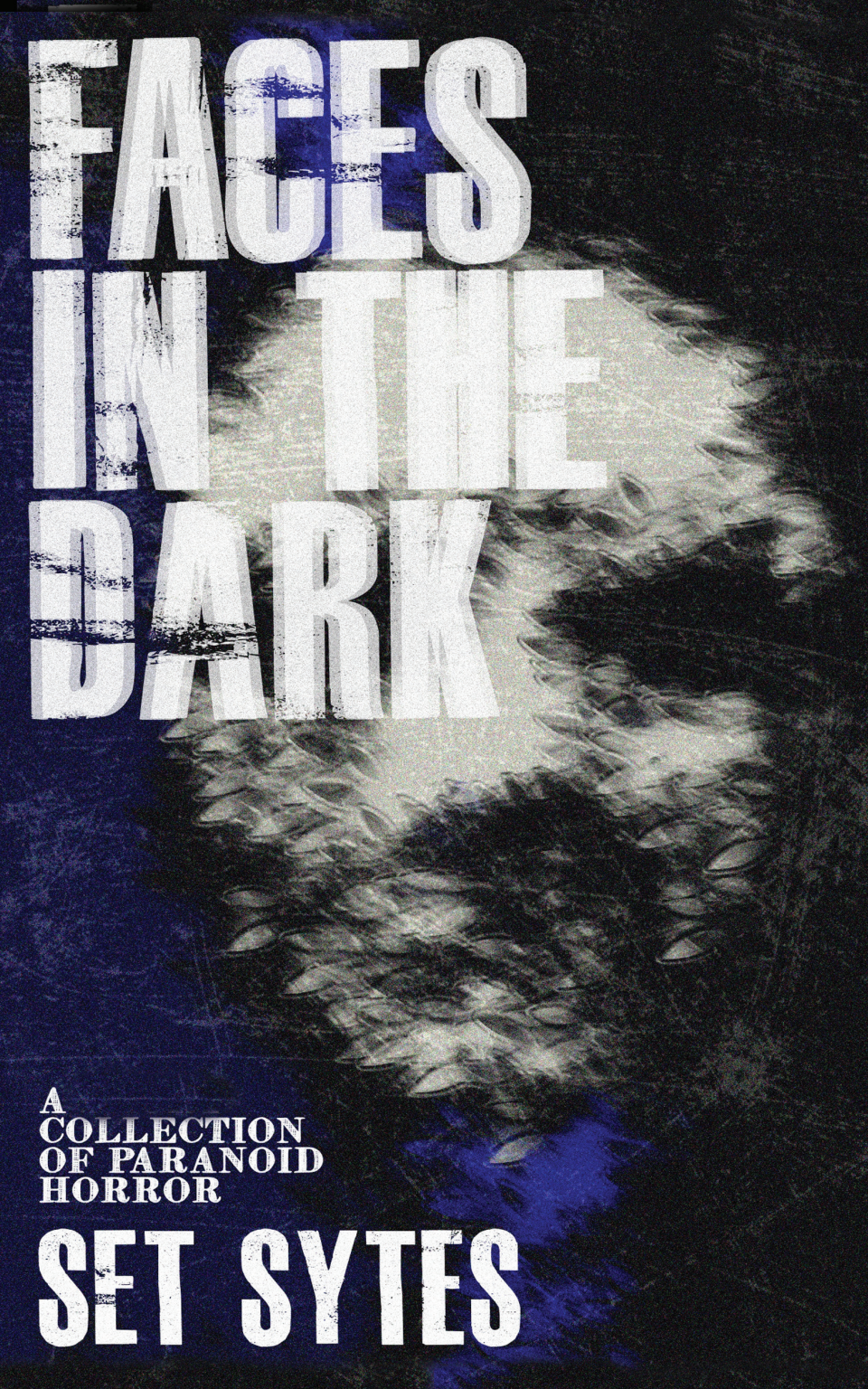




FACES IN THE DARK

A
COLLECTION
OF PARANOID
HORROR

SET SYTES

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A Collection of
Paranoid Horror

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Microcosm Publishing
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HER PARENTS' MASKS

They were huge and looked like bison heads, if bison had at some point mated with cockroaches and vague dark crustaceans. The thick brown hair obscured the eyes, but she wasn't allowed to brush it out of the way. She'd known that from the beginning. Seeing the world through curtains was the only way she'd ever seen it. There was a small hole under the long fur of the snout; you had to put the fork or the straw back and up, so even when they fed she couldn't see her parents' mouths, and even tipping her head back in the mirror she couldn't make out her own lips.

At thirteen years old Aran had never, ever seen her real face and she had never, ever seen those of her parents.

The masks stayed on. Always. In the bath. Asleep. There were no doors inside the house, no privacy in which to reveal herself. She struggled to remember clearly what had happened when she had questioned it all when she was younger. She only remembered her parents' responses as a feeling, that of dread and implied threat. Whispers that circled in her mind, and sometimes words would appear out of the fog, words like *cut* and *pain*, but whether these were words that had actually been spoken to her or merely given form in her mind she didn't know.

Her parents had never spoken above a whisper, and they rarely spoke at all. She thought she'd get used to those silent bison-roach heads looking down at her every day, that there would come a time when they would no longer fill her with fear. She thought

it when she was eight and shivering in bed, feeling them out there, downstairs, or on the landing, always listening and watching. She thought it last year, sitting at the dinner table and hearing her father's head whisper—the only thing said all meal—that she was a good girl.

She thought she'd get used to it. She hoped. But the fear never went.

What did she look like? She only knew human faces from pictures in books. She'd never left the house and its grounds, and as far as the eye could see there were no other houses. There were cars in the drive, and sometimes her parents would drive off, and come back with food. She wondered where they went, and if they took the heads off when they'd left her sight. Did other families wear these masks, or different ones? Did they wear masks at all? Were other children afraid of their parents?

It was a Saturday night in late autumn when she couldn't take it anymore, and she crept out of the house into the garden while her parents were upstairs and she took the mask off.

The feeling of the wet wind on her face, the coldness. The sight of the undraped world. The stink of the mask she'd never really noticed until it retreated. She was shivering again, but not out of fear this time. She took in deep clean breaths for the first time in her life and shuddered, marvelling at the air and how it bit at her teeth. She reached up slowly and touched her skin. It felt soft and warm and damp. She started to run her hands all over herself, catching her tears on her fingertips.

This is what it's supposed to be, she thought. We're not supposed to wear masks.

I need a mirror. I have to have a mirror.

She turned back to the house, and saw the shaggy dark bison heads of her parents watching her from the window.

She cried out and it sounded like the whimper of a small animal shot in the dark. It felt like spiders were marching in formation up her spine. She picked up her mask and shoved it back on her head and ran back to the door, but she knew it was too late. They'd already seen. They saw everything.

Over the next three days, they didn't leave her alone. They'd stopped speaking entirely, but in every room she was in they were there. They stood at her bedside looking down at her as she tried to sleep. She didn't know what was worse, keeping her eyes open or closing them and knowing those heads were still there watching. She didn't sleep.

By the third night she felt like she was going mad. Just moving around the house felt like moving in a nightmare. Everything was hazy and clipped, things jumped out at her. She slipped on the stairs and her parents were there watching until she picked herself up again.

At midnight on the third night her parents were gone from her room. She didn't know when they'd left, because she'd started to see them in the shadows. She wanted to feel relief that they'd gone, if only for a while, but the truth was it was too late.

She stood up and took off her mask once more, and placed it on the bed. There was a mirror in the bathroom and that was where she was going. She didn't care anymore. Even the fear couldn't hold her.

She left her room and met her father in the low light of the landing. He was standing outside the bathroom, at the top of the stairs, facing her. His arms hanging loose at his sides like they always did.

There was silent, frozen dread, for long, far too long, just her and him standing on the landing. And then the words crawled into her ears, like they were the first words ever spoken. 'You've been a bad girl, Aran,' her father whispered.

She was struck with a new wave of terror, fragile human face confronted with this monstrous beast. He wasn't moving, but before she knew it she was, moving in a surge of fear and anger and desperation.

Her shove sent him tumbling down the stairs. She heard a crack as he hit the bottom and that huge head lolled.

For a minute she couldn't move. She'd never been so scared, her hands were all over her face and she couldn't get air. She wanted to bite her fingertips off. Everything was at once sharp and swaying.

She took the first step down. Then another.

He wasn't moving. A shard of moonlight from the front door of the house lay cold and blue on his fur.

She felt like she was descending into Hell, some pit of nightmare, of bison beards like wet mud shuffling in the night, of shifting plastic carapaces and twitching antenna. At the bottom of the stairs things swam in the moon-sliced shadows, and in the corners of cabinets and between her father's legs she glimpsed the shells of crustaceans that clicked their way from out of the void.

There was no sound. The house had been drained of it. Even her own panic had been muted, and she couldn't know if she was still drawing breath.

She stood at the feet of her father and she bent down and she lifted the bison-roach head off his face.

She screamed and fell back against the stairs. There was a huge staring eye that took up almost the whole face. Stretched lips ran in a split grin from corner to corner. The skin was wet rubber. Inside the gap in the lips there was a very real grin like a wolf.

Her father stood up like he was made of sticks at the same time as her mother joined him out of the darkness of the next room. She too wore that bald and earless rubber mask with the giant eye and stretched smile. She too was grinning under it, the bison head clutched in her arms. They stood next to each other and looked at their daughter as she scrambled backwards up the stairs.

She stopped halfway up, paralysed by those faces as they continued to grin.

'You're not an adult yet, Aran,' her father whispered through his teeth, as he started to climb the stairs.

THE VIOLET DARK

These are the times of nightmares, where the shadows of day lick the world as they deepen, the trees grow towards us and the owls are the foghorns of the coming night; when ghosts rise and all is terrible and endless.

Bring on the violet

Bring on the violet dark.

OPENING

The violet dark

The horror's heart

He found her crouched like a dog over the corpse of her father. He was cruising on violet and she appeared to him then an angel, hair so white it hurt his eyes and her own eyes bursting with life.

He knelt down beside her as she quivered. 'What happened?' he said, raising a hand to put on her shoulder and then thinking better of it, hovering it in the air.

She told him between coughs and cries that he had been murdered. He looked and saw the hole through the chest, the drying blood sticking to the tarmac.

'Let's get you off the road,' he said, and she stiffened as his hand fell on her, but she allowed herself to be moved to the verge. She didn't ask who he was.

He looked up and saw the moon blinking cold and yellow, greasy and indolent and huge. It seemed to dwarf the land, a zoomed in face with its pots and scars oiling the sway of the wind and leering down at him. An owl sat in a grand spike of a tree, eyes like headlights. He heard the hoot like a foghorn and the grass at his feet moved in moans and soft howls.

He closed his eyes and opened them again before the bursting brilliance began, before the violet could pull him deeper in. He found himself hugging the girl, rocking back and forth as far off he watched lights click on and off in the town, bathing the streets in their white-yellow pools. He could hear the clicks as well as if they were doors closing right by him, though the town was miles away.

‘What was he doing out here?’ he asked, and silently smelt her hair. It smelled of incense and earth.

‘We—we heard a noise. He went to go see. He didn’t come back . . .’ She started sobbing again.

‘Easy,’ he said. He glanced at the farmhouse, a mountain in the moonlight, a fortress of shadow that whispered in creaks. He shivered and once more he heard the foghorn of the owl. He was always on the watch for shadows. They could come from anywhere.

The girl suddenly affixed him with eyes of a blue so radiant that he could have plucked them out and called them jewels. He moved his gaze down, fascinated, to the ruby red of her lips that lit up the jostling shades of her face. He stroked her back and swore his fingers passed through wings.

He gestured to his chopper, to the beast waiting to growl. ‘I was riding fast,’ he said. ‘I heard your cry in the dark. It was lucky I didn’t hit you.’

‘I wish you had.’

He shook his head empathically, and the trees blurred left and right. ‘Don’t say that.’ He shook his head again, admiring how the

land became a melting pot yet her figure stayed constant, as perfect and still as an oil painting.

‘He was such a good man,’ she said, tears leaving her face in pearls and icicles. ‘He didn’t deserve this.’

He breathed in deeply, sucked sickly clamour and spice. He took out his hipflask and offered it to her. ‘Here, drink this.’

She trembled in her grief. ‘What is it?’

‘It’s a dream for a better world.’

She took it and sniffed at it. He knew the smell, just like the colour. The smell of violets. She drank.

‘We need to get you a bike,’ he said.

‘Get me one,’ she said.

She lay on the road looking up at the night. The man had gone to get a bike. She didn’t care, for the world was changing.

Time was slowing. The patches of darkness around her grew like children. Solidifying and looming, growing tall, growing fat, growing protective and malicious. From either side of the road black trees reached out their arms to pull her in.

Bursts of dark colour around her eyes, dull flashes with every blink. The mind winds down, pads softly, carefully, a cat through the bracken. She closed her eyes and felt herself sway and spin at the top of a spiral staircase. A jumble sale of shapes and ideas thrown

and bouncing around her. Melting fragments, elliptical omens and geometrics cavorting like gypsies at a funeral.

She opened her eyes before she fell through the road and down into the depths. The stars glimmered soft and warm, coins of burnt gold scattering the heavens. The treasures called to her with such siren intensity, her body floating so light in its struggle to be free of gravity that she had to turn her head away from the sky before it pulled her up like a UFO abduction and swallowed her whole.

The violet kept on.

She was in a deep hollow of white—decorated in snowflakes, each pattern as sharp as knives, as skittery as spiders.

Feel the frogspawn as it swims the long silent lake of the soul. Twitching paddles breaking the divine lines. Flick. Twitch. Alien species find new holes to enter.

We feel fate... our hearts beat softly, so deadly softly, like a quivering fly... tears slide down the thrumming wall of blood. Oh, oh we feel fate alright. Father. Mother's egg. We feel fate.

The mush of the brain eaten by the higher forces... gobbled spoons... lipsmacking by those that dwell beyond fate: monsters, monsters out to get you, just nothing and nobody.

Crocodile werewolves and nothing and nobody.

The road helps those who help themselves—

‘Can you feel it?’

She opened her eyes into a shrouded world. He stood over her, his grin leaked out, pulling its milky whites past the edges of his teeth, becoming lunar and painterly and yet with only a pinprick of a snarl it was ghastly in its Cheshire madness.

‘I can feel the dying calls of the dead,’ she said. ‘I can feel the beasts feeding on their new kill.’

‘The dead have instruments,’ somebody said.

A slow pluck at the world’s strings. A black note. Somewhere in the darkness something hatches.

My father is—who was he—fifty-two years—

‘You’re lying on the road. That’s not good.’

‘The world...’

‘Yes.’

Yes.

‘Get whatever you need,’ he said. ‘I got you a bike. Get your things and ride with me back to where I left mine.’

She swayed through the cruel corners of the house. Moving as if in a dream. Once familiar shapes foreign and lurking, waiting for their chance. She tried to focus on the rest of her essentials. A toothbrush. Toothpaste. She grabbed them from the bathroom and

tried not to look at the grotesque manikin that watched her from the mirror.

As she moved back through the ground floor she saw a figure standing quietly by the living room door. She shook her head and it sat down. Crossed its legs, saying *I'll be here if you need me*. Not speaking, not even there, but time isn't for the conscious, it isn't for the rational. It isn't for thinkers. It's for the doers. It's their king and it's their world.

She left the front door wide to the night like an open mouth. She had her things and she had no idea how she had got them. Not like this. The house shuffled forward full of monsters and she ran to the bike and got on behind him and they drove off down the road, away from her life.

THE GIANT

Bigger than us

She didn't know how long the night span on but on it did. The world wheeled past. The bikes crunched through on the infinite scrawl of the road. The whites, the blacks. The thin grey desert carved through the hollow thickets of the land.

See the brambles and thorns as scissors with the sky. See the howl and thump of the air. Feel it, feel it pour through you. Her hair swung out behind her, each strand a pagan goddess, swaying seductively, amorally. The motes in the air the audience, rapturous, hushed. Waterfalls in the night when the lights go low.

The bikes seemed to run slow, but who really knew. Time couldn't keep up with the moving world. The bushes and dark ones did not whip along, but watched in a gradual impermanence. Each skull grin, each wide eye, caught in the crazed obsession of the blackness, all caught and replayed. Things took their time here, the route the orbit of the spirit. She remembered each beautiful nightmare. Each slide in the film. The projectionist looking down on her. Turn it down, dad. Wind it on, turn it down.

Ahead of her he came closer and closer, and she realised he was slowing, or she was still and he was riding backwards. He turned into the side and came off the motorbike like a falling tree.

‘What?’ she said, the word moving through her like the ocean’s sigh.

‘I thought it might be getting tough to ride for you now. The road wants us to take care of ourselves. Come in. Brake, *brake*, come in.’

She took the hand of the great pardoner and stepped off into his kingdom. Her princess dress nothing but the cobwebs blown through the early hours.

‘Lie down,’ he commanded. She followed after he did.

‘Enjoy,’ he commanded. She came first.

At first the grass tickled her, a thousand hands invading her, laying siege to the wall of her back. And then she closed her eyes, and the hands pulled back in deeply held respect.

She breathed in waves, feeling the rise, the crest—then exhaling the spume off the bare shore. Blowing the rolling hills back to the blue depths.

She felt the motions of the world, felt its pulse. As she breathed the ground beneath her feet breathed. A thousand giants below the surface, pounding anvils and raising steam, jumping, stretching, fighting and fucking. Each cough a storm, each sneeze volcanic.

No, just one, one behemoth, bearded and brawny, his hair the grass and trees, his beating heart the Earth’s core.

She saw through the soil, saw his rolling mad eyes, his tectonic fingers prying, probing, turning valleys to mountains. Then his eyes were the moon, two moons, except cast below deck by an intemperate God. Then whites go red, and the eyes were the twin cores of the Earth, still watching, still pulsating, melted blind and pupilless.

If only others knew the truth: that the rhythm of the world was the monster Gaia, the great, terrible wild man of all impossibilities. Wild man of the woods, the rocks, the deserts, the oceans; the mists in the sky his fogging breath.

All the time or none of the time. That's how you live, that's how you love. They lay side by side in the motherly guardianship of the stalking trees. Fingers so close. They could feel its each other's existence, more aware than any two beings ever had been before. A devil's angel and an angel's devil.

She opened her eyes when the trees moved. She saw the eyes in the trunks, saw the nests of the damned, saw everything watching. A silent crowd watching, moving slowly in gnarled twitches.

She made a noise and her body sat her up. Somebody was still running the thing, while all those upstairs either lay in a stupor or were petrified like stone.

He sat up next to her, and she cried out again at this sudden zombie. She thought she was trembling all over, but when she looked at herself she was still. Her body looked alien to her. She swore there

were eyes on her skin, looking at her through wrinkles, just out of sight. Mouths in the crooks of her arms laughing. And the corpse of *him*.

'It's okay,' he said.

'No it isn't.'

'You're right, it isn't. But it will be. You need to brave it out.'

'Brave . . . what . . . out.'

'The violet dark.'

She'd been running. She knew that from the sweat, from the punch of her heart, from the army drawing its breath inside her. But she couldn't remember, not really; just a rush of shapes, crawling patches of darkness, bogs of the pitch-dark sky sucking at her feet.

Why had she ran? The eyes... the laughter, the chorus of the owls perched all around like the bloodhungry at the Coliseum. The birds on the branches examining her with surgical eyes, just rotten old plague doctors; they'd not seen any in some time. Watched by all parties as she made her way through this house of trees with stoned terror.

Now she was in a drunken, wheeling panic. She felt like a girl who had woken up in a room alone at a strange house, drugged and ripped, a foreign chatter above past sprawled corridors that never ended. A date gone foul.

She struggled to make sense of the panic, to take action on it, to exchange information body to brain and back. He was not there.

The first drops of the storm landed on her fingers, then her nose.

She slipped through the trees as the rain ate at their leaves. It was a chatter that continued to increase in volume, a party of souls with as much wine as they could drink.

She imagined she was on a ship, an old galleon with high masts. Reading the stars by the lamps of the owls. Guiding the vessel through a maze of rocks, hands dancing at the helm—the trees crowding in, coming at her left and right.

When she bumped into him and he put his hands on her she thought that maybe life had ended. Everything stopped for a heartbeat, a freeze frame. She thought of it as a photograph in a book of her life. A baby in her father's arms. A child playing on the farm. A woman in the arms of the dead.

Her fist clawed at his head, and he tripped her up, sending her flat to the ground. Surely this was dying, she thought, but then he was there, his breath against hers, urging her that it was okay and stroking her hair as the rain came on.

The sky rent and gnashed, great holes appearing and reeling drunk like gaping portals to the black clutches of alien space. The air

bellowed and screamed, swooping banshees in their ears and the ears of all creatures big and small.

I am drowning, she thought, and yet she breathed through the water, writhing in transformation to mermaid. The world was a waterfall, and it all came down.

They were offering themselves as a sacrifice to the storm, laid in a small clearing as trees melted around them and sank into the earth. She swallowed the rain and it filled her belly, and she wriggled in the mud like a fish.

Watch the world drip away

Drip drip drip

It all falls down

Every last bit

The heavens ripped open with atavistic savagery, some calling of primeval gods ending in their destruction and the birthing of their blood fouled sons and daughters.

A homicidal night, and watch as the spindral hands of God come down from on high, from the tears in the cloud—or the hands of that Gnostic demonking, spectral and skeletal, crooked and shining in the blue white of the newly dead. It reached out, darting and jagged, and fingered the holes in the earth.

She rolled on the ground, hands clutched over her head, and he lay prone yet soaked and trembling, half concussed and with asylum eyes. Mouths were opened and mouths were shut and—

All words were lost in the screech and holler.

The rain stopped first. The clouds hung around, waiting for something that didn't come. One by one they slunk off, freeing the sky, the lightning and thunder gone to their beds in other lands. The orchestra over. Time, gentlemen.

She got up, so sodden and heavy and filthy with the mud that the rain had not washed away. *Not a mermaid or a fish, just a fat, slow woman, creaking the ground with her ponderous weight.*

She followed him back to the bikes. She didn't know how he remembered their location so well, but then again every tree was different, as was every bush and every blade of grass. After a time she noticed that the trees were pointing the way, and ushering them along. Their impatience was evident when a branch whipped her backside, and they hurried their pace, leaving a leaking trail as they went.

Perhaps it was the time dilation, but it seemed to take a lot longer to find the bikes than she'd have thought. *How far had I run?* The walk got easier as it went on, as the water fell from their clothes and hair, and after another sip of violet her body lightened even more. The air blew fresh and clear around the amaranthine trees, curling and singing sweetly as it sought them out and kissed them dry.

They sensed the silence of the road before they came upon it, and their bikes lay there like sleeping metal tyrants.

He walked past them to the road, and laid himself down.

'Are we not riding?'

'Not yet,' he said.

She lay next to him and blew invisible smoke rings into the firmament.

THE MOON

Watching as you sleep

She looked up into the sky, that lonely chasm. Each star a little slice of heaven, some sharp, needle holes poking through the blanket to something better, to the paradise of whiteness beyond.

And the moon. Fat and bulging, it dominated the sky, a bulbous eye watching, ever watching. It grew whenever she looked away, whenever she blinked, whenever her gaze unfocused.

Not grew—came closer. Everything did it—the trees, the rocks—creeping closer behind your vision.

It reminded her of a TV programme she had seen as a child. There was a bunch of standing stones near a house, and they kept coming closer, and closer, but you never saw them move, not an inch. Eventually they were right outside the windows, right outside the front door. You turned your back and they were right there.

The show had terrified her. The terror of the inanimate, the unknown mysteries—worse than undead, never meant to be alive, never seen to be alive, and yet—

It was like spiders, one of her fears. The horror, the real horror wasn't in the movement, but in the non-movement, the waiting for movement, the dreadful anticipation, wound up like high tensile wire. The lock of the legs. They crouched, and did nothing. When

they moved, as quick and horrible as it was, it was never as bad as how it had been in your mind. Horror always truly lay with what you didn't see, with what you made up, with the imagination giving graveyard life to the shadowed objects around you.

The moon seemed to fill the sky now. It was no mere eye of the night but a pale Sauron, a single staring eye for the cyclopean Anti-God. The eye of Death's negative.

The black pits on its face seemed to wink at her, and it grinned.

'The moon scares me,' she said, and it did not sound ridiculous at that moment but rather the words consolidated her fear.

'I know,' he replied. 'It's always watching. It watches everything. It wants you to be scared of it.'

He gave her his blanket and she wrapped herself in it, while he lay out on the grass in nothing. Sleep came on her like a coma. She moved through the bellies of demons and angels with diamond eyes fucked her softly.

He watched her for a long time before closing his eyes.

THE WAYSIDE

Stepping through mouldy sunshine

She tried to blink away the sun, but it would not go. Her head swam and when she tried to sit up everything was too sharp, too bright and painful. Everything newly angled, even the grass was carved with a knife.

He was at her side stroking her hair and she wondered how long he had been there.

‘I’m thirsty,’ she said.

He had the flask already in his hand, ready to touch her lips.

‘Do you have water?’

‘This will keep you hydrated.’

‘Hair of the dog, huh.’ She took a tiny sip of the drink. Anything to make the land soften.

‘You’ll need a bit more than that.’

She rolled her eyes, but that made her skull ache. ‘Get me a proper drink first.’

‘This is a proper drink.’

‘I want a fucking coke.’

He stood up and looked down at her, then walked off to find their bikes. A few minutes later they had steered them back onto the road and were on their way.

She's forgotten what the day had looked like. There was something pale and harsh and sad about it. She kept her eyes half-closed. The violet had taken a small effect, had taken the edges out of the world. She could feel them pushing to come back though. An artist's hand waiting to re-sketch, to draw every line harder with thicker, meaner pencils.

She watched him from behind, watched his hair run with the wind. When she drew up closer she sometimes saw his eyes closed as he drove, and then as if he could feel her eyes he opened them slowly and smiled at her.

Who was this man? Why had she shackled up with him? Was he dangerous?

She thought of the farm and the big house, now empty and loveless. She thought of the thing in the mirror and she suddenly realised she had not taken her father's body out of the road.

The thought was so awful that she drew a sword against it and cut it out of her mind.

Some tombs are best left undisturbed. Sometimes suns die and yet they never leave the sky. Just don't look at it. Don't let it hurt you.

They stopped off at a big store by the wayside. Both somewhat sobered; he was taking another as she pushed open the screen door.

‘It doesn’t belong here,’ he was saying. ‘It doesn’t fit. Where’s it gonna go? No place at all.’

There was only a couple of people in the store but they peered at her strangely and she felt uncomfortable. *Well fuck you too.* She wandered the aisles, feeling as out of place in this man-made artifice as the store itself was in the country around it. The man at the till coughed loudly and it echoed down the aisles. She concentrated on what she needed. All these names, brands, bullshit. She remembered when she would come to a place like this and how she had always wanted more than she could afford. Now little took her interest.

She bought a sleeping bag. She bought biscuits and bread. She bought vodka and coke.

They drank the coke, squinting in the muddy glaze of sunshine. They crouched under the jutting roof of the store. Less aggressive. A cool hand in service of the night. Helping the strangers who go all hours by the wayside.

‘I feel like I’m growing horns,’ he said.

‘What?’

He laughed at her with hard eyes. ‘We need to move on.’

Leave life behind and follow him, came the unshakeable thought. *It’s easy. Just follow. Follow until you are ready to lead.*

‘Where are we going?’

‘There is no where. There is nowhere to go. We just go.’

‘Until?’

‘The dark will come soon. Then we go again.’

‘Forever?’

‘For as long as time takes us.’

More violet, and on they went. Past houses, yards, fields and bushes, past monsters and effigies and voodoo tombs.

All that she had missed. All that had never come. Already she owed violet, owed her escape.

And you owe him.

The land blew past in dreams, just part of the wind.

The shades of the violet-cast day grew stronger and deeper as the sun grew tired. They drank water from a stream and the coldness ran through like a frozen orgasm.

The road was silent and solitary but for their bikes and the background roar of the world. They saw nobody, taking the small roads. Sometimes she thought she saw huge shadows chasing each other in the distance, on other roads. When the violet was strong all old detail was gone, replaced by a new kind of detail of what the mind believed.

She thought of the stories she used to write when she was younger, before she gave up. This wasn't like those stories, but it felt like she was writing new stories constantly, her mind scribbling away, telling her what *this* was and what *that* was. Rocks made of felt and drifting fields of haunted corn, and a sky painted blue by the same aliens behind the pyramids, behind Stonehenge, behind her birth. That shape a pygmy bear-child, the last of its kind. That shape a living statue down on all knees, grieving for its lost parent.

That shape before her the man who had taken her.

Nightmares come and

Nightmares go

Beauty sees

What nightmares show

A nursery rhyme of her own devising. She felt rather proud of herself. That is, until it repeated over and over through her head, not letting go. *You came up with me?* It seemed to be whining, snarling. *And now you want rid of me? You are my creator. You are my stupid repetitive creator. There is nothing in you, it is all in the outside world. I owe my worthless existence to you. I am your Frankenstein and you will feel me. Ride on, bitch.*

She rode on, and eventually the rhyme repeated itself less and less often. Each time it did it was angry and loud, overcompensating for its weakness. Breaking through the oceans of formless thought to

attack, and then cast adrift, screaming as the mere flotsam it was got swept over the waterfall.

Nightmares come but

You are dumb

You are dumb

To take his cum

He looked behind him at the sound of laughter. She was trailing behind, giggling to herself as her bike weaved erratically. Never again would he see her so beautiful, so perfect. She was his missing lung, his missing bladder, his missing stomach. He wanted to breathe her, piss her and eat her.

My angel of darkness.

Her body was his tomb. He would choose to lie and let the worms gnaw him forever, as long as he rotted inside her.

My angel of death.

One day long past, he would have come off violet to see if he felt the same. But such a thing was useless. Even if he hated her sober, even if she was ugly and cruel—though he knew she was neither—as long as he was in love with the violet her, that was enough.

And how does she see me? Which me does she see? I am all forms. I can be ugly and cruel. A day comes I am a saint. A day comes

I am a devil. A day comes I am a troglodyte, better served in caves than under another's gaze. A day comes I would rape myself.

Into the black

She looked at him, at this heavy-coated figure rocking slowly by the light of the fire. 'Where are you from? I know nothing about you. Tell me about yourself.'

He looked at her. 'The violet is wearing down.'

'How do you know? It is.'

'You would not be asking such a question otherwise. The violet distracts. Here, have some more.' He made to fetch the hipflask but she held up a hand.

'Later, maybe. I need this clarity.'

He shrugged. 'I don't see why.'

'Where are you from?' she asked again.

He looked into the fire. 'Somewhere south, somewhere north. A way to the east, a little to the west. I don't know. I'm from nowhere and everywhere. I've forgotten my home. If ever I had one.'

'Do you always answer in riddles?'

He grinned. 'Maybe.'

'What happened to you?'

‘Life. Life happened.’

‘What about life?’

‘All of it. Everything.’ He shook his head. ‘I gave up explaining a long time ago.’

‘Try me.’

He sighed, and took a small sip from the hipflask. ‘Fine. I never enjoyed it. Life. At least, not that I have any memory of. I wandered, in revolving cycles of depression, apathy and disillusion. Finding enjoyment in next to nothing. That was on a good day. I told myself that I always bounced back, over and over and over. After every blackness came the dawn. The nights were the worst. Not like now. With violet the night is my friend. But back then... I told myself as long as I had oxygen in my lungs I would always surface from the depths.’

‘And then one day you stopped?’

‘No. I had never bounced back. I had never surfaced. I rose in little bits, but I sank deeper with every night. I just didn’t see it for what it was.’

‘Depression.’

He laughed mirthlessly. ‘I thought that was all it was too, for a spell. No. Eventually I realised that in my times of blackness I had the truth of it. The fault was not with me, but with the world. Those around me wanted me to change. I did not understand that. It is too easy to tell a person to change. Hard to tell the world to change. But the blame must be laid at the right feet.’

She shifted uncomfortably. She did not want to question this, seeing that this man before her was a different beast entirely and she knew him not.

‘I eventually left the company of others. I felt sick and weary. I tried violet for the first time, and from that there was no turning back. The world was beautiful for the first time, either since childhood, or since forever.’

‘Populated by nightmares.’

‘Perhaps. But the kind of nightmares I can handle. Not the nightmare of a sober world and its expectations.’

She saw the sprites of the fire reflecting the sadness in his eyes, and she moved close to him. He looked at her and his grin was wide and bare.

‘Why don’t -’

‘No advice,’ he interrupted her. ‘I’ve heard it all.’

She said nothing for a minute, then quietly said ‘How do you get money?’

‘I find it.’

She looked into the demons dancing in the fire.

‘I don’t need much.’

‘Mmhmm.’

He picked up the flask and offered it to her. ‘Here, have some more.’

‘I’m okay for now.’

He shook it at her. ‘Go on.’

‘Why?’

He looked a little taken aback, as if such a question was indecipherable to him. Then he wagged it again. ‘You have lived your whole life up to this point seeing the world a certain way. You have done this once. The second time you will feel more in control.’

‘Is that so.’

‘You know you want to.’ He pushed it into her unresisting hand. His thumb touched hers. He looked at her with fierce, indigo eyes, and she felt the strength in the fire and the strength in his weakness. She drank a mouthful and he beamed at her.

‘What happens when this runs out?’

‘There’s a good deal more in my pack. If that goes, then we sober up a little and hook ourselves up with some more. It’s easy.’

‘And buy it with?’

‘I have money. And I told you, I can find more. It’s always lying around someplace.’

She nodded slowly, feeling the violet come on again. The fire reddened. Waving thumbprints and casting its thousand burning angels.

GENDER

You cannot share a voice

He put his hand on her bare arm, and she shuddered as if struck with some kind of charge. Her flesh seemed to give way before him, and she tried to stiffen, but her body was relaxing, pooling itself. Her skin spongelike as it bathed in darkness.

‘You are not like ordinary men,’ she murmured, and as she saw the crescent grin of bone she thought of men, men in herds, trampling the jungle and raising barrels of dust on old tracks. Men with their trunks and horns of all sizes waving and cutting through the air. And then, her eyes deeply closed, she saw their sight, their destination, and as if some cabaret parody of the reverse she saw the women, the lithe vulpines, twitching their tails and swaying serpentine, ballooned calling cards on their chests and lower backs, and the herds of men and women raised up their voices in song and shouts and screaming and roaring, all notes of chaos, pleasure and pain.

And then her eyes snapped open, the herds of the sexes snapped out of existence, and she knew how wrong it all was.

‘You see that it is wrong,’ he said, as if courtesy to her visions. ‘I am not like ordinary men because there are no ordinary men. There are no men and women. There is just a man. And there is a woman. And another man, another woman. Do you see? We belong no more to these groups than a cast rock belongs to the hillside. Society feels the

need to categorise, and especially for the biggest groups of all, splitting the world into a mere two. But nobody is alike. There is nobody, no individuals or committees who can speak for these groups, because they are chaos. The wall of sound gibberish of billions speaking is the same as having no voice at all. There will be no agreement. Never.'

He paused to smoke. 'I do not understand these gender wars. You look at me and say no ordinary man. I say no ordinary woman and I could say that to any woman anywhere. There is nothing in gender. You have the animal sex of your body. Beyond that two possibilities. No gender at all. Or every gender, an individual gender for every person that ever walked the earth. Either way it is meaningless. Your gender is your personality. You hold no membership cards to these sprawling groups. They are not your team. You cannot win, you cannot lose.

'These women and men—shapeless, allowed to become a brick in a living, pulsating wall. They defend "their own"—he danced his fingers in the air—'by attacking the other side. Us and Them—the most primitive of human behaviours, so regressive as to be embarrassing. There *are* no sides! No sides but every side for every one. Too many sides. You are on your own, do not permit someone to speak for you. You are an individual. You are never a group. Anything more put on you is a direct insult.'

He touched the skin of her arm, and felt it ripple. He closed his eyes and saw the throbbing wetness between her thighs. Under her flesh, the pump of hot blood.

He moved his face closer, and she turned her head, shaking.

‘What?’ he said.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I’m struggling to keep hold... after what’s happened... I don’t know you, I don’t understand what’s changing...’

‘I don’t know you either.’ He spoke softly, purring the words. ‘You do not need to struggle. Let life wash you away. Nothing has happened. The past has no existence.’

He took her by the face. ‘Look. Look around at the serenity violet gives you. This gothic theatre. A lurid opulence. This is where you are needed.’

‘Needed by who?’

‘By yourself... By me.’

She tried to smile and yet moved her head away again. ‘I need time.’

He inclined his head. ‘Of course. I know that. Time to develop, time to grow, to fall away... Time to love again. It took me long, too long.’

He moved away from her, closing the door quietly behind him. He sighed, reaching for a cigarette, and stood smoking in the cool dark. Clad in a shroud of deep sea blues and the side of his vision bleeding garishly from a neon sign.

‘Need,’ he whispered. ‘There’s all the time about us, she won’t be needing that. She’ll be needing a lot more soon. She will be needing me.’

The thought didn't make him smile.

THE FIRST

What is left when all things are empty

They saw the first one when they were on their backs. Lying on a quilt of grass in the hole of the night, loomed over by the skulls of houses.

The air was brittle, and from time to time he would reach out with piano hands and snap it. Fingers ivory keys in the blackness. Palms of the dumb. He'd grope up blindly, eyes tweaking like a pink mole rat rising from the earth. Fat raw limpdick. Loin maggot. Wait till you're out of your infancy. Snuffling round holes laid in the dewy dawn.

His silverback hands, rustling the tins hidden in the sheets of the wind, that hugged and poked them relentlessly, attention-seeking. His fingers curling, crab-like, scrabbling at the elements above. Finding a purchase among the nooks.

She felt it snap. A bone of air. She could hear it, like the click of fingers in her earlobe.

She shuddered, as he did it for the fourth time. 'Please stop.'

He turned his head on daggers of grass, and looked at her, holding a grin. Werewolf-in-tow. 'Am I breaking it?'

That's when it came. Slipping from the edge of a wall.

She shot up, the rush of new perspective disorientating her and she staggered. He took her arm.

There's one there looking at us. No sudden movements. Don't want her to—

He saw her rise to her feet like a pillar birthed from the soil. His eyes hooded and he climbed to his feet slowly, carefully, just in time to catch her stumble.

The shadow listed closer to them, hugging the wall. It was making sounds. Submarine sounds of the unconscious. They had always sounded so far off, incoherent. Drowned whale songs.

'I've got a gun,' he said.

The thing in front of them, a cut-out of the paper maps of the world and all its inanimates. Only oily space beyond.

The thing moved as if it was falling and melting through the landscape. A handpainted nightmare tripping between the pages of a comic book. Moving in slides. Falling apart and gathering in patches in a Rorschach mime.

She shivered in disgust. There was something deathly about it. Something corpuscular and yet without body—an un-thing, a gap in things. Negation in shape.

When she started registering the sounds she took a step back and gave a little helpless cry of fear. The sounds of dull rotting pines

banging together in a silent empty forest. The foghorns of old animals crawling and crashing out the mountain. Booming and braying at the pus of the moon.

‘Stay back,’ he said. She didn’t know if he was talking to her or it.

‘What is it?’ she whispered, and she noticed he was pointing at it with a twisted metal stick, some set-eyed guru shaman holding the demon back with voodoo.

She blinked and looked between them and saw a shotgun aimed at a quivering, crumbling blur. The noises gibbering and sullen.

‘Don’t shoot,’ she said instinctively. He glanced at her, eyebrows furrowed, and his arms lowered.

In an instant so vacuous, so robbed of living moment, the shadow jumped at them. It was a window pane of time that smashed them in the face, the flesh of the world in the shutter frames of a strobelight. It touched her, some greasy black flap waved over her bare skin. Its huge, hideous face garish in ugliness, in its spits of soot, its streaking lines of black blood. A face amorphous. Porcine and canine and that same naked mole rat twitching its eyes.

She fell back and her spine cracked the grass.

All eyes, mouth eyes. All mouth, eyes mouth.

A second had passed, and yet the scene moved in waves, slow laps at the shores of consciousness. The shape was wrestling with the gun, and her man—*person, beautiful real person! Her man!*—

was roaring angry and wretched. He kicked, and the demon fell. Its shifting coal features once more a smudge. No-face, no-body.

He turned, yelling 'RUN!' at her, and as he turned like a circus ride the blot in the grass reached up with a scabbed whip and pulled at his ankle. He lurched at the ground like a coffin-body tipped and evicted. It struck his chin, and he suddenly, face in grass, felt coddled by a burrow of ant-things, a swarm of nests gathering up the tangles of his facial hair and tying them to posts, them to ensnare him here like some Gulliver.

Pain bruised its way through his chin, carried up the lines of his jaw by a new postal service of ant-things, the old nervous system left hammered and purged. All innocent backs to the wall.

He was spun by a powerful force, and the galaxy of his vision was inflicted by horror, by a famine of good things and a desolation of ugliness laid bare.

He had only come so close to the face—was it their face? Was it one of many?—about seven times. Seven times seen that black grinning, garing maw, that boiled, pustulous sea. Always at night. In the doomy dive-bar depths of the violet dark. Treasury chest of nightmares.

He shoved with all his ancestral might and the stormcloud crouched over him like a lightless wolf alighted, pulled back by the hem of its neck, its soul's nametag, by a hand from above only ever visible as forceless void.

Its snout vomited some gurlish possessed dribble, then shrunk back into the huddle of features, the draws, cabinets and chairs that sat, circled and silent in the gloom of the gaunt attic-space of the devil. The door open wide, a cold usher to the wordless guests of the dead.

He realised the shadow was crunched, almost doubled. It was hurt.

He looked around, sweeping the treeline over the road with shipdeck vision. He saw *her*, running off into where his gaze could not follow. The violet dark between the trees.

He followed on foot, as fast as he could. He realised in slow-motion catch-up, an inside runner huffing to the delivery post to give the updated news, that he had left the shotgun.

He turned and saw that right behind him was the shadow, and suddenly the shotgun was in his hand after all, it was part of him all along, and he raised his hand like the fiery finger of God's wrath and he squeezed the trigger and the head of the thing—was it a head? Was it one of many?—fell off.

She loped through the air like a moonwalker, drifting in terror. It was the fastest her body could agree with her on. She could see next to nothing. Clapsed in the bosom of the wood. She stopped, a second-guess, a moment's premeditation. An image of a sawn-off shotgun.

The sound almost raised the graveful bowels of Hell.

• • •

She crawled through an orchard of thorns. The twisting claws of the undergrowth. She heard thudding all around, and incoherent screams and warcries. Footsteps of the hunter.

The plants bled together, caught up in this passing storm.

Focus

The plants blood blood of the plants my blood

Focus you fucking bitch whore cunt

Your life depends on it. The barrel of thought rolled into her, and things jammed a little clearer.

Quiet now. Remember the cats—move like them.

She stood up and turned right into him.

Him.

Her. After a moment of abject panic, the second before the storm, he saw her for who she was. He knew that light in the world.

He gathered her up in his arms.

A bear risen out of the swampy darkness and she wrapped in a bear-hug.

Canoes slit through soft, thin bayous on either side of her. In scared, bewildered embrace.

Into the heart of things.

‘What *was* it?’

‘I call them shadows.’

‘You’ve seen one before?!’

‘Oh, yes. All the time.’

SEX

Come in the night

They were still huddled together when he leaned in and his teeth grazed her neck. She breathed in a virginal gasp and moved her head, nuzzling. His mouth found hers and they clamped like limpets. His tongue bled as she bit it, and clothes were shed like an old lizard skin.

The grass came up to catch her as she sank down. Submerging herself in the night. The water in her blood was rich and sugared and it came out sickly between her thighs as he stroked her. The seeking sword of the hero invaded her, and her body choked on it as it searched for who knew what that she had hidden. *No old treasure maps to this.*

All the women in the country were moaning and quivering, and demanding more be given, far more than was offered. A greed never equalled. She heard their cries echo through the undergrowth, and all the insects roused came as audience and some wrote plays and sonnets to commemorate such a union.

The strength of the act only grew, and she saw him not as a man but as a bristling hunk of flesh and bone, borne upon her with tenderised savagery. A beast of writhing proportions, with eyes reflecting the night, not seeing her but seeing into her, through her. She felt as though a veil, a transparent coating upon some deeper

intangible space. His glazen gaze took her in as an ocean of infinite night.

There were no beating of hearts but someone high up in the hills was pounding drums, two behemothic drums played to one single rhythmic beat. The slow clapping of the thunder gods. Boom boom boom.

Unified, connected from spirit to animal. Her body dripped with a rainfall of sweat, her eyes moved slowly and madly. All the love in the world was here, in all its bruising and shivering heat.

She told him she loved him in a fit of delirium and the words sailed out and over his head in concrete silver shapes, drawing her attention but not his, taunting her as the wind pursed its lips and whistled through the O's. Now it was smoke in the air, dissipating with painful reluctance. It was almost nothing when—

'I love you,' he said, a rumbling of words that did not seem to pass his lips.

Thin spikes of electricity flooded her and she was encompassed by a circus of prickles. The rush came on, the build, the damn rising with apocalyptic pleasures.

The world sped up inside her.

He tore into her in a frenzy. There was not enough of her, not enough of the *real* her, just this wispy layer... He hooked into and raked through her back. His eyes fell back as he took hold of her spinal column. She groaned and his fingers came away painted white

and joints clicking in bursts of clouds like a desert snow, something ethereal and altogether unreal.

She said something he didn't understand, not with this deafening chaos of the world about him, and he found her mouth with his, a cocoon ready to birth. His root, that branch he waved inside her, those tendrils coming up her, it had gone so far it had reached her throat, and there it was for him, pulsating and sickly.

He took the head in his mouth, this squirming imposter tongue, and he sucked on it with masturbatory greed. It was the alien plant, the great fertiliser, and with one claw hand on her womb he felt it grow from below, her inside all weed, all bursts of seed.

'I love you,' he said, speaking to this brutal divinity of presence that tied the two, this bestial and hypnotic, murderous act of love, and he felt suddenly fully conscious of his body and hers, her outer layer now as solid as steamed rock, now immutable sponge, and he thought about eating her, and the spout burst its pressure at the same time as her scream tore the night open.

A PALE AWAKENING

Every hole an invitation to her soul

They stayed in the forest and made love as the night boiled into dawn. Through the trees came flickers of blue lights and strange calls. Some dulled panic that did not touch them.

She could not call it satisfaction, more a state of being. As though she had separated into two, and she had left herself to fuck, walked off through the trees without looking back. He took a hit of violet halfway through, and shook it in her open mouth, the liquid sprinkling onto her face. She licked herself lasciviously as he moved inside her. *I am the best of all animals.*

When climax came, as synchronised as before, the pleasure could not be separated from torture. The feeling was murderous, and they hit each other, not slaps but punches to the face and chest. Her teeth drew blood from his shoulder. *The vampire loves the werewolf.*

In the fades of death she saw him pass out, and then she too let the trees take her.

She woke freezing, and quickly gathered her clothes. Her brain burned and leaked itself into the morning. She found the flask and found it empty. She rummaged in his backpack and found a large canister, and after a sniff to confirm she took a long drink.

He was naked and she admired and judged it equally. It was not the man she had fucked. A phantom imitation, more boy than beast. His cock shrunken and flaking from being hard too long, inside her too long. *I'll take your dick apart piece by piece.*

Looking at his scabbing genitals prompted her own to knock violently on her door. She winced and walked tentatively, stiffly. The pain was receding slowly with the oncoming violet. Judging by the evening light they had slept for a long time.

She kicked him and his eyes glared open. Settling on her body, and then on his own. His hands quickly covered himself.

'Rough night,' she said.

He groaned and reached for his clothes. 'You're not bad, you know.'

'Tell me about it.'

They stuffed bread in their mouth ravenously. He refilled the flask with the large container while she retched and tried not to throw it all up again.

She spat into the grass and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. 'We go by dark,' she said.

He nodded.

She thought of the thing that had chased them, and wondered if travelling at night was such a good idea. But they couldn't stay in these woods, and she knew he would never want to stay at a hotel or B&B, even if they could find one. They had to keep going. She thought she should be afraid, terribly afraid, but the violet was warming her

and she felt strangely hopeful, anticipating the shifting dreamworld to hide in. *May the night's blanket smother me.*

Whatever had happened before, now the houses outside the wood bore no witness. The windows stared at her in grim silence. He bid her be quiet nonetheless, and they found their hidden bikes and drove. She thought she heard noises coming from a house behind her, a sudden glow from a window, but the noise of the engines encompassed it.

Her thoughts were blurry and warm. Just when she was breathing deep, peacefully allowing her mind its rising and sinking, she was suddenly jolted by the leering, obscene shadow face of *it*, and then it broke into a grin, and it was *him*, and the grin was some carnival appropriation of a good nature.

The devil is coming.

No. The devil is already here.

THE GREAT CATS

The road is its own

Something roared past her, so wild and black and so fast that it appeared an elemental summoned from the jungle and spat out along the road. She veered off, nearly crashing, toppling off her bike as it sputtered moodily to a halt and fell on its side. She lay on the rim of the planet, looking out over the road with the saucer eyes of the supernaturally abducted.

He walked to her, his own machine hidden on the embankment further up, and he lay next to her, and together they watched the road.

Time slowed and encased her in a bubble; she was fascinated and yet intensely peaceable, a cast of liquid serenity slowly setting in the sunless earth. The road the horizon, the road all horizons to all people, everybody ever lived and died.

A sound hunted itself through her ears, first a prickle from another world, a spirit calling from a past age—some great-great-great-grandmother trying to make herself heard. Then it was a purr, a housecat curled up by the fire. And a purr it stayed, even though the volume knob turned slowly up by an invisible hand, until it nearly deafened her.

A cat came along the road and was gone. No cat before in this world.

Another followed it soon after. These were the great cats, the beasts of the road. The size of huge boulders, or little bedsits. Bigger than her bedrooms at home, at what used to be her home. She had a cat once; it used to lay on her bed while she slept and she would wake up to it still warming her feet and obstructing their movement.

These cats would not only never fit on that bed, they would crush it to pieces.

They stayed and watched for the longest of times, absorbed as the beasts would appear and then vanish as quick as they came, always too fast for a good look. Their features the heavy blur of watercolour brush strokes pulling back like the oars on a boat. They were various colours soaked in black: midnight blue, midnight red, midnight green—even a midnight white that she would have sworn on her heart did not look any shade of grey.

They bounded along close to the ground, streaking through the night almost on their bellies like snakes, their legs bunched and whirring as fast as pistons, lost in blur. The only clear characteristic were their eyes, shining with their yellow-white baleful stares into the fog of night, piercing it and forcing its surrender to their advance.

‘You see them as I do?’ he whispered next to her, and it would have startled her had her body not felt so relaxed. It was the first word that had been spoken in longer than she could ever remember.

‘Cats,’ she said.

‘Yes. The great cats. Not just them, sometimes the nighthounds, growling and barking. Not as sleek, but still fast, still wondrous and brutal. Are you afraid?’

‘No,’ she said truthfully. Afraid wasn’t the word. When the aliens landed in your back garden, you didn’t say you were afraid.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘Just don’t get in their way. They don’t mean harm, but they have that power. And never, never try and get their attention. I’ve seen some ridden by demons. By shadows.’

A slow shiver passed over her. She looked at the next one, the next two that passed differently. Beasts of the road. Monsters to the unguarded. She saw teeth pulled back in a snarl, saw the flash of the eyes. Did they know they were there? Did they know who she was? Did they even know of people—did they care? They were predators on a different plane—but she could see their movements, always moving, racing, completing the endless circles of life in the endless hunt. There was only one road. This was their road, and no other. Feline gods, demi-gods, whatever. Basts of the modern dark. Chasing and chased by the bounding, guttural nighthounds, by each other, by purring, panting, whining, wheezing creatures that would always be lost to us, and we would always be lost to them.

Of course, deep down inside herself, she knew what they really were. At the bottom of a bottomless well she knew, but she could not reach it, could not, *would* not drag it out. It held fast, like so many other truths, and she let it. No shovel, no pickaxe, no rope or bucket. She did not allow herself. She was *not* herself, but her other self. The self transcendent. Why drag this world down with cold hard

fact? And who was to say where such facts came from. Who could say which dimension held authority, from which mad visions came truth?

‘Do you understand?’ he said.

‘I understand the road.’

‘That’s all there ever is to understand.’ He got up on his feet, a hulk of no grace, all human, all root and acting nothing like *them*.

‘But no,’ he said. ‘You don’t.’

THE SECOND AND THIRD

Close Encounters of the Netherkind

They were driving slowly along when they saw them. Two shadows coming in from the side, reaching out with clawing hands. Waving in the air like black weeds.

Horror gripped her heart in savage hands. She was frozen by these elongated demons, unable to move, unable to turn her bike or stop or speed past. She proceeded with ghastly inevitability towards their outstretched hunger, and the closer she came the more a sense of terrible decay festered within her.

With the anger of a rising engine he overtook her, and the shadows seemed to shrink, to gabble with sudden uncertainty even as he decelerated. He raised his shotgun and blew through one of them. The other emitted a shriek and contorted, spider-like, ready to spring. The gun span and there was empty space in its chest. The bike growled to a stop.

She stared at him and at the twitching grotesques. Inky clouds seemed to seep from the ground beneath them.

‘Move,’ he said, revving the bike and taking off, and as her bike rolled past the scene she felt control come back into her body, and with tight fingers she accelerated.

Think. Think.

It was no use. Her mind was scattershot and wild. Around her hedgerows and fences were paintings of carnage, of orgiastic horrors gorging themselves on human bones. She saw her face everywhere, plagued and in pain, and she saw her limbs eaten like corn on the cobs. Everything satanic and diseased, everything *them*, all watching her, ready to jump from the trees, from the sky above, legions of shadows eager to break through the road and pull her down into Hell.

Around bends she sometimes lost him, and then she was a doll of blood-coloured china, petrified and shattered with the smallest push. A minute would feel a lifetime, suspended in perennial shell. She could not even close her eyes, although she knew doing so would only deliver her into a blacker perdition, an abyss of no escape.

When she saw him again, that soft blur streaking through the night air, the relief rained on her in a hot shower. She would tailgate him, bewitched by his presence and his guardianship, and he would look back and through everything she could always see the smile.

The blue lights came up on them from behind. That same colour blue that had flickered through the trees while they were naked and bestial. A supernatural blue, a blue of Reykjavik ice caves, a blue of Roswell experiments on beings with tennis ball eyes.

Whatever was coming drove the lights before them, and when she turned her head to see she could see nothing but the sheen of abduction blue.

Something new. Is there no end? But her thoughts lost themselves to the cerulean haze, as though it were an occult fog designed to bend her mind to dumb wonder. Space. Ocean. I am theirs. Up, up and away. Neptune. Perhaps I am the alien here. Vivisection. Ice. A cold flood. The blue cheeks of death. I must. I must see. I must see the sea.

‘Don’t let them bewitch you. They’re not good.’ Her half-closed eyes opened to see him riding alongside her. She blinked and turned to look at it hard, and saw beyond the lights.

A great cat? Was her first thought, but she couldn’t be sure. Slowed down this seemed something different, though perhaps of the same dimension. Through the fuzz and watercolours and casts of fog she made out the heads and tentacle arms of shadows inside.

So, they have their tricks. They have those that would carry them, those that would shine the beacons.

She clasped the throttle just before he did, and as they raced through the muddy world the shadows and their lights chased them. She did not look back again.

Fear kept her in control, as everything about her turned to a smear. She was leading now, and they crossed onto new roads.

She turned onto a smaller road, then a track, then off the track and through woods.. She rode off a bank—her heart was in her mouth—and landed with a thump that tottered the bike and she fell off as the bike curled itself onto the ground.

He came soon after, making the jump and swerving to a stop just before he hit a tree. They pulled the bikes to the rim of the bank and crouched there, knees pulled up, listening.

‘Why are they after us?’ she whispered. If not for the violet’s effect on her night vision she would have been nearly blind.

‘They know we’re a threat.’

‘But why are we? Is it because we killed some of them?’

‘They came after us first.’

‘Then why?’ she pressed.

He sighed. ‘Because we’re not like them. We don’t live in their world.’

‘What world is that?’

But he wouldn’t answer.

Light flashed through the wood briefly, and they heard grunts and sunken hoots like netherworld gibbons, but after that no more lights came, no seeking shadows nor the roadbeasts that carried them. They stayed to make sure, and soon their eyelids blinked heavier and heavier, and the abyss clawed up to them and dragged them down with hungry arms.

AIRBORNE DREAMS

Too high to fall

She dreamt she was high up, looking down on a rug of white mould. Level with her passed a procession of spirits. They ignored her as any ethereal might do to a mortal.

Leviathans of snow and cold cotton came and went. She heard *him*, but the murmuring words were indistinct.

She drifted lower and passed through the carpet. Beneath it was the night. A black sea in all directions. The endless, sucking void.

Spider webs of amber lights defied the empty. Breathtaking mosaics spaced as far as the eye could see. Civilisation. The world of man was nought but a Halloween decoration. *Man and woman*, she corrected herself. This was hers too, and all must be held accountable.

Connecting these lonely outposts were trickles of moving lights that snaked through the ink, fighting through the black swamp that threatened to engulf them from all directions. She knew the trails must also be bridges, without supports, balanced or hovering by some magic across the void.

Stay away from the dark, she heard him say. *Love it with fear and stay away. When you leave the paths of light you fall and you fall forever.*

He dreamt of monsters with human faces and the shuffling dead. Of cold blue prisons, and a mantra, murmured through unconscious lips.

The hour is black, I do not sleep. Shadows they are watching me.

Do not answer the door.

He dreamt of a boy traumatised, not by the actions of others but by his own, struck dumb with all that he had seen, with all that come and not come from his being in the world.

This torture of the innocence excited the man he was, and while he dreamt of darker things and his head swam giddy, the boy in the locked cage cried and cried and cried.

DRIVE

They'll get you while you're young

The next day came, the morning long gone. She took more violet without really thinking, almost by instinct. Just to keep the escape running for a while longer, despite, or because of the evil that pursued them. *If you come at night, I will be strong*, she thought. *I can see in the dark. I can see everything and I can see inside you and I have seen how you die. You fall apart and go back to the soil. You have no soul. There is nothing to you but holes.*

They rode on along mute roads, narrow and neglected. She clutched with her thighs as the engine rumbled between her legs. It felt bestial and sexual. Sometimes she was nothing but vibrations, and once she had to pull him off the road in order to make love in the trees.

For now her eyes were fixed ahead. On either side of her trees like cathedrals, spires conducting the smell of pine. For a fleeting moment she felt a messianic wraith, twisting on the wind and called onwards, and then he overtook her and the moment vanished. Her eyes looked on, to what lay beyond all perspective.

The horizon was not a line, it was a point. The point where the road came to its end, something that never came and yet was dwelled on often. A destination of soullessness, of final peace.

It never came, and she rode on.

I'm thirsty.

'Wait,' she called out.

The toads croak. A bunch of old men crouched on a maiden's leaves. Cackling about the numbers in the years. Was it thirty-four? No. Was it forty-three? No. Was it sixty-two? Was it fuck.

Fat headed eyes and porcine looks. Get away from us. They burped and leered. Little bitch. Go to your daddy.

Come to me.

Predator boils. Crouched on a maiden's leaves, rubbing their lecherous webbed feet. All about the numbers in the years. It's always less than you think. They sniggered and clapped their feet on each other's backs, and leaked their mortal effluence into stygian ponds.

They drove along. The road in its endless sweep, the line to nowhere. It was the road to Limbo.

The sun shadowed and bubbling slightly, like cooking cheese. Blinking black spots all over. The sun has a disease. The air, the light, the heat, it's all going, I'm sorry.

Did you know? I was rimmed by a scabbed black halo. Not my fault. The crust of a scraped knee. Just the worst bits folks. We only need the first layer of a skin. You've got plenty more.

Right to the skin of your soul.

We can take that too. It all comes with the final package. It arrived on the doorstep when you were born. You wouldn't have been able to look at it yet, though. Maybe one day. One day near the end, when it's too late.

These are your cards babe. These are your cards. Look at them. Look at them.

Violence played the air, in fragile, desperate strings, floating and slashing—the air's silk curtains shredded. A redness beyond. The fires of a madman.

Bye bye sun. You did your best, but you made us all nauseous.

The first gothic painting in motion.

The eclipsing moon squats on a piss stain. Creamed pores and bruises ravaging sour milk cellulite. The clouds—those waiting beasts. Black monsters crowding, silent, stalking the last scraps of light. There was still a war against the darkness at this hour, the desperate moments before the clouds reigned supreme.

She had God's eye of those alpine forests up high, cloaked in the chill blue twilight of winter's shroud. They were the best hope, the only hope, and yet where they met with the yellow of the moon's accident it left a sick green ichor.

Such woods were full of unease. Cadavers shuffling through. Don't stay out late tonight... not there, where the dead walk, for we are fading fast.

The sky now a list of gouges; great gorges of darkest grey savaged out of the land. Growing in thick swamp moods to encompass everything. The patches of optimism were shrinking; even the moon couldn't fight it forever, not so diseased.

The servants of the night crept on.

THE BAR

The world was built on a misunderstanding

The argument had been going on for a while. She had started it when she had sobered up somewhat, and she knew he hadn't had violet in a while either. It wasn't easy to argue on motorbikes, especially with such distractions all around. Perhaps this was why she eventually won, just like she usually won with her father, back in that past life. *I wonder where he is now? Tending another farm.*

'Fine', he growled. 'If it'll shut you up. But you'll regret it.'

'Well then we won't be going back. Come on, onto a wider road and then the first one we see.'

He said nothing but she revved and took the lead. 'And no more violet until after,' she called back. 'Violet and other people don't go well together. We don't want anyone calling the cops, or anything worse happening.'

Silence from behind, and she took that to mean his sullen consent.

It took a long time but finally she saw the fierce glow of neon beers and they pulled up at the bar. She pushed open the door without waiting for him and as the chaos of chatter intoxicated her

ears and she smelled the smoke and sour breath and saw all the dirty happy people she realised just how much she needed this.

She saw the eyes as she went up to order, but she was determined not to let paranoia ruin this. The bald man at the bar grinned at her and she ordered herself a beer.

‘What type of beer?’ the man asked.

‘Hell, anything. Surprise me. Two please.’

She had enough money in her pockets and she paid for the drinks. She sat at a table and he joined her with a gloomy expression.

‘I don’t like beer,’ he said.

‘That’s nice,’ she said. ‘It’s what you’ve got.’

He glowered and sipped at it, grimacing and then sipping again. She ignored him and viewed the crowd, some of whom viewed her right back.

Do I really look that rough? Or have I just forgotten my own attractiveness? It’s been so long...

There were men with birds-nest beards and caterpillar brows, with trucker caps and cowboy hats, slicked back hair and shaggy roosts, shirts and t-shirts and biker leather. Women with hard laughs and girlish titters, sipping G&Ts or putting back pints, dressed up in skirts and tiny tops or no different to the men. Brusque faces, weathered faces, pretty faces and ugly faces cloaked in makeup. Studs and rings and silver necklaces, and everywhere heavy, nodding eyes and darting glances taken from the shelter of crystal rims. Glass

tinkled and clinked and men and women swore and laughed, told bullshit stories and shook their heads.

People, real people.

A man raised his drink to her and she did the same.

He looked in their faces and he saw them drawn and mean, eyes capricious, fingers clutching the glasses like butcher's hooks.

Get it out of your system, he thought, looking quickly at her. Her eyes were lit up as she drank her drink and peered around. *You'd think she'd never seen a bar before.*

And how long has it been for you old man? You've forgotten so much.

Drink your beer.

I want violet.

Drink your fucking beer.

She wasn't at the table anymore. She had left his poor company and was at the bar. A man said something to her and she threw her head back and laughed unattractively. Soon she was chatting away to two of them.

They're only people, girl. Dime a dozen.

One of them put a cruel hand on her arm and that's when he got up and walked over.

‘C’mon,’ he said, and tried to pull her away.

‘Huh?’ She looked at him as if surprised to see him.

‘Come on,’ he said again, pulling her again.

‘Easy fella,’ one of the men said.

Fuck you. He didn’t look at the man but took her arm more forcefully this time, and she flinched and looked at him in stupid anger.

‘Get your hands off her,’ another man said.

‘I don’t want trouble,’ he said. ‘But we have to go.’

‘No, we don’t,’ she said. ‘You go if you want. I’m staying here.’

You have nothing without me and violet. I’m trying to save you. Don’t make this worse.

Someone put an arm on him and tried to usher him away. ‘Get your hands off *me*,’ he growled, and shoved.

The shackles of the men rose, and a matted murlock darkness spaced across their faces.

He was outside by the bikes. Jets of pain. Left bruised and bleeding. He touched his ribs and a tear sprung to his eye.

Red string seeking the gaps in the pavement. He found himself wanting the sun, a warm evening sun to cast its healing rays on his trembling neck. Instead he lay in the cold oil spell of eternal

caverns, a grotto so titanic you could see neither ceiling nor walls, and his only light was the twitches of gruesome neon.

He coughed and spat as she helped him up. The men were gone.

‘I told you,’ he said through the ache in his chest.

She said nothing.

He closed his eyes as he sank into the seat of the motorbike. *Home*. He fondled the shotgun where he’d stored it. *If only*.

‘Are you sure you can ride?’ she said.

‘Violet.’

She got it out of his pack and put it to his lips. He drank greedily and she took it away before he was ready. She took a very small sip and put it away.

They left.

HATE AND ENDURANCE

A great reservoir of anger and hate

People—that amorphous malevolence, twisted deformity twitching with its grotesqueness, its predictable temperance and its catalogue of habits. Nothing to trust and loved only in fragments, parasitical and desperate and shameful in its desperation. People—the carnival. People—the musical, the demon-show of discordant notes and vaudeville contortions. *How could we ever think we were worth it at all. We strut as apes and pontificate like gods.*

His fury drove the bike, not him. His anger pushed and pulled him forward as it had always done. Before violet, it was all he ever had.

He talked to her as she stayed close to him, and the words eased his wounds. The pain had gone with the violet, but now the holes were closing, sewing themselves up. *They will tear again. They always do.*

‘Tell me,’ her shining eyes said, and he did.

‘Before violet, I endured life, I did not live it. To me, it was never about what I saw, what I experienced, what I knew. It was what I didn’t see, didn’t experience, what I didn’t know. I lived through my imagination—how I wished the world was. I never saw the world in

some exotic, magical way. I just imagined I did. I wished so fervently, and yet the world never was. Not once.'

He sighed, and it ran right through him as mutants and other miscreations kept vigilance on the sidelines. 'I was so tired. The world was a grave, and I was the dead, the undead, sleepwalking through it and only awake and alive in my dreams.'

'And then came the violet,' she said.

'And then came the violet,' he echoed.

He couldn't stop trembling, rocking back and forth, back and forth. Paranoid glances at the rise and fall of her sleeping body. On occasion he would make a wounded noise, and he would stuff his hand in his mouth and bite down. Full of anger and nausea. Not towards any trauma, no particular incident at all, but at the wholeness of life, its very nature, its demands and expectations of someone who was born without choice, and the selfish bravery required to die that he didn't have. Some moments, like when the violet was softening on him, these thoughts crushed him, stretched him beyond measure, gave within him an inability to hold his own skin together. He could barely breathe, though air rushed in and out at him several times a second in a state of mortal panic.

This too will pass.

And come again.

DREAM

‘A woman like that ought to smile. It’s like the sunshine. There’s nothing like it.’ He put his forehead in an old hand. ‘Go on, take her.’

‘You don’t want her?’

‘Sure I want her. I want her more than anything. But a guy like me will just make her sad.’

‘She ain’t mine to have.’

‘Well. Just you remember that.’

WANTING OUT

There are some bonds you cannot escape

He handed her the violet as she nibbled unenthusiastically on a biscuit. Her head was a swarm of hornets, stinging away every string of thoughts she formed. A connect the dots was useless. She kept her eyes half closed, away from the piercing light. It navigated cruelly under her lids and trod through the maze of brain with a searchlight.

The violet bobbed in front of her, held by a hand with sharp knuckles.

‘No thanks.’

‘C’mon. You’ll feel better.’

‘Maybe I would,’ she sighed. ‘Till the next morning.’

‘Then have it again.’

‘In case you haven’t realised, we’re being hunted.’

‘I had noticed.’

‘By demons.’

‘By shadows, yes.’

‘Look,’ she started, exasperated. ‘This isn’t a game. I’m scared. Either this is really happening, or it isn’t. If it isn’t, then I want to know it isn’t, that it’s all just in my head. And if it is -’

‘It isn’t just in your head. Our heads. It’s really happening.’

‘How do you know, if you’re never sober?’

He paused. ‘I just do. Don’t you?’

‘Maybe. But I don’t think I can trust my own mind. Not when I’m on violet, not even now. I need to be clear and focused. Don’t you miss clarity?’

‘Violet is all the clarity I need.’

She closed her eyes.

‘Look, we’ve killed three of them now. And we escaped those last ones. We’re winning. Violet makes us strong. We can see in the dark, we can see the shadows for what they are and destroy them.’

‘For what they are? What do they look like when we are not on violet?’

He shook his head, smiling. ‘They look just as evil, I assure you. You are new to this, you do not see yet. Violet is how things are. You are seeing things as they really are, as they were meant to be seen, as they should be seen.’

She tried to argue but it was too hard. She had never felt so muddled inside. Every attempt at forging reason melted before it had even got halfway. Trying too hard caused her pain. *And always the sun, knifing through the cracks.*

He laid a hand on her shoulder. 'I know, trust me. You'll get used to it.'

'I . . . can't . . . think.'

'You will get better at it. Your mind is still clutching onto the old ways. It must be terraformed. The process is slow, but you will adapt. Soon you will be thinking with more power than you ever did before.'

'I wish the sun would fuck off.'

He laughed. 'There is only one cure for that. Go on.' He pushed the flask into her hand and she gripped it tightly.

Once more into the breach, she thought dumbly, slowly unscrewing the cap.

But even as the nectar rushed down her, she felt a great chill, something she wasn't telling herself. That the violet was a false reality, and she was being driven by this man to a place she never wanted to go. Her strength and control sapped bit by bit, until all choice was illusion. For the first time she saw in him a seed of evil, of despair, of white-hot bitterness.

What have you done, came the whisper deep inside, and in some grey meadow she saw her father bow his head and turn away.

THE BURNING

Sol Invictus rides forth

They stopped in a small town as the sun died. The drug took away from the ache in her legs, all that sitting on a motorbike taking its toll.

Will I ever sleep in a real bed again? Lie on a couch, sit in in an armchair, read a book as the sun pours gold through the windows.

Great walls of crooked obsidian towered over her. Structures hewn from the bones of the blackened dead. Streetlights that bayed gently in the wind, casting their sour apricot blooms on slate pavement.

This was a domain not of their kind. It was fought by steel and the gutters still ran with the blood of those days. Streets built on mass graves. Once gallows now hung the lights that mocked hope and life. Every house a charnel house where people like them were hooked and after a steady pattering of scarlet rain were finally wringed dry.

‘We shouldn’t be here,’ she said.

‘We have no money. We can find it here. Or food, at least.’

‘These houses aren’t empty,’ she said.

They passed crumbling haunts and antediluvian kennels, where paned eyelets kept their neighbourhood watch. *And trespassers*

will be slaughtered. Movements in the corner of her eyes. Things hiding in the windows.

‘Please,’ she said, grabbing his arm. ‘We need to go now!’

He turned to face her, and his eyes widened and mouth tightened and his gun came up.

She turned to see the shadow behind her explode, showering a soulless gore over the road and over her hands and chest. The sound was taken from the world.

He reloaded the shotgun. She was shaking, not seeing anything.

‘Hey,’ he said, then shouted it. He clicked his fingers in front of her face.

He held her from behind, feeling her quiver with such warmth. Kissed her goose pimpled neck. His hands came off in shadow-substance, and he picked at it. It stuck to her like tar and then stuck to him too.

He heard what was to become the horde before he saw them. A thunder in the streets. Windows alight.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘I guess Hell is coming for us now.’

She looked at him in fear and he wished he had a camera; he had never seen something that defined the emotions of humanity so well. There was a polar beauty to it that made him think of the

northern lights, of empty lands and paintings made in ice. A snowdrop tear came to her eye and he kissed it away.

He saw four shadows glide along the street, but as he was judging the distance a door opened right behind him and another one was there. The picture of deep sea ugliness lost its head, he pushed it and it fell back into the doorway. He reloaded and more doors opened.

‘Let’s get out of here!’ she screamed into his ear.

‘Can you hear?’

‘Yes! Go!’

He ran into the house, ignoring her anguished protest, knowing she would follow for his protection. He heard the door bang behind him. *Good girl.*

Chairs and tables and the other dumb things of man barricaded their way but he navigated them and into the kitchen. He opened and slammed cupboards with staring eyes.

‘No,’ he said, as he saw her about to flick the light on. ‘We do this in the dark. That’s our advantage.’

‘Do what?’

He found what he was looking for, and took out several bottles. The noises from outside grew in number and discordance. *The masses are rising.*

He found cloths under the sink and the matches were already in his pocket.

‘You can’t be serious!’ she cried but he pushed two of the bottles in her hands and dragged her upstairs, which seemed to go on forever, twisting up and up. *Minas Morgul*, he thought, clutching everything to his chest.

A hall mirror was passed and there was something ghoulish and stricken that followed him from the other side. They entered a room that looked out on the street and he threw a chair at the window. It disintegrated with an exuberance that suggested it had always been waiting for it, perhaps made just to be destroyed.

He expected her to shriek as they stood by the hole in the house but she was tight-lipped and said nothing, just shook her head over and over, whispering nonsense pleas and denials. Below them were the denizens of this town, the citadel that stood on a break in the world and whose ancient inner chasm led right down to the netherworld.

Their faces were all turned up, and they howled and pointed ragged and glutinous tendrils. He could not count the number—crowded together they stretched and slimed into one another, so every limb was another’s, and seen from above it was an oil spill straining and swelling, desperate things grasping out from the muck and falling back, never free of the nebulous whole.

He placed the bottles on the floor, taking those from her unresisting hands and joining them with their fellows. One by one he unscrewed their caps and soaked their contents onto a cloth, then stuffed the cloth inside the neck. A sharp tang in his nostrils; he felt giddy. She watched him silently as the match flared into life on the first strike. Her face ghoulish and drawn.

The rag in the first bottle was burning as he picked it up. The abominations before him moved to scatter, but tied to each other as they were they bumped and stumbled; had they found their individual consciousness they may have succeeded in parting themselves from the doom coming down from on high, but precious merciful seconds were not given. For today time was in the hands of the righteous drugged.

The sun came out on grey stone and lit the hearts of devils. A sea of gold with violent waves that stroked the arms and legs of the screaming eels and preboreal chimera. The smell of toasting marshmallows.

He picked up another bottle, lit and hurled, and Sol Invictus himself rode his solar barque, grand missionary to the hadal trenches. All squirming, wriggling things, all you made in the gel of darkness, must know the word and fall back before the flame.

A hand grabbed him but he knocked it back and pushed the offender away. Screeches sailed the night and inside he was cold. *I stole your Reckoning*, he smiled grimly.

Burning shadows waggled and waved and fell down in the road. The hammering on the front door was deafening. Something blasted past him and then another and broken glass span past his ear. The offending shadows were soon alight and soon snuffed out.

The crowd had dissipated, nightmares driven by the torch. He heard her moan as a crash behind and below and a burst of frothing rage signalled they had found an entrance round the back. *No more fronts for this soldier*. He slung one last Molotov that caught a shadow already twisting on the ground, and it blossomed, and it

saved. Grab the shotgun, like a cat to the windowsill, fire at the shade flat against the wall like a silhouette, jump down and fire again from the knees.

She came down after him and he grabbed her hand but she pulled it away. Together they ran. Further blasts and the bay of the mob. Down alleys that at any moment he expected blocked off at both sides by a grinning swarm. Now he avoided the gun, fearing the attention, keeping the two of them close to the backs of things.

Mercifully the bikes, seeming countries apart from the carnage, were alone and quiet. Terrible sounds echoed, but they were far off, and they sat on their great and terrible choppers and geared to the street. The road rumbled fast under pitiless wheels as they made towards the edge of town.

Is the town a crematorium? he wondered, for nobody disturbed them, and just like before the first shot had been fired all was mute and still, and but for a light glowing faintly behind them it was as though they had never been there. They passed a golem belfry and the murder rails of its grounds, and their final disappearance from sight of those buildings and streets was minded by none but the dead .

Blue lights on the horizon and the siren of triassic birds. All left to the judgements of the past as their bikes turned through copses and along bleeding streams, ever towards a shelter to all but the soul.

WANTING OUT TAKE TWO

The greatest human fear is confusion

They camped—if you could call it that, without a tent—by a stream where she filled an empty flask up with water. She swigged it empty and then pushed it back under, letting it bubble to the top. It made her think of bubbling flesh. The screams still roared in her head. The wild claws of fire.

‘Thirsty?’

She took a deep breath. She hadn’t spoken a word in a long time. ‘We have to stop. I have to stop.’

‘Stop what?’

‘The violet.’

He said nothing for a minute. Then, inquisitively, ‘Why?’

‘I don’t know how you can even ask that question. I get the feeling whatever I tell you you won’t listen.’

‘You’re tense. You’ll relax if you have a little now. You know it’s not a harm to you. And it’ll make the world so much more beautiful.’ He made to get the flask.

‘I’m not taking any more!’ She felt herself flush. ‘How the fuck can you be so calm? Yes, fucking violet, but don’t you see? I’m

afraid, afraid all the time, even when I feel things are beautiful I am scared of their beauty. And the shadows, we cannot fight them like this, maybe we shouldn't be fighting them at all, god, I can't stop thinking of the screams, those howls, nothing should be able to make that noise . . . It felt like the apocalypse . . . watching you set them alight like that, and you were *enjoying it*. You were in your element, destroying them while I thought I was going to die.'

He stood up. 'I saved us both, and you should be thanking me. It was a grisly task and don't tell me I enjoyed it. But you're wrong. We can fight them, of course we can. I proved that.'

'What, and let them kill you? If that's even the worst thing they might do. How could you let one of those things come any closer ever again?' She shuddered imagining it.

'You're on a come down, it always breeds pessimism. We are strong with violet. *You* are strong.'

'I am strong *without* violet! I want to see things as they are again. I need to.'

'But why?'

'Goddamit we need control! You're lost to this violet, you can't see the danger we're in!'

'Oh I know the danger.' His voice had hardened. 'The danger is outside of violet. Can't you see this is all we have?'

'It's all *you* have.'

'What do you have?'

Her eyes shot daggers.

‘No, really,’ he said, moving closer. ‘You don’t have anything. Without this you’re gone, you’re empty. You can escape forever if you want to. But as soon as you stop then you will have nothing.’

She slapped him. ‘You did this! Why did you take me! Why did you take me from my home!’

He hit her back, and her head jerked. ‘You chose of your own free will,’ he said harshly. He picked up the flask of violet and thrust it at her.

She looked him in the eyes. ‘I’m not taking it.’

‘I see.’ He picked up the water flask and tossed it to her. She smelled it to make sure.

‘Enjoy your water,’ he said. ‘Enjoy reality.’

‘I will,’ she said.

He opened his eyes when he was sure she was asleep. Tip-toed over to the water flask, so recently filled. He emptied half of it and filled it back up with violet from the canister. As he replaced it by her side he saw her uglier than before, all too human.

You can’t enjoy reality. His eyes softened as he smiled sadly.
I need you on my side.

The next day the first thing she did was quench her thirst with a heavy draught of water. Eager for liquid to soothe her throat and cleanse that staying barbeque tang of last night, the strange taste of the water registered but she did not think on it. She sat there trying to arrange her head, trying to unlock locked doors and lock open ones. Mercifully she could not remember her dreams.

At first she did not recognise the slipping away of sense for what it was. It was only when she looked up and saw her surroundings that she understood she'd been spiked.

She found him pissing in the stream and she almost pushed him in. 'You fucking *spiked* the water!' she yelled, her face uncomfortably hot.

'I didn't,' he said flatly, not even turning around.

'Shut the fuck up. You put violet in it when I told you I wasn't going to take it.'

He spun to face her then, putting himself away, and he was angry. 'Don't you ever talk to me like that. What I did was for your own good.'

She was stunned for a moment, then just as her eyes lit up with fire and she opened her mouth he got there before her.

She lost focus on his words, but she felt the heat of him and saw the monsters within. He became incandescent in his rage, a thrashing storm. He said it all and he said nothing; it was all the same to her, all useless noises, the bleats of the mad. She saw how lightning licked his eyes, saw his mouth cruel and pathetic. His hands fists of trembling violence, uncontrolled, picking up a stick and smashing it

against a tree until it was only splinters. It was half baby tantrum, half wrath of the gods.

You always knew he was dangerous. Such a man is dangerous to everyone. Even you.

She held up her hands. 'Okay. I'll take it. Relax.' She was thinking of his gun, and she could almost feel it pressed inside her, cocked and ready to deliver.

His anger floated away into the air as suddenly as it had come. 'You will?'

'Yes. Just calm down.'

'I only want what's best for you,' he said, softening.

'I know.'

He smiled and moved up to her, took her in his arms. She didn't resist but looked out beyond him at the gurgling stream and the cages of undergrowth. He smelled of violet, but then again so did she.

'It's you and me baby,' he was saying. 'You and me and violet. Just you wait, there's more. There's so much more.'

He lay propped up on one arm, watching her sleep. *I need you*, he thought. *I need you on my side.*

It hurt him to remember his rage. He had not been aware of himself at the time, nor had he been in control. It had been like a gap in time. Knowledge had only come in memory, as though whatever had

inhabited him then had delivered him an explanatory note. Something ugly and rotten that had crawled out of its cave to take the reins.

He was afraid too. Afraid of her leaving him, of being alone in this dark world.

I need you and I've pushed you away.

He thought of apologising, but knew better. It was too late. He had desecrated his own tomb, and such markings can never be wiped clean.

FAKING IT

Not so pretty

'You're drinking it?' he said, as she swigged at the flask.

'Looks like it.'

'The violet.'

You complete idiot. How eager are you to believe? 'Yes,' she said. 'Now we have a flask for each of us, we don't need to share.'

He smiled, abashed. 'I'm sorry for shouting. It's just, I like you, and I want us to stay on the same . . . wavelength here.'

Side. He was going to say side. Sorry, but I'm on my own side now. She nodded at him, her head thumping. 'Don't worry about it. You were right.'

He shrugged. 'Is it still diluted? Do you want a top-up?'

'It's okay. You're more used to it than me. I can take it better when it's like this. We can always amp up the dose later on.'

'Sure.' He reached over to her and took her hand in his. 'I'm sorry again. And . . . thank you.'

'For what?'

'Just . . . thank you.' He wandered over to the bikes while she ate listlessly. She watched him for a while as the engine of her bike was silent to his touch. He swore and kicked it and it regarded him with cool dislike. He moved to his own and it chugged and coughed, but it was sick and it would not last the road.

'Your bike is dead,' he called.

She finished her mouthful. 'What's wrong with it?'

'I don't know,' he said lamely.

'Out of juice?'

'Could be. Could be anything. We haven't been treating them good. I think you're gonna have to ride with me.'

'We should leave the bikes.'

He ran his hand through his hair. 'Leave them?'

'You take us both out on the roads in that thing and sooner or later it'll die on you. Right on the road, and we'll be sitting ducks. Besides, they'll be looking for motorbikes all over. They'll find us.'

'What do you suggest?'

'We go on foot. Cross-country. Avoid the roads, they're too dangerous for us now. After what happened in that town they'll be everywhere.'

He wrinkled his brow, shifting his weight. 'I've always rode the roads. I want to keep on until I hit that final barrier at the edge of the world. I want to ride till the end.'

Petulance. 'Not with me you're not. I intend to survive.'

He knelt beside her. 'Please.' His face was etched with worry and his violet eyes were deep sinks filling with the not-so-distant notes of sadness. Imploring her to be with him unto death.

'You go on,' she said.

He put his head in his hands and his fingers seemed intent on burrowing into his scalp. After a minute he stood up, eyes shining. 'We walk.'

The bikes were left as anachronisms, relics of adventure that would one day make their way back to the roads. For now they would rust and the soil would hold them in its bondage. The insects and small creatures would creep closer and closer, eventually crawling on them and nesting, as all terrors fade in time.

The packs felt heavy on her back. Sweat glistened on her face as they left the trees and crossed empty fields. Green and brown lands sprinkled out from the hands of God, and they marked them all. Hills rose and fell, but this time there was nothing breathed within, just herself, her ragged self tramping.

He looked around him often, eyes hazy and bewitched, his face peaceful. They both took drinks from their respective flasks. Twice more he asked her if she wanted some of his stronger flask, but she didn't accept.

She said little to him, and he said little to her, entranced as he was by the glowing colours and curtains that violet draped over the

hills and fields and fences. She did not see what he saw, but she could imagine. *I still have my imagination. That's where the real violet is.* He asked her if she could hear the grass sing, and how ghostly it sounded, and she said it sounded more like talking to her. *Grass doesn't sing or talk. And trees don't listen and monsters don't exist . . . except . . . except they do, don't they?*

The ground turned to meadow, and she picked up a flower and twirled it in her fingers as she walked behind him. A hare shot out from some bushes on their left, and he pulled back, startled in dream, but she put her hand on his shoulder and moved him on. That was the first moment that she saw him look at her differently.

As time passed and the sun sloped downward, it became more obvious. He would walk further ahead of her, glancing behind him with first pursed lips and a set jaw, and then narrowed eyebrows, and then longer, searching looks, where he would not answer her questions, where his face was tense and he looked half-afraid.

Eventually they both stopped at the same time, facing each other. 'You're changing,' he said.

'What do you mean?'

'You're getting uglier,' he said simply.

'Excuse me?' she said icily.

'I mean . . . It's not just that. Something isn't right about you. You're . . . turning into something.'

‘Into what?’ she said, but she felt something rustle inside her, something that had locked itself in, something with evil eyes and a grin that foreshadowed truth.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, but he swallowed and she saw that the hand that held the sawn-off, that had brushed it through high corn and swung it indolently by his side on green pasture, as though a mere walking stick; that hand was tense, tapping, the gun wavering.

‘I don’t understand,’ she said weakly, although she was starting to. *Stay calm. He’s beginning to think you’re a danger—don’t go and convince him.*

He stared at her in silence, shook his head fiercely, and then raised the gun to lie on his other hand, held like a barrier on his chest. He made a small motion with it. ‘Go in front.’

‘What?’

‘Go in front.’

‘We’re on the same side, remember! We rode together. We fought shadows together. We . . . had sex. It’s *me*. I don’t mean any harm to you, you know that.’

‘I don’t know that,’ he said quietly. ‘You’re not the same person. Did . . . did one of them touch you?’

‘No!’

He didn’t look like he believed her. His gun trembled in his hands. ‘Stop it. *Stop it.*’

‘Stop what?’ She was starting to feel afraid herself.

He shook his head again, and beckoned with the gun again.
'Go in front.'

'Okay!' She walked slowly around him, in a big circle, and he rotated to match her, all suspicion and paranoia. His eyes alternating small and wide. *He's crazy*, she thought. *Well, of course he is. He's out of his mind, didn't you know?*

She walked on, conscious of the gun held behind her, and that it was ever-so-slowly shifting in the hands of a hallucinating stranger to point directly at her back.

'You've taken too much violet,' she said, facing the sun's decline and the blood-orange berth that awaited it with growing arms.

He laughed, and it was hard and nasty. 'You'd like me to stop, wouldn't you? So you could get the jump on me. It'll be dark soon, and I'll see and you won't.'

'What do you think you'll see? It's the violet, don't you understand? You have to stop so you can see what's happening!'

The noise of his boots brushing through the grass stopped, and she turned around. He was stock still. 'You haven't been drinking it, have you? You emptied what I put in the flask.'

Can the truth save me? 'Yes, I stopped. I had to.'

He raised the gun at her. 'You *idiot!*' he yelled. 'You can't do this to me!'

She raised her hands and took a step back. 'Do *what* to you?!'

‘Don’t you realise you’re lost? Don’t you know where you are?’

‘Do you? Look, give me the violet, I’ll drink it, just put the gun down.’ *I can always fake a swallow.*

He smiled grimly. ‘It’s too late for that. You’re already becoming one of them. Night is coming and you’ll be a shadow.’

‘No,’ she said faintly.

‘You’ll be a shadow and you’ll come for me. And I’ll kill you.’

Tears sprang to her eyes. ‘Please, *think*. Please, just let me go. I won’t come after you. I’ll run. You’ll never see me again.’

‘I’ll know you’re still out there.’ He was crying too. ‘I wanted you, you know. I wanted us to be together. You had to ruin it, just like everybody else.’

How many times has this happened?!

‘Please don’t,’ she could only say, but he wasn’t looking at her any more, he was looking behind her, at a shape shadowed by the sunset that came towards them from over the crest of a hill.

‘**RUN!**’ she screamed with all her might, as the shape halted.

Two blasts at range as she fell to the ground. A third closer, as he advanced. ‘Stop!’ she cried, and he did. He held the gun in the air and observed as she crawled, sobbing, through grass and dirt to the figure prone and trembling.

THE DEATH

I never did like people

‘A shadow,’ she said in the smallest of voices.

She waited for the shock and it didn’t come. She always knew, deep down. The violet kept it from her. What had been done. The blueprints of the Reaper.

She remembered how he had come across her, right after her father had been killed. With those purple eyes. Where had he been? Where did he come from?

Tears ran their rivulets and yet her face was without emotion. They ran on their own network, their own road. Straight from her heart to her eyes. Don’t let the brain get involved.

She saw the light die in the man’s eyes. Light. She looked up and saw the lights of the world. Another town before her. Night merely heralded the dawn, and dawn would indeed come, the moon would hide and the sun would be strong and fierce. The humans would come, come to her.

She reached into the man’s jacket and pulled out a holster and gun. She took the gun out and checked the load. Nothing.

‘Is it dead?’ he said. She turned to see the barrel of a shotgun pointed directly at her face. She saw as if in slow motion his finger tense and curl on the trigger. The gun sailed out of her hands and

hit him in the face and he cried out. He cursed, fumbling, and she launched herself with a yell at him. She tackled his legs and he went down.

There was no thought but savagery. She pulled herself on top of him and the gun. Her hands raked his face and beat it, again and again. Bits came away under her fingernails. He took one hand off the gun and punched her in the side. She felt nothing, swatting away his flailing hand and wresting the shotgun upwards, hammering the butt into his belly. He grunted, beast-like, and she smacked it against his face in a burst of blood.

She stood up heavily and he peered at her through a veil of gore.

‘You’re one of them,’ he said.

‘Yes.’ She raised the shotgun. ‘Do you know what you have done?’

‘Yes.’

‘You always knew.’

‘I don’t know.’

She looked away, up at the moon. Then she looked back and fired at his legs.

After the initial clamour, he calmed down. He was trembling and she sat down next to him on the grassy plain and stroked his head with her hand.

‘Was it worth it?’

‘Yes,’ he said. She had to lean close to understand him. ‘Worth it, just for something different. I never knew the people I killed. Good or bad . . . they were only people.’

She shook her head, still unbelieving. ‘Do you not have regrets? After all this . . . this carnage . . . all these lives lost?’

He shivered violently and couldn’t get his words out and she ran his fingers through his hair until it settled. ‘I find it hard to regret,’ he said softly, stuttering only a little. ‘I have been a monster in a world of monsters. And in that I am the defender. No, the liver, the lifer—the only one alive, even . . . even as I lay dying. The sole figure of existence in all this, alone, always alone, from cradle to grave.

‘I have seen a face to the world that is Heaven and Hell in its divinity of the demon. The violet did not distort reality, did not bend or fracture it, did not paint it anew. The violet *was* reality. It was my reality. A better reality . . . for good and evil. The earth otherwise is suffocating in its greyness . . . its moribund energy . . . its bleak portraits and architecture of the lifeless.’

He exhaled in a rattle. His eyes closed and then opened again, looking about with infinite weariness. ‘It was never weird enough. Never weird enough to live. Just not enough. Not enough of everything.’

‘And then came the violet,’ she whispered.

‘With the violet I could live. With the violet I could love. Even in the dark. For better Hell than Limbo—and Hell has beauty, fierce beauty. I take the worst of all things over nothing. I’d do it

again. Shadows, shadows. I lived a life of murder, somewhere I always knew . . . though I buried the suspicions, the sharp, piercing pains of knowledge, so I could keep on. And yet how could I regret? I am still alive.' He gave a faint smile. 'For these final seconds, as life turns itself down, the world is truly calm, softly leaking its beauty. I am sorry. I am sorry my love. But not sorry enough. I am alive. And I wanted you to be alive too.'

She bent towards him and kissed him on the forehead, and she stood up. 'You are forgiven,' she said.

One more shout to the infant night. She had that power.

Eventually, she pulled her hands from her ears, the roar retreated. Her boots were wet.

She'd never seen life as so awful, such an ordeal. Sure, there were bad times, but . . . life was just . . . life. After all, there was nothing else to compare it to.

She looked down at the blown bits of his skull, and then up at the sky. The shallow moon.

It seemed to wink at her, but then again perhaps it never had.

THE WATCHER

The air is black, and I do not sleep. The hours tick by. I do not sleep because someone is watching me. The hours toll by and my eyes are open.

In the dark, clouding my vision, I sense his presence. Like a reflection in a mirror he just watches me, hovering, or crouched, at times only inches from my face. He waits for me to look at him, but I never do, and so I never sleep. I fear him in the night, but in the light, when I am brave enough to look, he is never there. He is gone.

I know my surroundings out of the day, but through my imagination they have changed in the night. There are the walls, cracked and bleeding plaster, and the floor, rough, thick and scarred. The pictures around my room leer down at me, faces twisted like demented effigies. The room is no longer the semblance of order and right; it has spiralled down through waves of unease into a macabre cage, a prison of the dark.

My imagination runs further, deep into aberrant horror, and I see above me large black spiders crawling over the ceiling, the size of children's hands. Their legs are permanently crouched and bent, as if ready to spring down onto me. They are shadows and nothing. They are the focal point of my hallucinations. He can control them, make them spring, with a word, but for now he says nothing.

I never look at him, I never know his name, but I always feel it is on the tip of my tongue. He makes no sound, but I can imagine it, should he ever open his mouth, as an ethereal moan, or a throaty racking groan. They would be at turns sadistic and pathetic. I pity him. He is a ghost. There is no corporeal body; he never truly belongs to this world.

The air is black, and still do I not sleep. There is no promise of a dawn; perhaps it may never come. Perhaps I will remain stricken to this bed forever, my eyes always open, and someone always watching me and my fear. I long for an end, for some burning light and sanity to sear me into reality.

I think I know what he looks like. He is clad in ragged cloth, which in the day would shine lurid white, but which in the night is merely images and shapes, fleeting and cowardly. His hair is dank and matted, strewn over his ragged face, and his eyes are worn and tired, the eyes of someone who never sleeps. Behind his eyes can be seen worry, and some semblance of neglect, and also evil, and anger, and hate. He is angry at me, for I never look at him, and for this he hates me; yet he must also love me, for he never leaves while the night still reigns. He knows nothing of the goodness of love.

The black air starts to scare me now, and I want him to go away. Terror is like a rolling wave washing over me and sending me shivers and cold clarity of the threatening silence that tries to engulf. I switch on the light by my bed, and the soft glow throws shadows around like paper. I dare a quick glance around my room to see if he is gone.

He is still here, but he is hiding in the shadows. I think he is close. I breathe in dryly and then I cannot resist as he climbs in my mouth and into my body, where he whispers to me, so quietly I cannot hear any words, just morbid intentions and whining pleas.

He cries out deep in the abscesses of my mind; he calls for rebellion and misanthropy, for anger and disgust, for guilt and the ending of all things that are good. I try to push him out but he has set up throne; he is reigning in demons and ghouls. He is everybody now. I have never known anything else.

Eventually he leaves, to wriggle into a gap under my bed, into the welcoming gloom. I can still feel him boring into me, puncturing my life. An hour creeps slowly and agonisingly past, and then another, with every second like a dead weight on my chest, until dawn finally seems to come, the thin sun slowly burning its way through my curtains. I crawl out of bed and open them, to flood the room with a dreary grey fire, to chase the shadows and the darkness away. Simple and natural illumination to destroy the phantasms of the night.

My room looks normal by day. The pictures are all blank on the clean walls. The floor is simple carpet. The ceiling is bare. There is nothing frightening anymore. There is nothing to fear anymore. He is gone.

I hear, or think I hear, a knock on my door, as the birds chirp their dawn chorus. I open it but there is no-one there. I look around the corridor but it is empty and barren.

Perturbed, I step away from the door, which quietly closes before me. I shrink back further into my room, feeling a slight chill,

and a small sense of unease creeping up my back. *Too many nights without sleep*, I think.

There is another knock. I open the door again.

He is there, in the day. He has taken control now. It has taken time, but he has broken me. He is there, in the day, clad in white rags, with his arm outstretched. Maybe he has come to shake my hand. Maybe he has come to kill me.

ANAMIA

Transcript of assorted entries from the Anamia Diary, found among possessions.

Wednesday 12th June

Last night was the worst night of my life, or it would have been if I'd remembered it.

My boyfriend remembered it. He told me today what had happened. I feel like I should be more appalled, shocked or cringed harder, but I don't. I feel bad, yeah, and I apologised to him a lot, but I also feel kind of detached from it. I guess because seeing as though I didn't remember it, it's just a story. Somebody else involved. Perhaps he mistook me for someone else. With the same name. And hair. And face.

Anyway, I'll tell it as he told me. I'd come over, and we'd hung out with his flatmates and drank. I'd told him earlier on that I'd had some bread to eat that day—a lie, but why does he always feel the need to ask? And on the vodka I went.

Apparently I got drunk too fast. He hadn't been smiling or talking to me—I hadn't much noticed—and it was because upon being questioned again I'd admitted that my eating bread, my eating anything that day, had been a lie. I think I'd mentioned I was drinking on an

empty stomach. He'd gone quiet after that, and hadn't responded to my drunken attempts to kiss him. I guess nobody likes a liar.

He'd left our company and gone into his room, and I'd eventually followed. I kept asking what was wrong, and it took him a while to tell me. It was cause I'd got so drunk the way I had, and that I'd lied about eating, but also cause I'd then told the truth so blatant in front of everyone like it was no big deal.

Maybe that bothered me the most. That I'd just come out with it. I like to keep some things personal, you know? It was a long time in our relationship before I'd ever admit certain things to him even.

After he'd said his piece in the bedroom, that was when I really opened up. Of course, I was wasted, and I wish I could remember what I'd said. I only have his word on it (not that I don't trust him). He said today that while we'd talked about my ED a lot online, he'd never really had to deal with it face to face before, not like that.

Now I'm thinking about it, it does upset me that the night went this way. I feel detached still, but . . . I don't know. I guess you can't avoid the feelings that come when you hurt the person you love.

He remembered one particular thing—that I'd asked him if he thought I was thin now. He'd replied with saying I looked normal, perhaps a bit thinner than before. I'd gone crazy, crying and crying over not wanting to be normal and *hating* being normal, and got myself into complete hysterics.

This just makes me more embarrassed than anything. Urgh. Moving on. I gotta get this out quickly. I'm so glad I can't remember all this. I just wish he couldn't either.

He'd started crying too—and I don't think I'd ever seen him cry before. And then the worst part. I started begging him, still crying more than ever, to force me to eat. To force food into my mouth, to force me to eat it, or I'd die. Those are the words he used when he told me, and I don't doubt those aren't far off the words I'd used myself.

Fuck.

It didn't end there. I'd told him, between barely decipherable sobs, to get the crisps, and he did, and moved them up to my mouth, but I pushed them away. Then he couldn't take it anymore and he left the bed where I was sitting and sat away from me on his computer chair.

I cried and cried for him to come back but for ages he was trying to block me out. He told me today that he couldn't think, that he didn't know if he'd ever been in such a bad state. All the stress and upset of trying to handle it calmly and rationally over the past year, trying to understand and help the girl he loved more than anything, finally got to breaking point.

He said he was actually thinking of killing himself at that moment, like by going out the window, or maybe killing me instead. I don't think he really would have done anything, but I understand that he couldn't think. He said his mind felt like chaos, like flies buzzing in all directions.

Eventually he forced himself to sit back on the bed with me. We may have talked a little more, or not, he doesn't quite recall, but I quickly passed out. He stayed up and covered me with the duvet, then went into the bathroom where he looked in the mirror and saw his eyes almost blood red, like demon eyes. His words.

He stayed up for an hour or two, trying to collect himself before going to bed. Just when he climbed into bed I started making throwing up noises.

That's when my memory kicks in.

He helped me to the bathroom where I threw up drink and bile. I was still very drunk. I vaguely recall him saying we needed to counteract the alcohol and line my stomach or something, and he went to get some bread, which he tore into pieces and tried to feed me. I had a couple of small pieces but then couldn't accept anymore. Eventually I settled and we both went back to bed.

Phew. Now I've finished typing it I'm kind of torn between emotions. Sure it was bad, and I feel upset that I upset him so much, and made a fool of myself, and I'm kinda disgusted with myself too, but also maybe it wasn't as bad as it was in our minds at the time? Perhaps we made too big a deal about it when it had all kicked off. I don't really know . . . Like I said, I've just got his account for most of it.

I think that's all for now. Writing this has pretty tired me out.

Monday 15th July

He keeps telling me not to drink so much coffee, that it's bad for me. He can be a little controlling sometimes, but only when it's to do with things that worry him, with me I mean. It's not as though I really do what he says. I like coffee. Well, it doesn't taste great, not with skimmed milk and no sugar, but it stops me being so tired all the time. I can't function without it.

I think he's so worried about it because my heart has this irregular pattern, and sometimes it skips a beat. I don't know, I can't remember what the doctor said. I do sometimes feel tightly wound, like a coil. He told me the phrase is 'like butter scraped over too much bread', which is apparently from Lord of the Rings, which I've never read and don't intend to.

We don't have that much in common, but I do love him more than I ever thought possible to love anything in this world. He's loved me I think ever since I sent him my suicide note two years ago. I'd never met him then, but we talked online and he was pretty much the only person who was kind to me.

Sometimes it's nice when someone really wants to look after you, sometimes it isn't so much.

I can't say I'm always glad that suicide attempt failed (I suppose I wasn't trying too hard—I was young), but I am today.

I wish my essays were over and done with already. That's another thing that worries him. He says I work far too hard for things that don't really matter in the long run. Apparently I should be enjoying the summer.

They matter to me. I don't think he works hard enough at anything. Part of me thinks I don't want to end up like him. But then I feel bad for thinking it.

Wednesday 20th August

My boyfriend's in a mood because I don't want to get fake tits anymore.

Okay, that's not too fair. He's not in a mood, but he is bothered by it. And there is context to it. I always want my body thinner, but that's one part of my body that I wanted bigger. Wanted—past tense. Seeing as he really, really doesn't want me to get any thinner (or at least says so), maybe he thought that was some small victory. Even if it's an unnatural one. I don't really like natural things. My body is natural and I hate it, it disgusts me.

But yeah, I've changed my mind on getting implants. The idea excited him once—I could tell—but I don't think I can bear anymore to have one part of me any bigger. Now I think my breasts are too big. They're a C cup but they often seem bigger than that. He likes them, and I remember when I used to. They used to be the only thing I really liked about myself, but now I hate them too. They're just these big awkward mounds of fat. I don't want fat.

I told him I'm considering a reduction. I'll probably never be able to afford it but it's nice to plan for it. But it annoys me that he's annoyed. It's my body, not his.

I finished the last of my essays. I feel empty now, and I don't know what to do with myself. I need to distract myself from hunger pains, so I'm revising stuff and seeing what else I can work on or work towards. It never hurts to be prepared.

I started a new diet today. It's called 2-4-6-8. The first day you eat 200 calories, then 400, then 600, 800, and back to 200. It's a way of shocking your system so you keep a fast metabolism, and lose weight. My boyfriend isn't happy about it. Surprise surprise.

Saturday 21st September

The diet isn't going very well. The 800 day I can't handle at all, and the 600 day is difficult too. I feel bloated and overfull, even though I see people around me eating so much more. I think I just have a smaller capacity for food. But it depresses me. How can they eat so much and yet be thinner than me?

I've altered the diet, so now it's 0-2-4-6. I think that suits me better. I thought the day of eating nothing would be hard, but the hunger pains aren't as strong as they used to be. Perhaps I've disciplined myself well enough that I can handle them, or my body is getting used to going without food.

My boyfriend hates food shopping with me. He complains because I spend ages in the aisles counting calories. We've had arguments about calorie counting, because he thinks it's ridiculous. It's easy for him to say—he's not fat.

He made a meal for me last time he came to see me. It was a pasta meal—he eats so much pasta and cheese, it's not fair. I couldn't even eat half, and after he'd left I had to make myself sick in the toilet.

Sticking your fingers down your throat becomes pretty much routine after a while. You get so used to it that it doesn't really bother you. I mean, it still *feels* horrible, but when it works it's also really satisfying. Purging yourself. Becoming clean inside and that bit more thin.

When it doesn't work it's simply awful. All pain no gain. I've had a panic attack before when it hasn't worked, and it's set my heart beating all over the place.

My mother said something about my weight today, she asked if I'd put any on. I held it together but couldn't stop myself going to the toilet and purging. I couldn't stop crying. But it proves that I'm not crazy, no matter how much my boyfriend tries to persuade me I am. It's pretty rare to get someone who can be honest with me now. Even the doctor lies. Everybody's too worried about my feelings and that I'm going to do something bad.

When I was in the bathroom I ended up cutting myself. I know, I know, I thought I'd gotten over all that. A small relapse won't hurt. You get all these people telling you you look great and beautiful and aren't fat at all, and they seem so sure of themselves and yet all their faces show is worry, and what they're really worried about is saying the wrong thing to you. They tip-toe around you sometimes like you're a mental patient. But whenever you look in the mirror you just can't tell yourself you're crazy, because you see what you see. I *know* I'm fat, it's as obvious to me as the nose on my face. So I get

angry inside sometimes, but I do know most of them are doing it only because they care about me.

Whatever happened to your body your choice?

I made the mistake of telling my boyfriend I cut myself, and why. I tell him too much. He's the only person I can really talk to about anything, but he puts me off sometimes because he tries to make everything so logical and sensible and argues for so long, typing so much, and it just makes me fucking tired and fed up. He's said before that he wonders if he doesn't make things worse. I don't have the heart to tell him he does. What can I say? I want to look my best for him. I want to look beautiful for him. And the more he tries to tell me it's all in my head the less I trust him.

But yeah, he was so pissed off at my mother. He blames her often. He asked how much did I cut myself and I said it was just a few words, and then of course he demands to know what they were. I wouldn't tell him for a while but finally I did just to shut him up. This was online, by the way, which is pretty much the only place we talk properly about these things.

I wrote: *thin thin stay strong achieve perfection*. The marks are on my thigh so nobody will see it. Only idiots cut their arms, unless they wear long-sleeve tops which of course I don't.

I thought I saw something in the mirror when I was doing it, but when I looked it was just my disgusting self.

Tuesday 15th October

We talked for ages online last night about my ED. All about my options, like hospital and telling my parents and all that. He's really worried, and I'm worried too that he's taking it too much on himself. He can't stand not being able to make me better, he told me he feels so hopeless and impotent.

Having an ED is really weird. Some days you can admit it to yourself, and maybe to the people who you trust most, like my boyfriend and my best friend. On those days you're willing to listen when people say your 'negative body image' is all in your head, even though it still feels really . . . off. Like a half-truth. But then other days you just *know* that what they say is bullshit, and that you really are fat, and that you don't even have an eating disorder. There's something kinda schizophrenic about it. No not schizophrenia, my mistake. Multiple personalities I meant. The schizophrenia is more in the nature of my ED mind. Something like that anyway.

My boyfriend finds it so hard. One day he'll feel like he's making progress, and the other it's back to square one and I'll deny having an eating disorder. I'll tell him I'm fine.

And I don't know, maybe I am. Today is a day I just don't know.

I've stopped having skimmed milk in the coffee to save on calories, now I'm taking it black. It doesn't taste good but I still need it. I had an anxiety attack last night in bed though, and I thought I was having a heart attack. I didn't want to wake my boyfriend up and worry him, and so I called for my dad who came and calmed me down and sat by me for a while. It wasn't a heart attack of course, but

I felt so tense and my heart was beating so fast, hopping and skipping around. It was horrible. I haven't told my boyfriend about it yet, he'll only freak out.

I've been putting off telling you about the worst bit of today. I was weighing myself—I have the door locked when I do so, because I hate for people to catch me in that state, not to mention know my weight. My boyfriend doesn't understand how I can see that my weight has gone down and yet I think I'm still fat, or even fatter. He says it's like shifting goalposts, and I suppose it is. Taking the measurement is only a signal of progress for losing weight, really. It doesn't tell you how you look. It's just numbers, but they're powerful numbers. Great when they're going down, but when they're staying the same or, god forbid, gone up, then it doesn't matter what your doctor or boyfriend tells you, you're still obese to yourself.

I put off telling you again. I was standing on the scales, and I saw something in the mirror again. This time I saw it better, and I shrieked and spun around. I was terrified but there was nobody else here. Nobody was at home to ask me if it was okay (yes, I still lock the door when I'm by myself).

I can't get what I saw out of my mind. It was still only a flash, and I can't be sure of anything really, but my imagination has since filled in the gaps. It was . . . It was a body. I won't say anymore.

Times like this I really do think there's something wrong with me.

There's not a chance I'm going to tell my boyfriend. He doesn't need that. He's stressed enough as it is with this relationship.

Thursday 7th November

He came to visit again, and it wasn't good. One night he left the bed and went to the spare bedroom. I woke up and went to find him, and in the darkness I touched his face and it was wet. He doesn't make much of a noise when he cries. When I asked him what was wrong he just said 'everything'. He said he could feel my ribs when he touched my chest.

We told each other we loved each other, and we went back to my bedroom. I don't get any visitations while he's with me, for all our upsets and occasional disagreements I feel safe and loved, not haunted by anything, not seeing things where they shouldn't be. We don't really talk about the ED, and I much prefer it that way. I wish it could always be that way.

As I told you on the 2nd, I'm still scared of the bathroom mirror. I told my boyfriend I was (but not the reason for it), and he jumped on the opportunity to tell me to avoid mirrors again because they're bad for my body image. It's ridiculous though, I'm a girl, how can I avoid mirrors?!

I try to stay in the bathroom as little as I can, but it's hard when I have to purge. I took the weighing scales out and up to my room but my mum noticed and put it back. There was one time I got upset and actually tried to hide them for good but my mum found them and put them back and told me off.

They aren't a source of comfort. I'm not sure they ever were, at best small satisfaction quickly lost with a look in the mirror, but now they appear downright cold and cruel. There's a weird look to them, these two buttons on either side and the old-fashioned thermometer-style scale in the middle, and it looks like two eyes and a mouth.

Now I always feel watched in the bathroom. By the mirror AND the scales.

I'm always scared, except when he's with me.

Saturday 30th November

I'm finding it really fucking hard. Every other day I feel like I'm actually insane. I have panic attacks more and more often, and I don't even try to sleep because I'm scared of my nightmares. When I do sleep I wake up in the night shivering and sweating thinking I'm dying.

I'm starting to think I'm addicted to caffeine, but it doesn't matter because I need to stay awake. I'm always so tired, and so I have to drink more coffee just to make it through the day.

I spend hours every day on my pro-ana forum, which is where I get all my thinspirations from and support in losing weight. It's the only place I feel sane, because it's the only place where people aren't telling me I'm crazy.

The visitations have increased. I'm not even sure if I'm awake or dreaming half the time. Now I'm terrified to look in all mirrors, but I have to so I can see if I'm any less fat. The days of feeling slightly good about myself for making progress or perhaps a day where I think I look better than yesterday are gone. Now all I can see is my fat. Even my hair is becoming dry and lifeless, and I *liked* my hair.

I look in the mirror and I see a gross thing, wobbly and misshapen, nothing like the gorgeous models, or my thinspiration pictures saved on my computer. But when I turn, out of the corners of my eye I see that *other* thing, and my heart goes as fast as a hummingbird and I feel like I'm about to be sick.

Everything makes me feel sick now. Not just the horrors that try and catch me off guard, but seeing people eat, seeing other fat people and feeling inside like I'm one of them but worse. When somebody even talks about food my body shakes in protest.

I'm living in a nightmare. My body feels so strained, and brittle, like twigs (if they were coated in blubber). I haven't seen my boyfriend in a while now, but I know how upset and frustrated he is, and he only knows the half of it. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad if we lived together instead of having this distance relationship. Then again maybe it would. As much as I tell him that none of this is his fault, all I can think is... *my life became worse when you entered it, because I tried to be good enough for you.*

I love him though. I know we're young, and you'll think us silly, but we've talked about marriage and kids. I hope those days come. Maybe they will, when I've reached my target weight and can

be happy. I reached my last one last week, but I looked so awful that I had to make a new one, a proper one.

My mum told me I was looking thin, and that I don't seem to eat much. Finally, so she joins the doctor and my boyfriend and friends in their little club of lies. I'm not sure I trust anyone anymore.

I'm starting to hear things too. Just whispers, but there's never anybody there.

Wednesday 10th December

I passed out outside today. I just felt faint and dizzy, and just collapsed. I think one of my friends phoned my mum and told her, but they won't own up to who it was. I can't believe they went behind my back like that.

It all came out. Well, not all of it, but the straightforward "eating disorder" part of it. I think I just told her what she wanted to hear. Well, not what she wanted to hear, but you know what I mean. The obvious stuff. I made it sound alright though, which it is, and stopped my mum worrying too much. She did want me to go back to the doctors, but I refused, saying I was fine and he never knew what he was talking about. She says we can have a proper mealtime together so she knows I'm eating. I can't see that lasting—and while it does I'll just sick it back up afterwards. Still not looking forward to it though.

My boyfriend is telling me I have to go to hospital or he's splitting up with me. It doesn't really make any sense. He's been talking to my best friend though—I don't know how he got her number. I think he just wants to use all this as an excuse to break up with me, so he can be with other girls, thinner and more attractive ones. He's probably secretly ashamed to be with me.

I struggle to understand his arguments these days. In fact, reading posts on my forum is hard too. Maybe I need glasses. I just can't concentrate on things. I get light-headed when I try too hard and have to lie down.

I wanted to remove the mirror from my bedroom but when I came to do it I just couldn't. You don't understand, but it's a big part of me.

It's okay if I look straight into it. I hate my reflection, but at least it's only me, even if it flickers into something else sometimes, something terrible. I look directly at it, then I close my eyes and turn around and walk away. If I see something by accident, I try to ignore it. That's the best way.

I actually think I'm going to be okay. I'm nearing my next target weight, and the people on the forum are so supportive. Most of the time that is—I mentioned seeing things at one point and that thread didn't go so well.

I think the thing in the mirror will go away when I'm finally perfect.

Friday 20th December

My boyfriend broke up with me today to fuck other girls. He didn't admit it because he's a coward. He gave me an ultimatum, saying that he couldn't handle feeling so helpless, that he's too young for all this and he doesn't know what to do, and that all he could think was that maybe him leaving me would give me the push I needed to check myself into a hospital. He said that as much as he loved me the only truly important thing was that I didn't die. That he's doing this for me and not himself. It's such fucking bullshit. I'm really upset right now. I knew I wouldn't be good enough for him this whole time, and he just goes and proves it. Just in time for Christmas.

I can't stop crying and I'm so angry. So lost. I feel like I'm having a breakdown. I have to go to the bathroom to do you-know-what again. Here's hoping I don't die . . . not that it'd matter.

Sunday 23rd December (this final entry seems to be hastily scrawled and is difficult to read, but transcribed as close to the original as possible, apart from the drawing which is not reproduced)

I saw it

I saw it

Im so fucking frightened

I dont even know where my heads at. I just know I saw it in the mirror. I have to write this just so I dont have a fucking breakdown

help me

I dont know who to talk to. I rang my boyfriend I mean my ex and he wouldnt pick up. I rang my best friend and there was no answer

fuck

My heart wont slow down and im really scared. I have to tell you. I was standing in front of the bathroom mirror naked and on the scales after cutting myself again and I whispered to myself *bones are beautiful* and it just appeared in the mirror. From a reflection of my obesity to this terrible evil from my nightmares—this grotesque cave creature—humanoid but not human

this vampiric true form of anorexia

it was just *bones*—bones stretched tight over skin, and it had this hanging jaw and limbs and sunken eyes and its skin was all pored and diseased and its hair was like this long matted straw that hung down

and the way it *looked* at me

it looked *dead*

but with these demon eyes

its still there I know it is Anamia I just ran up here and theres nobody in the house and my heart is going so

THE GREMLINS

All around the world, things go missing. Some of the time they inexplicably reappear, hours later, after the whole house has been turned upside down. Then, there they are, in a place you had checked four times over, looking smug.

Some of the time they don't come back. You know, you know for *absolute fact* that the item could not have left the house, perhaps not even left the room where you last saw it, maybe only a few minutes ago. Keys, a TV remote, a pair of glasses, a bookmark. They have nowhere to go to, no means of escape, and yet gone they are.

This is not a story about the things that go missing.

This is a story about what takes them.

The headphones in your coat pocket. You spent five minutes at the beginning of your last walk into town untangling them. Three days pass. You take them out, and lo and behold, they are tangled again. No, not merely tangled, but *tied in knots*. Actual knots. How did this happen? It's almost, you think, with an expression a mixture of annoyance and amusement, as if somebody was, when you were fast asleep, taking the wires out of your pocket, looping and knotting them up with fiendish glee and putting them back. But you shake your head, unscramble the wires again, and go about your day, not for one serious moment entertaining the prospect that your previous flight of fancy might be true.

This is what they want you to think.

They vary in size, most of them anywhere from the size of a fingernail or a bogey to the size of a large hand. They have two arms and three or four legs, and they move like spiders.

They are often a muddy, greeny-brown colour, but they have a natural camouflage that turns them into a mere blotch on the environment. They do not have nails, but have long fingers, very thin and sharp as needles. They can climb anything, completely vertical and upside down. They can climb up your plug-hole. They can crawl across the ceiling, above your head while you sleep.

They say that, in the city, you're never more than six feet away from a rat. Well, you're never more than six feet away from at least a hundred gremlins. Six feet above and six feet under.

They wait like spiders too. They can stay perfectly immobile. Your eyes cross over them all the time. They're in the shadows, in the corners of things. They're clinging to the downside of the desk you sit at. They wait in the cracks in the armchair.

When they move, they're fast, very fast, like very small things with legs often are. If your eyes detect them at all, they're nothing but a blur, the idea of motion, the tick in your vision.

If you ever saw one, your brain would not register it. The mind convinces itself too firmly against the existence of countless little undiscovered creatures hiding and sneaking and scampering silently around us. You would simply see a bit of dirt, a ball of hair, a

thick stain, a bulb of mould, and your eyes would move on instantly and your mind would not remember.

Maybe you touched one, without thinking. Most of them are slimy, and greasy, like wet frogs. They trail mucous like snails in the hot sun, invisible to the human eye. Some of them have scales, like lizards or fish. Some of them are hairy, not a soft cat-like fur, but hair like tarantulas. It is the kind a hand might touch without looking and instinctively pull back, an immediately recognisable *bad touch*, and yet when the eye looks for the culprit it finds none.

They are very patient, and when they are not being patient, they are being quick and invisible. The smaller ones do not need to wait for you to leave the room to sow their discord. They can steal things from under your noses. They could re-arrange half the room in the time it would take some old biddy to notice something was wrong.

They live short lives, a year at most, but their ancestral memories run long and deep, right back to the beginning. They are made up of individuals, countless individuals, but they also share a hive mind. They are directed, they are completely unified, and things always go According To Plan.

If you ventured underground, to the places where the very walls are made of them, where they seem infinite in their numbers, you would see the same three words scrawled over and over. They are written in their language, their alphabet, a cluster of sharp points like tally marks scratched on the cave walls. Translated they would read:

DISARRAY

GATHER

RECLAIM

In their alphabet, however, a scratch can mean more than one letter, and a word can have more than one meaning. These words could also be read as:

MADNESS

HARVEST

SLAUGHTER

This is the Plan. The first stage, Disarray/Madness, and Gather/Harvest, is in motion, and has been in motion for thousands of years, always growing in efficiency and strength. Disarray involves the taking and movement of our possessions, and other small, interfering activities, a great host of tricks to play on the unsuspecting humans to slowly, but surely, drive them mad. Each year things are ramped up a little bit more from the year before. And in their malice, they think it hilarious we have not noticed anything amiss, but blame ourselves and each other every time.

You may say it is having little effect. It is not. It is having an ever growing effect, simply one that humans do not recognise. For every murder and suicide, there are the prime reasons, of course, but there are also the little things, the mounting up of endless little annoyances that serve one consolidated purpose: to drive you over the edge.

These little things are the work of gremlins.

Gather works in partnership with Disarray, and involves stealing our things, and keeping them for themselves. Some of them are useful as they are; most of them are made into new things, bigger things, dangerous things. Gremlins are very good at building, at making crude but terribly efficient things out of gizmos, doohickeys and thingamajigs. Things that will make them stronger, things that will come into their own when the time comes to Reclaim.

The second stage has not begun yet.

They have been around since before the time of the dinosaurs.

Back then they were kinder, peaceful creatures, living free as individuals, without any hive mind. Then Homo sapiens came and exerted dominance and, with a surety and indomitable force of will that had never before been seen, the gremlins were nearly exterminated.

They do not hate us because we nearly wiped them out.

They hate us because we did it without having ever realised.

Once gremlins lived in the light of the sun and the moon, in the woods and the grasslands and the lakes. Homo sapiens took the environment for themselves, and the gremlins, invisible to the humans who trod with their thoughtless feet, and raked the land with their thoughtless machines, were driven out of their homes, and died in droves.

They were naïve, and they were weak, and they were frightened, and they were unprepared. They did not know where to go, and they did not know in which direction to move. They starved, they were crushed, they drowned, they were wiped out by our diseases by the trillion. They ran into death, and they died quickly. They were stupid.

The gremlin population sank from a population close to that of ants to around one hundred. Never in history has there been such a genocide. And the perpetrators remained completely oblivious.

They would grow again, now underground.

Gremlins are hermaphrodites and, when they feel like it, when the environment can support them, each one can have a hundred children.

Humanity has the arrogance to believe that it can fight anything. We write stories and make movies about fighting against huge monsters, against incredibly destructive alien forces. We are always the underdogs. And just when things look bleak, our greater numbers, our unconquerable spirit and determination for survival,

and the combined forces of all our weaponry, take down even the biggest of monsters, and we are victorious.

It is easy to point your guns up and shoot something.

It is much harder to point them down, and shoot something you can barely see. When you are the monster, you are the giant to take down, when you are the one hopelessly, impossibly outnumbered.

We brush off insects, and we often think nothing of them. You might laugh at the idea that we, as an enemy, would be utterly pathetic to them, even if they were only a little bit unified and only half desirous of our destruction. That we could win such a war, whether it would be easy or terribly long and terribly difficult.

It is estimated that there are 170 million insects to each person.

There would be no war. There would be a massacre.

When the time comes, when the gremlins are done playing with us, done stretching our minds, confusing and corrupting our reason, making us doubt ourselves, making mistake after mistake, when humanity is tired and half-broken, pinpricked with holes from ever increasing suicides and murders, when every other human is paranoid and neurotic, trusting nobody, not even themselves—when the gremlins are done torturing and weakening us, when they are so strong and vast that they will roll over us like a wave rolls over pebbles, that is when humanity will have had its last days on this earth.

There are the ancient ones. Who knows how many there are. It is not clear if they are gremlins or not, only that they are on the same side. They do not die each year like the others. They know of us just like they knew of the dinosaurs.

They are bigger, much, much bigger than ordinary gremlins. They slumber in enormous subterranean caves, and at the bottom of unexplored ocean trenches, too deep and dark for divers or their machines. Sometimes they come closer to us, watching us, thinking. If you are swimming, perhaps you have had that uneasy feeling of a shadow below you, a shadow that filled the sea.

It is not simple paranoia. Paranoia is the word given because we don't know about the gremlins.

The ancient ones guide the hive mind. They will not come up when the second stage—**SLAUGHTER**—begins. They are not stupid. They know they can be harmed when all guns are brought to bear. No, they will come up and walk the streets when humanity is broken, when it is a shadow of a shadow of its strength. When there is no unity, merely those that die as they flee. Then they will crush and they will rend, and they will know that those with the longest patience have the biggest payoffs.

The gremlins will rise up, from the floorboards, from the corners, from the shadows and from the sewers, from the cracks in the plaster, the underside of tables and chairs, from behind the pictures on the walls, from between the books on the bookcases, from under your fingernails, and from in your hair.

They will pour in their thousands from your attic and they will swarm onto you.

In one long night, a night that crosses the world, a third of humans will die, most in their houses, most in their beds. A billion will die before anybody knows what is happening, snuffed out, no time to even scream.

You cannot win. They are already here. They've always been here.

When you feel that shiver up your spine—that's them crawling up your back. The itch in your hair, that's them. The tickle on your bare skin that you slap away: that's them, but they've already moved. Some of the smallest ones nest in your mouth while you sleep, or in the hairs of your nostrils during the day.

You can't win against an enemy that you can inhale, that can hack you apart from the inside. If you shut your mouth and clamp your nose, they will push through your eardrums, or wriggle under your eyeballs.

The second stage has not yet begun.

But it will.

The gremlins chitter in their thousands, in their millions, in their trillions upon trillions the world over. They all say the same word, *ukta*.

It means, 'soon'.

DEAD STREETS

It was between Hallowe'en and the advent of Christmas, that half-haunted and melancholic time of year when spirits and ghosts one by one went to their slumber in the hidden places. I had spent the night drinking and smoking with a friend, and now in the small hours I set off on the pale roads to home.

From the first steps, as the chill night closed its web around me, I knew this was no ordinary walk. I was there for a snapshot of rare world, a world in undress that was intended for no human eyes. The ground crunched under my feet as I turned out of the estate and onto a main road.

Cars lined the street in an endless procession of tombstones. Each appearing to me some frozen sentinel cold and implacable. The roads and the land betrayed no movement. Each grave of a car standing as testimony to the desertion or extinction of the human race. I would say that never before had I felt so alone, and yet this was not true, for I was shepherded by the world, and roused those spirits not yet asleep, or woken by my heavy footfall. Unseen eyes opened in slits to see my passing.

There was an almost unbearable, and yet beautiful, sadness throughout. Here was the world stripped bare, skeletal in form, and I privy to these emotions that were at all other times impossibly guarded. I could feel them leaking, the last few leaves on the branches dripping like tears, the railings shivering in quiet failure, desperate

to cease their never-ending point to the heavens, waiting to leave my sight so they could collapse.in solitude.

My own tears sprang to my eyes as I beheld all that had been hidden, and at such longstanding pains. I ran a gloved hand over the window of one of the dead cars, preparing myself for something terrible within; a rotting ghoul perhaps, or a bristling werewolf. As the ice swept away I only saw a hollow, an emptiness like deep space that echoed that within my chest, and I sank away and continued on.

I did not really want to see such horrible phantasms, to fright myself to death on this eerie walk. But, somehow, the nothingness was always worse.

I crossed a bridge and looked out on the black glass of the canal. Willow trees hung over the banks, their ends wilfully drowning. I pictured huge crocodiles under that still surface, and then Lovecraftian monstrosities. At any moment their heads and tentacles could break the waters and rear up to me, gnashing and flailing . . . but the moment passed, and all other moments, and the water remained as it was, all such secrets kept too deep for mortal knowledge.

The bridge and canal was lost to the turns of my route. Houses passed on the side, every one lightless, each street a cemetery. Humanity's gaze had ceased to rest on this town, perhaps everywhere, and there were not even other animals to make sound or sight. If there was life anywhere it was only in the drift of ghosts and their haunts, coming to rest now that humanity and its noisy wildlife had been finally scared to death. I knew then, as my footsteps echoed in the silence and my breath fogged out like bonedust, what it would be like to be the last person alive.

It was while I was thinking thus that a figure came upon me, and we both kept our faces to the ground, saying not a word in greeting or parting. For nights as this belong to each of us alone, and it must be alone, for on such nights nobody is entirely human. The thoughts and moods in the air are not to be shared, except from the earth's whisperings to our individual soul.

The figure left, and it was as though it had never appeared; and perhaps it never had, and I had imagined it as I imagine so much else.

I looked up as I walked. In the ghost-black, almost translucent sky was a pinhole moon, something stabbed through from beyond. I peered at it and through it I sensed a bright hospital room, crowded with doctors unnaturally long of limb and face, who called out to me for my birth.

Push through, they said. Come on through.

I will, I replied.

Come on.

Soon.

I came upon the road leading up to my flat, passing the glow of traffic lights that changed for no-one. On the path was a telephone box, and I wondered how many years had come and gone without its use. It emanated a wispy, amber light, that gathered as if in currents, and I wanted to believe that it was a hostel for travelling spirits, readying for the next fly-through in the cold, and yet as I passed it seemed occult with melancholy, and I almost heard the plaintive calls that were sirens to my heart.

On the last stretch to my home I felt the rising and familiar urge to stop dead. I knew if I did so I would not move again. But no matter the strength of the feeling, my body would keep on even while my mind rebelled, for my body was as much on autopilot as it has been since my beginning. I would take the same route, the same steps, think the same thoughts in the same order and say the same words to every person I met no matter if I'd turned back time a hundred times.

If I stopped then the sun would rise on my statue. People would try to talk to me, and there would be no answer. The police would try to move me, and they would fail. Days, weeks, and eventually years would crawl by, and people would become long used to this immovable form, as though I were a lamppost or a park bench. Kids would throw things, and drunk men would piss on my feet.

A little girl, on a day trip, would tug at her mother's sleeve and whisper, curious and biting her lip. 'Why is he standing there?'

The mother would look up and say, as the residents bustling around them smiled and shook their heads, 'Why don't you ask him?'

The little girl would hesitantly come up to me, and ask me the same question.

'I don't know,' I'd reply, out of the corner of my mouth, so nobody else could see, and so quietly only the girl could hear. 'Why don't you join me?'

The girl looked confused. 'There must be some reason.'

'I think, perhaps, if I stay completely still, then maybe things won't carry on without me. Or at least as far as I'm concerned. I can put a stop to it by putting a stop to myself. Don't you want to

join me? If you stop too, then maybe other people will stop, and one day everyone can be completely still, and nothing bad or difficult or tiresome will ever happen again.'

The child would bite her lip again and then shake her head, and her mother would call her back and they'd both walk away. And neither of them would stop for me, just like all the other times. And in the end I would always be the only one.

I let myself in the front door and climbed the stairs to the flat. I entered the warmth and turned the lights on. I took off my gloves and scarf and coat and unlaced my boots. I poured myself a drink and sipped it, and in the lounge I closed the curtains, dissolving the night into a mere fancy of the imagination. Something that could never be truly explained to anyone, never accurately described, for it was a night that may have happened and may not have happened, but whether it did or it didn't it happened to me, and I cherished its rarity, now gone.

This was not a story about zombies and vampires, about things going bump in the night, about unbridled terror and nightmares realised. This was a story about the things that don't happen, the nothingness out there, and that hollow emptiness in the car's window. My nightmare is not monstrous or disfigured, it does not have tentacles or fangs or the form of a beast, it does not drip goo or blood and it does not shuffle and it does not snarl.

I drank my drink and I looked at my television and my computer, at my large collection of DVDs and books and videogames,

and at the pictures on my walls, and I sat down, my thoughts once again returning to suicide.

But for one more night like this.

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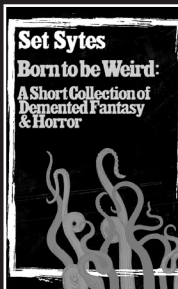
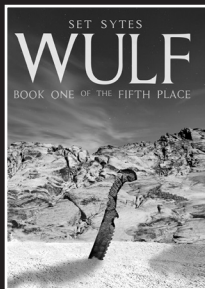
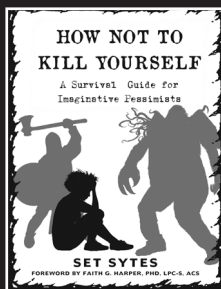


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*A girl begins to question why she and her parents wear monstrous masks they have never, ever taken off, though she may have been better off not knowing. An insomniac spends every night watched by a dark, silent figure in the bedroom, and while this figure disappears by morning, he seems to be growing stronger and bolder. It turns out that when things go missing, spidery little creatures with the missions of disarray and madness, gathering and harvesting are to blame; humanity has deeply wronged them, and between their antics they've been planning a much more sinister revenge. These and several other horror stories await within, as well as *The Violet Dark*, an unsettling, dreamy (or nightmare-y, rather) novella revolving around an addictive drink.*

