy, surely I would follow you into the jaws of hell.

I looked to the others around me. They were not concerned about alien crosstalk. Didn't care about the collective unconscious or the traces of Jung in these cables. The cables that were secretly swapping info when packed too close. Like when you know something but don't know how you know 'cause you never learnt it. Collective unconscious is how. Then again, maybe I didn't care quite enough about Jung either, because I normally had my theory ass-backward. They looked sullen and dejected as indentured slaves, these co-workers. Their thick greasy brows fell down about their unshaved faces. I could identify, I too needed a cigarette.

The message came through for me to report to work a couple of days later. It was an automated thing. I had been thinking about alien crosstalk a lot since my induction to make sure I was ready. The work would be night-work up town in the bank district. We were wiring up a bank building while it was still under construction. A standard bank. It was near Canary Wharf. This was the bank zone of London. Where all of the numbers converged and shit really got loaned. The past, present and future was loaned to everyone and their mothers in that zone. I fist-pumped the air! Now I was a migrant worker with work again. I rolled a hand-rolled cigarette to celebrate.

On the train I looked at the other slack-faced passengers. This was necessary when on the tube. Don't talk to strangers. Woes betide those who speak upon strangers. Lots of crazy people in London. I saw a man just weeping and screaming once on the train. Surrounded by people ignoring him and weeping and screaming. Some say there is a catch and release program. They catch the crazy people and keep them for a year or two and then release them to make space for new ones. I don't think this is the only place this rumour exists. It's probably a meme. Maybe alien crosstalk.

On the way into the bank building I am stopped by a group of kids. It's dark now and they stand in front of me. 'Hey Mister!' they say. I look at them. 'Who you work for?' the boldest one barks. I begin to formulate an answer containing the recent developments about just starting a job laying cable as part of one company hired by another to lay cable then begin to wonder what has motivated this question and this thought interrupts the other one and they conflict with one another in terms of the one that will maybe actually be said which results in a lot of hesitation. 'THAT'S RIGHT' the ringleader says 'YOU WORK FOR ME!' They skip off laughing raucously and shouting 'WANKER!' at the top of their voices.

I suppose I do work for them. I am a migrant worker in the great industrial information-nexus of London city and they are born citizens. My taxes will go to build their roads. They're like my silent partners. I thought about this in my green labourer chinos, work boots and worn grey fleece. I traipsed through the busy streets. The building always made things difficult in a cramped city. There were always uncomfortable spaces of exploding steel shit, noise and material everywhere. It's alive! It's alive!

When I got there they put me on a team with a bunch of people who didn't speak English. I tried to reason with the guy in charge of these decisions. He was an officious Australian man with a bald head. His face was red with anger. He was permanently angry like someone was standing on his balls. He said I could make it if I tried. He said you didn't need words to lay cable. You just laid them. Bam! Loose lay like a dingo's tail. Some shit about a dingo.

This was, of course, an avalanche of bullshit. I liked my Bulgarian teammates as much as the next guy but it didn't mean I could understand a word they were saying. They were not too happy about it either. I was like the guy last picked. That old forlorn beach ball that no one wants to play with anymore. That was me. Chopped liver. The dud. That made it worse. All I wanted was to please my teammates. Show them I was worth my weight. That I could box clever. I had, for a time, moved furniture with the best of them.

Really I was just a big child. Living in a dream world where I was walking around London in big woollen pants most days using an old mini-disk player case for a wallet. Hoping something great was about to happen. But nothing great was happening. There were just all of these people in London getting on and coming off trains. Wearing shades and power-walking. Everyone had more to think about than I was thinking about. I felt like a kid who was not sure what he wanted to do. But I was also not a kid. I was also a grown-up who wanted to eat, fuck, make money and take drugs.

So I looked out into the expanse of the half-forged building. A place of limbo. Three in the morning and only half-way through my workday, this was night work. The artificial light coated our faces like the sick sticky syrup of a spilt energy drink that smells like puke. This was the space. I thought of it as a great dragon carcass. The great Smaug himself had been felled and was being rebuilt. The floor tiles were like its scales. It squatted monolithic on a pile of money. These floor squares stretched off into infinity.

The leader of my team came up to me and introduced himself as Niko. It was at least an hour before he did this. During that time I stared into the expanse of the early hours of the morning and shuffled behind the others trying to pick up a tool or something, to be, or look to be, useful. Niko was a tall guy who had some broken English. His face was a bit like a horse. Equine, I think they call it. He looked at me with his long face and proclaimed: 'They fuck us.'

Sometimes the Australian guy would radio us where I was sitting with Niko trying to learn more about how to loose-lay the cables around the floor beneath the tiles we had pulled up. He would look at me sadly like I was a child who had asked for a present he couldn't afford. He would then talk angrily with his Bulgarian co-workers about how the Australian guy wanted to know why we weren't working faster. Niko made an angry gesture at me and his eyebrows knit into a half triangle above his long horse face.

Then I knew. *I* was the reason that they were not as fast as the other team. I wanted to explain to Niko that I couldn't helplessly do nothing any faster, but I didn't think he would get it. Rather I looked off across the back of the dragon carcass and felt for the tobacco in my pocket as reassurance that I would smoke it later. Every time the Australian guy with an angry bald head would radio to chew him out Niko would say 'Peter!' as this was the Australian guy's name. He would say 'Peter, Peter, Peter Pan!' but he would say 'Pan' like 'Puhn!' He spat it out. I liked that.

Niko told me another thing. When we were walking around the corner between two or three in the morning one night looking at all of the loose laid cables leading up to the data cabinets and our boots were desolately thumping on the corporate floor – it always interested me that data cabinets are called cabinets, like cabinets for data, like you just go to the data cabinet and help yourself to some data – what he told me was: 'When the pussy is tight then the dick is hard'. He told me this while doing a half bicep curl and clenching his fist in front of him. It seemed plausible, I thought. Like the two weren't exclusive, but I was glad that maybe he was opening up to me. Niko then told me that he had learnt this in Italy. Italy was Niko's Promised Land. Then we plugged a lot of cables into the data cabinet.

But generally I had nothing to do but contemplate the void. Listen to the chatter in my head and look out into the night of this half-finished building. Also, I could feel anxious. Great anxiety at this golden opportunity slipping through my fingers. I'd travelled to this land trying to learn how to get a job and needed this one to work out. I was in debt for my rent. I wanted to just lay some fucking cable. So I stressed out about not knowing Bulgarian. I drilled many holes in the back of the dragon. Holes to screw-mount little curls of cable. But my mind kept fighting. Like some economic battle raged. Some anti-capitalist shtick I had drunk the kool-aid of years before.

In the depths of that night I felt like I was a secret agent for the rebellion. I should not sell-out to the man. I should, in fact, try and not stretch out my greedy little fingers to grab at the coins. Don't be respectable. Shun the top-hat and umbrella. But the little man with the top-hat and umbrella owned the building. The squares of lifted tile floor I was working on were the squares of his monopoly board and he owned everything. I looked down at the coil of purple CAT-5 cable where I had drilled a hole. I looked down and thought about it.

It would connect to a computer in a month or two. Then a slick sales guy would trick an old lady out of her pension and then the dragon would be online. The dragon of this bank building would be a fully operational dragon stretching out to rake in that rich gold from the weak and the needy. This was my primary malfunction. I had been encoded at some stage with the idea of being free. It felt like late one night some supernatural hero person had had a heart-to-heart with me about the need to save the future and then hypnotised me to forget it all. Still it was there. Deep in my subconscious where the supernatural hero person had left it. God I love that guy or girl, they were like the friendly-dad-guy, but on steroids.

It didn't matter because I was just another tool, actually. A tool on the dragon's back. Standing there with an industrial drill in my hands and staring at the fluorescent lighting. The battle raged on in my head. What was I doing there trying so hard to help the man destroy the future while I needed rent? Like, could I function with this whole other thing going on in my head at the same time, in the heart of London, far from home at three in the morning? The thing was like a battle. Like behind the closed doors of my mind a battle raged. There I was with a power-tool and people were fighting cold-war style about how the world should work.

To console myself about this I would sing. I would sing songs in my head. Maybe this is a little crazy but what-the-hell? It's only crazy if you tell people about it right? So I would sing *The Cranberries*, that one, you know the one. 'In your head, in your head, they are fighting' This was my mantra. I would sing it while I was wandering around looking for a task. While I was waiting at the data-cabinets where Niko had side-lined me. Maybe Niko wasn't my friend with a horse-like face. Maybe I was standing between him and Italy. He liked me just fine but not as much as Italy and he was against me, plotting my demise.

So I sang on: 'In your head, in your head, they're still fighting. With their tanks, and their bombs and their bombs, and their guns in your head, in your head, they are dying' I wailed it out to myself and looked at my less-than-dad-hands and felt the moist wad of rolling tobacco in my pocket. I sang *Zombie*. Travelled from Africa to work through the night trying desperately to lay cable or maybe even one day terminate it and sing *Zombie* by the Cranberries in my head.

It was a good song. The Irish have some amazing songs. But maybe I got into it too much because it really gave me the feels. It gave me all of the sentimental feels at once about senseless violence. Because a weird thing happened when I was singing *Zombie* loudly in my head at three in the morning while holding power tools and plugging the purple cables into the different holes in the cabinet. There was this guy. He was a security guard. I think he was Francophone African. He was really young. His job was a bit like mine. He really had the night to deal with because there was no other thing he was meant to be doing besides sitting at his post.

He was a gamesome lad who always had jokes. He liked to shit-talk in French and mess about with the guys who came in to work. Maybe he was a little crazy. Then the one night while I am at my post sitting near the data cabinet awaiting some orders from horse-face-Niko and I hear the radio. I hear the radio and this French voice that crackles over one of the walky-talky's crooning: 'it's in yourrrrrr heaaaad, it's in your heaaaaad' and then some hysterical laughing.

King of Chaos

When you are sailing the land on the horizon gets bigger little by little before you actually get to it. It can take a day or two before you actually get there depending on the wind. It is both gratifying and tantalizing. Different to a plane landing somewhere all of a sudden. But when you are sailing a lot of things happen. You often get really sick for the first day or two after leaving port. You wish that you could have just kept your sea legs from the last time you were at sea. You have to get used to the pitch and roll all over again. Or this was the case for me. It was also the case for some of my crew members. We are all friends. This is what the captain wanted. The captain felt that it was too impersonal – sailing with people he didn't know. He felt that he had shared all of these extraordinary experiences with people and then they just left and he never saw them again. So he preferred to just teach people who were his friends to sail. I agreed with him.

The guy who got the most sick was a big dark-skinned guy of Greek descent. I had known him for years. At least since university. Where he had identified himself as another interesting loose-end of a person. Someone knocking about the columns and steps on the campus. Studying something that would not be saleable in the long run. I had known the captain even longer. Him I went to school with. He had wanted to start a radio station that played a very specific type of alternative rock and roll. Instead he went sailing around the world. This replaced university. The school of water. I always envied him for this.

Which is why I found myself tying a rope after a sail change and looking at the blip on the horizon. He'd taken me on board when we ran into each other some years down the line overseas. Now we were nearing land and a spot appeared on the horizon. The blip became a bowl shape and grew and grew until it spread across the length of the space where the sky meets the sea.

Then we were docking in Bali. The captain was really good at this shit. He parked the boat like an expert. Sometimes using his foot to steer so he could look over the cockpit. This impressed me no end. His parallel parking skills were magnificent. He slid it diagonally like an ice cube. No side-thrusters. I ran around with a fender. A boat cushion to soften the landing and tie it in with ropes.

Call me Ishmael. Because I had made it to Bali. There I used flip-flops to walk around. It made me begin my quest for the KING OF CHAOS. It had been a hard year. Life had fucked me up a bit. I was trying to remain employed. I imagined the future where there would be even fewer jobs. The shenanigans required to play the game would be even more diabolical. I was trying to recover from my experience of this through sailing. So I decided to take a lot of speed.

This was one of those things. Marijuana was strictly prohibited in Bali but speed was freely available. My first experience of it was in an internet cafe. Where I bought a sachet of a hot chocolate coffee-drink and consumed it. I don't know what was in it but I wrote like the wind. Straight caffeine maybe or was I high as fuck? I corresponded to everyone I knew. Wrote letters home, to parents, friends, estranged cousins, acquaintances and pets I had once owned. I wrote forwards and backwards. It made me really happy for at least an hour and it tasted like pure candy.

Hard to separate the high, though. How much was the stimulant and how much was the exultation of communicating? I found both exciting. It was difficult to tease out the difference. Comme ci, comme ça. I thought of the Beat poets. They were inspired by Benzedrine. It worked for Kerouac. It was a Neil Cassady staple. These were folk-heroes. Maybe it could work for me.

Deciding to take speed because it is functionally legal is maybe arbitrary. It is maybe not a good reason. It is maybe like doing it because it is there. Because other people you read about did it. It is also not a big deal. So I bought a box of pseudoephedrine from a guy selling snacks and cigarettes and pseudoephedrine through a hole-in-the-wall kiosk. I was certain they would not work because they came in a box and were legal. So I ate four or five to start with instead of the recommended one or two.

They didn't work for about half an hour to an hour. Then they caused some serious rushing. A whooshing of adrenalin and life and energy in my whole being. Perhaps something to do with my central nervous system. Definitely did something to my CPU. Then I was like a firecracker. Unpredictable Roman Candle sparkler pinwheel fizzing incandescently from one place to another. I took to the night.

There were men doing a festival. Dressed up in white. They were holding up colourful dragon deities cross-pollinated with Hindu gods. Processions of people moved down the street, clapped, rang bells and sung. One of their number would enter trance. They'd be possessed with the spirits of gods and ancestors. One guy was laughing with his tongue stretched out down towards his chin. He had temporarily left his body. He turned and charged forcefully at those behind him. His family members restrained him in the same way one might restrain someone who was having an epileptic seizure. Restrain them out of love. Then they turned him around and drove the spirit vessel forwards.

I ran through the streets raving mad jumping and shouting through shop-front neon twilight like a bat. Local folk who were hunkered down and playing chess on street corners regarded me with disinterested wariness. The way one might regard a fly that buzzes past, loud and fizzy and then gone. I whooped and skipped and proclaimed truths and thoughts leaping focus from THIS THING to the NEXT THING. The rest of the crew thought I was acting like an idiot but kept me contained. I was looking for the KING OF CHAOS. The underlying governing force.

I washed up in a bar somewhere with the rest of them. I had eaten the rest of the pills. I drank and washed my face in a water feature. A little fish with a spouting mouth was mounted into the bar wall. The water was probably foul. It felt really good on my face and I wondered why no one else was doing this. They asked me if I wanted a drink and I ordered a White Russian and sat facing the burly dark-skinned crew member of Greek descent I had known from university. Suddenly I knew everything. I could see into the future, read Tarot or yarrow stalks, tea leaves, I was the omni-knowing psycho-ana-therapist.

My advice was delivered to him in a rapid-continuous-bipedal-variable-speed-turbo-charge. It still made sense. More sense than on alcohol for instance. If sense was even a thing. I was looking for the KING OF CHAOS. This was simply a pit stop. Like I had just happened to be sitting opposite this friend of mine. Time to be the oracle. I told him he should spend more time apart from his family. His brother was also on the crew. They spent endless hours bullying and playing mind games with each other. I thought it was inhibiting his growth. Maybe I was just jealous. I was beginning to think it could be me that was the KING OF CHAOS.

But some time later I found him. Sitting at the bar next to me. The guy had a one-week unshaven face and folds of face-skin. The hairs on his face looked like little black stalks. He was Russian and spoke with a whiny nasal voice. He sounded pretty disturbed. Maybe just had a lot to drink: 'They just wanted to watch me' he said. Then he proceeded to whine about what a Greeaaaaatttt time he'd had on the island. How very wonderful it had been. So looooveeeely he said.

'I stayed at a hotellll. It was sooo wonderfullll. Everything was soooo wonderfulllll.' he whined. 'But what was evenn betterrrr was whennn I went outtt into the villaggggeeeee.' he whined. He didn't really seem to care if I was listening and he sounded really drowsy. 'You seeeeee this family took me and they just looooooveddd me...' he continued 'they would alllll come arooundd everyyyy night and I would sit at a taaaable and they would put foood in front of me and they would all sit and watch me eeeeeaattt' he looked off in rapt memory 'and everyyyy nightt they would all go with meee to the bath and wait for me to get undressed and they would all watch me and the familiyyy would baaattthh me because they looooooveddd me...'

BAM. I thought I had found it. This was too weird to be normal. The crew pulled me away from him because we were leaving. I would never know how long I had sat there and listened to his brain-sucking whine. I had thought the KING OF CHAOS would be some Dionysian punk-rocker with bleached hair and a fear of NOTHING. A skinhead guy with bulging eyes, black leather and manic laughter. The Devil Rider. The Ghost Rider. This is what I was looking for.

This would have been HIGH VOLTAGE. Rather I found this very ordinary man who was not ordinary. Who wasn't wild. He was just peculiar and strangely imperial in his willingness to promote public recognition of his naked body. This man who attempted to deify himself through the possession of a foreign body and currency. A sad version of Captain Kurtz from *Apocalypse Now*. If I was looking for a Devil Man maybe this was it? A wretched tourist. Maybe the KING OF CHAOS was not a king at all. Maybe just a punk desperate for someone to acknowledge him in weird ways.

We reversed our steps and elliptically ravelled back into the boat. I cowered in the space of a bunk. Shivering and wired I consulted the pages of a comic book about a vampire. I ogled drawings of stripper vampires and their simple line-drawn breasts. Their pointy vampire teeth complimented their pointy nipples. I forced myself to masturbate because I was worried the speed had made my penis fall off. This was an unfortunate side effect of the drug. Then I lay back as a hollow-spent-shell-of-a-person. I was jellied scum in a petri dish – I prayed the real hero was out there somewhere, streaming out a million-words-a-second of heinous babble across the night sky in every direction of divine flame and bunching them into the shape of a thundering horse; outstripping every limitation of the conventional self.

Transit

It's not it's not that I have a problem with crowds there isn't an issue of claustrophobia but rather the all surmounting painfulness of strange work in strange places being in strange positions where dreams seep into real life and visa-versa the squash of the human fart factory is not is not the problem here the problem is feeling ill-equipped to be a person that knows how to climb over other bodies to get higher so I think back to having slept for twelve hours on the filthy floor of a train station in India with groups of others in similar positions but more used to the rats running over the bodies littering the waiting zone where I had nothing else to put on the ground but a page of newspaper and very cheap biscuits that kept us going and the insanity of the man behind the counter who had a strange and angry face who would only converse with me in Hindi despite our failings to know his native tongue in his native land and the man who sat next to me and told me all about Shiva and his excitement to follow him to one Shiva centre or another in a Shiva town where there were last sightings of his holiness holding his holy trident dancing over the tops of the hills off to do mysterious things in the snow with conch shells which in all ways is a pleasing image to me that I can relate to with the rats and the people and the smell of excrement and the bandylegged Sadhu men walking over the distance as still this is not a problem being propositioned by a Punjabi man who has Sikh wisdom to confer on me which did not include women as they weren't involved in big boy conversations which he casually explained and talked away at me and the station would house my wretched body until I finally found a train that was only two and a half days late that took me through a lower level class where many on the bunks below me smelt very strongly of urine where toddlers were not wearing nappies and probably pissed on the seat while it was a holiday so a raucous card game was going on with people smoking really wet weed that smelt so strongly of thick sticky burning leaves smoke it was hard to concentrate mixed with cheap liquor that raved the fervour of the train contents upwards and upwards until I arrived in the morning hours when things were dark but no one sleeps in India and the station was even bigger and more heinous and the sheer humanity was wrenching my brain in strange ways as the dogs of the station slunk away looking sad and dangerous at the same time thousands of taxis then bombarded me with aggressive questions barked compelled commanded imperatives that I should get in get in get in but I was only trying to have a smoke to vent some of the frustration and my mind is doing backflips because I feel like I am in a warzone of thousands of unfortunate bodies slumped into layers on the station floor because I don't know what is bothering me maybe only the exhaustion and I would like to fire some rage at nothing and everything that maybe I am always trying to avoid the crowd hope it did not exist because I can't function in the milieu won't admit I am struggling in the face of real life chaos as a snowflake but just a lot of people for everyone else with nowhere to go here next to a massive Mosque next to the station that rang out with the call to prayer which can be beautiful or screeching depending on the context but here it was aggressive and turn to see a poor Buddhist monk being unnecessarily harassed by a group of men hating on her for having a shaved head and wearing robes forcing her to move over and over from one side to the next for being different in a way they did not like and I feel so far beyond intervention all I can do is stare at them in dismay from where I am standing and each station I get to seems to be bigger and badder and crammed with more people desperately making their way but for my little mind it seems like the next level of hell or Maya or Samsara or ketamine or whatever else comes in amplified layers and my wife and I threaded through throngs of people and overweight policemen with batons skulking down the lines keeping order through force where a train that may be going where we

need to take us out of what appears to be three in the morning bedlam really is just the back office of the whole world how everyone lives so you get used to not stepping on people or stepping on people as it were but still I couldn't recoil at the person's back in which my nose is buried when transport lurched I just remained obliterated and was unwilling to digest the emotions of being in transit for three days without anywhere to rest my bones and that was real and the sheltered existence of my mind is not real and still this is not as bad as the weirdness when it seeps into my pores of sitting around doing some job that makes no sense and trying to hoop-jump but that is all we are doing and especially when we were trying to catch the next train but actually there were no more berths available so only general standing was available which is more or less a push and pull scrummage where you see how many people will fit on the train and I had to lever myself over the precipice onto the train through packs of people that were brimming to the rafters after which the angry local train-goers places I had taken by being there before them were baying for blood where I took their spot and an argument broke out on my behalf and it was back and forth and some person on the train was defending my right to transportation but really I just had one foot in the toilet as people had literally reached the ceiling and I told myself I could handle it because I had been on the floor for two days and someone sold me a fake ticket and we had to wait in eight hundred degree heat taking a shower every two hours through the deadest part of night which is not dead because the place is alive with traffic through the night and only shortly before dawn maybe slightly peaceful so I told myself to grip a hand-hold and get through this train trip because then at least maybe I would be over the border to Kathmandu before my visa expired so I could deal with being a solidified piece of humanity but this wasn't what hurt my mind the most but something else that the little mind in my head cannot fathom how deep the worlds are perched on top of one another heaped and heaped and what to think about all of it all of the time and still the thing that feels more detestable than this discomfort is the thought of a strange reckoning of selling my personality for five cent pieces until I fit the shape of some mould even though I am lucky to be on the conveyor belt that stamps my societal function and anyway this is what I thought when I was younger and couldn't reconcile the world until I did sort of but I like to recall this memory to consider these things and see little or no sense in them only that they were and we are and large swathes of humans suffering has no significance at all and I remember how I was filthier than anyone else at the end of that trip and after the train I found a bicycle rickshaw to take me to a bus station where the conductors and their henchmen were getting high and drinking energy drinks and asking me about promiscuity maybe only fifteen years old doing their hair in the mirror as they were sleeping under the bus and finally I could rest and the bus pulled away and I was prone on the seat and the shirt on my body was brown with the filth of myself and others but the saddest part of all was driving past a dead body I only saw for an instant left on the highway wrapped in sheets with only a few crows to keep it company where its bearers could bear it no more.

Suspended in Honey

Last night there was nothing floating in the sludge of me. Wallowing in the deep recesses of sleep. There was nothing happening there. Nothing that I can remember. So the day flashed by. I woke up like a Polaroid picture. The hills were as amazing as they normally are. There was a sheen on the clouds that were hanging over the ocean in the far-off distance. A fluffy smattering of bulbous vapour-balls. They had been dolloped there like cream. The morning sun shot down and tinged their tops pink. The hill rose up and I drove past it. Living in a model world. Thick greens of various hues. They look like felt. The hues of the landscape. Swishing around the hill. They seem fabricated. Really they are plants. Like the trees I worship on my way. They pull themselves out of the earth. They do not get stressed. They get destroyed. The forest isn't barren. There are rolling hills. They roll on by.

Gary Recurring Point Two

Talk to Gary. The flo lighting here is fizzing and buzzy. It is the kind of white noise that you can tune out to. I am isometric. A piece of codified information. You just see me here waiting at the data cabinets. At the beginning of the stage, round, level or whatever. Within the stage I am also here because I will always be here I think. For infinity maybe. My blocky head will bob up and down on my shoulders looking out expectantly at the world. Above my head will be: Talk to Gary. But if you talk to me nothing comes out. It looks like I might say something but only: Talk to Gary flashes above my head again and again. I am as angry about this as you are.

Skate Uphill

I am thinking that I don't really add up. There are parts of me that want to be serious and shave my head and get a serious haircut. Then there are parts that don't really care about this. Let the messy hair reign in chaos. What's worse is both of these people sabotage each other. The ordered one puts the kibosh on the free one. The free thinking ideas-man is never all that radical because the ordered part always wants to reel it in. To exist within reason. Drink within reason. Fight within reason. Fuck within reason. All things in moderation. The free version of me never really gets going because it's always pulling back. Coward. Until it does something rash. Does itself a mischief. It makes children and other free people wary of me. Some of them pity me. It's all fucking annoying.

This is what I think when I pick up my skateboard and tuck it under my arm. Grab a box of cigarettes and lighter and stuff them into my pocket. House keys and a handful of change also go down the shoot. Into my jeans. The serious side of myself could ask what I am doing pretending to be a skateboarder at thirty-eight years old without any more serious prospects. It would ask why I am not seriously contemplating the void. Why I needlessly make a spectacle of myself instead of just getting on with it.

The serious part of myself could ask these questions but doesn't. Because I need to get out of the house. So I am going to the Monument to skate and look at the aliens hovering miles above it. I am going past the busy petrol station and the mini-highway. Past the big road that flushes plastic bags up into the air. Past the hooting taxis and the people that stop to ask you for things. To give them things that are quite arbitrary. That make no real difference in real support. Temporary comfort or sustenance. Something. Maybe they would be angry with themselves if they didn't ask you for things. Maybe there is a chance you will give them things. On the way back I will give someone what is left of my handful of change.

I cross onto a big university campus. It makes me feel good to see a lot of space. These bastions of knowledge. Great loving history of elitism. Maybe the good kind of elitism. Like the good kind of fat. The fat in avocados for instance. This university has wide open spaces and it is many things to many people. The sheer scale makes me a little happy. Today, it is empty on a hot day. The sun has baked everything static.

I waltz upwards to my destination. In the heat. Past the old sentry tower. I consider all of this tradition and whether it is tradition or just leftovers from the past. A coffee shop housed in an old military prison. The building was hewn out of chunks of solid rock. Masons maybe. Suppose there had to be masons if it is standing here. Some kind of masons. Somebody had to know how to build it out of rock. Now it is still here generations later but a coffee shop for those who can afford to spend their dough on coffee, precious few can. That and beer slug it out for supremacy.

Caffeine versus alcohol. They are in competition but also partners in crime for your spend-therapy experience. Your: I-feel-like-I-have-a-purpose-for-the-duration-of-the-coffee-rush experience. Or the: I-understand-how-pointless-it-all-is drunken delirium. Again there I go projecting. Don't forget nicotine. The good old Coyote chasing the Road Runner. Smoke and smoke and smoke. Wait an hour or two and smoke again.

This makes me tap my ciggies in my pocket. Think how many are left in the box. Sadness sets in when you are past halfway and the box begins to rattle. Today I won't buy coffee – I am rather just going up. Up and up and up. To skate at the Monument. Look at the aliens. Here I see the parking place of an esteemed professor. It is empty. Her name is printed on the sign though. If she were here she could surely park there if she wished. Her space is reserved. This is the top of campus. Where it ends and the behemoth of the Monument begins. Which is a giant chunk of engineering in itself. Another relic acknowledging another time.

It is an eyesore but also very impressive. Such a construction perched on the top of a steep hill. Overlooking the whole of the town. This town in its sprawl. The informal sectors keep slouching outwards. They have long ago outstripped the tar-road residences next to them. There is probably a truth in this. A reality that wants to merge with the existing concept of the town. There are more people than it can possibly cater for. No one to keep it on the straight and narrow in good governance. Keep it moving upwards. No one to make sure everyone is looked after. No basic service delivery. No ability to pay for it. All these things. Filled with people and all of their ideas and thoughts out there. Wanting to get out.

I WANT to get out of this place. That is why I have come here to skate. To be with my thoughts and pray that they are fashionably ordered. The town spirals upwards and hands stretch to heaven seeking... what? Seeking the things that people seek. Affirmation. Control. Providence. Acceptance. Sustenance. Any of these. But life is really just a short play. Where you get stopped on your way into a convenience store and a destitute person asks you for something. This plays out in all of the different ways. You have something to give. You don't. You decline. You ignore. You defend. You deride. You deflect. You avoid. You listen. You wait. You give. You check your supplies. You turn your hands up. As if to say the whole thing is fucked. This can be life in a nutshell. They care. They don't. They smile they scowl. This is life for you and others.

Flip it and you are the one appealing to others. For aid. For charity. For mercy. Unhinged. Trampled. Crunched under the spokes of selfish genes and economics. Then you will really know skating up hill. A steep fucking uphill. Today I am not though. I am nearing the top. The bush is homogenous to the area. The space below the Monument that blends into the botanical gardens. They are botanical. I feel pretty botanical today too. A yellow hashing of grassy lands. Intermittent greens. Plenty of rocks. These are the things that haven't changed.

The fighting seems to remain the same. I have gotten to the top now and passed a big rock with the numbers 18 and 20 carved into it. It is a solid chunk. Now I wonder if it was put there all those years ago or more recently. It is solid enough to have stuck around. The carving must have been redone. It looks pretty fresh – the carving. Here is the parking lot I am looking for. In front of the Monolithic building. The beast. Many stories up. Many giant pillars. A hollow centre. Sometimes I pretend that the building attracted the aliens. A *2001* thing. It is used for arts and culture. It has a little fort next to it. Where they would survey the land. The colonists. With all of their cannon-balls.

I am just digging on the pavement though. I push and glide across the parking lot. Smooth tarmac to take my body forwards. There was a time I could do tricks. Now I just slide. Push push slide. Think. This is skating. These are the answers I don't have. This is the time I spend on this. So that I can get away. So I can be free. Feel the propulsion. Skating would not have been an ancestral past time. It is a way to feel the streets. The streets I don't know.

I don't care that skating was imported from America. This is just a vehicle. My vehicle. A board with wheels. I am just on top of it. None of it is really meant to be here. It just is here. Maybe if I stopped thinking about it I wouldn't be a thirty eight year old that doesn't add up. Then maybe I could place some bets. Speculate on stocks. Rake it in. Maybe I could have worn a suit. Maybe I could've made deals. Sold some shit off that doesn't belong to me. Get in on the mining action. In on the data mining action. But I am not. I am here on this fucking skateboard.

Which is what I think when I sit down and light up. I question why I get the feeling that I want to be somewhere else. Like - is all of this randomness not good enough for me? Like this luxury skateboard? This privileged access to time and cigarettes? What else should I be doing? Learning how to fix cars? Start a mechanic shop? Repair rich people's coupés and Lambos. Get other people to repair them for me? Bob's my uncle? Be rich quick? Plumber? Electrician. No. no. no. Thirty-eight year old skateboarder sitting on the board next to an ancient sun dial put there by pioneers pioneering other people's land.

I feel the crackle at the end of the smoke. It fizzes with the oxygen. Puff some into my cheeks to get it lit. There is the nicotine again. It has to hurt the back of my throat for me to know that it is working. That I am getting what was promised. During the head-rush of nicotine I am transported to a smooth commercial experience. People are sitting around in rich white cottons on big white couches and they are laughing at how successful they are. How they really did a number on the market this time. She laughs at him who laughs to her. She is happy that she has snagged him. He is happy he is a king-ding-a-ling. They have stuff and exclusive lifestyles. Their lives have a soundtrack. I am one of them while the head-rush lasts. Then it's gone and there is only the elastic feeling of a rubber balloon in my lungs and a bit of tar. The white cottons are covered in oily grease and the knives are coming out in the perfect family.

I rock the board under my bum a little and look up. There they are. You can really see them from here. They look like massive white birds. They dive and swoop over each other. The aliens. The world first noticed them about ten years ago. They look like giant birds but are just really big wings that constantly glide over each other. No visible heads or feathers. They also must be massive as you can see them clearly from a great distance. They must be many kilometres above us.

Now they are there. In the afternoon for everyone to watch if they want. Just another development in our history. These alien birds. Come to nest in our atmosphere. We don't know how long they will be here. Letting the sun glance off their wings. They could leave as swiftly as they came. But it makes you think. Makes you wonder about your place in the world. Or it does me. Maybe I am projecting again. But it makes me think maybe not adding up is not that important. I will probably shave my head tomorrow. Try and fit in for a while. Always be a little bit of something. But not that much of anything. Who cares? They don't. You can't skate uphill.

Abduction

I thought they were alien abductions, the first time they happened, or the first few times they happened anyway. Though then later I thought maybe they weren't abductions in the paranormal sense of the word. All of the lights and the sound and the overwhelming nature of the experience made it seem like an abduction. But I am not so sure anymore. It is something that I still struggle with through the small hours of the night, through the times that I have tried to deal with it, in my bed. My mattress that is mounted on a network of springs and a steel frame. A bed that bounces with the weight of me, here and there, then breaking wind occasionally, lying down and standing up to varying degrees. Different poses.

These pains and forces are involved in getting up from where I lie all of the time. On that bed. Sometimes I feel up to it, or more like I felt up to it when I was younger. Getting up. Getting up to it. Later there seems a springiness in my knees and a heaviness in my legs. These are some of the difficulties I encounter when getting up to move to the window or the door, to look out at the landscape. See it as the same as before, alien and irreconcilable. All scraggly plants and aloes, in across the dusty stones.

They look not like me, yet sinews and bones are much the same as vines and roots. Yet these were not the things that seemed so alien, so much as the times that it happened. Where the roof was lifted from the domicile, from the very concrete walls. The corrugations of metal lifted clean at an angle as if it were on a hinge. To peer inside at me, and things became so completely bathed in light there was little for me to see. I felt like a creature with no sight, similar to the mole, as no shapes could be made out through the light, and only the sensation of being lifted, maybe by a hand.

Then my head placed between huge soft lips and sucked for a time, this strained the muscles in my neck, against the pull and a tightness around which my head is contained. Heightened with every suck. Face, ears, mouth, nose all submerged. Only I think of the shape of my skull, like a loose kneecap, which occupies soft negative space in this mouth, rubbed completely smooth. A pebble. Then placed back down into the domicile and enclosing roof. Most notably leaving me on my bed to wake or sleep and remember the event. But not to make head or tail of it. Only to feel that some of me had been lifted away.

This, this is the thing that is hard to place my finger on. This began once, when I was younger, still living in said domicile and it continued and persisted over a course of years. Sometimes punctuated by more than one or two years. Sometimes as many as five. But through its course, there is the definite impression that the experience I yielded to the mouth was a diminishing one. A transference of some kind. As the years advanced my skull had been sucked clean. Now left only with some homogenous layers of self that were not as multifaceted, as those that had, in fact, been on exhibition to begin with. Not so rich with promise.

The head I had was still intact, to the best of my knowledge, where it is felt through my fingers at any time I choose to check on it there atop my shoulders, between the bed with springs, or the small kettle, or the window.

Potatoes

There are these potatoes. I bought them from the supermarket. Supermarket jive-potatoes. In a big packet. Want the big packet because the paper keeps them natural. Old school potato transport. Then after a few days noticed some of them were rotting in the packet but the packet obscured my ability to see these rotters. Removed many potatoes. Arm snaking into darkness. A deep skunk of potato rot slid under my fingernails. This disgusted me. Felt awful. Found the bad potato. Rotting more than the others. Its rotting face had transmuted itself through the paper package so it could be seen in exterior space. Foul. My hand felt that one. In the darkness of the potato bag inner-space. Gungy and slick with rot. Pulled it out. Found maggots feasting on the face. The bad one. Put it on the ground. The rest came out. Varying levels of rot and mould. White patches in crevices. Big tumours of dead flesh.

There were potato chips to be made. So jettisoned many of them. The best still had worms nesting. The healthy ones. The chrysalis of the creatures embedded in the contours of the healthy one. Burrowing downwards. Metamorphosing into something else. Laid there by the queen worm. Starting to eat inwards. They almost looked natural. Blending into the blemishes of said spud. Cut them off. These were the best for chipping. The rest went to the heap. Had to cut out countless tuber tumours. Then boil then bake. Eat the golden brown suckers later. Right before the power goes out.

Flying Ants

Let the little ink page marks walk out there in all of their complexity. These ants and their marching. They make their shapes. Forget ye not these ants. This hive. You eight billion, times ten. Let the white on the page be made by marks of ants. All there and here. This is you and me and them. This is not that, this is this. The ants in their caves are seething mad. Flying ants like the ones that fly into the shitter. Feed off shit in a flying-ant-orgy all of them. Seething out there. Outside of you. Outside of your face. These ants got scooped up. They would fly after shagging. They were up all night in the stinking bathroom, come from the great expanse of wild farmland on the wind. All of them. There is a spider living under the table who made itself a house out of leaves all stitched together like staples.

Ancestors

You always had the most amazing hands, they were rivuletted with folds of skin that hung over them as they artfully held those cigarettes that you got for yourself out of a tell-tale copper case that held them that I was allowed to play with and inspect to my heart's content, sitting in your lap because maybe I was foisted on you briefly by a parental unit, those hands were still holding the cigarette and smelling of the all-pervading aroma of ash and cross-word puzzles that were your past time and you looked resplendent coming back from the beach in your jeans and old brown shirt that had style and class with a floppy hat that you always wore sun-baked and smelling of the sun and smoke.

You sat where you were haunting a space in the room we convened in, within the house that belonged to the farm that belonged to your parents, making them my great, great, very-great, grandparents, coming here to stolen Africa but laying claim to the endless stretching hills of the Karoo, that were not actually called that or theirs to lay claim to, but this is the catching of the tale that history likes to reverse and reorder at will where it wants.

But really people move like waves of the sea and you walked in with your sun hat and your walking stick which were two of several talismans that you had, another being your thick black-rimmed spectacles that you needed in order to focus the words in the newspaper, that was always folded and kept for the crossword on a table next to the gin you drank, on most occasions, unless it was night when you drank the brandy that sometimes got you going and you would drink from the bottle to show us how a real granny drank, which you were, but never a 'granny' granny, but quite the opposite, and we hailed you from afar and your aloof distance that you kept so that you could interface more readily with Boots your dog, which would be bitten by a snake, but not in the Karoo where the farm was but rather where your cabin was in Sedgefield, a whole province away, where we pored over snake-bite books and pictures of swollen limbs like macabre pornography in your living room, where you lived with your second life partner because your first life partner was a doctor but did not make it all the way to the end of your life, but people called him maiden's prayer, which was an old school name for a hotstuff maybe, or something like this, which is nice, I guess, but I never did meet him, but I did meet Frans the second of the life partners you had and he was a German man which I thought funny because his name was Frans, like France, but he was from Germany, and there the both of you were and you would listen to the steam train that still ran behind the vleis and I loved that place because it was like a painting and was beautiful and also afforded me a beach around which to fling my young body where I discovered imagination lying against a sand dune that could have been from another planet in the light brown sand.

I shifted away in endless waves like the ones on the beach that crashed around little squirming snails in bunches that delighted me so much, with the colours they had and their marvellous life, moving forward in circles to pick one up, maybe it squirted some water but looked slippery like mermaid parts, but now you were back from the beach and you walked in to find yourself a spot on the couch and your glasses plus cigarettes and cross-word puzzle where many years ago you entertained your more outgoing radical cousins or nephews that came bumbling in like so many dwarves, but really just two of them, switched on sixties-loving-types, came into the house with you and produced some marijuana for you to try which was real hip and progressive of them, to bring it and see if you were interested, as your sensibilities were generally open-minded which

was why these young nephews enjoyed hanging out in Sedgefield shooting the shit while rolling cigarettes of dope, which you sampled, but found it unpleasant and the whole house swelled and shook and you retired and left those Satyrs to their own devices in the living room next to the fire, but the sweltering sensations were changing the house, causing it to expand and shrink all around you, where people were roaring in a circle like a stadium into your ears, so lying down was better, but there was also this stampeding, thick-skinned, dusty-grey rhinoceros bearing down on you from out of nowhere.

The flying rhino came thundering across the planes of your mind, coursing through the wilderness, roaring unnameable snorts from mouth and nose, trampling bushes, small trees, and anthills and spitting klippies from its feet and getting closer and closer till a blackout of fear, but you managed to return from that world, but many years later this rhino still persisted, maybe chasing you down in the form of the cigarettes that you smoked, but did not finish, but tapped out half-way through, in the ashtray, and returned to your cigarette case, so you could enjoy them again later as half-cigarettes, which would go nicely with the coffee or other drinks you planned to have in a few minutes, watching the train all that time wrap its way around the hill once a day, this was, of course, unless you were not there, but at the farm where your son had taken over from your parents at being the farmer and looked towards those flocks of sheep bleating in the desert, but you would be in the sun-room beneath the picture of dogs playing poker, one of them hiding an ace between the toes of its hind-paws awaiting drinks, ignoring a lot of the people around you but still in conversation with one of your daughters, that could be my mother, about a book you read or the so-and-sos, but still there are the cigarettes that are trailing after you, and you began to cough and curse - dash it all - when the coughing stopped, and had another gin and exhausted conversation, and got quieter and quieter until you had emphysema and needed to be transferred somewhere with professional care which was Graaf-Reinet, which is where you were born, and where I met you when my path had wound down there, as a sixteen year old, travelling across the land with my parents and it would be the last time I saw you, where you were hooked up to an oxygen tank with cables and tubes but you still had a hidden stash of cigarettes that you dipped into, their grey ash the same colour as the dusty hide of the rhino.

The rhino that finally came for you when I was far away, spiriting you away to the stars that wound themselves around my eyes, and now the flying rhino thunders on and heads my way where my teeth are now on edge because I too have smoked and smoke and I blast you for already being on its back and love you for already being on its back, where you have existed like a force or pattern in my life, a collection of ideas and memories woven into the fabric of my childhood where I cannot know what we meant to each other, except the certainty of the rhino, that was coming, and never stopped picking up speed until the stamping feet squash me amidst shouts and raging, maybe acceptance, of a heavy weight crushing thoughts and ideas that are really only differentials of synapses and neurons collected in patterns just like those silvery fields of stars in the Karoo night.

The Kind of Aimlessness We are Talking About

A universe could be encoded in a handful of sand. Universally this was most likely to be one of the other universes. The theory for this had to do with dark energy and other universes may not be stable enough to sustain life. All of the atoms would simply drift away from each other. So the reality he was dealing with was really just as aimless as he was. What's more these were not facts. These were shifting laws of evolving knowledge. The aim of life was to feel good. Be entertained. Master your environment and have sex. The last two were generally trickier than the first two. He managed the first two by enjoying what he ate and finding the world around him quite intriguing.

Mastering his environment was not simple. He was certain what he was drawing on a piece of paper with a Bic pen was not all that good. It was thoroughly derivative. Being derivative was more of a problem than it used to be. He was just energy in a system though he thought. Fire in a lamp. Water in one of those elaborate hourglasses. The ones that used water and oil to allow globules of coloured liquid to race around their interior until it all pooled at the bottom. Those things were awesome. He remembered them from the doctor's office of his childhood. He should try and draw that for a while he thought. Those were awesome.

This was the kind of aimlessness he was talking about. Whole lives that are spent in meaningless pursuit of the next pot of gold. A life spent searching for meaning in a shifting soup of shimmering reality. The trees were reliable, though. They grew consistently and their beauty was multi-faceted and deeply moving. The setting keeps changing. He wanders from place to place but still feels homeless. The internal fear cultivated by top-down systems intensifies as he gets closer to the top.

The whole thing is a god-damn commercial to make him look harder for somewhere to rediscover what was there all along. He fears the money-men and their capacity to shut the doors on his privileged nest. He fears the criminals who walk among the poverty stricken and bully those who follow the rules. It's a lot of fear. That he keeps inside as he aimlessly wanders from one setting to another.

Transitions were not that quick for him. He could not switch channels in this way. Though air travel and sleeping pills had made this close to possible. This is the aimlessness he was talking about. He looked down at the image he was drawing. It is good. It has made him feel alright. It is not really going to get him anywhere real. His mind was going. There were slippages at the edges. He had no idea how sensitive his mind might be. It seemed quite sensitive.

He had no idea what he would do that evening. He thought of having a cigarette. They made his life less free. They were a damn inconvenience but they were also a great excuse to get outside and waste some time. The zombie creep spreading into the edges of his consciousness.

He sat staring into the end of his weekend. He was not as prepared as he wished to be for the week ahead. It made it difficult that nothing would just stay still. It was all moving about. Toons were creeping around every corner. There were dancing rainbows between each moment. He had but to access them. They were there waiting to be accessed and yet not.

He took another swig of beer and set it back down on the table with practiced precision. What type of a man was he? A business man? What sort of a businessman was as aimless as he was? No real kind at all.

He took out a packet of cigarettes and extracted one. Set one between his lips and the lighter rasped and shimmered into a brief volley of fire. He bent down and inhaled. This used to be much cooler he thought. Now it is just a damned inconvenience. Ja, Ja bro, if you have to think about it, you are only going to quit.

He rose from his seat at the table and walked out of the room. His hands were in his pockets and he paced his way through the night. The night was full of natural sounds. Insect life buzzed in a background fizz. The call of the void – slamming his soul in a car door. He loped across the street. Unlocked his car and sat down heavily inside it. It started quite easily. He pulled away into the night. His frustration at this aimlessness seemed like a shroud to obscure the fact that his life was average and unremarkable.

Time was not on his side. He was on his side. The space goblins. The earth eater. The master droid. Science was a vast thing. All of the reams of data. All of the thought patterns that belonged to one another. He listened to radio shows from time to time. He wondered if the scientists on those shows prepared what they wanted to say or the format was fairly free form and improvised. A slice of culture that he could assimilate into his head.

This was a construct. This was next to and not central to what it was to be human. Perhaps to be human was to argue he thought. Besides the other things. To love, fuck, eat, shit and sleep. These were things were also central to being human. He still needed to be useful and fulfil a function. No point drinking this shit in, he thought and turned another corner. The road was long and keeps turning on him. Brown eyes twisted like sun.

Gary Recurring Point Three

Talk to Gary: I am as angry about this as you are. All of my pixels swell with anger. My face won't show you this as it always has the same engaging and outgoing expression on it. My eyebrows rise and fall and then enter the same loop. I am here waiting next to the data cabinets. I am waiting for someone to come and talk to me. When they come it will all make sense. They will: Talk to Gary but nothing will happen. The four or five coloured pixels of my mouth will move. They'll move up and down real fast. Like a puppet or dummy. The wonderfully neutral white background of the speech bubble above my head that is perfectly rectangular will indicate that you can: Talk to Gary. Changes will happen like you completed a command that would allow me to talk but the speech bubble will only present you with: Talk to Gary. My position here is recursive.

An Endless Loop

I would rewind these films and then hit play on the VCR. We didn't call it that. We called it a video machine. I think we called it a video recorder. That doesn't sound right either but more likely than the video machine unless there was something wrong with us why would we call it a video machine? Like some people call computers machines. Like what do you have running on those machines over there? They are computers but for some reason we call them machines. Therefore I would just rewind the tape in the video recorder and listen to the servos increase their pace and ramp up their speed to go backwards.

Go backwards all the way to the beginning and begin again with my VHS copy of *Aladdin*. Jafar would say that they were late again and that they offered a thousand apologies oh patient ones and that he had it the treasure and that he would get what was coming to him and we'd see the cave of wonders and the guy would get swallowed up by the giant panther mouth made of sand.

You get the picture. I would watch it many times and rewind it and watch it again. It was almost on loop if you like. The sound of the tape machine, video deck or whatever I used to call the machine that played those chunky VHS video tapes that movies used to come on, reminded me of reincarnation. The idea that we just start at the end.

Maybe this is incorrect perhaps it cannot be reincarnation if you rewind. There is the *Tibetan Book of The Dead* thing where you see your life flash before your eyes but this is not a rewind. It would more look like a highlights package. Because it would need to be in reverse if it was a rewind. The Tibetans don't talk about this. They say things happen in regular playback and aren't time pitched backwards through your life like the rewinding of *Aladdin*.

I am also not sure about reincarnation. It has something going for it in terms of everything feeling like a copy of a copy or déjà vu or like we are just doing the same thing over and over again with different results, sort of like a simulation, but at the same time there is no definitive scientific explanation for a consciousness that has seen many lives.

The only thing backing it up may be the Newton's energy-cannot-be-created-or-destroyed sort of idea. The only thing I can think of anyway. I learnt this in science class and thought it sounded quite Buddhist. There does seem to be something to be said for the whole notion of travelling around in circles. The snake swallowing its tale. I liked to think about a lot of these things. Wandering the labyrinth and looking for a way out. This is Maya. This is Samsara. These are the illusions that drive us round and round like the spokes of a great wheel.

Like the spokes of my VHS video cassette as it travelled back in time and brought me to the beginning of the movie where the credits are opening. We are swimming through time and space. This was like the great wheel. Though maybe the wheel is better than the cassette tape. Because a cassette tape requires two wheels. The great phases of creation in the Eastern Hieronymus Bosch tapestry only needed one wheel. The eight spokes of the Tibetan wheel.

These are things that I have thought about. Huge aching chasms of time. The driving force behind things like videotapes did not save me. When I was lying on the couch and my father would come into the room and tell me I should be doing something with my life and not just lying on the couch in front of the television watching *Aladdin*. Looking back he was probably right. I did not know what it was that I was supposed to be doing though.

There were times when I thought I caught a drift of what I was supposed to be doing but then it would be gone again. That or I was addicted to watching television. Addicted to not going out and getting something. Addicted to squirming under the oppressive judgemental gaze of someone urging me to be more productive.

These were minor reflections I would make when I tried to reconcile different aspects of Hollywood from where I was sitting in a room jamming the tape into the tape player. I was sitting there on the floor in my jeans that did not really fit all that well. They were just thick and sturdy and did the job. I was wearing my Challenger Tennis Academy T-Shirt which I got from the Challenger Tennis Academy that met every Saturday on a couple of courts a few blocks away from my house. We would try and move fast and hit things then drink a canned cool-drink if we were lucky enough to have the pocket money for it. Back home I was only jamming things into the tape deck. Still I cannot remember what I used to call the video machine. Video recorder? This seems more convincing. I think we can stop here to pause and say that video means 'to see' in Latin.

I learnt this about the meaning of video and I thought it quite profound at the time. To see something and record it. Watch it again and add to it. Video. The basic building blocks of computing. Putting something back into the same sequence. Is there a connection between this and watching the same film again over and over until it has influenced your personality? Repeating the process? Run the algorithm again. Crank the handle and churn all of the numbers out.

Is that what I graduated to from rewinding the tape deck to cranking the handle in my lace up tennis shoes on the wooden bench in front of the computer running DOS and a black screen? The numbers all started spewing out. Two hundred and fifty six thousand different colours. Like in the game Lemmings where you had to get the little creatures safely from one side of the map to the other without letting them splat if they fell too far. Get them safely into a Christmas box where confetti would stream upwards in a profusion after getting all of those lemmings home. The numbers like confetti.

Should I tell you what I was wearing when I played it on the Amiga computer though we only had the demo version and I was sitting and watching other people playing in my reddish-pink tracksuit pants and yellow t-shirt with an image of a lion on the front? I got the t-shirt from a school expedition to the zoo where twenty of us were in a group and we had to answer questions about animals. One of the group member's mother was a conservationist and he got all of the answers right so our whole group won t-shirts but I didn't really do shit. I appreciated that shirt when I spied it in the corner of my cupboard I bet there was a whole lot of confetti going off in my head.

This was maybe what you graduate to if you find yourself growing up in sheltered space. To games on new technology. The way I saw it what was the point of an International Business Machine if you couldn't play *California Games* on it? What was the point of life if one was not meant to use it to entertain ourselves? What was the point of getting off the couch when being on the couch was more comfortable? These seem like adolescent indulgences when I think about it. Really they are entrenched in a variety of philosophies.

The irony was that I did want to get up and do something. Do something great that was befitting of the mystery contained in magnetic tape and the glossy covers of plastic cases that snapped

shut. Shelves of these tapes could be rented and you could travel to worlds. I wanted to do something like this. I would frequently end up sitting on the top of the stairs in the attic where my room was. Looking over those stairs and feeling the chasm I was talking about. Falling downwards and into the night I felt an abyss in the space above those stairs. It was connected to it dawning on me. That it didn't actually matter how hard I tried because it just wasn't going to happen. I would never manage to break the gravitational pull keeping me tethered. It would always all amount to zero.

Sometimes this feeling comes to me when I am staring at the loading screen on a computer. I find myself slide into a feeling of digital purgatory waiting for something to happen. Was it always like this? I want to know what is going on underneath. We say the computer is thinking. Like if you ask me what the square root of pi is. I am thinking before I tell you I have no idea. Behind the beach ball on some computers the numbers are cascading while that wheel is being cranked millions of times. It could be interfacing with the stars.

All of us people down here looking at these buffering wheels on computers and in the corners of our cell-phones. We have all sat down in our work clothes or leisure wear and logged onto something or other and waited while the wheel spins. I wonder if we added all of the time that we spent watching spinning wheels across the billions of people connecting to the internet if it would balance out to the time we might have gained by not writing letters.

I wonder this in my black Fei-Yeu sneakers and woollen army surplus pants too baggy for me terminating upwards in a leather belt and smallish white t-shirt covering my stringy emaciated frame wearable on its own if the weather was hot enough. The spinning circle is the icon of choice for computer thought. I liked progress bars for a while but the spinning wheel is more ubiquitous. More comforting. The snake swallowing its own tail. Elon Musk (the great friend to all people) wants to put things in our heads to let the machines communicate with us. He says that we are the clogged bottleneck of information transfer. The information that gets into your head through your screen moves too slowly through your eyes. Your brain can't get enough. We need to free up the highway.

I feel clogged alright. All of these moments watching screens and feeling disenfranchised. Inside the computer I have fallen and can't get up. Dividing by zero. My parents are still concerned I am not living up to my full potential. I sit night after night clicking on things at random. Watching colours and archetypal avatars float across the screen. I guess I should have tried harder to buy into something. I tried moving out of the house but I always came back. Still with this feeling that there was something I could be doing other than waiting.

If putting a computer into my brain would fix this problem I would give it a try. If it could bridge the gap between feeling both alive and so completely random I would sign myself up. If a neural lace can give me the jolt I need to get past this loading screen I am for it. They say that the machines have a better chance of understanding the stars. 'They' being the scientists. 'They' being the scientists also say that we will never understand the stars because we were not designed to. We were designed to slug things on the head.

I am not sure putting tiny little wires into the synaptic pathways of my brain will help me. For starters I am not sure they would consider me. They only send the strongest and smartest into the great beyond. The chosen ones who fall into the great American hero category of astronaut. I am just trying to get out of the house. Tie my own shoelaces and break out of the walls of my

childhood. I am not astronaut material.

These screens are a lens through which to magnify my anxiety. These rants come to me from time to time. When I am thinking about what really matters. How little I know about what really matters. Electroshock therapy matters. Reminds me I am alive. A cheaper jolt than the one that Elon has designed for us. The screen still flickers in my face with the cigarette end of some game I have finished. The animations are stuck on loop in a celebratory dance.

Maybe there was a girl who could have brought me out of this. Pulled me kicking and screaming to be my second mother. Prince Charming in female form. This had happened a few times. Though the women I met may have struggled under the weight of my inertia. I became distracted on the phone to them being acutely aware of how difficult it was to hold a conversation with another person while staring at a screen. They just didn't seem that into it. It was also unrealistic to think that another person can carry you out of the mess you've made.

Some say the purest expression of individuality is self-destruction. The greatest act of rebellion is a revolt against the self. I see it as a way out. A way to break out. Albert Camus told me things about the matter. I couldn't claim this kind of grand gesture for myself. I just wanted to get out from under it. The discomfort of knowing that it will all amount to nothing. Any dreams I have will be dashed. This is gravity. The anxiety associated with waiting. Waiting for my screen to load. Knowing there is something I should be doing but not what it is. This constant gnawing at the back of my skull. Gets uncomfortable.

I don't blame my father or my mother or any of the people who have shown me kindness or given me the time of day or shut me down. Quite the opposite. Maybe they will blame me but guilt can only keep you alive for so long. These things are all just representations of something else. A greater and more complete picture of a cracked world.

The screen was still loading when I found an extension cord and tied one end to the cross-beam in my room and looped the other end around my neck. I watched it from my vantage point. That screen that was my graduation. It ushered me in from the world of the television and I had spent so much time with it. Through the small hours of the night whiling away the time and trying not to think about what might need to happen in the morning. That screen flared like a flaming metal bin where people gather to warm their hands. It kept fizzing as I thought of her. The last one I talked to on the phone. The cadences of her voice a mix of frustration and empathy. I thought of these things as I rocked the chair I was standing on with my feet.

Out there in the universe somewhere that spinning wheel is meditating on a dead planet. Where cells have fallen away in long domino-like chains. They have degraded in unison. Blistering away like the victims of nuclear fire in slow motion. Decay and corruption reversing into chemical compounds. The left-over polarized elements of concentrated chemicals turned toxic. Enough revolutions leave the planet without any energy at all. Not even the geyser spurts of hydrochloric acid left. Just cold dead inert rock. Floating through space. After a dead sun.

Mars Dust

He would pick up a handful of the gravel and chew on it sometimes. It had a chalky gravelly flavour and it dried his mouth out right away. He had been walking up and down the parking lot behind the supermarket. He did this every other afternoon. Because he knew that he was really on Mars. That he had been moved there and this was just the residual shell of his surrogate body. His body still walked through the mostly-empty parking lot. He had been moved to Mars through the neural link idea. Logging onto his brain and downloading his consciousness.

What he was really doing was wandering around and around in circles on Mars. Many people had been sent there to mill about. Many people found themselves suddenly switched. It was a little like being a zombie in that there was a lot of milling about. The same way street drunks can sound a little like zombies. Particularly if they have been drinking. Or if they have been drinking the night before. Both times they sound like zombies. Are wracked with savage pain. This is not what he sounded like as he chewed on the handful of Mars-dust. He did think it weird that he did this. Maybe he lacked calcium.

Because Mars was a big place and you needed to get your vitamins, he thought to himself. There were others here like him. Seemed that they had been uploaded to bodies on Mars with the consciousness that they had on earth. An information transfer. This is what had happened to him he was sure. Though at the same time he had faint inclinations he was walking around the supermarket parking lot and just looking at things. He would look at things around his immediate vicinity. A rat sometimes could be seen moving from one of its spots to the next. A plastic bag invariably slid wraithlike past him. This would often be his dream on Mars that he was back on earth. Not always. Most times he didn't remember his dreams.

Mainly he was on Mars. They had hooked them up with solutions for breathing. These were little devices that were unobtrusive on the bodies that they were all in. The others didn't really talk to him all that much. This was the zombie part of the equation. Though they were not zombies. They were not zombies because they were not always starving for brains. There was not a hunger that cut its way through them compelling them to tear up the flesh of those not infected. There were not inhuman screams emanating from deep within them. There was none of this.

More, a lot of shuffling. He saw Magnus shuffling a ways away from him. Magnus was kicking up the red dust in the afternoon. A slow shuffling kick. He thought his shuffling was akin to blowing those huge bubbles. The huge bubble blowers that use ropes as rings and wave soaped up ropes in the wind. This was the kind of spectacle that Magnus was up to. A shuffling, shuffling, shuffling and then stop. To admire the work that he had wrought. The Red dust floated hypnotically in an intricate swirl and came to settle in slow motion a like it was underwater. Its movement was slow and undulating.

Mars dust was cool. It was everywhere and had a distinctive colour. He had never really gotten all that close to Magnus. Magnus had just told him his name and then shuffled off with his hands in his pockets. The people on Mars were a bit like people from an asylum. An asylum that is fashioned in our minds. An asylum that is portrayed by method actors who never actually suffered from any form of schizoaffective disorder in reality. The method acting you see in films like *K-Pax* and *Twelve Monkeys*. Magnus was not an actor. He was not an acute case either.

Pauline was a far better example. He sometimes saw her off in the distance. He only knew the names of the others because they would shout them loudly at him and point to themselves. He would do the same. They hailed each other this way like ships on the surface of Mars.

He figured that they had been transmitted to Mars to create a human base. Not a human base like a fort with spikes and walls but rather an organic one. Like a layer of human organisms. Layers of multi-cellular activity one on top of each other. Layers of cells with the ability to replicate. People who would fuck sometimes but even that is not that important. There were more bodies that could be uploaded to that were stored in the hub. They were like a layer of human bacteria. An attempt by earth to coat parts of Mars's surface. The fucking was to transfer bacteria more than birth humans.

This didn't bother him at all. Mars was not an intensely libidinous space for him. He did wonder if the body he was transferred to when they uploaded his consciousness through all of those tiny, tiny, nano-wires they stuck into his earth brain was a direct clone of his. He knew they were clones and not originals. This much he was sure of. You could go and wander around inside if you wanted. He had done this before. You could kick around the banks and banks of organic humans being grown in the hub. Then when you were ready for upload they would wake one up so that it could shuffle out into the desert with your consciousness in its brain. This is what had been done to him. They hadn't transported his physical body here.

He would walk day in and day out thinking to himself that he may also be at the supermarket. He figured it was easier to just upload people and set them loose. Their genetic imperative would keep them walking. Around and around. When he passed another he would shout inanely at them. Or wave his arms or sometimes he, or they, would expose themselves to each another. Just for the shit of it. A morbid flapping of genitalia in the Mars breeze. They held shirts tucked under chins and elasticated waistbands fell around ankles. They would growl loudly while they did it and waggle their hips in a circle for effect.

The thing that stuck most in his mind on Mars were the mountains. There were two that he liked most. It had taken him quite a while to get there. They were the hollowed out shells of volcanoes. So big he felt that most cities could sit inside them. A city could easily squat there like it was taking a shit inside the dead innards of the volcano. It just reared up out of the desert. Many times bigger than any of the shit he had seen on earth. Three times the height of Mount Everest for instance.

There would be a whole host of them in front of it. All in their denims and old shirts tucked in over-flabby tummies, un-athletic asses, man-boobs and flabby breasts pressed against t-shirts in the Mars sun. There would be quite a shuffle in front of the thing. There were two of them that he had visited. Everyone still kept their distance but a big whirlpool of shuffling would go on in front of the Mars mountain. A seething vortex of aging running shoes, sandals and hiking boots. They chased each other in a circle and kicked up quite a storm in honour of the volcano. They growled and scuffed and skanked at the surface to pay tribute to the thing. Like those fish that circle a specific rock in the river as a fish-ritual.

He had been to both of the volcanoes and joined both of the skanking circles. Sometimes groups got into the hundreds all shuffling around. Round and round. He had a good time doing this. Kicking and kicking at the chalky dust that flew upwards until you couldn't see any of the others. Round and round he went kicking. They generated a slow motion whirlpool of mars dust in

which to immerse themselves. To become one solid thing lost in the dust. Until he got tired and stopped and then made his way back to the hub for a rest.

Ariadne

The bulbous big head. She did not want to go out there. To Johannesburg and see the Dome. BoardCon was an event that saw the convergence of various sub-cultures aligned with board-gaming. Scrabble, Snakes and Ladders, Backgammon, Go, Checkers, Dungeons and Dragons and Tic-Tac-Toe. These many fell upon The Dome north of Johannesburg. A monolithic monstrosity shaped like a submerged giant with only the top of its balding head sticking out. She followed her lover Brian there while she was pregnant.

She did not want to go because she had never left her animals before. Her flock of assorted cases. Clients. The animal crew that were her livelihood. Her job was to maintain their health. Remove porcupine quills from the snouts of dogs. Whisper and woo lost sheep out of their ad-hoc hidey holes. This was her own variety of animal family. Chicky the chicken, Sparky the hound, Sebastian the cat, Briscoe the horse, Mandibles the sheep, and Luna the goat. She was particularly fond of Briscoe and his equine brethren. They were her speciality. Their bowel movements were her business. She felt naked without them.

Brian had insisted. That they must take this trip despite her being pregnant. Leave the animals behind. Board games were a passion of his that ran all the way down to the bone. He needed her to understand this and needed her to accept this about him. She stepped across the fairy mound: the goblin-market of tekkie-wearing bi-pedal dice-toting terrestrials that were Brian's kin. He led her by the hand. The weight of her belly swayed pendulously from side to side. She was uncomfortable. His smile was wide and over-tight. He was acting weird.

A wetness hit her knees and ran down her ankles and she realized her water had broken. Cramping, knifing, contorting pain seized below her belly button. Her knees buckled and she stumbled through swing doors into a commercial kitchen. Heavy and full. Smooth stainless steel surfaces and industrial-sized deep fryers lay in wait. She grunted and braced herself between two countertops and pushed down hard. The pain was everywhere. Ripping every single nerve ending. Stuck – and cramping PAIN. She lay down. Ready to give up. She couldn't go on like this. It was unreasonable – un-right – not fair. Past pain, past endurance, past breathing, past everything where she was ready to die if it meant this would stop was where she found herself.

But she pushed out a birth sac from inside her nonetheless. The sac burst open to reveal its contents. Sloshing fluid travelled omni-directionally. A horse-human baby opened its mouth and began to cry. The swing doors thunked as they were forced open and through them strode Brian, fully bedecked in light blue armour 'I claim this child for the empire!' He threw back his head and laughed, his armour was chunky and magnificent emblazoned with winged skulls, and above him flew a battle standard: *Nemo Me Impune Lacessit* – no one provokes me with impunity. He was attended by soldiers in similar colours.

Ariadne had recovered enough to spit out: 'Brian? What the fuck?' His smile was cruel 'I needed your animal healing ways, you served my plans, my machinations, my strategy, now finally you have given me what I needed, this 'thing' he pointed 'will win wars!' Ariadne's eye's narrowed downwards and seemed to burn with unholy power. 'The HELL it will!' she shouted. Soldiers streamed forwards clunking in blue. She reached into the cardigan she wore and drew out a tattered card and held it outstretched. A benign crowned female figure framed in picto-graphic simplicity and underneath, written with ancient Italian brushes, simply: The Empress.

Swing doors swooshed and in walked a Japanese Talk-Show Host in a natty suit holding a microphone. 'Wellllllll!' he shouted into the mike 'What do we seem to have here? She has played... The Empress! Yayyyyyy!' He jumped up and down and clapped his hands 'Sorry Brian' he said with mock pity 'This means it will have to be...' he paused and threw back his head and closed his eyes 'A COOK OFF!!' the magnitude of this announcement really took it out of him 'You get twenty minutes with only the ingredients in your half of the kitchen, ready, steady and let's get this shindig UNder waaAYYYYY!!!' The Talk-show Host walked up to Ariadne and smoothly cut the umbilical cord with a pair of heavy paper scissors.

It was in the midst of her cooking fervour that a small girl wandered into the kitchen. A little girl dressed up as a nanny goat. Clipped and clopped across the tiled floor. She made her way up to Ariadne and tugged on her apron. Her big eyes were surrounded by floppy goat ears and the little nubs of goat horns above her forehead. She walked up to her and said 'use the Magic Cabbage'. Then the child walked away. She had not thought to use cabbage. It did not really go with what she was cooking. Ariadne was not sure what to do. The child with her smooth features and cute shining eyes. Could she be trusted?

'Five, Four, Three, Two...' the Japanese Talk-Show Host sang out the words 'and... stop Cooking!!' The teams of soldiers in aprons came to a mechanical halt. Brian looked arrogantly self-congratulatory. 'Mmmmmmm' moaned the host 'smells goooooood!!' He moved forwards and walked towards Brian's simmering broth and ladled some of it to his lips. 'Woweee folks!' he exclaimed 'that is some SUPER broth!' he beamed lovingly at Brian and his entourage of soldiers.

'Now Ariadne let's see if you have any answer to this cooking excellence' he moved over to her pot. He spooned some into his mouth and stopped as if stunned then immediately reached for more. After five or six more spoonfuls he was heard to exclaim mysteriously: 'The cabbage!' and leant over to give Brian a taste. Others snaked forward to the pot and dipped their index fingers in. More moved forwards inquisitive. They got a sniff, then a smell and then a taste. Soldiers climbed over each other to scoop handfuls of the aromatic soup. They began to wipe it off of each other's faces and lick the remnants from their fingers. The Japanese Talk-show Host was recycled to the back of the crowd and slumped blissfully to the floor with the horse-baby still in his arms and began to snore.

Ariadne lifted the horse-child from him and brought the whimpering baby to her chest. It snuggled into her bosom and was silent. She strode from the room without hesitation. The doors swished behind her. Some may be giving chase. She did not know. She did not look back but held the horse-baby closer and zig-zagged through the crowd outside. She saw the young girl dressed like a nanny goat who had helped her, she was pointing to an owl. She thanked her as she passed and moved to a giant saddled eagle owl with orb-like eyes and a sharp curved beak. Ariadne shifted her weight onto its back and the three of them lifted up and out into the night air in a flourish of feathers.

Gary Recurring Point Four

Talk to Gary: a recursive signal of information. One that is trapped in a loop. That is me. I am still here waiting next to the data cabinets. I am in a game and waiting. I am waiting for something to happen. I am waiting and there is the option to talk to me. That is what is said in the pixelated speech bubble above my pixelated head. In this bubble it says: Talk to Gary. But when you hit the arrow nothing happens. That machine just spins and out comes: Talk to Gary. I don't know how long I have been here. I just know that nothing better than this is destined for me. I am a collection of information. Maybe in these data cabinets or maybe I am working on them. This is the subject and the object. There is no real change. Roll the dice. Spin the wheel. Always there will be the same result: Talk to Gary. I am stuck. Stalled. Trapped like a cyber-parrot.

Life Forms of Earth

Hello life forms inhabiting the planet we describe as earth. I walk your surface the same as all other bipedal denizens of this great sphere. Chanting life and landscapes rear up around me but I slide into myself letting the words of everything wash over me. That faculty that binds us together in the frequencies of communication. Sounds and markings from the ends of our consciousness create the middle ground. The blind object on the other end of the voice is not tethered to a single time and place. I sit here musing about you and me amidst the sounds of the wind and crickets. The cat asleep on my lap. Our conversation is a leap of faith.

My weaknesses disable me early in the day obsessing about consuming something in sensory distraction. A cup of coffee, a cigarette, soft pornography of a music video, advertising campaign, steak sandwich, video game, chocolate, cartoons, literature. Intellectual masturbation through passive ingestion clogs up my mind preventing me from dreaming of the endless seas undulating around the planetary expanse. Or the colour hue values on the trees that I drive past looking painterly in the afternoon heat and engorged with Spring. An afternoon bake of heat washes out a white-blue sky. Listless exhaustion.

I peer dimly through this haze juxtaposed with the void where meaning or progress might be found. Happy to hide behind the reality that nothing is coming. It is only me and the floor beneath me and my breathing. My apathetic non-attachment executed in incremental levels of self-error. I use this to justify my lack of surprise at the latest international scandal. Politicos of every phylum, genus and species take to the stage.

Analogue systems of money-squeezing so vast sitting down seems like the closest I can come to disentangling. Real people burning in drone strikes and solid futures pissed away in greed. Members of the earth sold in cages. Children mining cobalt, diamonds, carrying Kalashnikov rifles. Smart phone sweat shops. Fracking. Military carbon. Slinging dice down on Wall Street. And why not? Given half the chance I would bite the juiciest apple I could find.

Observing the breath in my nostrils that allows desire to cause an electrical storm behind my eyes. Thick oily shades of skin spread across the canvas. Cavorting under the moonlight of Bacchanalian tradition. We stay home now in our corridor of mirrors and electronic impulses representing shadows on the cave wall. How do I know you exist behind your image?

I hope to look outwards. Stars pin prick patterns dizzying in my eyes. Knock back another beer and look up letting the night air in. Maybe we will manage to unhook the violence. Maybe we will move into a space with hard work but no losers. Maybe we won't need more slavery. Maybe we will be able to hit reset. The hardest button to button. Maybe we'll be allowed to go back to our roots. Dig gardens and build greenhouses. Instead of urban bedlam groaning.

If it comes it won't be because of me. Hands chained to the television remote. Pushing down the peddle. Eating whatever treats will go in my mouth. Revelling in the wholesome flaws of a thousand shards of broken glass. Poking their way up from rich earth. Savouring the synaesthetic sound of the whip crack. Maybe the earth was meant to be squishy. Morally flexible like a rubber band. Tightrope balance of Circus Logic. Bouncy return to point of origin. Perhaps this is aesthetic truth. I will tell children to fascinate in the yellow of the tiger's teeth.

Swan Dive

The main thing is to get out of the first person. This is beginning to sound like some other twentieth century post-modern garbage. What makes it special? I don't know. The fact that it is not special. I had a dream last night. He stood looking at his mother. He was at a garden party. He was an adult but still affiliated with his mother.

His mother was fairly pivotal. He could not see his mother. He was not aware of the feeling of having a penis. So how do we know he was male? He just knew. One of those things that one just knows. Or think they know. Not everyone just knew, but he did.

They were all standing around a pool. His mother was probably talking him up in some shape or form. Trying to make out what a great child he was. His mother was doing this. Not all mothers do it. This one did. Most mothers do it. Some mothers do it with more determination.

A sort of petty competition among middleclass mothers. Measuring their children up against each other. He did not wonder why they do this. He was only thinking to try and impress everyone. He had made mistakes in several areas. He had failed to perform. This, he was going to be able to do. He was going to show that he could dive into a pool of water. He was going to show that he was a great diver. That he could lift off of the ground and sweep into the air with the grace of a swan.

He did this. He could do this. His motivation was to feel the cool sloppy sensation of being immersed in a body of water and impress everyone. He steadied himself, sunk a little on his feet and sprang into the air. As high as he could. It was a similar situation to being on a trampoline where one did one's best to bounce as high as one possibly could.

The idea that one is really putting everything one has into something. Kicking a training bag. You train your leg and really swing into the motion with all of your might when you kick it. To create an impact on the bag that is explosive.

This is what one does with this kind of a dive. One can leap as high as one likes and as far as one likes. That is what he did. He leapt as high and far as he possibly could into the air. Doing his utmost to hit the height and distance that was at his full strength. He did this but as he did he put everything into it and began to shape reality.

He began to become weightless as if his very intention was having a direct effect on the world around him. Shaping the parameters of the space he was in. The result of this was that he overshot the mark. The level at which he was warping reality was in proportion with his desire to impress everyone. To desperately show everyone what he was made of. His muscles were taught and at full stretch and he arched over the pool. He hung in the air but inexplicably kept going. As if he was on the moon.

He sailed seamlessly through the air in an arc right across the span of the pool which was a good twenty meters long. He ended up sailing all the way into the garden where he sublimely rolled into the grass. He landed gracefully and rolled up onto his feet.

His movement was similar to that of a gymnast. When he got to his feet a flash of annoyance made its way across his face and he looked a little unhinged. It was a look that replaced the

satisfaction he was hoping to experience, piercing the water in aquatic relief where he planned to swim.

So he moved to the pool again. He stood there waiting. The attendance of mothers and watchers were all still there milling about the garden. He still felt the watchful eye of parental scrutiny. He stood taught again in readiness to make his dive. In front of the pool. The look of concentration was almost palpable on his face. It was stuck there as he visualised his dive. He visualised the motions he was to make with his hips as he hit the water. Like a dolphin he thought. He thought of the pleasure. It would be pleasurable. Executing a magnificent dive, feeling the weightlessness of flight and then the sliding sensation through the water.

He steadied himself and crouched down, swung his arms forwards and swung with all of his might. Out and over the water. The same thing happened. He moved out and hung in the air. The size of his intention meant that he ended up floating clear past the pool and into the garden where he milled about. Various people acknowledged his potential but as he sauntered through the crowd he stole baleful glances at the grown-ups talking to scorn the grown-up world.

Light Wave

Spend nine hours a day letting the gestation period of your walks sink into your body and feel free about the life that surrounds you. Only a little more brittle every year you grow older, your friends and family are the only interactions that can be meaningful. Unless you are a spiritualist spreading spiritualist ideas, or maybe you are someone else, who helps people, or a doctor or something like this, or even a pedagogue like me, which is fine. Then maybe you might engage more meaningfully with others outside in the greater public.

When you try and look at the sensory perception of the people, you think how best to get them interested in writing and human expression. You feel you should still go back to first principles and really try and see all of the work that you have read. Look deeper and shout: ART THOU NOT ENTERTAINED!? - scream-shouted the bard from above on his balcony. The words of the masters that have joined the ranks about them are kooky and beautiful. I behave like a child, enjoying the build-up of win-lose mentality. Pretending to be a fairy or an ent in some spacey backdrop of pixelated programming.

The beach trumps my social games, on the click expressway. Where the Belrog, is summoned by the warlock, is hit by the dragon form of the knight, who is dispelled by the enchantress, stomped on by some smoky thing that is hard to determine. All of these things are fighting each other, with different numerical values. We make our way up the map to their base and storm their bastille. Like making it into the cave. There are caves in history. And castles that were stormed. So maybe it is a sublimation of reality, but actually, actually, it shows us everything we have achieved.

From Papert and Logo and the turtle in all the squares, which so many have written about, because it is iconic, so iconic. The little turtle that made its way into my reality, ten, five, ten years after the rest of the world because we live further away from the centre in Africa. This did not stop Elon Musk who was quite a bit of a real champion in some ways where he managed to influence the shape of things but doesn't talk about his time in Africa that much. He needed some big spenders for his early PayPals because we weren't ready for his ideas yet maybe, which seem mainly to be about luxury products at the moment.

Maybe they trickle down like cars, you had to make them better than horses, but a fine horse and carriage was still the choice of the rich, so they need to make electrical cars like fine stallions so that the wealthy can adopt them. So that they can produce them en masse in people-less factories that work off the sun, sounds wonderful, but people still die from malaria and we haven't fixed that. Neither the odds of being shot in the face if you are born in the wrong neighbourhood.

But now there is the beach and I recall reading about a story next to the river one year ago. It is a splendid river of a thousand ripples and mirrors. Better than Gatsby's automobile. Seeing trucks taking commerce over the bridge gives me a hit of some kind of chemical that my brain makes. Similar to the joy I feel when I walk along the shoreline and shuffle through the small waves that hit the land. This is the central truth to life on earth, this meeting of the water and the land, liquid and solid, phases of matter. But, I reason, we are all underwater as the atmosphere is not that different from water with its humidity and moisture and oxygen that we swim through.

Then you become one year older because it is your birthday, and the sun has orbited the earth five hundred years ago, but now it doesn't, it is just one part of something else we rotate around. Persephone bringeth not the Spring. But it is beginning here. Even though the water is cold, the whiteness of the spray on the waves, is maybe the purest white I can think of besides snow. The water and salt are driven into this froth by the moon. And I read the cosmic comics and wish to replicate the wondrous entities of the mythological past coming to us through the night stars. Their shapes, the wondrous fishlike shape of Medusa, her scales thick green and slithering. Taut body and hideous head screaming daisies. Throw flowers. Let it all rain down. Then walk slowly back up the hill. To sleep, with the worlds that live in this space, fleetingly, through your head.

Same Game Again

I play the same game again. A video game I have played many times before. Nothing is new. I play it again. To see the animations. To see the characters buzz. Play it again without feeling much. I watch the blocks fall one after another. There is a blue one. There is a red one. This one is yellow. I move it over to one side. Lay it down over there. See how fast I can move it one click left and right. Leftrightleftrightleftright. My face remains emotionless. Jump over a goon. Jump up a platform. This one has coins. This one has rings. Jump. I've played this before. I know what to expect. But I can't help it. I play it again.

Artillery

There was a time that I was firing a machine gun. I was trying to get it to work. It was not working as fiercely as it could. So I changed the setting on it to fire a higher calibre. A deep resounding claps of gunfire. It seemed to be decimating the targets. I think my only frame of reference were video games and movies and the result was a mix of both of them. Destroying the area around. Then there was a woman who had her boobs out. Her nipples had become elongated. Sort of like small fingers. This was quite normal, my wife informed me. It happened quite frequently to women like this with their boobs out near machine guns. She was quite matter-of-fact.

Testicle Ants

You feel the heat. Sandwiched by it on the ground. It is an okay heat because you have placed yourself in water. Placed yourself in water and then placed yourself on the ground. For a minute. For the minutes that you have to spare to do this thing. To place yourself here and look at the birds. That is what these minutes are for. Other minutes will be for something else. They have been going at it all day. The birds. In the trees. There are hundreds of them. They swarm.

Someone told you their name. It sounded like azaleas. But it wasn't azaleas. These birds. So now you think of them as azaleas hovering in the air. Their stalks hanging down. Their petals collaring their heads. Humming in a group. A group of flying azaleas. But these are birds and they are swarming. All at once. Making an incredible ruckus. They are a feedback loop. One goes they all go. Knock on effect. From all directions they come. These birds. Screeching as they move. Decorating the acacia. Azaleas in the acacias. Back and forth. Once the last few land the ones starting the next move have already begun to flee. They do this over and over again. Through the heat. In a loop.

You just lie there stranded. On the terrestrial rock where the cool water on your body is wearing off. In these minutes. Allowed for looking at these birds. In a frenzy. Organized frenzy. Frenzy of azaleas. They scream. Their heads off. Your head on the ground. Where you lay it. For these minutes. To be sandwiched by the heat. Look down and see the ants. These ants are the big ones. With massive thoraxes and long legs. Speeding across the floor. Speeding in a frenzy. These ants. Like a hand scuttling its fingers across a table. You think – what if. What if these ants crawled all over your body. What if these ants found their way into your testicles. These ants. Testicle-ants. Floor ants to testicle-ants.

Would testicle-ants inherit your features? They would have ant bodies and your head. Thousands of them. One sperm per ant. They would fly from your inert testicles sandwiched by the heat. You could be the proud Genghis Khan of testicle-ants. Human heads with ant mandibles bursting through the cheeks. Compound eyes bulging out the face like goggles. This is the going rate. They'd need to keep going and gather resources and bring them back to your testicles. Make a mound of them. A mountain of testicle anthills. Two of them. Like kidneys. One could be a backup. For a race of testicle-ants streaming from where your testicles used to be.

Would you be able to kill-squash them? Little ants with your features. Would you be able to stand on them by mistake? Would you be able to control them if they got out of control? If they multiplied to the point of collapse. Would you be able to right the wrong you had done? Would you be attached to your testicle-ants seeing them as yours and yours alone? To go down with their ship if they lived beyond their means? Parent clinging to child. Would these multitudes of ants with your head on top of them be presided over by you and only you? Simpler than that the testicle-ants may already be gone. Come up to your testicles in the seconds that you dozed; locked frozen in the heat. When your heartbeat catches and you open your eyes again the testicle-ants have vanished. Already pointed out into the world. With their chemical compasses and little human heads. Nature has run over you with its course.

Gary Recurring Point Five

Talk to Gary. If you do the same thing will happen. I am still here waiting. There is a sign above my head. My body is a small pillar. I can wave. I can move my legs up and down. If I do these things together it looks like a little dance. I can also face two directions. I am plugging things in. Patching them with cables. Switch this one off. Turn that one on. Try another combination. Scale the problem up. Plug. Unplug. Is it better? I can't tell. Try something else. There is a dialogue box above my head. It says talk to Gary. If you hit the button that says talk to Gary. Talk to Gary will disappear for an instant and be replaced with the words: talk to Gary. It does not matter what combination of signals you try. What connections you have. It is always the same. When you hit the button: talk to Gary.

Numb

He looked at pictures of vaginas. On a conveyor belt. Microfiche. Libraries have these. For newspapers. He trawled through images. Just vaginas. One after the next. All women had one. Some took photos of them. Different shapes. Hair density. Tangles. Viscosity. States. Ages. Parting lips. Inner lips: outer lips. Brown lips. No masturbation. No spreading. No unnatural exposure. Just vaginas. Medical detachment. Hair colour and density varied the most. There was a red one. He whiled away the afternoon. Smoking. Drinking coffee. Controlling the machine. Vagina after vagina. Perhaps he would do dicks next.

Slot-Machine

A one-armed man that you saw on the television makes its way into your dreams. The one-armed bandit with his pistol out says he will take your change with an eye-patch and no sign of machinery about him whatsoever. Think of the lack of verbs and let it all rush over you. Sex, sex, sex — like three slots on the machine.

There is some comingling of sex and beauty. Not that you can fuck a sunset (which is beautiful), but the awe you feel transmutes itself into other sides of the self-sensation. Sex like a sunset. Feel desire and the value of muting it, negating it, ignoring it. The token of shame on the slot machine that swallowed your last coin. Sublimate desire into the furry sex that is the animal skin on the wall of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

Try not look at the slot machine. Suggestively vulgar plump cherry twins. Back away and fall all the way down. Thinking of hairy pubic regions that stretch down into the land of sensation and the inside of sea-shell pink. Vanish, boom, poof, gone replaced with *Zarathustra* and his animalistic symbols.

The structures of his thought are oh so wonderful but you are missing all of these connection points and deeper meanings. You keep on eating it up, because, maybe otherwise you would die, and this has something to do with it. All of your deficiencies and anxieties as a human and a being make you think that maybe the greatest thing of all is the idea of sitting still and emptying yourself of all of these things.

The aimlessness takes you again and you can't remember what you were thinking about. The bandit winks and then – slippery vaginas and pounding cocks. A specific aesthetic to reflect on because here it is like swinging pendulous bosoms held in a very suggestive way that you cannot touch. Thoughts you cannot reach. Tantalus giggles and you think again and again of the sharp edges at the sides of the page.

Octopussy

Siaxiou35 could not remember the first time she took that octopus to the back and placed it between her legs. Only that it had continually caused her intense excitement and shame in equal amounts. She could not account for the shame immediately. On more persistent investigation she reasoned it was linked to the feeling that someone was watching her while she did it. The peculiarity of the act did not cause her immediate embarrassment. She thought it was an action that she made use of for pleasure and nothing more. The judgement of others, however, placed a different spin on things. It made her feel weird to begin with and sometimes put her off the whole idea completely. So she left the octopi alone for some time where her husband had piled them on his return. This was, she ruminated, the first source of her shame.

The notion of the infidelity towards her husband was the second perhaps. Siaxiou35 counterbalanced this with the amount of time her husband spent apart from her. On many occasions, he was on the water fulfilling his role as a fisherman from very early hours in the morning and gone all day. Other times he returned very late at night with the smell of alcohol on him and only thoughts of food and sleep on his mind.

Therefore she was elated at the thought of the octopus when lonely and eyed a top most octopus as it lay on a pile of other octopi in a wicker basket near the door. She tested its skin with her finger and found it to be sublimely slippery. Siaxiou35, being a sensual being, soon became curious as to what may transpire should she experiment with this slipperiness in other ways. It should be said that her husband was not an overly cold fisherman. In fact, there were many occasions when the octopus made her feel depleted. That the experience did not measure up to the meaningful interactions she felt with real men like him.

The octopus could not give her this. It gave her something else during the times she connected with it. Connected and felt that uncanny feeling that someone or something may be watching. What the octopus provided excited the octopus too. It slowly became an aroused octopus. Savouring the moment of contact. A spark of life attained through touch. More than just life – a need to reach out, ensnare, entangle: consume. This was what the octopus hoped for anyway.

It had remained motionless at first. Allowed itself to be hefted and carried and used like a tentacled wash flannel. Soon, however, it woke up. Slowly at first. This resulted in Siaxiou35 being unsure if the movement she was feeling between her legs could be attributed to the movements of her hand guiding the octopus or if she was accurately detecting a subtle squirming. Something akin to the reflex-movements of dead bodies. Soon, however, there could be no doubt that the orthopod was indeed moving.

Not only this, but it was timing its movements with when she was closest to climax. Japhy86 became gradually more responsive. As he grew accustomed to the routine of their meetings he was able to make sure he was completely awake for them. He also worked diligently to improve his techniques. When alone schemes were hatched on how to better move his tentacles for pleasure. The tricky skills needed to maintain a creative awareness of the neat rows of little yellow suction cups down the length of his body. These ideas occupied his mind.

Siaxiou35 gained the rewards of his diligence. Where she entered a small stone store room with a Japhy86 clutched in her hand and his tentacles spilling down in a waterfall of undulating furling

and unfurling suckers; a curtain of shimmering colours and hard-edged aromas. She had no sooner shut the door and loosened her garments when Japhy86 slid animatedly off her palm and onto the floor landing with a squelch. He propelled himself forwards beneath a mass of limbs, the foremost of which, reached out to wrap around one of Siaxiou35's dainty heels. She closed her eyes instinctively. It was slightly uncomfortable like stepping into cold still water.

The tentacle proceeded to encircle her ankle twirling its way up to her knee. More tentacles joined to enmesh her legs. Giant octopus eyes looked up at her adoringly. Tripped her up slightly and she leaned back against the door lifting her garments. It was at this point she thought she sensed someone else there. Some presence observing their connection. She wondered if she might see an eye looking through the key hole if she were to look for it. Maybe a presence looking down from one of the corners of the room amidst the cobwebs. Spying.

Violent red and black tentacles traced their way up past the back of her knee. Rasping gently behind and up the thick backs of her thighs to saddle one buttock. She felt the exhilaration of the tactile sensation. Japhy86 gained purchase at her midriff with more of his appendages converging to create a foundation. Here the pioneer slippery suckers slithered upwards across the open expanse of her back. Siaxiou35 shuddered. The tips bobbed over the nobs of her spine while others below cradled the contours of her tummy. One lone tip collapsed abruptly at the entrance to a belly button where Siaxiou35 regarded it quizzically.

His big octopus mouth slurped distractedly at the side of her stomach while another tentacle caressed her shoulder. She felt an ache inside her. She had been looking forward to this all fucking day. Her hands came down to cup Japhy86's slippery octopus head. She marvelled for a moment at the fractal waves of green and yellow making up the hypnotic surface detail of his head-skin. Delighted at the sensation of his mouth gliding over her, sliding around like a suction pool cleaner.

His mouth was still submerged on the surface. She shot him a knowing look. Her eyes narrowed. Then she sank slowly to the floor cradling the octopus while leaning against the door. Her butt landed on the cold stone floor with a little thud. Suckers slithered up to encircle the nipple of her left breast and it heaved lightly around the areole. An engorged centre hardened into a ripe nubbin responding to the teases and taps of the tentacle tip. The sensation felt liberating and good. A nipple suddenly aware of its contact with the air.

She slid further down onto her back and raised her knees. Japhy86 let gravity take him down to the seaweed garden of her vulva bush. His mouth vacuuming the sides of Siaxiou35's body. It found its way to the side of her inner thigh and paused there. Let tentacles seethe around next to it. She squirmed with anticipation. The octopus mouth was a bit ticklish. She felt her inner thigh polished clean.

She then felt two tentacles separating her vulva gently coursing around and over it. She watched the slick-wet red and black tentacle surfaces juxtaposed against the scraggly mish-mash of her pubic hair. Rolling the contours of soft suckers back and forth at variable speeds. At its slowest she could feel each little sucker rolling over the edges of her skin. She appreciated this. She knew now she would not have to worry about this not happening. She let out a small moan. Stretched out her arms. It became hard to keep track of where all of the tentacles on her body were. She felt she was being played like a sticky violin. Every time an erogenous zone relaxed it was subtly finessed back to life. The back of her knees. Her lower back. The base of her skull.

Beyond the pleasure she imagined the cascading steps of a dancing arcade game. You had to jump on any of four different steps in time to the music. The steps came cascading towards you on a screen. Forwards, backwards, left or right. As the music progressed the steps came hurtling faster and faster. Beyond the pleasure she imagined this. Endless waves of musical steps. It helped take her mind off the other presence, the alien watchers – a maybe audience. She mashed herself into the Japhy86's face in a short staccato rhythm.

Siaxiou35 felt one tentacle tip caress her clit and two others open her vulva in an oozy sort of way. This was done with undulations until Siaxiou35 could endure this sensation no more. She felt the excruciating tingles of ecstasy welling up inside of her. It was a bit like pins and needles but concentrated in a single space. At this point he engulfed her vulva entirely with the watery opening of his mouth. She felt it oscillate there in total overwhelming fucking ecstasy. She savoured the eminent loss of control. He pulled her buttocks towards him with his tentacles. She fucked right back into the yielding squelch of his face.

She squeezed her thighs to get a better grip. Felt the squeeze of octopus between her legs, looked upwards at the ceiling and bumped the back of her head lightly against the wooden door, pushing harder. She felt him test the entrance of her vagina and leant forward to press her weight down on the octopus. She felt him gently increase the depth of the tentacle with each entrance. He then engulfed her once more with his mouth and stretched tentacles upwards to encircle both nipples and twisted them. Siaxiou35's toes twitched in helpless desperation. A slithering tentacle dropped into her mouth. Just enough to suck to the back of her throat. The door rattled. Ramping frustration of pleasure. Her toes flexed.

She shut her eyes and then she felt a tentacle fill her cunt completely. Siaxiou35 ground her hips hard and desperate. The tingles were exploding. Other tentacles slithered frantically between her butt, suckers rasped at her butthole, her perineum, her inner thighs. The mouth sucked and squeezed at her clit while the tentacle plunged into her. She came suddenly and violently contracting and squeezing from ass to clit. Brow furrowed clenching around the abyss with gaping relief.

The eye at the keyhole looked in at her facial expression. Siaxiou36 gave the octopus her last dying humps. Wringing out the last bits of pleasure. His octopus eyes looked up at her. A look of exertion and triumph on her face. That deep chasm. He was already retreating and she felt tentacles slide lifelessly away. Siaxiou36 was quite satisfied. The alien eye monitored them briefly but then seemed to dissipate like rainclouds clearing from in front of the sun.

Bouncing Sound

A house where there was no power. It was a farm that was off-grid and disconnected from the world. Where I needed to stay for the night. I needed to sleep there. Not much going on around it. A truckle bed. The farm was a farm from a documentary about living like we used to live in the old days. There was this noise coming from somewhere I couldn't see. A continuous knocking. My wife's sister was next door. Not sure what she was doing there. I walked in on her. Using my beard clippers to shave her vagina. I averted my eyes before I got a look at her snatch. Her big creamy legs were raised in the air. This seemed quite comical. I felt a vague sense of outrage. I needed to use that tool on my face. I walked out into the night. To try and work out what was going on. To try and confirm whether I had the right idea about this farm. Outside I looked left and right to get my bearings. Someone was playing with a ball. It was my sister in law's boyfriend. He was throwing it up the street where it was hammering into a wall and coming back to him. Long overarm throws.

Belt Buckle

My knuckles look white when I look down at them holding the bed frame. It is one of those old bed frames. Made out of steel. Rusted. My fingers wrap around it. I feel the frame's shape between my fists. Still a good bed. Springy and spartan. A cot more than anything else. Nothing luxurious. It holds me just fine. When I lie there and read my books or look at my phone. What else does it need to do? This is not a hotel. It's a hollowed-out shell of a place. All blasted from the inside. The paint has chipped. There is a gaping window to one side. I look out over the city through it. It also has a torn-out feel to me. It's chipped all around the edges. Old paint and wooden frames. Those windows that get stuck when you slide them open. Such a city out there. This room is small but it is all I can afford. It's my little hovel in the city. I inhabit it. Like a lodger from a Kafka novel. We are all in some ways lodgers from Kafka novels. That's the point of them, isn't it?

The feel of the steel bed frame in my palm holds a tension. It is enough to get me interested in sensation. A morbid fascination. See how much I can have. Kurt Cobain's *nature is a whore, we can have some more*. Because I know what is coming. I remove my belt. Lie on the bed for a while and try and stave off the impulse. Then I know trying to would be useless. Like when I was quitting smoking. But I still had cigarettes hidden around the room. I would sit and stare at the inches of a cigarette in my hand. Trying to figure out what I was going to do. Wondering whether I had control over it. Control over placing it between my lips and lighting up. That was what this was like.

I swing my legs off the bed and sit on the edge. The springs support my weight. I like the feeling of bouncing under my ass. Makes me feel like a kid again. My belt is in my hands. I stare at it. A strip of leather. Folded over a few times. Chipped metal buckle. Sturdy. Reliable. Then I loop the belt through itself and place it around my neck. Looks like it is happening. I sit there a while longer. Control is slipping away from me. Will power. When I get up, I feel that moving to the cupboard is inevitable. Like, I could try and avoid it but I know it is going to happen anyway.

The belt has a couple of extra holes in it. I made them a while ago. I get up on a little step and wrap the belt around the rail a couple of times. There's a little peg I fixed to it that fixes the end of the belt in place through the little holes. This gives me enough tension. If I sag a little, I feel enough constriction around my neck. There is enough pull to limit air flow. I get into position and then drop my pants and underwear. Let my balls and dick hang down with the rest of me. I start feeling myself and run my hands over my body a little. Then I cradle my balls with one hand and pull back the skin of my shaft lazily exposing the glans with the other. It takes a while for me to harden. After a while I can slap it into the palm of my hand - like a policeman with his truncheon. Then I know I am good to go. I've used other things for this set up. Bits of rope. Stretchy fabrics. I like the belt because of the feel of leather around my neck. The belt is solid. Reliable.

I let my body sag a little more and I begin to drag my hand back and forth along the length of my erection. This is all it takes. This is all there is to it. Establish a rhythm. Feel the nerve endings sing. Let the belt take more of my weight. Close my eyes. Feel a catch at my neck and struggle to breathe and then relax into it to allow for the blood to flow down to my dick. Get it extra hard. This is part of it. The blood can't get to your head so it goes down to your pants. It isn't like it

completely revolutionises this activity. It's not separate. It's still masturbation. It just makes the whole thing feel - a little more. Like, I want to get everything I can out of it.

I heard that it became a thing from public hangings. That people sported mammoth hard-ons just after their necks crack. Sometimes they'd spurt too. I think I do this now because the regular way isn't enough for me anymore. I need all I can get. I want everything. I'm always trying to improve. Perfect this. Striving to get that balance. Seeing how far I can take the choke. How hard I can come. It makes everything else a little less shitty.

That and the other thing. The other thing is that I start to see things when I do it this way. My vision blacks out around the edges when I'm choking. Sometimes colours explode there. Sometimes at the edge of what I can see the world drops out. There are things in that darkness that I have been trying to focus on. I like to get as close as I can. I step off the little step and now I need to stand on my toes to keep from passing out completely. That would be game over. The strength in my calves are the only thing regulating air flow. It brings on the patches of darkness and I go towards them.

I imagine all sorts of things when I am doing this. I look down at the end of my penis and squeeze the shaft to make the head throb a bit. Like my dick's head is an alien's head. Like the one that pops out the stomach – slippery and purple and screaming. But beyond that it's like a movie. Fantasy unravels, like on one of those old-school movie projectors that you see in other movies. The ones they used to have to wind to show you the film. My hand does the winding back and forth. That is where I go in my head. Imagining trashy scenes with heaps of sucking and fucking. Spread pussies, gaping assholes and slippery dicks. But when I follow that darkness at the edge of my vision – the black-out darkness – it stops being me imagining things and it just happens.

Most times in the darkness I see trees. A dark wood with trees all around. Trees so thick everything is in shadow. Then out of the blackness come fields of dark, shadowy green. Colours well up. Shapes materialize. A whole mess of shapes and as they come I can wander around lucidly. It feels like I have two bodies – the one back there and this one. In this body, the forest goes on forever. And more than that, it seems like it has been lost in time – vast.

There is a rich smell of growing things and wild pungent aromas of decay. Musty, sharp, plant-herb smells. They all mix. It's like I have surfaced there after being underwater. I can walk through and I don't have to think about my shitty life. Plus I am really fucking aroused. Full stretch and about to blow. Balls swinging below me like a pair of pendulums. It's a lucid dream where you discover that there is this whole world available – meaning you don't have to deal with the one back there. It's a solution to life.

That's how I felt the first few times until I came gasping and spurting and brought myself back to deal with the shame and hide the marks around my neck. But that promise. That idea that I could wander in that forest for as long as I like kept me coming back. I always tried to go deeper. See more of the trees. Prolong the inevitable need to reach the point where the old world would call me back. Maybe like those free divers who keep pushing themselves deeper under water but this world was alive with trees all breathing around me.

I beat off faster at a run. Leaves and branches hit at my face and I run faster into the darkness. I want to reach the end. I want to see what's at the back. At the back of this darkness. I feel like a young warrior chasing life through the trees. Moving faster and faster piercing deeper and deeper. Every time I hoped I would do it: reach the end. Hit the back wall. Break that record. Like a sprinter, diver, athlete who keeps wondering if this will be the time they break a record.

Which is when I suddenly hit a clearing. A smooth circle in the trees. Slowing down my run, I've entered it before even acknowledging its existence. A massive oak stands tall in its centre. Before it, on a huge stone, is a woman bathing herself. Pouring water over her pale skin. Over her jet black hair. She is impossibly beautiful. Though there is also something inhuman about her. Something wild. Something above and below human. Natural and ancient. Something from sculpture, from urns. From art. Something that has always been there but is still shaped like us.

It's in her eyes. An alien sparkle. An all-knowing corruption in the sharp gem stones of her irises. They look amused and cruel. She sees me and stops and moves over to me. Her arms encircle my neck. Her elbows touch behind my head. The softness of her body pushes into me. I melt into it. She stares deep into my eyes and laughs with pity and happiness. The kind of laughter that is somehow the same as crying. The two things on top of each other.

Her face is so close to mine. Her skin is so close to mine. She is so close to me. Vulnerable like a child and strong together. Rare. A thing sensitive but violent. Magnetic. Charged. Elemental. I am suddenly naked and I taste batteries. Look deep into the pupils of her eyes that are dark like the bottom of pools. We cavort and fuck and shake. Desperately. Deeper and deeper. She is laughing the whole time. An edge of cruelty. A touch of thorns. She sounds like water. Falling. I just want more. More and more of her. To feel closer. To fill the void. To get tighter and tighter and tighter. The belt around my neck. To strain harder. To forget myself more and more. Far away. A choking yawn. Somehow, I know. Deep down, I know. That I cannot enter here and also leave. Cannot see her bathe herself and also live. Cannot drink it in. Cannot know this thing. Cannot trespass. Not with her. It all gets darker. I am falling. I am hanging in her arms. Strung up in the branches of a tree.

Sleep with the Dead

I shuffled forwards. Got into an extra-space cave crevice. Chamber is the best term for it. Enough space to swing a cat. This is something I thought of. I had premonitions of a cat but I could not remember one clearly. Furry animal. Then I realized that I was not alone. There, in the middle of the chamber, was a stone slab. The natural bottom half of a massive stalagmite. Shiny and bare like the rest of the cave.

This was the part where I realized that I was not alone. It was not the slab that was inhabiting this space but a cold-looking maiden that was difficult to see clearly. She had elfin features and was very pale. I guessed it was a *she* as I could make out the soft curves of her body. I stood still. She was lying very still. A pose that is akin to sculpture. Forlorn and bereft of the world. Crumpled, her head buried in her arms. Head buried in the subject's arms. This was something that rang true of the pose that I was witnessing at this moment. An alluring composition of limbs. She could have been made out of porcelain. That is how pale she was. Very smooth. A tangle of limbs like the branches of a tree.

I moved around her and further ascertained the nature of her sex. I witnessed aspects of her that certified that she was a woman with a head of fine black hair to bury her arms in. Knees hitched up beneath her. Still unsure of her life-ness though. Still very little to suggest that she was in-fact animate and not the opposite. That she possessed faculties like I did and was not just a vision. But the skin I was looking at looked fleshy as I got closer. Hints of blue made her skin seem like that of a cave dweller. This was probably from the light. No natural movements from her collection of curved lines. A subtle pile of human embodiments composed in such a way as to look cold and smooth and timeless.

Then she did move. She moved slowly like the unwinding of a clock. She had, I presume, become aware of me in the emptiness of that chamber. Aware of my standing there next to her. She rolled over onto her back and sat up resting on one hand behind her. The other arm was extended in my direction and the elbow on top of the knee on one side of her. There she regarded me. Looked at me from out of the mass of silky black hair. A smouldering gaze and long willow-branch arms. The angles of her cut good shapes. Ones that were alluring. They had symmetry. They were minimalist. They were all I could make out in the sick-light. She rotated her wrist and curled a finger to beckon me.

This was not that unusual. There was quite a lot of this happening in these spaces. In fact, when we were not fighting on the surface above us. So I was not completely sceptical. This was why I moved forwards to her. This was why I dropped what I was wearing. This was why I climbed onto the slab with her. This was why I felt the desire run hot through me. This was why I felt all of the desires I had ever had well up inside of me. These things that were in my genetic programming. That stretched back to Earth. This was why this was happening.

She felt smooth but not completely cold. Faint glimmers of life within her long body. It wrapped around me. Felt me feeling it. Soft silky thickness of fine hair sashaying like water down over my back. Enveloping pillars of her tendril legs allowed for passage to her waist. Mounds of her breasts pressed against me pinned by her rib cage. She felt like marble.

Desire and heat is what I felt. Glossy finishing of images that spun the way double helixes do. Fantasies contained beyond vision. Marble patterns of cloud-stone. Dripping caramel poured into the naked vestiges of puffy white ice-cream. Fields sprinkled with crushed nuts. Smell of mildew from the cave. Velvety softness of her inner thigh. Slender branches and perfumed pages elicited in me proud engorging. Engorgings of a hard cock that was close to erupting. Salivating slightly I slid it in and out of her. She fucked into me with her hips, causing her to buck and gasp, snarl and bite at my shoulder through the silky shroud of black hair that tumbled down her face. The wet black pubic paint stroke. Our bones ground desperately into each other and I came gasping and felt something leave my body. Some scum. Some fluttering heartbeat that pulsed grotesquely out of the end of me.

And the marble sheen of her contours began immediately to wither. The lights I had perceived inside her eyes receded. Eyeballs shrivelled like old grapes. First the feeling of tree bark on her skin. Rippled and wrinkled. Then to the dry leaves of paper and layers flaking off. One after the other exfoliating in layers. Gooseberry sheaths tearing; and seams splitting. Discarded wings of flying ants. To reveal cracks and rips all over her body. Below this deteriorating skin were insects wriggling and she was coming apart. Folding downwards. Ripping away. Innards revealed only as a seething mass of bugs. Centipedes, worms and ants. Frantically crawling away and over me. They fled. Entropy forcing them into every direction. Until only I was left alone on the stone table. Spent, traded and quite horrified.

Objects

I am your meat dildo. Packed like a package of pork. Squishy bits of meat with a film of plastic around it. Mincemeat. Can be prodded with the finger. Leaves a little dent. I am like this or any other item at the supermarket you can rub yourself against. Injection-moulded polished plastic. Detachable shower head. Hard and unyielding.

You are my blow-up doll. Also plastic. A reliable surface to push against. To spurt need into. You never refuse me and are always available. Always there. Like the need. Always building up or breaking down. Waxing or waning.

Now I am your blow-up doll. Pull me. Push into my plastic holes. Filled with inert gas. You grip me with your arms while I lie here. Push the taut air into my limbs so I flail momentarily. Bright cartoon colours. Homogenous skin-tone. Fake yellow plastic hair. Red O-face mouth. You could be rubbing against anything.

You are my meat popsicle. Squishy cylinder on the end of a body. I only need this part. When I am ready. Vacuum packed raw goulash. Thick density. Little flesh-fist. Pack of drumsticks. Poultry next to the dairy section. I need that part. But not the rest of you. Your meat could be any meat. Don't even need you inside. When the time comes. Just need you near. I'll finish on you. You're my meat dildo.

Your Asshole is Rubbed on my Heart

You look at me hungrily. Here we are. The two of us. Down here in the pit. It isn't a pit. It is a basement. Underneath the world. The look on your face is a little demented. Cans of foie gras in a pile. Goose livers. You crawl over to them and sit on your rump. They look really neat-wonderful stacked in a pyramid. My stomach yearns for the richness. You pry open a tin and scoop some out. Lick it off your fingers. Look at me like you won't share. Keep it to yourself. It will be okay if we don't have too much. I hear myself saying. If we reduce the level of our hungers. Eat only an elegant sufficiency. Then the bull dozers can fly. Pulling out the earth's entrails. To build buildings and geese and ducks. But you have finished the whole can. Sit there licking your chops. The liver that seems to grow back. Prometheus. Maybe if we put a plaster on it.

I grab a ripened tomato and take a bite out of its juicy face. The juice runs down my chin. These are the fabulous food-European ones. Big fat juicy and good. They're sitting right here next to me. Just one more shouldn't break the bank. I'll plant a few more tomorrow. Fire up the steam engine. We are ready to dance. I rub the 'mato in sea salt. Give it another good bite. You look stricken with hurtfulness. Give me quoth you. Look feistily through wet locks. Hand jabbed out forwards at me. Splat down the rest of the fruit in your palm. I like the feeling of your want. You hide it in your face very quickly. When it's finished there's a moment of shame. It's quick and it's fleeting and there.

I want more you moan. I guess we can have. My body feels great but dirty on top of you. For now we are happy in clownish lust. Enough of us to go around. Enough to hold in your hand. Your delight is self-evident. My body feels empty-full. Had enough but I still want some more. Surely we can still get through this. We grow through organic degrees. How can some more be wrong then? It isn't. Stop talking you croak. I am rather heavy and you must be feeling raw on the floor.

Florescent lights on the basement. Spacious. Well-lit. Empty. Body-wrench. Soft lips and insides slippery. Push cock right upwards. Gets in and slides home. Rooted hard encircled by your inside. Repeated rough rasp of body hair. Grotesquery screams from your open maw. Closed knuckles rap against the outside of my skull. Hysterical you want to feel more. Fuck you. You scream. I'm sick of all of this shit. Smarting off the surface. Skull centre of the head. Flailing knuckles knock at it. Now smother you further. Feel our lengths of skin intertwined. Aroma of skin and heat. Comingling wells upwards. Organic stale fungus. Growing on the inner thigh.

There's space to roll me over. Now up there on top. Move the weight of the body forwards. Bring your pelvis up. Buttocks weighing down on chest. Slick smooth butt cheeks on rib cage. Your asshole is rubbed on my heart. Just enough time for a balled fist to crack against an eye socket. My head snaps back. You never gave me enough! Fuck bastard. My eye is covered in pain. Instinctively I close it. You flailing like a willow on me. Push your pelvis further. Vulva rubs against my chest. Maybe it's more perineum. Pain in my stomach. Semi-erect penis flopped over the side. Knees are now pinning my arms. There's more gas in Russia. Hock up a loogie and spit. It hits the floor with a splat. There are tools all around us. Hammer. Tongs. Rasp. File. Wrench.

You pick up a pair of pliers. They are hefty in delicate hands. Your one hand slaps down on my forehead. The other aims pliers under my lip. Ridges catch onto an incisor. They feel alien and huge in my mouth. I'm still too surprised at the intrusion. Scrutinising what's going on. Both hands now you scream and lean backwards. Strain your lower back and pull. Hysterical pain erupts. Roots loosen and fail. Out comes the little bone. A thick spray of blood. Deposited in chest hair. The tooth hits the floor. Skitters on the polished concrete. You lean down to kiss lips full on the mouth. Push your teeth through to grind yours against mine.

The messy empty tooth socket. Oozes pain and blood. I am still choking. Tongue jams hot in my mouth now. Thick muscle-eel jabs at the empty crevice where the tooth was. Spooning out the gelatinous mass. Slurping sounds. Gorge yourself on this taste. Bolus clogs up and you choke. You're still convulsing above me. Dirty blonde hair stuck to your face. Bony shoulders and hanging breasts. Punch you in the throat.

The bottle of vodka is heavy. Like a gun in my hand. I peer over the tooth. Oily white against concrete. Get myself a good look. Like when I used to watch ants. Here lies my tooth. It was a chomper from my mouth. Now just an artefact. Bring the bottle right down on it. Feel the crush beneath the glass. The tooth breaks like a piece of chalk. I push down harder. Grinding it out. Feeling the little pieces yield and collapse. Until it's a coarse powder. Outstretch my tongue flat on top and press down. Taste a sandy cold floor. Pull head forwards and curl the tongue back inwards. Another pull from the bottle to wash it all down. Burning bloody tastes bitter.

Look over to you. Heap of extremities, limbs, digits. Completely still except your eyes. Prowl forwards towards you. Grip ankle knee hip. Tan thighs kick outwards. Heel glances a rib. My fingers grab you at the armpit. Open my other hand right next to your face. Reveal a left-over piece of bone. Still sticky bloody. A bit of the root. I give you what's left of my smile. My lips feel tight around gums. You lean forwards. Yes. Thankyou. Take it out of my hand with your mouth. One gulp and it's gone.

Your arm whips across my face. Willowy. Open palm slaps cheek. Only the report of flesh. Maybe stubble contact. Fuck you not enough. Get on me and give me some more. We can shoot the waste into space. My hand forks your elbow. Weighing it down. You slide your back away but thrust hips up. Loins incongruously hungry. Vulva open to make slippery contact. Swollen now I collapse into you. Feel the ready moistness with the end of my penis. Tearing a chunk out of your shoulder. You let out a cry and fuck harder. Bones grind together. Things are resisting but part. We try to get closer. Knee presses down on your thigh. We struggle and buck.

I imagine a beautiful roof. Re-shingled and patched up perfectly. On an old but respectable house. Cleaning out those clogged gutters. Leaving it ready for rain. Thrusting faster now. Head-butting at the contours of your face. Chewing on torn nipples. You bite off the end of my ear. A great big house. Made out of strong beams of timber all on fire. Yellow, red and orange. The flames suck and spit. Something wet and sticky on thighs. Bathed in runny shit. Ass-hole let go in the moment. The stink is overpowering. Sticky-thick. Seems to enthuse us even more. Jealous of my chewing your teeth nibble at my jugular and rip. A sting of pain at the side of my neck. Skin is thin and pierced like the end of a balloon. Watery blood starts spurting. You lap at the blood just a little. Paints a quick shiny ring around your mouth. A fleshy flap has opened up at my neck. Our bodies fuck harder together. More we say softly together. My thumbs find their way to your eyes. Press down. More. Fingers scratch deep into scalp. Then slam your skull to the ground. With all of my shouldering weight. I hear a crack and plates part. Nausea wells up in the

stomach. Feel something soft and sticky between bone. Left shoulder a river of blood. I'm feeling quite dizzy now. My face slumps into the mess of you.

Star-Ants

He has to get back. To turn on the diesel generator. To avoid the onset of night. Where the smallest cracks will become entryways. To the parallel universes that sprawl their way through the land. Held in the many stars that lie above and overhead. The many stars. That represent the universal market place. Pulsations of light. Make their way through space. They bring with them: ants.

Ants that follow you back. All the way back. To where you sleep. Crawling through the night.

Out of the stars. Out of the stars and into your sleeping space. Like little silver trinkets. Go marching into your head. Where they feast on your dreams and replicate their base reality. Taking the slumber you win from a waking day of life.

They take it for themselves. Send it back along the lines. To the nest that exists in the sky. They send your dreams back into the stars. The universal computer. They replace your dreams with copy and pasted items. From your previous day. So that you have no hopes. But rather just get stuck in whatever pressures happen to make themselves felt on your person for no real reason other than the belief that pressure makes for better service. This is the illusion. Like that film *Speed* where there is a bomb on the bus. Where they play the CCTV tape over and over again. The bad guy has no idea that his hostages are escaping. He just keeps watching the looped footage. That is what they do with our dreams.

I have what I Want and Now it Is Over

The skull is always the same. It sits atop your, my, head. In it there is some space. Some space for something. There is space for a sequence of events. It is a place for something to grow. Does this make it like a nut? My skull is a hard bony shell. Covered in skin but beneath this is bone. Plates are in the shape of a dome. It is a finite immutable shape burning in cosmic fire. The skull is submerged in watery soup. The skull sinks to the bottom of the ocean. Inside of the skull is a life. A life that is told it is alive. A life that is told it can play games. A life that is told it can have feelings. But the skull knows that the life inside it may be a lie. It may already be dead. The ants crept in while it was slumbering on the earth lodged firmly in the squelch of mud. They removed all of the good dreams. Each little neuron bobbing out in a stream of exiting ants. They streamed out of the nose holes, ear holes and eye sockets. They left just enough for the skull to function. They have what they want and now it is over.

Applemagic

An apple. No crab apple. Scrumptious big delicious apple. Golden green. Don't know about quinces and their business. This is an apple. *The* apple. From *the* tree. When I look down at it in my hand. I can only just hold onto it. Monolithic mouth piece of a piece of fruit. Hanging from the tree. Now in my hand. This complete thing. Whole fruit. Fine flesh of land now here on my palm where I look at it. This gleam of waxy green. Sub cutaneous layer. This apple skin. It is a solid weighty thing. Enough to snap off a bite. Scrunch out another one. Face mash that thing into mine. Tear into the juicy juice. Sweet nature of nature. This round tree-heart losing itself bit by bit to my mouth. Get that apple glue going. The way a horse does it. When you feed it an apple. It pulverises it – completely. I do this, in little bits, and then I swallow it down. I hit something hard deep inside the apple in my mouth. It jolts me. Jolts me good. Like when you are walking up stairs and think there is another one but there isn't and you land and it hits your spine funny. Unexpected. It is like this except between my teeth. I push it out with my tongue, through my lips and into the gap waiting between finger and thumb. It scrapes my teeth as it passes. Ridges, like a comb, file at them. When I hold it up and look at it between my fingers. It's a tiny metal screw.

Part B: Portfolio

Portfolio

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

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by

Andrew Stuart-Watson

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Reflective Journals

Introduction

This is a curated selection of observations pulled from a massed collection of reflective journal entries made over a two year period. I have focused on reflections that deal specifically with my creative process undertaken in developing the pieces that appear in my thesis. These have been supplemented by observations I have made on authors, novels and writings I have been fuelled by over the last two years and beyond. I have favoured the former over the later for the sake of brevity more than anything else. The observations and journal entries in this section are arranged chronologically and I have commented retrospectively to try and provide context where needed, these comments are indicated with italics.

I have considered the confluence of form and content in these reflections. What emerged was the initial process of orientating myself around structured creative writing and reading. I later grappled with the interplay between spontaneity and crafted structures in stream of consciousness works versus conventional narrative structures (whatever this may mean). I then attempted to weigh up the merits of expressive writer voice versus the actualization of world and character. I did this conceptually more than in application and my work leant towards voice as opposed to mechanical character arcs. This is viewed alongside a lens of selected writing from suggested lists as well as the occasional supplemented text. The section starts with a reflection I made at the beginning of this process outlining what I foresaw as my navigation points starting out.

Reflective Journal Week 5 January 2020

This journal will stand as reference to the journey I am embarking on in undertaking a Masters in Creative Writing. My intention in this journal is to create a space for reflections and observations that may be useful to refer back to during the course of my development.

It should also be a vantage point from which to track my thought processes and verify the directions I will be headed in through this experience. I hope to establish a direct link between observation and technique but I suspect certain elements may well become more organic than this and may well extend beyond formal syllogistic cause and effect.

This meant we would need to prepare for an online seminar and a reading group that would both occur bi-weekly. My interaction with lecture or seminar material would be done after the fact through audio recording. Therefore there was a correspondence aspect to this. I felt a bit like I was on assignment. To paraphrase a quote from William S. Burroughs I felt a bit like a secret agent on an alien planet deep undercover and unsure where my next set of orders would come from.

The next element to the course would be the reading group. This would constitute the selection of reading material that would be read and scrutinized in a group of about ten of us. This allows us to examine what the effects of the words in front of us are as well as bring us into contact with what other people are reading. So a network of reading and reflection is established through the group promoting growth.

The previously described exercise of reading work in groups is developed by choosing anthologies to peruse in pursuit of writing one wants to talk about. Here I examined elements of causality in myself choosing an anthology that fits a preconceived notion of what I was looking for over instinctive visual attraction. Both were viable options but I went for the former in an anthology called *Short* by Alan Ziegler.

In terms of my actual writing I am not yet certain whether prose or poetry is the strongest suit for responses and suspect I will experiment with both for a while longer as they both seem to serve the assignments set for us. There are elements of craft I would hope to be able to utilize more actively which is a challenge when I am aiming to achieve something spontaneous I feel if it is over crafted it loses some of its pizzazz. So the trick for me will be to try and become aware of techniques of craft to the point that they emerge naturally. This is an exciting prospect.

What I think I took away from the experience most prominently was the fact that it was exhilarating reading work to other listeners. To get work out there so to speak. Even if this was part of a structure that was in place.

Reflective Journal Weeks 9 & 10 2020

Something becomes stale if you try and use it with the expectation of effect. It needs to be experimental on some level. I also think these things are effective when they have been internalized to the point where you are unaware of their application.

Stacy Hardy's seminar on writing from the body was an engaging one. I enjoyed the concept of writing from the body. Trying to get closer to write something of the raw humanity of human bodies. There was a powerfully sexual component to the seminar. This being a strong driver of the body. This was supported in the readings that we covered which dealt with incest (*Hogg*, Samuel R Delany) and elements of bestiality (*Dark Spring*, Unica Zurn) and in some instances sex with arachnids (*Spider Fuck*, Willie Smith).

The experiential takes us out of our minds and roots us in the body. Which, for me, is core to art: the experience.

Therefore my casual observations on my memories appeared to be more compelling in many ways than the writing I did intentionally portraying a specific set of ideas around the body.

Reflective Journal Week 13 – 14 April 2020

I am really enjoying the way the course is structured to organically allow us to encounter texts. The reading groups give us insight into what other people are reading. It hinges on the fact that there is a solid store that we are drawing from. So far I have enjoyed ploughing through titles on the long and short reading list.

I am always curious whether the author thinks of the story first and sketches it many times and knows exactly how many levels he wants to write. Or has a rough idea and spontaneously generates several levels to keep things fresh. They end up being similar concepts. All I know is that, for me, if I try and work too much out in a story it becomes laboured very quickly. Through lack of skill in its execution or simply through a laboured writing that is too wordy. Which is something I now try and avoid (in many cases unsuccessfully).

Reflective Journal Week 19 – 20 May 2020

This reflection deals with the process around writing the first draft of Transit. This was a stream of consciousness piece written about travelling through India. It was written while reading a lot of postmodern American poetry but as a direct response to the poem 1st attempt: the bus by Antjie Krog.

I was definitely influenced by what I was reading in the approach that I took in my assignment. The poem that stood out to me the most was Antjie Krog's poem (*1st attempt: the bus*) which had been written without any punctuation and was one long poisonous rant about a truism in that we are all ecosystems for microscopic bugs. Not using punctuation is not as easy to pull off as it seems as I recall trying it out many years ago in an attempt to mimic Kerouac in an experiment and I found it very challenging to sustain that kind of narrative.

I think it is useful in trying to formulate a stream of consciousness writing that contains little or no punctuation to work from one's own memory as it feeds the flow of the writing and is immediately available. This was something that I had toyed with when practicing forms of venting thoughts and found that I could get into a rhythm that allowed for a flow that was varied in its content but maintained a narrative (to an extent). This resulted in a very long poem.

Reflective Journal Week 21 – 22 May 2020

Alongside these discoveries were the beginning engagements with Charles Bukowski's *Ham on Rye*. I have wanted to read this book for a long time so I was enthusiastic about its inclusion on the long list.

What I found most interesting was the way Bukowski was able to use imagery in his writing. Where he will include a figurative element now and again but because he does not frequently adorn his writing in any way it is all the more potent in the reading. Therefore his prose perfectly mirrors the content of his characters and they exist in harmony. Still the way he composes his images demonstrates considerable depth and one cannot but help observe the artistic elements contained in his simplicity. This in itself is quite paradoxical as a counter-culture novel probably scornful of high-minded notions of art.

Bukowski would also be an influence to the 'low-brow' writing I was going to encounter at the end of the course through the literary journals I would read.

Reflective Journal Week 30 – 31 August 2020

What I took away from our last reading group, where *Altman's Tongue* was read, was the power of one of the first sentences in the first paragraph. 'He had found his daughter facedown in the sun-thick mosquito-spattered mud, by the back corner, where the dark paint had started taking air underneath and was flaking off the house now and falling apart at a touch like burnt turkey skin.' (Altman's Tongue, Evenson).

This line hit me as such a powerful description and includes so many different elements of, what I perceive to be, the intended aesthetic. There is something very poetic about just this line. It is also incredibly descriptive but also delivers some of the sad value judgements of the story. Likening someone's skin to flaking paint or burnt turkey skin is quite a leveller when it comes to human life.

This is a concept I ended up experimenting with within my assignment for course teacher Chwayita Ngamlana on writing about sex. I ended up writing about the anticipation of sex almost more than the act of sex but I placed a specific focus on the first line of the piece.

Reflective Journal Weeks 32 – 33 August 2020

There is something quintessentially philosophical about death and writing about death.

I wrote about my grandmother. She was someone I could conceive of a before and after with. What I think worked for me was how much information I had to work with. I like the fact that I had a wealth of memories to draw on in writing the piece. I also wanted to plan things quite comprehensively in my own mind before writing but not actually write a series of mind maps to try and keep things fresh. This way I spent a few days or weeks thinking about the piece I wanted to write and pondering, reconnoitring and spelunking different aspects of the story.

There was the idea around a rhino coming for the person I was writing about. The rhino was a symbol for death. This was a symbolic element that was included through a vision the protagonist or subject experienced.

Once I had these aesthetic and symbolic elements confirmed in my mind I felt far more comfortable writing the piece which I had reasoned to have a go at using the continuous style I had used previously.

The style here, though quite energetic for a piece on death, I hoped would mirror the inevitability of death and how there is nothing we can do to escape it. This, I hoped, would be conveyed through the continuous stream of consciousness style and lack of formal punctuation and paragraphs. I also reasoned that it would afford me some interesting opportunities to play around with memory and jump around, so to speak, from geographical location and time which would be useful for the aesthetic.

I recall agonizing over the concept and planning of this piece. It was stressful trying to get everything right and never being sure whether I was making the right choices for the piece. I recall getting very angry and needing to go for a walk to clear my head. This definitely helped in cultivating the space I needed to get the piece out onto the page.

After the first draft I reflected on the piece and considered that maybe I could make it more crafted through beginning with a style that was not continuous and swap into the stream of consciousness style to describe the rhino in the hope that form would mirror function. I think after all the feedback I got on this was that the first draft was more natural for the piece and the second version that bounced between third and first person narration was maybe a little forced.

*Looking back on this I think there is still the possibility that I did not execute the switch in style as effectively as I saw it used in Robert Coover's *The Elevator* and this may account for it not working. An equal observation is that the form the piece is now in is now right for it.*

Reflective Journal Week 36 – 37 August 2020

During this seminar I would write a short piece attempting to replicate the style of Beckett's monologues. The piece would later come to be called Abduction in my thesis that comingles themes of existentialism and alien abduction.

The Beckett seminar facilitated by course supervisor Paul Mason asked us to recreate a monologue with a very broad base from which to start.

The readers were composed of works from Beckett's novels: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnameable* from *Samuel Beckett the Complete Short Prose*.

This is an observation about inspiration, muses and how spontaneous and unpredictable they can (and maybe should) be.

The part that inspired me was a scene describing the methodical sucking of stones taken from a pocket and then deposited in another pocket. This I found to be such an interesting image and it is effective as one can think of the tastelessness of the stones similar to placing a marble in one's mouth as a child.

The challenge was then to write this as succinctly as possible. I really enjoy this image and there is a chance I will revisit it even more in the future. The difficulty for me would be to get it just right. I would need to try and get it so the story could come through and live on its own terms and not be obscured by stylistic elements of the writing.

The first draft I did I was very verbose in my explanations and the volume of words. I tried to carve into the language and use the stylistic devices employed in Beckett's work. To work on the second-guessing and constant clarification of the speaker's voice.

This worked to the extent that I was able to sketch out the story but it ended up being much too long. It is difficult editing stream of consciousness writing as it messes with the flow of the piece but this was also a practical skill I practiced here and something I would like to get better at.

I work-shopped an editing technique of isolating sections of work I wish to work with through hitting return and condensing them individually and then reassembling them. I found this useful in line with how one might edit film

There was also the fact that I wanted to leave it open to being a vagina that was sucking his head and considered adding an anus for him to be inserted into as well.

The above refers to the content of the piece Abduction describing a man being lifted out of his home and having his skull sucked by a gigantic mouth. I still think an array of orifices may have been an interesting development in the story but perhaps a little clumsy. In retrospect I think an alien 'mouth' was probably the cleanest solution.

Research Journal Weeks 38 – 39 September 2020

This reflection comes at a time in my process where I was still unsure if I would be compelled to seek submission in a prose format as opposed to a poetry one. I gained a lot from immersing myself in the writing and reading of poetry but would finally make the decision to submit my thesis in prose form.

During the course of the week I had been listening to a Naropa Institute talk by Allen Ginsberg on improvised poetics which had been fascinating on ideas around the value of improvised words. It examined the notion of ‘first thought best thought’ and aspects of its fallibility as well as its merit. What was equally useful to me was a text cited in the form of an essay by Jack Kerouac called *The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*. This I found was a good thing to have a look through in terms of trying to develop my abilities in stream of consciousness writing.

Generally a lot of the advice contained in the very stripped-down essay was useful. It spoke a lot about the ethos of writing stream of consciousness but keeps the process sounding quite mystical which was not surprising when I consider it was written by Jack Kerouac – *who was something of a new-age mystic himself*.

I consider the essay a bit of a find and though it is enshrouded in the mystical elements of the jewels of reality, I still think it a good manifesto for the technique. So I will be able to refer to it more in the future, I hope. Some of the feelings that I have been interested in have been the notion of the shape of words in writing. The way they come out seem to have shape in my mind. In the format of poetry every word seems to occupy a compositional shape in its sound.

In retrospect this essay was not that instrumental in informing the style I adopted in the stream of consciousness techniques I worked on. I was simply unable to implement the specific rules outlined in it in my own writing in a natural manner. What I did find very useful was the essence of the essay. This likened stream of consciousness writing to playing jazz punctuated with skill and passion. This meant that the essay was still an important find for me but just less of a user-guide in this writing than I initially thought it may be.

My own reading has shown some shape where I am embarking on *Valis* by Philip K Dick which I am really enjoying and always find his work fascinating. He is not a style writer in my mind but his content I find to be really compelling where I really love his combination of narcotic usage and technology.

Research Journal Weeks 39 – 40 October 2020

This reflection deals with a piece I wrote that focused on motif in narrative for course teacher Henali Kuit's seminar. My piece An Endless Loop would look at loops and circles linked to video-tapes and loading screens. The video tape idea was inspired in part by Ontessa Moshgehg's My Year of Rest and Relaxation where she uses old videos and videos to substitute social connections in real life.

The issue that I encountered when I started the process of composing something for my assignment was that I did not find it that difficult to replicate something that would lend itself to forming a motif in writing but I struggled to think of characters.

I gave it a lot of thought and settled on the loading screen or spinning wheel that is a modern symbol or icon. That is because when I think about motif in writing I think of all of the symbols and semiotic manifestations representation can take the form of. I think of old religious monuments and iconographies associated with loops and circles.

I settled on the spinning loading wheel in computer space as it was conveniently shaped like a circle which I knew I could splice with the spinning wheel of Buddhism that has a few spokes.

After receiving the feedback and making notes on what they had said I resolved to try and write more of a plot into the story. The idea that came to me immediately was that of suicide and depression. The idea of being stuck in an endless loop or illusion struck me as a good way to end things with suicide. It is also in line with *Valis* which deals with botched suicides. There was also a scene in *Chair* by Lidia Yuknavitch from *Liberty's Excess: Fictions* found in a previous seminar that dealt with suicide quite nicely.

I did not end up trying to recreate Chair which magnificently maintains the tension of a chair involved in suicide but rather just used the useful object of a chair. So I adopted the image of the chair for the end of the piece as opposed to the conceptual fireworks found in the piece from Yuknavitch.

The quote at the beginning of Chair is taken from George Bataille, a radical French writer I would read more of later in the course.

Research Journal December 2020

The creative piece I submitted this cycle was titled *Fisherwoman*. I initially titled the piece *Fisherman and Octopus* which was really the first title that came into my head. I am still struggling with the title for this piece, that I have now titled *Octopussy* for the interim. *Octopussy* is a snappy title but it may be too vulgar and ‘poppy’ for the piece and has nothing to do with James Bond and therefore it is in some ways trying to be funny and clever.

I struggle with titling pieces I always try and write the thing first and worry about the title later. I think that a title is quite important. As in the same way that a first line is something that can or can’t hook you, a title also has this capacity.

One always wants a title to be perfect but in many cases I think they are also quite arbitrary. This, I feel, is similar to band names that occasionally have great names but there are many very great bands without great names or even non-sensical names. So the title is always nice to get right but a challenge.

The piece itself was something that I had been thinking about for a while. It was, on the whole, inspired by the image or painting *The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife* by the Japanese artist Hokusai. In this image an octopus is engaged in sexual acts with a woman. I wanted to recreate this idea. However I wanted to include the notion of sex through technology aesthetically.

This is not really what the piece evolved into. There is something that was included in the beginning about being watched and for this reason I tried to build on it at the end about aliens watching her. This also feeds into the notion of voyeurism. Upon a second edit I left some of this stuff out. It may come through and it is hinted at but I felt the piece was more streamlined without it.

This would be revised later on where I would include the notion of an alien watching more prominently in the piece. On the point of the title it would end up being Octopussy. There were many other instances where I worked to find better titles for existing pieces in my thesis but in this case Octopussy began to stick. This got to the point where I acknowledged, finally, that perhaps the piece wanted to be called Octopussy and accepted this as its name and stopped trying to find it new ones.

Research Journal January 2021

This week I embarked on writing the *Blood and Guts in High School* by Kathy Acker book review I needed to write as the book review section of the course.

In preparation for the task of writing the review I reread *Blood and Guts in High School*. This was something that Paul Wessels, course supervisor, spoke about in our tutorial on writing reviews. He said when he used to do it he would read a book in the afternoon and write the review in the evening. There was no way I was going to be able to finish the whole thing in an afternoon but I reread it just the same. I think this is a favourable approach if one has the time to do so.

One of my other observations was that the text should link to some of the themes that I cover in my own writing and I was cognisant of the fact that I included Acker in my thesis abstract. This is something I may have to look at again. Upon re-reading *Blood and Guts in High School* I perceive it as taking *so* many risks and coming across as *so* hard-core. Like a tightrope walk that very few can pull off (perhaps I will include some of this in the next draft of my review) that either I will need to do something more grotesque in my writing to follow suit with hers or perhaps amend the thesis abstract. This is just a thought. One can be influenced by something without needing to emulate it directly or in the same way.

Upon further reflection I came to realize that it did not matter that I was perhaps not as radical as Acker or Burroughs as people and writers. That there was something that I could include in essence in my writing that did not have to compete directly with the extremism of their characters which I respect. Therefore the above comment did not prove to be a problem but is relevant in my own development as a writer.

Reflective Journal January 2021

Poofartstinkbreath had started as a small idea when I was thinking about the effect of repetition and how things grow on you as rhetoric. There are so many elements of life where I have seen repetition used really effectively. I thought of this in terms of bullying where I wondered if you just kept calling someone something they would become that thing in some ways. I think this is true of many situations. Sometimes relationships are governed by this kind of thing.

So I thought of what may happen if someone is repeatedly called something during their formative years and to what extent this may cause their individual to become this thing. In this way there is an element of magic involved in this repetition. This is where I thought of a reading we had done during the poetics section of our course by Vladimir Khlebnikov titled *On Poetry*. I re-read this reading and tried to include some of these concepts in the piece that I wrote. The concept that words have the potential to be engendered with a range of meanings and that there is magic involved in making the connections between words and phrases and meanings.

I also needed to include the element of autism as an area of the brain that is unpredictable but also prone to repetitive behaviour that manifests itself in different ways. I also found that gaming was a good landscape for this experiment as there is no shortage of verbal bullying and trolling in this space and looking at a genesis for this made sense to me. It also fits in with other themes in my writing.

I enjoyed the internalisation of Aaron's brother at the end of the piece – a flawed sense of self that lurks within – which allows him to live on even beyond his death as his legacy in some ways.

It also allowed me to base the piece on form as it uses repetition of a conglomerate word. The piece makes use of the same repetition that is being used on the character. I also enjoyed including areas of abjection – poo, farts, stink and breath. They could be described as basic id acknowledgements (though I use this term loosely) and things that we are often trying to project onto other people as is done in the piece.

Childhood lends itself to colourful illustration. I used the shift in the perspective as it allowed the character to demonstrate that *Poofartstinkbreath* was embedded in him like a psychological tumour from the beginning and was still there.

Reflective Journal February 2021

*I began developing pieces and techniques I hoped to include in my final thesis. One of the techniques I dealt with used stream of consciousness writing where the piece I speak about *Light Waves* emanates from.*

Light Waves, is more of an observation of the internal and external worlds of life around a character. Trying to sketch in and paint images that come together to tell a story. I find the writing I do in this way can be compelling in its spontaneity.

Perhaps this is an example of improvised recognition.

This feeds into the concept of writers versus novelists again. Where novelists try and peer into the darkness of their characters and through great effort try and nourish them through the act of writing about them. Whereas, writers (not novelists) are more concerned about trying to express their voice through their craft. This is the concept I encountered in the poetic collection of essays I read by Ursula K. Le Guin *The Language of the Night*. What I found exciting in *Light Waves* is the style. It is another experiment in stream of consciousness writing – with little or no punctuation.

Chronology of Water really delivered the kind of raw power I am excited about. I really enjoyed the risks she takes in her writing. Breaking up sentences and breaking just about every rule there is while still creating a voice that was just so strong for me. This is an interesting prospect because there are a lot of basic errors and typos that I can only imagine were left in there on purpose as she did not want the piece of writing to be 'perfect'.

Reflective Journal February 2021

The pieces I wrote over the last cycle were *Testicle-Ants* and *Skate Uphill*. They each have something different to them. The first one was an idea I had where I was lying down on the ground once and thought there was space to reflect on how strange the insect world was. I reflected about how it was a part of us and yet so completely alien. I wanted to engage with this in a piece. I think the piece worked as it was short and playful. I think this is all I wanted it to be. I think short and playful pieces of writing can work. It is also quite bizarre so it speaks to the pulpy elements of writing that I seek to create.

Sleep With The Dead finds the image of an object of desire which he sleeps with. Here I wanted to explore the relationship between death and sex. As well as the idea that we are often sexually fixated on dead images that are not in fact real people in advertisements and pornography and the like. So I hoped it played with some of these things.

The last piece *Skate Uphill* was an idea that I was thinking about when considering alien life and that is what if there is no explanation for alien presence at all. Just like when we look at ants or animals in different environments. They have no way of accounting for us. There is a strong possibility that there might at some stage just be aliens that are there but don't really interact with us.

I remember doing a reading group last year where there was a short story read and I mentioned him being a blameless character which is something that the group found intriguing so it is something that I explored more here.

The reflection below pertains to my engagements with Sam Pink's writing which would prove to be an aesthetic wellspring for me as my process continued.

The *Ice Cream Man and Other Stories* by Sam Pink has a lot in it that I would like to emulate. I really enjoy the way he uses character to create really bright and colourful imagery in his short stories. He also takes a different approach to form where he uses almost a poetic form to propagate his stories. I like this because I find it more arresting for the reader. It makes it less dense and more accessible for me anyway. It is not that easy to do but it was something to think about.

His characters all used tropes of very visual activity. They clicked together and they became compositions on their own. He also deals with working class problems that I like and included some of the emotional ideas around trying to hold down a job.

He examines some really nice industrial characters. There was a motif of food coming out in this collection. He wrote about a couple of different groups of people working in food industries. He portrays pain through his characters in a tragically funny way. I appreciated this too.

The first few stories struck me as librettos maybe because each of the characters had almost musical catch phrases or actions like snapping tongs for the chef or constantly saying "I kill you" to his co-workers.

Reflective Journal March 2021

The pieces I wrote this cycle were once again influenced by Sam Pink. I am still very moved with what Sam Pink manages to achieve with his writing. How he manages to create something so colourful through such an unconventional style. I also like how his narratives roll into a single voice for me. I like that I struggle to separate the speaker from *Person*, to *Witch Piss* to some of the stories in *The Ice Cream Man and Other Stories*. This voice I found to be something of a neo-Bukowski.

I hear a sense of matter-of-fact despair and confusion in both writers and this was something that influenced my piece *Clock-Worked*. I started with a central image of a bath being a receptacle that the speaker ends up in. A drunken end point where he could humorously wallow in acceptance of feeling like a sad-clown or some kind of loser. A minor character in the story of the world. Tragic and blameless at the same time in my mind. The booze maybe could be a sublimating tool for this.

The sense of being tethered to the ground is what I was trying to engage with wallowing in the mud. This is in line with the notion of the Beat poets who coined the term not only in terms of their rhythm but also that life had them 'beat'. This bath is some kind of glorious defeat.

I think the notion of the sad-clown, wandering idiot who is welded to the earth was what I wanted to convey through the influence of Sam Pink. *A Clockwork Orange* was also useful as an inter-textual device. Aided by the booziness I tried to include elements of scrawl, digital speak and graffiti in the writing to be playful with form.

Swan Dive was something that was far more raw and subconscious. This may make it slightly frustrating to get into to begin with, but this sense of dissociation is useful in the fact that it was a dream shard that inspired the piece as well as the fact that I wished to include dissociative writing too.

There is also something truly wonderful about moving through the air or water for me and flight is something that I keep coming back to as a concept, as explored in a previous work of mine called *Frogs*.

Reflective Journal May 2021

Contact week was useful as it prompted me to revisit pieces that I may not have revisited if not for this. In some cases suggestions served to augment aspects of pieces that I thought to do but maybe held off of. Points that I had considered but hadn't necessarily executed in the pieces were confirmed. In the case of *Octopussy*, for instance, I was prompted to look at introducing the idea of voyeurism and aliens earlier on or as a more concurrent theme.

There were also elements of the writing that I could consider trying to modify slightly to, perhaps, bring an added dynamism to its intensity. I was, perhaps, too closely fixated on the sex as an act and could look beyond to its affect simultaneously on the characters as an idea. I reworked this in the final version.

These are just some of the many suggested edits I received from much of the work that I read. I certainly did not make all of the suggested changes but I have thought about many of them.

In addition to this I have completed reading *The Story of The Eye* by George Bataille which was an interesting foray into his work. He is a very sexual writer who is often considered radical and sometimes taboo. It is full of sex and bodily functions and how these overlap. The sex and violence transcends mere gratuitousness for me and seems to move into a Kafkaesque mode of symbolism when it works so directly with psychological symbolism but is also very raw.

The image of the eye is one that stays with me from reading the novel which is central to its imagery. Grotesque as it is I still find it profound. It is something that I will think of using, though obviously not in the same way, in *Octopussy* where I may be able to find something I can introduce in the notion of an alien eye.

Reflective Journal June 2021

Over the last cycle I have been focussing specifically on finishing some book reviews. I have been looking at the completion of a book review on *Valis* by Philip K Dick and a book review on the anthology *Word Virus* by William S. Burroughs. Both of these tasks have prompted me to delve deeper into the writing of these two authors

In the case of the Burroughs review, though, I really enjoyed looking at some of the work I had not read in a while by this author. The stuff from an excerpt called **WORD** was particularly interesting to me. So the mode of writing I found in his stream of consciousness and very raw stuff fascinated me. It seemed like it was off the top of his head but there were rhythms that I think I have tried to replicate in my own writing.

At times I have vaguely imitated his style without meaning to. It is hard to know when fragments like this are pervasive in the way that they operate. The concept of breaking writing down into simple little bite-sized chunks is something I have experimented with. Bytes of information or packets of data.

I have spoken previously about the difference between a writer and a novelist. The novelist devoted to character and the writer devoted to raw voice. A novelist trying to divine this sort of thing as if through a crystal ball peering into the shadows like birthing a child is also something quite incredible. But it is not something that I have found myself moving towards easily.

I have made lists and tables of the world that I wish to present to the audience before and it tends to make the writing I write stale (or I think it has).

Reflective Journal June 2021

Over the last two weeks I have been looking at literary fragments, reading a fair amount of new content and worked on a piece called *The King of Chaos*. I have predominantly been reading Sam Pink but I found another book that contained some of his writing which was interesting. This has all been as a result of seeking out new journals to try and submit my work to.

I have found a couple more journals to submit to. I found these through following Sam Pink on Twitter and seeing who he follows in terms of publishing houses. So I have been reading a fair amount of content on these online journals. They are generally composed of short fringe writing. The two journals I have been frequenting are *X-Ray Lit* and *Hobart Pulp*. They contain short pieces of poetry and fiction and I have submitted work to both of them.

I find it interesting that the more I read of this kind of fiction the more I think about trying to alter my style to suit the style that they are looking for or promote on their websites. I do not mind doing this but I am unsure if it will yield effective results. Specifically, I would like to assimilate aspects of Sam Pink's style and I have done this on a few occasions before in some of the pieces I have written for the course and I think there is so much that he does that I am interested in.

In my abstract I spoke about wanting to write in the same way one may draw a cartoon or graphic novel. I wanted to write things that are really fun and pulpy and accessible and low brow. Very close to a Bizarro style but a little different. This is what I see in Sam Pink. He has basically done a lot of what I would like to be able to do in writing. I found this evidenced in particular in his anthology *99 Poems to Cure Whatever's Wrong with You or Create The Problems You Need* where he writes about the reader being in his cartoon. This is a recurring device for him and I think it a good one and it struck me because it was really similar to something out of my abstract.

The catch is, perhaps, that I do not naturally write anything like Sam Pink. Where he contains a lot of bravado and brevity in his writing with the economy of words what I have tried to do is the opposite. I have frequently tried to gain momentum through a lot of words in a stream of consciousness context in order to write very quickly. I do this with the aim of accessing subconscious thoughts that may prove themselves more compelling than what is on the surface of my mind. This is something that I saw in many of the postmodern American writers and these writers also inspired me.

So I think it a possibility to try and adapt my style to write in a more accessible economic way. Not to try too hard on the thing in order to keep the prose I write uncluttered and straight to the point, punchy and colourful. That is what I am seeing in these online American literary journals. That anything as convoluted and complicated as some of the writing I do will struggle to find space on these websites.

However, it is not exactly what I have tried to do with this thesis. In fact, this thesis is meant to provide a range of different styles with the development of an overall mastery of a couple of pieces. The pieces will vary and I see it as a means of developing my understanding of writing. There is also the reality that if I only read very short blog-style pieces I feel I would be limiting myself from long form. What I mean to say is that I do not think journal articles can be my only source of reading material where I think it may be fine for others. I would

still need all of the longer works that I have encountered and think that the journals serve to keep my horizons fresh and not altogether mainstream.

I focused on some of these things when I wrote *King of Chaos*. It was a conceptual piece that dealt with writing and was in line with what I had been reading in online journals to an extent. It did not have a specific beginning and an end but drops in and drops out. I considered changing the speed pills to smoking meth as I read a story on *X-Ray Lit* that I think was better and harder hitting and had an edge to it and I thought maybe that could be achieved in the story I wrote if I swapped out the drugs. I also wondered if I needed to include the masturbation scene at the end but I like that it brings in something cartoony. It may be unnecessary and a bit off-putting but I thought it good to add a gritty edge to the story.

I am now thinking that perhaps I need one or two more pieces about space in particular and that is what I am going to try and focus on.

Reflective Journal August 2021

During this process I have also been trying to bring all of my pieces together into a single collection.

I also have been doing more reading. I have also submitted more pieces to American journals for possible publication.

I have worked on *King of Chaos*, *More Fragments* (which consists of a lot of fragmented bits of writing) and another piece titled *Night Work*. I have also finished a few smaller pieces that may also be strategic bits called *Call Me Gary* and *The same Game Again*.

The things that I write, however, on reflection are not always as well received by me. There are so many psychological things going on in one's head when you choose to work creatively. There are unfortunate realities when you stare deep into yourself. These things are unavoidable. One hopes to have harnessed them as much as possible by this stage. And the practice of writing at every possible opportunity over the course of two years does instil in one a sense of fitness.

There have been times that I have thrown my toys in my personal space. Where I have buckled under the pressure to perform and screamed at this, that or the other distraction. However the act of writing occupies my mind constantly when it can so this helps. Of course it is not just two years, it is a practice that spans the whole of my life but perhaps you know what I mean. It is easier to field the catch. It is easier to grapple with the opponent when you have been working with it for a while.

The way that I work with getting a point across in words, normally through the voice of narration or first person is something that I have gotten better at working with. Other things that I have written in the past have been in the third person and while this has its advantages there is something raw that I enjoy about the first person.

I have been rereading Sam Pink's work to try and immerse myself in its structures simultaneously with book by Ben Lerner. Both of these authors are working in similar spaces in that they are both creating something one may describe as automatic fiction or fiction that seems like it could be autobiographical.

It interests me because instinctively I would say I tend towards a more wordy style and for this reason I would lean towards Ben Lerner. He is, however, incredibly high-brow and though his approach is edgy his self-referential character is incredibly well-read and no academic slouch.

In comparison I like Sam Pink because he constructs a vivid voice through far fewer words that still demonstrates many of his own sensibilities. What I am trying to say is that I feel like I have gotten to the point where I write more like Lerner and feel more like Pink.

After speaking about a lot of ideas with my supervisor around trying to gather up all of my work over the two years into a collection I decided to use a spread sheet. There was an idea that maybe printing all of the pieces and pinning them up on a wall might help and I have seen this done before with poems but I do not think it would work with me.

My supervisor and I discussed this at length and we also made headway in the importance of ordering my work. That there was similarity between ordering a collection and, for instance, wine pairing where you try to match wine and food together to bring out the best in both. This could be applied to art as well where some colours complement one another. This was more how we saw it in comparison to trying to find themes or headings.

There was another directive which was that both my supervisor and I agreed that stories with completely different tones shouldn't be grouped too close together unless the aim is to shock by contrast. So if I had a piece that had a childlike innocence I shouldn't follow it immediately with a piece about heavy sex or violence. This, in my mind, would detract from both.

This took quite a while and I had another meeting with my supervisor. I asked her if there was anything that she thought the collection lacked desperately and then I could try and focus writing a piece that might fulfil this role. She didn't think anything had been overlooked in relation to my abstract and what I had set out to conjure up in the collection but the one thing that was missing was a title.

I think I went back to my spreadsheet and tried to think about something that might sum everything up. That might bring everything together under one banner. I looked and I looked and then I hit on the idea of aliens and abnormality that I tried to cultivate in some of the writing. That some, it felt like, were short-circuiting a little and didn't make sense at times. Then I thought of this concept that I had heard of and I really liked.

I think actually my supervisor helped with this too as she had said that my vibe was quite 'retro-tech' or 'eighties cassette tape' because I often forget that I am quite old already and the technology I refer to is often based on older pop-culture references that you might not encounter first hand today.

So I was thinking about tech options and then I remembered this thing I had read about when you patch computers together. It is called alien crosstalk and it is when packets of data jump from one cable to another. This I thought was symbolic of many things in my work and it was also a solid title in that there was a proper scientific phenomenon behind it. So I was really happy with it as a thesis title as it touched on so many elements.

But I realized I didn't just want to title the collection this I wanted it to be embedded in the collection too. So I set about writing a piece that may be able to house the idea of alien crosstalk within it so that it could become the title. What I like is that my supervisor was right and that if you do come up with a title that you like it can give you some nice momentum to tie the whole thing together with. The piece *Nightwork* was also a piece that I was proud of. It brought together a lot of the techniques I had been working around in terms of synthesising a graphic, colourful style with a counter-culture voice creating a world through its imagination. Things I have been working on incrementally through the course of the two years of this course.

Poetics Essay

Poetics of The Wor(l)ds We Live In

A kid rides a bicycle around in circles. Pumping the pedals they move up and down. Up and down. Centrifugal pumping. This rhythm. This measure. This is writing for me. The act of writing. The feeling one gets when writing. These are things that draw me to it. A sense of freedom. This purely personal feeling. I enjoy it. So I write. The kid cycling around the car park. He is being filmed by his father. This is writing too.

The spinning wheel. Goes around and around. The highs and the lows of the language. This is writing to me. Some measure. The slow, the fast. Stressed unstressed. Bits and pieces. Solid and empty. Chi. The rhythms coiling. Writing. Makes me really feel. Makes me feel alive. This is why I do it. It can be a selfish thing. It is primarily for me only. Starts with the self. Self-indulgent. This elliptical movement. Here are words. The immediacy of it is quite wonderful.

In Brian Evenson's essay discussing his book *The Altman's Tongue* he speaks about someone getting into a car and pointing a gun to their head. This is how I feel about writing. That there is a gun pointed at my head telling me to write. That if I do not write something terrible will happen. If I stop writing for any period of time I throw tantrums. It's always there. A weight. A pressure. Also a friend. It is therapeutic. It is often no more than this. Instances of graffiti that say: I was here.

A kid is told they are the chosen one. They are told that they have magical powers that they didn't know about. The kid goes on adventures and has to use magic incantations. Finds out they are more special than they thought. This kid was me. But it wasn't me. It was a kid in a book I read. This kid is told by the librarian that when you read a book properly you feel like it could be you in that story. Like it was written about you. That was me. Maybe that kid was a sucker – but that's why I read.

I always really got off on were song lyrics and lines from movies. These would lodge themselves in my mind. In this way I see no distinction between song lyrics and poetry. Lines from a film and prose. I find poetry could exist in pretty much anything that is written. This is what interests me about it. How it encompasses everything. It is one with everything. That Buddhist thing. At least in part. This is how I see it. Allowing everything you have ever experienced or thought about speak for itself.

So with poetry I still hope only to travel in circles. But I hope to include everything possible in it. To include programming and languages structures. Code poetry fascinates me. How programming is aesthetically pleasing interests me. Cut-up-styles and procedural text generation intrigues me. Snippets of everything rush at me. Random song snippets. Superimposing pop culture. Take something from everywhere. This is cut-up for me. Cut-ups of life. Editing. Different to the formal method of cut-up. Similar in essence.

These are thematic elements I cultivate as a writer. The strange addiction to playing games. The need to win. That sense of compulsive gambling in gaming. The morbid obsession to see the end. What's the score here? These are sensations I like to work with. Some randomness and the spinning of the wheel. Try and articulate them through language and image.

Video games also provide a strange experience of narrative. Role playing. Choosing a character. Puppeteering. Fantasy characters drenched in blood and magic. Archetypes. Mythologies. Far-reaches of trans-dimensional space. Infantile but addictive. Dungeons and Dragons. Engendered with mechanistic elements of coin-op Pavlovian entertainment. These are all areas I try to cross section in my writing. Things I seek to imbue in my poetry and prose.

Lists and tables are central to programming. Programming underpinning video gaming. I've used lists, strings and tables in my writing. Though I enjoy trying to interface with them as a human. To try and craft them into something that is in some way recognisable. My goal being to bring everything I have ever experienced to interface with ideas of language construction and syntax. Playing with elements of measure. Relating them to image. Automatic at times but organic. These things all give me momentum. Allow me to cycle faster.

What I find so wonderful about Aimé Césaire's essay on the role of the poet is his extraordinary ability to champion the poet's role and his discourse on mythology. The level of conviction and sincerity in which he establishes the poet's capacity to transcend the boundaries of a world threatened to be beaten into soulless submission by the methodologies of pure reason and scientific thought. He leaps over all of these hindrances, of which there are many: scientific, commercial and political, with the flaming heart of humanity held firmly and raised in his fist.

"My past is there to show and hide its face from me. My future is there to hold out its hand to me. Rockets flare. It is my childhood in flames. It is my childhood talking and looking for me" (Césaire). This moves me because I think we are in conversation with our childhoods and I find it fertile space from which to write. I enjoy how past, present and future weave around each other here. Playing with time is something that I have used in stories that I have written. I often look for core elements I consider inspiring.

The essay I felt that dealt the most directly with inspiration was that of García Lorca in his essay on the nature of the *duende*. I appreciated his distinction between what he considered to be angelic inspiration and what he considered to be the muse.

He describes the high and the low in terms of the immediacy of inspiration and then introduces the concept of a third force that comes from deep within the unconscious. An energy that is both universal to, and independent of, all human consciousness. He describes a nameless force that supersedes the boundaries of life and death but has a more powerful grip than either. A raw elemental force.

So when Lorca says the *duende*: "delights in struggling freely with the creator on the edge of the pit" and that it "wounds, and in trying to heal that wound that never heals, lies the strangeness, the inventiveness of man's work." I find this both exquisitely beautiful and true. In particular the concept of a wounding. Needing to write I sometimes see as an illness. An irrational need. Like maybe life would be simpler without it (though it would be like an amputation or lobotomy). Similarly the notion of trying to heal a wound that will never heal is apt.

Tsvetaeva seemed to articulate her need to write slightly differently from this. Though in both instances the sense comes from within not without. For the most part this is what I feel. The things that exist outside of myself when they write are most exciting to me but it mainly

comes from within. This spoke to me because it gives me a frame of reference through which to try and better understand my own need to write. Her description of poems as dreams works for me. It feels as if she had a live current flowing between her unconscious and conscious minds.

Her point here is well illustrated through the mechanism of Odysseus of Homer's *Iliad*: "On Odysseus' ship there was neither hero nor poet. A hero is one who will stand firm even when not tied down, stand firm even without wax stuck in his ears; a poet is one who will fling himself forward even when tied down, who will hear even with wax in his ears, that is - once again - fling himself forward." (Tsvetaeva, 2010)

This is why I appreciate the *duende* as a force that wounds deeply. That one seeks to resolve this wound for the rest of their lives but cannot, as such forces cannot be resisted. A correlation to Tsvetaeva's observations. I found evidence of this notion in Camille Roy's essay on experimentalism where: "I entrust my twisted little pieces to the warm nest of the sick social body, and I feel our bond". Her notion that what is disfigured about us has more value than what we consider complete is intriguing. What is wounded is more important.

Though it is interesting to note that Roy suggests that ego wants to be dismantled but is resistant to the pleasure that will achieve this. This suggests that the act of pleasure offers us an escape from a policing sense of self: "People want to be taken apart so that ego control (resistance to pleasure) is subverted. Where there was distaste, there is now desire mixed with dread." (Roy, 2004) these are pervasive concepts that make sense to me that I have assimilated in my own approach to an extent.

Much exciting content exists in what is forbidden to us in real life. I have leant on this in content. Though the subtleties of realism are aspects that I am still working on. Attempting to maintain the subversive and the recognisable. To try and give readers access to the unintelligible.

"The desire of the reader to be aroused or to otherwise escape is the keyhole through which all the mechanisms of the narrative operate" (Roy, 2004). This idea speaks to me because this is why I do it – to escape. Though I don't want cheap escape – I don't mind cheap escape – but I would prefer the best possible escape.

As automatic and unstructured as a lot of what I try to achieve in writing is, I would also like it to make people feel. If this is too difficult I would like it to bear testimony to what I have felt. To prove I have done so. Random images come together to allow for a reader to interpret them in a way that makes them feel or maybe suggests a version of what I have felt. The more complex and powerful the thing the better. I appreciate writing that can do this. It is how I understand Roy's description of "improvising recognition". An inner sickness or deep pain as the force behind much artistic creation is established by Lorca and evidenced, in part at least, by Roy but it is also picked up by Lidia Yuknavitch in her essay *Daguerreotype of a Girl*. This essay demonstrated to me what is possible through the poetic portrayal of concepts as opposed to attempting to describe them through a logical framework.

This is another approach towards the same goal of identifying forces and functions behind writing. "I do not want to die, but my life will always be like this wounded animal lurching against the white. This is what will motivate her to paint, to draw." (Yuknavitch, 2008) feeds directly into Lorca's description of the *duende* and is elaborated on with: "even as healing

appears impossible. Healing herself through sexual release. Through artistic production. Through the endless act of making.” (Yuknavitch, 2008) suggesting again that we are trying to fulfil a need to create artistically in the desperate hope to heal something that can never be healed: a wound through which all life and death outpours.

The introduction of the wolf and the snow are provocative and fierce elemental images that resonate to activate arousal. Thereby instead of discussing how these items are generated and their effect Yuknavitch simply shows us this concept in action in her essay. The concept of the trapped primal side of our natures dripping blood on the snow as marks might reflect on a piece of paper is apt in its demonstration. Moreover the strength and inner conviction for the animal to free itself from the trap, something that resonates with Césaire’s description of the poet, even to the point where it must leave a part of itself behind is again an effective demonstration of the act of creativity.

Included in this is an articulation of the creative genesis of female sexuality through this act of creativity and wounding. Raw animal spirits embarking on the irrational to attain freedom from constricting forces. Allegorical for the act of sexual activation and the act of creation and including these together is also both intriguing and relevant. Though if this was not ample food for thought in artfully articulating difficult concepts the image that followed explodes this view even further. By including the little girl urinating on the severed limb of the wolf introduces a multiplicity of new concepts. The notion of territorially claiming the animal spirit, honouring its struggle, introducing id notions of sexuality relevant to a child but immediately transposed into sexual rites of passage are all immediately illustrated. There is a lot to ponder in this image and I continue to do so.

What Yuknavitch also isolates well in this essay is the concept of the desire to know more. This is a mechanism I have seen at work in many successful narratives. Something that I seek to emulate but know it is not that easily achieved. That is the act of drawing the reader in and hooking them into a narrative. Where she describes: “For once a woman has captured the imagination of an audience we must read her all the way through to her desire, to her demise” (Yuknavitch, 2008).

This concept also pinpoints the notion that when we consider images we are helplessly voyeuristic whether it is a lunar eclipse or animals slaughtering each other our reflex action is to look:

“More than anything we are consumers.

We want to see the image.

You will always want to see the image.

It will never again be enough to simply hear the story.

Do you see how much power I have in this moment?

To give it to you, or to withhold?

This is the nature of art.

This is the nature of desire.

The nature of life, and of course, death.” (Yuknavitch, 2008)

There are many practical elements that I seek to internalize in my writing that are described here. This being one of them: our wish to consume as in the base sense of beasts and an addiction to sensation that can only be navigated and never really resolved. This is something I aim to do in my writing, to make it desirable, to make the reader want to see more regardless of flighty notions of integrity or high art. A smorgasbord of raw images listed and tabulated. To see a dark twisted side that does not fit in because it can only live here in writing.

An image of a boy undressing a manikin of a young girl. He stands in front of it and unbuttons its dress in the front. There are people around him but he does it anyway. Because he is curious. The smooth yellowed surface of the skin catches the light. Dead painted eyes look back at him. Until above him are his mother and a stranger working at the shop. Looking down at him and laughing embarrassed. Those mother figures with desperate edges to their laughter. Judgement from a height. They pull him away from the scene of the crime her with her dead plastic eyes looking after him.

A concept that includes the improvisational nature of narratives is something that I also wish to emulate. There have been many occasions in my work where I have tried to refine things I have written. More often I am beginning to see something that is unplanned as working better for me. Trying too hard in the planning often constricts anything I try to write. Bringing me back to the feeling of writing. To try and not cling to it. Whether it is the first take or the fortieth take that is better I am unsure.

This relates to the generative notion of fiction but also its capacity for continual change in the moment keeping it unpredictable. Therefore many of my favourite instances in my own writing are those where a character does something that I can't explain and from there my narrative gains strength which is in line with Roy's notion of 'improvising recognition'.

The generative element to writing is also echoed in Robert Duncan's essay on poetics where he says "in the work of art there is generative seed"(Duncan, 1979) this generative seed is in line with the automatic nature of writing: "As in Darwinian evolution by chance significance emerges" (Duncan, 1979). I have thought of this theory in relation to my work on many occasions. That evolution relies on random mutation to see progress. Therefore what is important in my work is that I keep churning out mutations, many will die but some may find an edge, the only way to truly fail in this approach would be to stop.

Though the decimation of form and preconceived notions of categorization in novels and writing to the point where the novel is unrecognizable from any other 'traditional' novel does leave the question on how I should evaluate experimental and random writing I do. Useful in this conversation for me was a snippet from Khlebnikov's essay on the magical nature of writing that cannot be understood. Presents the value of energies within words as incantations. Language that transcends words and letters. Presents them as magical and beyond sense.

This is why I began reading in the first place. It was an infatuation with magic that had reeled me in. But here it begs the question of how to tell a plain acorn from a magical one which is

something I often ask myself: “poems may be understandable or they may not, but they must be good, they must be real” (Khlebnikov, 1995).

This I could use. Here the word for me is ‘real’ as opposed to ‘good’ which is subjective. I understand it as possessing an authenticity in its creation. Maybe an abstract intention in the moment it was conceived. I feel this if I am in the moment in writing. If I have found a groove. A flow state. Many times in life I have succeeded in some menial task I have been trying to do when I stop trying to do it and find myself almost watching myself doing it. This is in line with meditation and Buddhist principles that exist in this state for me. This is what I would think of as real.

In an attempt to come full circle I re-visit notions of the hero-poet in the real hero poets of Philip Zhuwao and Lesego Ramapolokeng. What I enjoyed most about their interviews was how unashamedly they owned the fact that their writing was about the exploration of themselves and nothing else. That this was primary in the way that they thought about their work in these interviews. They bore no responsibility, though made numerous important contributions, to a general public. Therefore they bore some responsibility inadvertently. Illustrated in the lines: “Firstly the self. I am much more interested in the self. I'm not interested in the man in the street. No. The ordinary man doesn't interest me. Some people say my writing is selfish. But I have to take care about this personal thing before anything broader.” (Zhuwao, 2003)

This is largely how I approach much of the writing I do at the moment. It is centrally an exploration of myself articulating a wash of experiences. I try not to cling to outcomes. Too many times I become seduced with what it will feel like to write something in the future. This is subordinate to the act of writing in the moment. I try to avoid craving a resolution or purpose to much of the writing I do. I hope not to cling to what I want it to be. I like to try and focus on the moment which is in line with meditation though this is not core to my actual writing or its content. It is more core to being.

“The word has to be constantly given birth to...” (Ramapolokeng, 2003) These words ‘being constantly given birth’ to resonate with Lorca’s “endless baptism of freshly created things.” This is part of what I love about writing and reading. What I do as a writer. This sense of oscillation and playfulness. The capacity for words to reach deep into us. Cowering in the darkness smearing shit on cave walls. Dealing with the intersection of animal and mind. The abstract organisation of information structures. Pixelated avatars death-fucking. Endless spaces of the universe. Agonising despair and a wounded need not to stop. I try to include parts of myself that don’t fit anywhere else. My indulged addictive gluttony for sensation. Losing meaning but still cranking the handle of the generative mutations of words. Always coming back to the moment. Something akin to Zen. Pedalling. Spinning the wheel.

“I want to give witness not to the thought of myself—that specious concept of identity—but, rather, to what I am as simple agency, a thing evidently alive by virtue of such activity.” Robert Creeley.

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Book Reviews

Witch Piss – Sam Pink, Lazy Fascist Press, 2014

Witch Piss follows the story of several, larger than life, homeless people living in America. The story is told through the perspective of a central character whose social status is never made clear. It is never made evident whether the narrator is also living on the streets. The ways the characters are portrayed is so colourful and lively I find it does them more justice than a documentary ever could which is a testament to Sam Pink's skill and craft. I think the romantic idea of hermetic life has been lost in our Western society and wandering people are generally undervalued in contemporary society. This is something that the Beat Poets of America spoke about. Kerouac laments the fact that vagrancy was made so completely illegal during his lifetime.

There is something of the Beat Poet's lyricism in Sam Pink's writing and he is often considered more a 'Bizarro' writer. His shorter work is included in issue five of *The Magazine of Bizarro Fiction*. His longer work, however, I think transcends the nature of other work found in these anthologies. Perhaps this is just because they are meatier by virtue of their length and because his voice is given more space in his book-length offerings. Whatever the case, the way he represents loneliness with the off-hand vigour contained in a master work painted with congealed t-sauce is quite something.

I have a soft spot for authors like this who take the story of homeless people and weave them into colourful narratives that focus on aspects of their character that are whole. There is an existential truth to homelessness. A bravery despite the terrible realities of this hardship. Life can feel terrible. I appreciate the universality of this. It feeds into the vein of Bukowski heroism for the underdog. And authors who can represent the rough edges of the human condition and homelessness in an authentic and appealing way are doing something alchemical in their craft. A perfect balance between what is sentimental and harrowing. I let out a cheer when I read it.

This is what I saw in this offering. He champions several people but doesn't omit the nasty realities of living on the streets. I really enjoy the way Pink does this through minimal language and the first person. He uses slang and short operative line breaks. Breaks his prose down into short glib observations but includes verve and colour in his writing. Nothing fancy but effective. Which makes it feel unfiltered. The writing is stripped down to its bare essentials. He focuses on portraying character mannerisms and strong dialogue. Cutting out any preamble or superfluous character posturing. This and the unorthodox line breaks support the effect of the author speaking directly to you.

It also makes me feel that he is writing from experience. That he really hung out with these homeless people and got drunk with them and accepted that their only solution to life was the use of substances. To make the pain of all the ways they felt they had fucked up feel less acute.

One character that stands out in particular is the aptly named Spider-Man. A homeless man trying to get his shit together while leeching off of – and caring for – a disabled woman dubbed 'his long term lover'. Spider-Man may well be the narrative centre piece. He is larger than life and utilises a string of catch phrases and spontaneous verbal outbursts which he spits out in intermittent bouts at whoever may be listening. This punchy character and his dialogue

is a high-point in the novel and a prime example of what Sam Pink is capable of. Writing plausible dialogue for unusual characters can often struggle to hit the mark, but the explosive nature of Spider-Man's interlocution delivers on all fronts, and propels the narrative forward in much the same way the reader envisions his wild gesticulations.

Indeed Spider-Man becomes a vehicle for the intersection of the colour of the graphic novel world and literary representation. This demonstrates Pink's craft where he 'sketches in' a character who in turn 'sketches out' aspects of comic books and super hero movies in the novel. The diametrically opposite tropes of homeless person and superhero are brought together simultaneously in him allowing him to demonstrate the colour and shape of his imagination by shooting imaginary icicles out the ends of his hands at passers-by with an array of well-crafted sound effects that are interspersed expertly with minimalist prose.

It is the deeply flawed nature of Spider-Man in living on the streets that make his assimilations of 'superhero form' all the more endearing. He is a representation of the archetypal tragi-comic fool. The portrayal of a fool executed through onomatopoeic portmanteaus and 'poem-like' line breaks.

It is the verve and innovation in Sam Pink's writing style that allows him to fashion voices that 'tell it plain' through a pastiche of colloquialisms that capture the crusty flavour of his characters. The book's title *Witch Piss* is fitting for a collection of this ilk. One that gathers together the musicality of a set of social misfits. A narrative that is sometimes reminiscent of Raymond Carver in its brevity, *Catcher in The Rye's* misfit sad disaffected reflection and Charles Bukowski in its relentless scraping of the drink barrel. Verily the title is an ad-hoc reference to the dregs of the bottle. The toenails. Gone lukewarm and flat but still sticking around. These are some of the characters collected here, brought together through Pink's words, to joyfully mourn, witness and celebrate the remnants of their former selves.

Blood and Guts in High School – Kathy Acker, Grove Press, 1994

“A love so full it could send us always” - *Bush*

Writers are not meant to be rock stars. They more commonly fit the stereotype of reclusive hermits working behind the scenes to construct narratives in basements and garages avoiding people at all costs. In some cases, however, this presumption is thoroughly subverted and Kathy Acker is a prime example. In a similar vein to hero-poets like Arthur Rimbaud, William Burroughs or the punk rock voices of Patti Smith or Sid Vicious, Kathy Acker exhibits rawness in her work that scrawls her message across subway walls in a thick paste of human abjection.

A central jewel in her literary crown: *Blood and Guts in Highschool* shakes up the etch-a-sketch blueprint of the novel form and generates a maze in which the reader may lose themselves. The novel focuses on central character Janey whose journey explores a subconscious traversing of the psychological *id* and various societal snares that both constrict and gnaw at her being. What arrests one's attention most directly perhaps is how unfiltered Acker's writing is. The innovative use of form utilizes theatre dialogue to bend the reader's ear. You gain free entry to a labyrinth that is constantly being atomised through experimental prose.

The primal moan of Acker's voice distinguishes it from traditional narratives. The reader is completely convinced that the speaker is bearing their soul. She presents her internal landscape to the audience with funhouse mirror warps and distortions. The sheer amplitude of voice in the novel generates raw ungovernable energy. It creates the momentum needed to examine something that twists out from underneath you the moment you think you have gained purchase as the reader. Dadaist repetition jams your signals when you think you have a cipher. A playful approach that wilfully alienates the reader, in a punk 'fuck you' style, but recovers artfully: form might be rejected but lyrical and philosophical depth remains.

There are references to the French poet *Mallarme* which is a tip of the hat to the spiritual forefathers of the punk rockers who also sought to outstrip the bounds of conventional life through poetic rebellion. Using a full range of experimental tools, from diagrammatical renderings of dream maps, to crude etchings of spread-eagled genitalia, she punctuates her written text with visual elements to create a playful deviation from expectation. One that articulates a series of violent thrashings against the accepted establishment of the time – that of an affluent male-dominated social dynamic as Janey experiences it.

The novel focuses heavily on the notion of female sexuality in its raw, and at times crude, form. These range from touches of the pornographic to disturbing traces of self-mutilation. It squirms under the itch of sexual desire to escape the present. Janey's father is also her lover, as introduced to us at the beginning of the novel, but snubs her for “a younger starlet who is refusing to fuck him. A raw representation of sexual awakening, coupled with simultaneous acknowledgement of neurotic-distortion. This is, in essence, part of Acker's credo: a presentation of the broken, maimed ballerina spinning glitchily atop a music box.

It is the novel's capacity to manoeuvre in its use of complex themes of sex, sexuality, and addiction that make it compelling as opposed to mere noise. Acker's power to shape her offering at will keeps the reader listing through a swathe of life experiences quite difficult to digest.

Blood and Guts is like a drug and every time you think you have got your bearings it shifts its gears on you. In some ways the narrative is assembled rather than built. It is a combination of varying stylistic and literary elements that represent Janey's journey which might be correlated to aspects of the author's life. This is demonstrated through her journey from the split of the father and child and consequent search for power and fame. The loss of the father-lover in the story's opening leaves a void that is filled in various ways – though it is a gaping psychic wound that can never really be soothed/healed completely.

Rather the scratching continues through the drug fixation of the SCORPIONS (a gang of unruly misfits Janey belongs to) claiming an identity for her fractured existence. The SCORPIONS split her persona into fragments to form a pack of wolves that harangue society through their tongues and fists and thereby express their gross malcontent. Addiction and sexual frustration fester beneath the surface in her quest for escape from bondage into a position of power.

When the reader meets Genet we are magically transported to Turkey. Transitions like these are as dreamlike as the confounding maps that festoon the novel's centre. Her quest for power continues as feminine identity is questioned under the weight of male bondage. A relationship of the slaver and sex-slave peppers the novel – the callous authority that locks her up and keeps her captive. Enter the American president. Carter is undermined sexually and grotesquely portrayed as a greying animalistic human-pig – a base creature signifying the corruption of the world of suits and cigar smoke as the dominant ruling hegemony.

The narrative dissolves once more when we reach a multiplex of sexual encounters and anguished fixations on raw cunts and spiked clitorises. This is interspersed with hieroglyphic iterations of lions, wolves and alligators. They express prophetic parables in their evolution as the artwork melts away. Tracing tattoo lines along the tracked arms of the venom spitting, punk-girl captive Janey, Acker carves the ink of her interior world onto the pig skin of her pages. Her story spills out as a jumbled mix of varied broken toys and spare parts. It hums with sexual electricity that is as disturbing as it is darkly funny in its achieved balance of poetry and drama.

The broken ballerina continually twists the ropes as she spins around and around; trapping her in a whirling dervish that creates a spectacle that is both breathtakingly raw and beautiful to behold, consolidated in Janey's final rejection –

*Blood and guts in high school
This is all I know
Parents teachers boyfriends
All have got to go.*

Valis – Philip K. Dick, Vintage, 1991

Philip K. Dick's *Valis* is yet another foray into the hall of mirrors that characterises his body of work. He once again spins a web for his characters whose wild thrashings manifest themselves as this literary offering. *Valis* defines itself as one of Dick's seminal works. It establishes itself as a core work against a backdrop of over thirty published novels and hundreds of short stories from the author.

Once again Dick hones in on a set of characters that are trapped in a world of their own making. Paradoxically this may be a reaction to the realisation that the world they thought existed inevitably gives way beneath them to reveal a greater schism at work. This technique may be influenced by his predilection with the *Plato and the cave* idea. He encountered this well-known philosophical concept during his educational ponderings at Berkley University California. This sense of disillusion often results in characters that are predisposed to self-harm and radical reactions against a prevailing system or school of thought. A system, revealed as a vast and sinister network in many cases, outstripping his characters' attempts to rip free from the bonds constraining them.

In the case of *Valis* the narrative is focused on one Horselover Fat who is recovering from a recent suicide attempt and infrequently tunes into subliminal messages slipped to him through radio and television broadcasts. A deep level of paranoia often permeates Dick's work. Political paranoia in his opposition to a dominant system of thought and psychological paranoia experienced perhaps first-hand through the mental challenges he experienced during the course of his life.

A sense of identity muddling is evident in *Valis* where it is revealed that the narrator and Horselover Fat both are, and aren't, the same person. A common technique, perhaps, but unusual in its presentation in *Valis* where the novel's *modus operandi* is to represent the psychological splitting of identities. An interesting interrogation of the split between character and author which lays down the foundation for a range of unhinged confusion. The narrator refers to the character as a separate person but it transpires that they are one and the same. A split personality living within the host. As a reader, one finds oneself wandering deeper and deeper into a rabbit hole of twists, turns and phantasms whilst exploring the central plot of *Valis*.

The story begins with some of the drug-chic writing Dick has come to be known for that is one of the reasons for his central place at the table of dark sci-fi writing. His style is a cultivated mix of San Francisco sixties conspiracy-theory esoterica. Drug references abound in *Valis* where LSD and a drug newly fashioned by the author: *Digitalis* are referenced frequently; the latter is the selected drug Horselover Fat tries to off himself with through an overdose and car fume asphyxiation combination. Suicide is another concurrent theme in many of Dick's stories.

In many ways the author posits the question of what happens to those early drug pioneers

when the drugs wear off. The psyche is, in the case of amphetamines in particular, left jilted by the system and becomes awash with the anxieties of withdrawal. It is scoured clean by chemicals and has nothing left to go on with but glimpses of realities made real by the shorting of brain circuitry and synaptic fire gone haywire. It is Dick's ability to engage with residual existential quandaries, those encountered by people dislocated from normality and society alike, which make his characters so special. It is being brave enough to make manifest this form of psychological suffering against the backdrop of a rapidly changing technological world that places him ahead of his time and shows him to be a voice for a particular generation.

It is this bravery that identifies *Valis* as a semi-autobiographical work. Dick alludes to this in using his own name 'Phil' as a character revealed later on in the novel and even despite this the parallels are quite obvious. It proves that he has some skin in the game and gives the work a certain potency as a result. Horselover Fat has recently survived a suicide attempt and faces acute separation anxiety from the departure of his recent wife and child. Similarly Dick's life was riddled with suicide attempts, a slew of five wives and a variety of difficult relationships.

After his suicide attempt Horselover Fat does a stint in a mental institution which is not dissimilar to where Dick ended up after a Canadian award ceremony bender and subsequent meltdown. There is another element of Dick's own life in *Valis* which is translated through his religious alignments. Dick himself became increasingly interested in theology after a mystical experience involving a beam of pink energy reflecting off of a golden fish necklace worn by a woman delivering something to his house — which is essentially the central theme in *Valis*.

The story is fleshed out, however, to include satellite transmissions, rock bands, hidden messages, an ancient codex and god complexes. A trope reflected in Burroughs' schemes of intergalactic transmitter and receiver influencing the conduct of everyday life on earth. This is another influence that engenders this novel with a sense literary depth and mystery. Dick ploughed a lot of his own theological research into the novel creating a veritable warren of classical and mysterious references understood through the unhinged psyches belonging to the a host of characters.

This is a factor contributing to how difficult it is to gain sure footing in *Valis*, how difficult it is to discern between the fiction and the real, how difficult it is to work out what is really going on. This is part of the craft of the novel. It translates the anxieties, paranoia and speculations of the author through his story. It is a manifestation of the author's inner world. This is contained through several character types. Horselover Fat: in many ways considered beyond understanding, David: innocent and sympathetic, Phil: the narrator is understood as a believer in *Valis* but with some deep reservations and Kevin: is the quintessential doubter and cynic to the mysteries and is essentially along for the ride. Other minor characters punctuate this triad. A triad because it is unclear if Horselover Fat and Phil are indeed the same person or just think they are.

This comes with its own strengths and weaknesses. The narrative is often disorienting by design: having a narrator who is only revealed as separate to a character much later on in the novel, for instance. But one also gets the feeling that the author does not always map out the structure of his novels all that meticulously. Something quite understandable given his decade-long use of amphetamines to complete some very rushed science fiction writing in the early years of his career.

As a result one can trace breaks in the structure of *Valis*. Many of the earlier chapters are self-reflective musings on questions of existence and suffering that really bring Horselover Fat to life. He recounts many different relationships with women and drugs which are an explanation, in some ways, for his current state of psychological and societal discomfort. They are also a comment on alternative society as it exists and existed in the American seventies. The latter half of the novel speeds from one set of extraordinary discoveries to the next which kicks off with a rather arbitrary epiphany embedded in a film Horselover Fat watches with Kevin. In this way *Valis* feels almost like two novels which is perhaps apt considering the psychological splitting embedded in much of Dick's work.

The discovery of VALIS (Vast Active Living Intelligence System) sets them off on a treasure hunt culminating in interactions with a divine child who dispenses omniscient truths a bit like the wizard of Oz. In a similar fashion to the debunked wizard the child dies shortly after this leaving all of the characters questioning the authenticity of VALIS as god or godhead and the journey they have undertaken. All except Horselover Fat who continues his search for evidence of the successful historical transmissions of supreme information across the globe and into a trilogy of novels from the same author.

It is, however, the inclusion of classical references that give the novel body. Characters who stare deeply into the veritable abyss associated with the depths of divine consciousness. An appendix of various adages and wisdoms contained classically and posited as the result of VALIS transmissions demonstrate some of the deep thinking behind the work. It is what separates it from other offerings from the author. Horselover Fat's derangement is not only a result of waking up to a core untruth shaping his identity and its reality but of something more. Something arguably more universal perhaps. It seeks to peer deeper into a history in conversation with our reality, tracing glitches and back alleys behind the curtain of the mainstream 'known' through the psyche of a drug addled protagonist reeling from personal traumas. *Valis* is a tale that could only be told through the voice of Philip K. Dick, it isn't always pretty, but it flies its freak-flag high and lets us know it was here and it knew all along.

Word Virus, The William S. Burroughs Reader – William S. Burroughs, Grove Press, 2000

William S. Burroughs had it right when he composed the self-reflective line ‘the book spill off the page in all directions’ taken from the *Word* excerpts to be found in the weighty collection of Burrough’s work *Word Virus*. The collection has been put together like an arcane mechanism, bringing together mystic steam-punk components from the life works of a rather remarkable man.

The contents page sprawls across both land and dimensions, rolled out like the dusty sheaves of a map. The kind of maps found at the beginning of fantasy novels. We are taken on a wild ride through the phases of Burrough’s work spanning more than half a century in this one lengthy compendium. Though the contents page may serve as an atlas of alien places the excerpts themselves are like space portals channelling the reader directly into trans-dimensional realities. Spaces that are manifested through the frenzied mind of the writer. We are catapulted deep into his gloriously automatic rhythms of subconscious depravity and left to grope about on the soft-sick underbelly of the human psyche with all of its fleshy wrinkles, strange protuberances, and hard-edged hind claws.

The collection is presided over by James Grauerholz who writes biographical notes for the collection accompanying each of the major sections to be found in the collection. He provides guidance and tools through these accompanying chapters to help the uninitiated try and navigate the scope of so much manic expression in a single place.

There is no way he could actually properly prepare one for what is to be encountered through the phantasmagorical cascading nightmares and illusions contained in the snapshots of Burroughs’s greater body of work. The journey is a descent into craziness, knee deep in the flesh pits of a mutant conglomerate chewing itself to pieces. The vast sprawling life of the writing is what makes it something to behold. It flows across the page as an anthropomorphic liquid, like the enchanted buckets of Fantasia, headless and demented, wild for escape.

The old line from Nietzsche is used repeatedly in the collection: “nothing is true, everything is permitted” and it is this inversion of sense that characterizes much of the author’s work. It is not so much a matter of insanity but rather the experience of an alternative logic. The cogs are jammed and made to operate a subversive, often hideous, machine. This is how *Word Virus* operates. A hidden cipher beneath the surface, down dark alleyways and within abandoned building squat pads Burroughs was steadily birthing the cultural movement of punk and junk.

If the nature of junk and its user is catalogued in *Junky* its use and the effects are celebrated in the category titled *INTERZONE* in the collection. The section contains excerpts from both *The Naked Lunch* and *Interzone* which arguably form the core of the Burroughs’s literary offering as seminal works. *The Naked Lunch*, in particular, contains some of the most extraordinary writing. We encounter a feast table of intersecting insect dimensions cobbling together a dark sensual tapestry of flesh-myth and symbol.

The inclusion of *Word* from the *INTERZONE* section of the anthology exemplifies the author at his most raw perhaps. Having broken the shackles of the journalistic style writings of *Junky* and *Queer* he branches out into the experimental nature of his prose. *Word* is an excerpt from something Burroughs described as his *Word Hoard* which was basically a 1000

page collection of the author's writing where he began truly leaning into the scope of his creative power. A giant store of his thrashings both wild and depraved but at the same time needle-pointed, deadly and intricate.

He creates rhythms that are both self-referential and reactionary. He will establish an idea and allow it to create a chain reaction leading the writing in all directions at once "spill off the page in all directions". Analogous to *Beat* writers like *Ginsberg* and *Kerouac* who he was close with. This automatic writing differs from Ginsberg's protest word streams and Kerouac's smooth experiential realist flows in that it is decidedly darker, bitter and mechanical. It is less sentimental and what sentimentality Burroughs does possess is perhaps expunged in his *Word Hoard* through a fabulous release that would later serve to make up the building blocks of *The Naked Lunch*.

Though he takes the time to stake his claim that his style, though spontaneous, should not be assumed easily replicable: "you will observe in my production every word got some kinda awful function fit into mosaic shithouse of the world" — *Word*. A subtle 'Don't try this at home kids' disclaimer balanced with graphic shit-smear self-deprecation and despair. Word etchings smeared in excrement across the cave wall.

Which is a reminder that this is how it has always been. Loosing noise into the void. The patterns found in this noise, however, are surprising, revelatory and frequently ineffable. Alien frequencies that sizzle with more information than they are capable of conveying sensibly. Clutching at dark realities drawing and creating the glitch connections of misfiring synapses that would characterise the Science Fiction works to come in Ridley Scott's take on *Blade Runner* or Gibson's *Neuromancer*.

Colourful improvisation like this is frequently used in conjunction with superimposed death and sex motifs "like an innaresting sex arrangement". Two twin drivers of mortality. Much is made of the mythical hang man's erection in these excerpts. Snapping necks likened to spurting phalluses. The suffocation of addictive need is articulated through the sexual release of orgasm. Hypodermic needles and syringes are frequently substituted with cock and ball combinations.

He articulates the creepy embrace of inevitable defilement in his portrayals of autoerotic asphyxiation. Frequently young and innocent bodies are corrupted, often as satirical responses to oppressive Western sexual suppression but also as sensual amplification. The pain pleasure neck snapping index is a comment on the dark death-wish associated with the lust for more. The lust for something.

After *Word Hoard* he was moved to a process of distillation where chunks of poisonous honeycomb floated to the surface and were welded together to form *The Naked Lunch*. Much of the defining characteristics of *Word* remained in this writing but a more concurrent, though still phantasmal, narrative could be forged. The recycling of fragments, excerpts and chunks of writing would characterise the body of his work.

It is through this that he sustains his discourse on words being a virus. The sender and the receiver. His transmission theory and mechanical replication. He inverted the narrative to accommodate the virus' perspective. Switched the roles. The human cell is the home place for the virus. Junk searched for its home in the human bloodstream. The living cell deteriorating and seeking its home of death. Life like radiation. Frequencies losing invisible energy over time as they wind down through the cycles. So too could word combinations

contain a virus. Parasitically attach themselves in the “gentle reader”. Junk, words and the virus all led inevitably to their end place of death.

Beyond this, one of the last published works in the collection is titled *My Education* which is essentially a collection of the author’s dreams. He relied heavily on his subconscious as an author and frequently spoke of lifting characters out of his dreams. *My Education* is, in some ways, an end point for the greater works of the author. Not necessarily in death but a comment that art may well begin and end in dream as opposed to the hard edge of a death realm. The dreams are varied but well curated and a testament to the strength of dreams as writing.

Word Virus is a lengthy collection but it achieves an overview of a body of work that is simultaneously chaotic and meticulously mechanical. It is no mean feat to try and safely traverse the works of William S. Burroughs. As it has been opined before the more you read of his work the less crazy he sounds and the more crazy you feel. In this way, perhaps, the virus has found purchase in the reader, crawled in through their eyes, their ears, or their assholes. Maybe the virus predates the author. Perhaps it was sent down to earth through nefarious invisible forces and has lived in the shadows ever since. But given Burroughs’s ability to seemingly detect it, seek it out and stare at it in the face for as long as he dared, it seems he had more control over it than most.

Response to the Reader Report

What struck me most about the reader report was that I felt that there had been comprehensive engagement by the reader on my entire thesis and its contents. This may seem like a given but I was, nonetheless, grateful that the reader methodically responded to a cross section of its contents. The report initially sounded like it may be very critical of the stories that were found in my thesis but then changed tack and was quite complimentary about some of the content. In this response I hope to engage meaningfully with what was observed in the report. I will focus the most on the note of sequencing as this was something that I found to be the most complicated of the changes suggested, then the cuts and micro-edits, the additions of certain stories and finally an observation on style, theme and impressions.

The report described the collection as one that could be disorienting. This was part of what made it seem like it could be a critical impression of the thesis but then the elaboration was that though the collection could be disorienting it executed this in a compelling manner. This may be an overgenerous interpretation of this from me but I think I agree with the report that the stories can be dissociative. They were intended to be dissociative at times and I think the analogy that the reader used of being led down a corridor only to have a door slam in the reader's face is apt, though I was quite fearful when I first read this that the reader may have thought the author rude, blundering or insensitive in doing this. I was therefore elated where the thesis was described as: "Confusing and disorientating, but always interesting enough to keep going." I think the "enough to keep going" is what was important to me in that this confirmed the aforementioned consistent engagement I welcomed from the reader.

I do not want to get lost in responses to interpretation and therefore move to the initial change that opened up a can of worms in terms of my editing. I think what has been of particular importance, besides the constant refining of stories, has been the sequencing of them. It was suggested that *Octopussy* be moved to a later point in the thesis to include it with some of the other more sexually charged pieces.

I agreed with this in principle. The reason that I, with the help of my supervisor, had thought to sequence *Octopussy* earlier was to introduce sex earlier as a primer. This and the fact that *Octopussy* is a slightly lighter story than some of the other sex pieces meant that it made sense for it to exist apart from them in a more innocent phase of the collection. It was like a mid-point reward to try and keep the reader interested.

Therefore I had thought about including it later initially and upon reflection I did think it reasonable to move it to support some of the other sex pieces. This would mean that the collection would end with these more sexual pieces and they would serve to be a finale of sorts. This made sense as long as the reader persisted up until this point.

It is important to note, however, that all of the sexually charged pieces like *Sleep With the Dead*, *Belt Buckle* and *Your Asshole Rubbed on My Heart*, were not just lumped together by theme. They exist near each other but I, with the help of my supervisor, had gone to great lengths to try and balance these pieces with other shorter pieces so that they might complement each other. That they might be in conversation with each other and create space and shapes through their proximity. This was the intention in any case.

Therefore, a small move like lifting *Octopussy* and dropping it in later on in the collection seemed like a simple move but I soon found that it would not be as easy as this. There was a knock-on effect: by moving it that changed the flow to that whole section. In addition to this,

it is the last section and for this reason it could be the clincher. The final bite of the apple for the reader and I therefore wanted it as good as I could possibly get it.

It seems necessary to note here that one of the other suggestions in the report was to include one or two more segments to the concurrent shorts titled *Gary Recurring*. I liked that these were well received as I had added them to the collection at a later stage to try and hold the collection together in contrast to more of the dissociative writing. Therefore I welcomed the idea of including more *Gary* pieces and got to work fashioning another *Gary* addition.

When I started working more carefully with the last section of stories, *Octopussy*, *Belt Buckle*, *Sleep With The Dead* etc. I soon realised that it would be difficult to include all six *Gary* pieces. It worked aesthetically for balance and distribution but the issue was that it was too jarring considering the content of the other stories. To go from something rooted in the body and sex and then switch to an intentionally bland computerised theme was not working and doing so would detract from both.

The way I found to resolve this was to play the fifth *Gary* story off some of the themes in, *Numb* and *Slot-Machine* which were both sexual and mechanical and then accept the fact that the last few stories would not be punctuated at the same regularity with a *Gary Recurring* story.

These are the kinds of decisions that I think are hard to make. Because it is very hard to ascertain whether one is making a meaningful difference in changing these subtle elements. One hopes so and at the end one has to accept one's own decision. I find this similar to much creative thinking. That is one reason why I tend to avoid small changes. I find that if I have stuck to my original vision that I am happy with what happens beyond that.

So during the process of making all of these changes I lamented the fact that I had shaken up the order at all. I felt like I was messing with the original order that I had become attached to because it had been decided upon. However, the point I got to at the end I think was superior to where it was when I started. The other change that was suggested was to move *Star Ants* to the end as it was a darker narrative that could resonate with the visceral heaviness of *Your Asshole Rubbed on My Heart*.

This change I only partly agreed with. The movement of something else to fade out with after the climax of *Your Asshole Rubbed on My Heart* made sense but the suggestion was that it supplant *Applemagic*. This was due to the fact that *Applemagic* deals with apples and seems a bit more innocent. The reader posits the question about whether this was intentional and it was. It was intentional for the reason that there is a twist at the end of *Applemagic* a twist that is quite subtle suggesting the interruption of an illusion through finding a screw embedded in a delicious apple. Maybe the reader didn't miss this so much as not find it that disturbing but this was its intention. So I was determined to keep this as the last point of contact for the reader and therefore resolved to move *Star Ants* to the end but place it in front of *Applemagic* and not end on it.

This again had an impact on what was going on in this section. It meant that I needed to read and re-read all of the pieces in the section. I realized that anything coming after *Your Asshole Rubbed on My Heart* might lack impetus because of the laboured intensity of the climax found in it. Therefore the stories I had placed after it maybe weren't doing what I wanted them to. So I reasoned that perhaps I could have them before but they seemed a bit short and tame. This meant that I had to read and finesse the order of the whole section. I struggled

with placing *Numb* for this reason as it is meant to be a reaction to feeling desensitized by sexual fixation.

I thought I may have to cut *Numb* entirely because it wouldn't fit but I finally found a home for it at the beginning of this set of stories where it could interact with the clarity of one of the *Gary* pieces and hopefully usher in *Octopussy*. Therefore this mechanical feel was useful in articulating the tone for this set of pieces and would therefore precede *Slot-Machine*.

I was adamant to begin with that *Numb* and *Bouncing Sound* needed to live next to *My Asshole Rubbed on Your Heart* but finally I was able to resolve this through the image that *Octopussy* ends on resonating with something dream-like and softer in the tone of *Bouncing Sound* making this a nice blend of ideas. Therefore my fixed ideas to begin with had to be reassessed in order to reach my final re-working of this order.

Some of the other suggested changes and micro-cuts were also not too difficult to assimilate into the collection. They were clippings to *Nightwork* and *Poofartstinkbreath*. *Nightwork* had, in fact, already been cut back so I did not see cutting two more lines off of it all that problematic. Cutting the end off of *Poofartstinkbreath* I was a little more reluctant to do. This is because I was trying to convey something specific in the end of the story. That the narrator had internalized and become something that Aaron's brother had created in him. A psychic tumour is what I refer to it as.

I did, however, think the suggested edit made for a more stylish ending. In the way I had it, perhaps I was going to too far to explain what I meant to the reader. The suggested ending would allow the reader to make up their own mind about it. Therefore I was okay with accepting this despite the fear that I may lose something.

Another response to the report is one concerning style. The reader picks up on a mode of phrasing that they felt was compelling. That framed things in an interesting way. This is something that I can only feel is part of my style. It is not something that I have done consciously in my writing but something that I am appreciative that someone else appreciates. It confirms one of my beliefs that all techniques are executed most successfully when they are implemented as second nature or subconsciously by the writer.

There were things for me to think about in terms of this observation. By isolating a clever turn of phrase as a strength in my writing I was appreciative of the acknowledgement of this aspect of the writing but it was not something that I could readily repeat in other stories to try and make them better. I went back to *Clock-Worked* and *Mars Dust* which were stories that I hoped could be amplified or improved to put them on equal footing with stories that had caught the reader's eye and thought how I might be able to refine them with the above in mind.

This, however, simply ended up changing things rather than replicating a particular style that existed in some successful pieces in the pieces I wished to improve. Therefore I had to hope that the same style already existed in these pieces as they have the same origins as the other pieces. Therefore my editing sought to hone in on vivid images in the writing and up the contrast to try and catch the reader's eye as opposed to re-writing them in a specific style.

The other useful note I take from the report is that the pieces that caught the reader's eye were generally the more conventionally written pieces. This makes sense as there is more to take away from these pieces, they are more plot-driven and therefore there is more to relay in

them. I like to think that the other more dissociative and dream-like pieces help add to the variety and tone of the collection.

What I appreciated was that the reader seemed to understand the collection and appreciated the stories contained in it. The ‘razor edge’ of tension between real and unreal was important to me in writing the thesis and something that the reader picked up on which confirms a proof of concept in some ways. It would suggest I could produce more of this kind of work and hope it achieves the same kind of tension.

I would also like to respond to the reader where it was observed that some of the writing made them feel ill. Though a sense of nausea or sickness is not the only response I wished to illicit from the reader it is still a favourable one where the intention of the writing is to make the reader feel. I think the reader would attest to this but thought it relevant to acknowledge. Similarly some of the writing managing to successfully ‘provoke’ the reader is also an active response for which I am grateful.

Similarly, in seeing some of the writing as disorienting, I think that this is in-line with the intention of the writing. That many of the stories exist without being tethered to recognizable foundation points in reality. The fact that there was enough for the reader to keep going makes me appreciative of the fact that they were willing to take the ride.