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Luckenbooth

and

The Metamorphosis of a Novel (Inspired by Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*)

Jenni Fagan



Submitted in satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of PhD in

Creative Writing

The University of Edinburgh

2020

Declaration

This thesis has been composed entirely by the student, and the work is entirely their own. Where other sources of information have been used, they have been acknowledged. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:

Dated:

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Abstract

Luckenbooth is a novel inspired by Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. It is set in an Edinburgh tenement building and concerns the metamorphosis of the residents' lives over nine decades. The purpose of setting the novel over such a long period of time is to be able to show how society changes but also remains the same. The aim is to represent how wider societal structures regarding the evolution of society impact upon the individual. Each story concerns itself with a protagonist whose life is in some way peripheral to mainstream society, or who is responding to the centre from a point of Otherness. Famously, the opening line of *The Metamorphosis* sees travelling salesman Gregor Samsa awake as an undefined yet monstrous creature. Kafka's opening is a climax that is unravelled through the entire story. In a similar vein, the characters' lives in *Luckenbooth* are woven together by a main event that impacts on the structure and narrative. In this way my opening includes a delayed climax that can only be fully resolved at the end of the novel. *Luckenbooth* begins in 1910 when the devil's daughter, Jessie MacRae leaves her Father's corpse rammed on a cliff top on a small island in the Highlands. She gets into a coffin her Father built for her and rows across the North Sea to Edinburgh. She begins a job at No. 10 Luckenbooth Close for the Minister of Culture. She is to be a surrogate for Mr Udnam and his fiancée. An extremely violent event occurs and Jessie MacRae curses no.10 Luckenbooth Close and the lives of its residents for the next hundred years. Structurally the building houses the curse much in the same way that Gregor Samsa's body defines his fate. In flat 1F1, 1910 we have Jessie MacRae, in the 1920s, a young woman (who used to be male) is going to a drag ball in 2F2, 1930s sees a young civil rights activist from Louisiana, living in 3F3 and working at the Bone Library Royal Dick Vet. Ivy Proudfoot is a young woman training to be a spy in the war in the 1940s. There is a seance in the 1950s that exposes much of what happened to Jessie MacRae. Beat poet William Burroughs is doing cut ups in the 1960s and attending the famous 1962 Writers Conference at Edinburgh International Book Festival. In the 1970s an

Edinburgh gang fights the Triads. A miner who has a phobia of light tries to care for his niece in the 1980s. The last decade occurs on Hogmanay 2000 where a cosmic agent called Dot exposes all the secrets hidden in Luckenbooth Close for a hundred years. I wanted the final voice to be that of Jessie MacRae so we conclude by going back to the event alluded to at the very start of the novel and she tells us in her voice exactly how this all began.

The accompanying critical essay *Luckenbooth* / 'The Metamorphosis of a Novel (Inspired by Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*)' explores how the influence of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* informed my research for *Luckenbooth*. It discusses many of the academic texts around Kafka and *Metamorphosis* which deepened my understanding of why this story had called out to me so strongly as a literary artist. The essay discusses Kafka's influences both theoretically and creatively to see how they influenced his ideology. Kafka referred to his life *as* literature. The art of life is something Foucault saw as part of the practice of literature. In between these theories I explore how my own fundamental approach to art, literature and life has encompassed the influence of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and how it underpins my entire approach to *Luckenbooth*.

Lay Summary

Name of student:	Jenni Fagan	UUN	S1500405
University email:	s1500405@sms.ed.ac.uk		
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Title of thesis:	Luckenbooth — The Metamorphosis of a Novel (Inspired by Kafka's <i>The Metamorphosis</i>)		

This thesis explores the metamorphosis of the lives of residents in an Edinburgh tenement over nine-decades. My fiction novel *Luckenbooth* begins in 1910, when the devil's daughter (Jessie MacRae) arrives in the tenement to work for the Minister of Culture, Mr Udnam. Jessie has been employed to be a surrogate for Mr Udnam and his fiancée, Elise. During her time at flat 1F1 in no.10 Luckenbooth Close a huge and violent event occurs and Jessie MacRae curses the entire building and its residents for the next hundred years. The secret of what has happened to Jessie MacRae, and the curse, weave through nine decades and all of the residents lives until it is fully exposed at the end of the novel. *Luckenbooth* was inspired by Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and like his novel it also begins with a climax. However, unlike Kafka's novel the inciting incident is only hinted at in the opening to *Luckenbooth*. In that way the entire novel works back toward a climax that occurred ninety years before. I also wanted to show the metamorphosis of Edinburgh society over the nine decades. We see progression in areas such as technology, music, fashion, politics and wider societal attitudes toward gender, equality and religion. The residents include an ex soldier who has transitioned to being publicly identified as female, she is going to a drag ball attended by the Edinburgh literati. Flora remembers a polar bear that had arrived in Edinburgh at the end of the First World war and whom (to her) was a symbol of the power of real love. In the 1930s there is young black man from Louisiana, who is working in the bone library at Edinburgh Royal Dick Veterinary College. He is building a bone mermaid and spends his time, in an environment of wider war and great strife for civil rights — thinking. He believes this is the greatest act of transgression in his times, to think deeply and fully about all things and it is his way of responding politically to the world around him. In the 1940s a young shop girl called Ivy Proudfoot is being trained to be a spy in Paris in the Second World war. Ivy has always understood she is different from other people in as much as she wants to be violent and kill. Whilst she is morally able this urge is finally going to be allowed a legal way to find expression. She wants to use her urges, which she understands are not publicly acceptable, to do some good by trying to counter Nazi influence in the war. In the 1950s a seance is held that exposes a lot more of the secret that brought about Jessie MacRae's curse on the building. In the 1960s the beat poet William Burroughs has recently attended the 1962 International Writers Conference at Edinburgh International Book Festival. This was a pivotal conference and is remembered for those who attended and the debates that were held. In the 1970s a famous Edinburgh gang arrive at the tenement to have a fight with the local Triads. In the 1980s an ex coal miner has found himself homeless, living with his sister and niece. He has a severe phobia of light and has had a horrible marriage to a very troubled woman. His best friend has had an affair with his wife and arrives to try and make amends. The ideas of masculinity in Scottish working class culture are shown to be changing through this interaction. Finally a young woman is squatting in the derelict building on Hogmanay 2000. She is a cosmic agent and is going to expose all the building's secrets before it falls.

Through the accompanying essay I explore the metamorphosis of writing my fiction novel *Luckenbooth*. I show how Kafka influenced me with *Metamorphosis*. The thesis considers many texts including Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. It uses Kafka's own diaries, translations of Kafka's letters by Max Brod, translations of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* by Stanley Corngold and Susan Bernofsky. Also, Nicholas Dungey's essays and explorations of *Power, Resistance and the art of Self* in Kafka's texts. Sokel H. Walter's study of Kafka in the *Myth of Power and Self*. Julian Preece, *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*. Also, the *Art of Fiction* by David Lodge when considering issues of narrative and structure, alongside A.L. Kennedy and Romesh Guneskera's *Novel Writing, A Writers' & Artists' Companion*. Also, Adam Sexton, *Master Class in Fiction Writing*.

LUCKENBOOTH

The Metamorphosis of a Novel (Inspired by Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*)

by

Jenni Fagan

A Dissertation

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LUCKENBOOTH

BY

Jenni Fagan

Edinburgh is a mad god's dream.

Hugh MacDiarmid



For Boo,

&

Dave Balfour

PART I

1910

Flat 1F1

Jessie MacRae (21)

the arrival

I

My father's corpse stares out across the North Atlantic Swells. Grey eyes. Eyelashes adorned with beads of rain. Tiny orbs to reflect our entire world. Primrose and squill dance at his feet. His body is rammed into a crevice. The shore is scattered with storm debris. Cargo boxes. Little green bottles with faded labels. Swollen pods of seaweed slip underfoot. It takes me an hour to get from our clifftop to the water's edge. I have a blue glass bottle. It is tincture of iodine. Skull and crossbones on the front. I wash it out. Tell it my secrets. Stopper them. Lay it on the water. When I look back our beach has a long straight line — right down the middle — like the spine of a book.

It is where I dragged my coffin.

I use his oars.

Push the vessel he built for me — into waves. It is not the journey he foresaw me taking in it. My Father built one for each of us from old church pews. Knocked them together outside the kitchen window, so Ma would see. She saw the world through those four square panes. Each season. Each sorrow. That night he made her sleep in hers. Then my brother took to his. I varnished mine ten times without any premonition. How buoyant such a thing can be! A light spray fans peaks of waves. I will not look back at him in his crevice. It had to be done like this! Hoik my skirt up.

Wade into the sea. Pale bare thighs bloom red in the cold water. I kiss my Mother's cross. Set it onto the floor so there's one holy thing between me and oblivion. The sea won't take me. I am the devil's daughter. Nobody wants responsibility for my immortal soul. My address cannot be — The Devil's Daughter, North Sea. I'll never knock at heaven's door. Hell knows I could do far worse than take over. I dip the oars in. Pull away from the island. I watch the dark blue line of the horizon. A seal pops up. Black eyes. Long whiskers. He'd have me sire a seal child if I'd do him the favour of drowning.

On the first night I lay down in my coffin when the winds drop.

Easiest sleep of my life.

When I wake the ocean swells roll bigger and bigger. I sing. Smoke. Thin spires rise up. I breakfast on oatcakes and cheese. Run chapped fingers through the water. The seal brushes them with his whiskers. I eat a raw fish I brought with me. Lob the bones out. It barely touches my hunger. A hairline crack appears in my coffin. Cross myself three times. Wish I had brought more to eat. I see no ships all day. The sun falls with regularity. Her opposition — the moon — rises. It is round and yellow — a single eye to watch my journey.

On the third morning a fog unfurls.

A ship calls out long and low.

The spirits of the sea are matched in sorrow by the living. I rest my elbows on the sides. Scan the horizon. All I can see is a grey abyss that feels like it has come directly out of me. The day passes in misery. At night the skies clear and wind picks up faster and faster until sailing feels like flying. Arms out — travelling through a hundred, million, billion — stars.

I have no compass.

When I draw near land I shout — *where are we?*

Those who don't faint, or cross themselves, or throw something at me — give enough information to get to my destination. I drift into the Water of Leith at dawn. Four cormorants skim across still water — wings almost touch their own reflection. So graceful! Stash the coffin behind the trawler boats away in a corner of the docs. I tie it up. Leave it bobbing in a corner of the harbour. I climb out on rusty wall prongs. Men argue nearby. I strip quickly behind barrels — comb my hair twenty times, tighten my corset, pull on clean stockings, slip my mother's best dress over my head. It is charcoal with a square neck. Low enough to see a heart beat. Tie up long brown hair. My skin is white-blue. My lips are kept fresh with vaseline. There's neat green buttons on my leather boots. The Priest bought them for my Mother. She gave them to me. I throw my farm boots over some barrels. Somebody will use them no doubt. My old dress is stuffed in a bag. I pull out the last piece and carefully fix the clasp — her silver cameo.

I'm ready.

Walk quickly along Constitution Street.

The thing is to try and look like a woman.

Not a demon.

I have the eyes of every man on me.

Flawed thing.

All want.

They could find so many reasons to hang me.

I go past the Boundary wall. Odd symbols and rubbish and broken tools line it. Some of the children run by me barefoot. They must have soles like leather! Up along Elm Row. Finally — the very fancy new North British Hotel appears. I turn onto North Bridge. Wind skelps me in the pus. I can see Edinburgh Castle away to the right: wisps ay steam from Waverley Station below: Arthur's Seat and the Craggs to the left — a flash of blue further even than waves. It's good to know the sea is nearby. It's important — in any city — to know the escape routes at all times. Da used to bring me

here once a year. He'd sell offal, or trade, then leave me to wait in a tavern whilst he went off with a woman. I stop in the middle of the Tron. Behind me there is the Royal Mile, to the left is the Southside and on the right North Bridge. I stand in the middle. Streets crossed below me. Tenements of all heights stand as sentinels on either side. They inspect everyone who passes below. The High St. is cobbled and it slopes up. There's wooden doors and small blown-glass windows or fancier sash panes with wooden shutters. A motor car turns right onto Cockburn Street. The spunk-hawker stacks his tinder. Between the well-dressed and moneyed there are glimpses of the hungry and hunted. A big church has a beggar sat on its steps with his ratty wee dug. A young man smiles. He wants to defile me. An urge to let him. Right here in the street. Who can save me? My father is the devil! Our kind are not holy. I must perfectly hide the sharp tip of my horns. Woodsmoke spirals out tenement chimneys. The reek permeates everything. Pretty rooftops are tiled like dragon skin. Just as I am about to step forward a black mass flows onto North Bridge. Along the High St. news signs declare: WORLD MISSIONARY CONFERENCE. One thousand-two hundred men of God flock toward me. They stride in tens, twenties, hundreds. I knew God would have a message for me, but I did not know he would be so direct.

Spit.

Saliva — still tinged-pink.

I look at it there on the cobbles, just a tinge of blood — only seen by me.

Everywhere there are black suits and motion.

The men press close as they go around me. Cleric collars. Smooth hair. Clean skin. Moustache or beard. Shiny shoes. They pass like crooked ships on a grey sea. A young Minister's eyes slide over my body with thoughts impure as any. I know what lays in his trousers damp and feeble as a mouse. That thing will only stand on end for cruelty. Heat on my temples. I could easily stake him! Shoes click on the cobbles. One-by-one they disappear into the City Chambers up ahead. The

speech crier calls out.

- Evil walks among us! I step forward.

The spires at St. Giles Cathedral rise up. Gar-

goyles crane their necks out bug-eyed to stare.

Edinburgh seduces with her ancient buildings. She pours alcohol or food down the throats of anyone passing, dangles her trinkets, leaves pockets bare. She's a pickpocket. The best kind of thief, one you think of — most fondly.

There is a cage around my heart — made of bone, bone, bone.

I must appear not to see.

Not to know.

Rub my foot against my leg. Check the bit of paper again. The drawing has the entrance to No. 10 Luckenbooth Close clearly marked but I am told nobody can ever find it. Ignore the cathedral and the cobbled heart. I walk by the entry to the Close three times before I take a few steps back.

Turn down into a shady narrow street.

The sounds of the city quieten.

A man dressed smartly appears and he glares at me. I have to press back against the cold wall to let him pass. He is a reptile. Stones for eyes. Scutes all over his skin — slick, armoured — a tail to flick left-to-right. Over a million years reptiles have perfected their ability to detect and exploit weakness. It is almost admirable. Sometimes they seek easy prey. Other times they enjoy a fight. They sit in courtrooms. Deal out judgement. Turn up to football games. They turn a red leather barber's chair and welcome your child with a lollipop and a wide reptilian smile. They act in theatres. Teach in schools. They hold keys to the police station. They bake your wedding cake. Bow on stage as a curtain falls. They write poems. They take up a good cause. They save things — loudly! They are careful to be seen to be doing things that are nothing at all to do with murder. They

are charming. They are liked. It is important to make sure others — owe them. Reptiles lay in bed reading. They get a cold. They take two sugars in their tea. They are concerned for you. They bring a gift. They are often top of the pile. Who would be a top predator and let a nicer person pass? The more talented? The greater thinker? No, no, no! That's not how it works. I am not talking about lizards. This is nothing to do with geckos. I have no issue with chameleons. It has no relevance to turtles. The reptiles I describe — are crocodiles.

God must have mercy on you if you lay down in your bed each night with a crocodile.

If you marry one!

Have its baby and look into tiny baby crocodile eyes!

The crocodile will suckle its victim at night. Each morning they will wake with disdain and a wide-toothed smile. They open their muscular arms only a little. In an act of evolution they have learned how to make you want them. Once you step into want they begin to squeeze you tightly. Grin wide crocodile grins as they expel air from your lungs — keeping eye contact all the while. An ancient dance. Spin. Spin. Spin. Descend to the depths. There it is — the deepest ocean floor with a forest of seaweed to filter out the light. Your face will be unbelieving at the end of a death roll ride! When your body is limp and your expression — incredulous — they will stash you.

Sometimes they will swim back down from the light.

It won't be to rescue you or apologise — it will be to find your corpse and take another good long leisurely bite. Whilst you'd like to think you were something unique to them what you find as you turn around is millions of other women and children (mostly) all stashed in an identical watery grave.

What I must do is sew my real eyes shut and look out with a pretty blue set painted on.

This is it — no.10 Luckenbooth Close!

Go down four stairs and a smell of ammonia climbs up my nose.

These tenements are so high!

Laundry creates strange shapes — in between me and the sky.

The air is dank down here and much older than on the street. This place is closer to the Castle than I thought it would be. Looking up I can see nine floors, built from huge slabs of stone.

The steps are scrubbed clean. I pause with my hand on a freshly painted wooden door like it is a lover's chest.

It's heavy to push open.

The stairwell smells of lemons and smoke.

Wall tiles are a dark green, my mother's favourite colour. Wooden balustrade and a huge glass cupola all the way at the top like the church manse library where I hid from my Father. Turn onto a landing. 1F1. Raise my hand. Before I can rap lacquered wood — the door swings open. A woman almost as wide as the doorframe — is clearly angry.

- Yer late!

- I'm sorry.

- Ye dinnae look sorry.

I don't attempt contrite. It's not in my array of convincing facial expressions. I try out impassive. Honest isn't something I carry off. Neither is concerned. My mother always said I did a good line in unreadable and impassive. I arrange my features into something to appropriate those attributes. The woman snorts. Turns around. I follow her into the apartment. High ceilings with ornate cornices, polished wooden floors, long red Persian rugs. There is a smell of tobacco and wood smoke and brandy.

- They're waiting. I'll show you around quickly before I go. Don't go down to the basement — ever!

- I won't.

- It's locked anyway but you better not.

- I promise.

- Are yer boots clean?

- Aye.

- Say, yes — in here.

- Yes.

- Talk slowly — don't use Scottish in front of them.

- I won't.

- He can understand it but he doesnae like it.

- I see.

- He is a Minister of Culture, a man of letters!

- I was told.

- If you do one thing wrong — they will hang ye by the morning.

She leans in toward me with manky breath. Grey hairs strain to escape a shiny pink skull — even the woman's follicles don't want to be near her.

- Speak only when you're spoken to.

- Yes.

- Are ye sure those boots are clean? If there's shite on yer boots clean them downstairs, this flat takes up nearly the entire first floor, below here you've got the entrance way and underneath that you have the basement cellars, you don't want to go into the cellars — you'll no get back out, there's catacombs down there, you know that?

- Aye.

Follow her down a hallway with polished wooden furniture. Lash-less eyes. Dry, cracked, dimpled hands.

- Over here is the Lady's room.

A real four-poster bed. Carved tables. Thick curtains A fancy armchair. Winged legs so it can

fly away! These rooms are huge! Highest ceilings I've ever seen.

- Is it Jessie?

- Aye.

- He takes his clients in the other room, the Consulting room. He does all of his work and socialising in there, he sleeps there as well.

This is nothing like our two-room croft at home. Our place had sheep in there with us when it was freezing, which it was, every winter. She takes me back to the kitchen. There is a wooden butcher's block centre of the room. A scrubbed table in the corner. An old range cooker emanates warmth. Herbs hang on a rack. Heavy iron pans sway on hooks. In the corner there is a real copper pantry — fitted out to keep every bit of bread or cheese, cool as a shelf in a fancy cheese shop.

- Ye can sleep there.

The woman points at a gap under a huge wooden dresser.

- You're near the cooker so the floor is warm. If a rat comes, kill it! You look too delicate to kill anything but you will have to! I saw one last week. Size of a bairn. I used a spade to take its head clean off.

I smile.

- I heard about yer Faither, barred fae maist ay the islands is he, no? Why'd they no bar him fae this last yin?

- They knew he'd only row back and slit their throats whilst they slept.

There is a silence apart from the grandfather clock tick-tick-tick-ticking in the hall.

- What did he die from?

- I poisoned him.

- Terrible.

The woman tuts. Stacks up china plates. Whatever I say is not what she hears, or often, what

anyone does. I'm like the girl in the story who lets toads fall from her mouth but others think they are pearls. I still have the smell of death on me. It will be weeks before it goes.

- What does Mr Udnam's fiancée, do?

- Elise, is a suffragette or so she thinks, marched with that Pankhurst wifie last year, rich wummin have time fir aw that shite!

The woman inspects the width of my hips.

- Send her in!

We both look down the hall.

A red glow from the fire.

Drapes pulled.

The maid grabs her coat and leaves.

The front door clicks shut.

I smooth down my dress. Pinch my cheeks. Walk slowly to the Consulting room. Elise is sat on the desk. Amethysts fir eyes. Her hair is even longer than mine. It is the reddest hair I've ever seen. She wears a green silk dress. Fingernails stained red as if she has dipped them in blood. I fancy she does exactly that each morning. Bare feet. They are tiny. I take the long ornamental pipe she holds out toward me. There is a wicked tilt to her smile. Behind them a huge bay window looks out across the entire city. Views of the skyline sparkle brighter and brighter as I put the pipe to my mouth and inhale.

Mr Udnam smiles.

I hold the pipe back out unsure I can stop myself from dropping it.

He turns to kiss his fiancee's neck and puts his hand out toward me. She leans her head down to hear my heart beat — lays her hand on my throat and strokes it, she takes a long drag and whispers.

- Open yer mouth.

She blows smoke deep into my lungs — heaviness descends through each part of my body taking every bad memory far away.

- How pretty she is Elise, do you think this one will take?

- Yes, I think she'll do more than fine.

An entire wall of books curves to inspect us. All those characters, plots and locations look toward each other and then me. There is a gap in the top row that looks like a black tooth. An electric hum in the air that is nothing to do with his fancy Tiffany lamp. Mr Udnam pours each of us a drink, green, in a tiny crystal glass. It is sweet and sharp and soothes as much as the smoke from the pipe does.

- You know why your Father sold you to us, Jessie?

- Yes, I do.

- The child will be named by my wife.

- Of course.

- We will raise the infant with no knowledge of who you are.

- I see.

- You will not approach the child if you see it in the street. You won't speak to us again afterwards — my wife will go into confinement during your containment. When the baby is born Elise will say she gave birth in America. We will never let anyone know the child is not completely ours. You have my word.

- Thank you.

- Are you happy to do this?

Elise sounds like she smokes a lot of cigarettes.

- Yes.

- Together? All three of us?

It would be hard not to nod to anything she says — the woman is a walking spell.

- The money was due to go to your Father.

- I know.

- As law sees it, he is sadly not alive anymore so that can't happen.

- God rest his soul.

Mr Udnam looks at me like he knows exactly what has been in my mouth this week and I get a taste at the back of my mouth like iron and grit and earth and ice so cold it could burn your skin away. He could choose not to pay me. He could send me away easily. I keep my face relaxed. Imagine a tiny house somewhere that has a name I chose for it above the door and no man to keep me.

- So the fee will go to you, is that acceptable?

- Yes.

My heart beats so hard.

It will happen.

One day I will have a place of my own. Another sip of green liquid soothes me. Elise gently pulls my dress down and traces my shoulder with her fingertips. I'd like to pretend I don't want this but every bit of my body and mind and soul desires it too. She kisses the back of my neck. Light kisses. Her lips are soft. She uses her tongue to flick out and there is a shudder all the way down my spine. He pushes her gently toward me. She pulls up her skirt — parts her legs so I can see — blows a smoke ring into my face.

A giant crocodile on the wall bares its teeth.

One hand slips down my front. Another pulls my hair back — exposes my neck — like a swan on the butchers block.

2

The polar bear is at least ten-feet tall. She stands on her hind legs. Salutes! Children at the end of Iona Street jump up and down. Anxious mothers yank them back. A wee laddie gets a slap over the back of the head. He has bloody knees and he stares at the polar bear with reverence. The energy on Leith Walk is palpable. Blue skies! Jazz music spills out from a tenement window. A woman leans out, watches the crowd and rolls a cigarette.

Down below her people talk and gesture.

Their words are trumpets.

An old man dances — each step a key on the piano.

His jumper sleeves are mended at the elbows but he glides with a dancehall elegance.

Hearts beat like big Tom drums.

A barmaid comes out to see it all, there are 460 soldiers stood either side of Baška Murmańska.

Handsome, dangerous, war wearied men.

Baška has black eyes.

The polar bear weighs 650 pounds and she is an official daughter of the Polish regiment. The men have a brightness to them. A luminosity to their eyes. They have seen too much. Baśka Murmańska has kept more than their spirit alive. She could kill any of them easily. They do not look at her with fear. Outside the bars men smoke and watch, unable to believe what they are seeing. Cloth caps, waist-coats. Smart jackets. Shoes shined so the scuff won't show for a good half hour at least. They are all having a few pints and a nip before kick off at Easter Road. Opposite them the soldiers mill around chatting to each other beside Baśka Murmańska.

That's exactly how it was.

Flora needs to stop remembering this over and over again but she does not want those memories to fade. It was the most important day of her life.

She nods to the barman.

Accepts a second Gin Rickey and twists the stem in her fingertips.

She can remember every second of that day nine-years ago.

A man she had never met before walked up to Flora. He was eternity and she the beginning of time. They had travelled 12.9 billion years to meet each other — at the end of Iona Street. There was some reason for him to say words. Flora said some back. It was all so polite. All the while another conversation was going on below that one. He was in uniform. It was the last day she would ever wear hers. War was almost done. They were ready. To forget. To make love. To walk back to a strangers flat and go to their bed.

She finishes her second Gin Ricky.

Drinking too fast.

Always.

Nods at the barman again.

His face is watchable and kind. It's not to be underrated in a man. He has a beard. Wild eyebrows frame warm eyes. His lips are too moist. He isn't skinny. Flora can't take that in a conquest.

She should not be thinking like this! It's bad. It is. She shouldn't be getting drunk in the afternoon. She should not have had cocaine for breakfast and certainly not with Champagne. Flora takes another tiny bump from a phial. Lets it sting her nose. Brighten her eyes. She warns herself. Behave, behave, behave! Do not fuck a stranger ten minutes before attempting a long awaited possible reconciliation. It's in the big reconciliation handbook! Don't do it.

Her man from the beginning of time had taken her to bed. He made her feel more free than she thought it was possible to feel. He told her she was a chimera. It was the first time she had heard that word. There were other words before that. Freak, hermaphrodite, boy-girl, in-between. He was the first one to tell her she was not two things but one perfect creature made from stardust.

He wanted her in every way.

It turned out in the end that it was him who was two things. What he thought he was. Then who he actually was.

The pain in her is too great.

The barman has a jaded tone that makes him more attractive.

He is not too handsome. Flora is not attracted to conventionally handsome men. They don't fuck so well. She doesn't get that thrill of truly losing control with them. She gets that with flawed men. He laughs at her story and there is a real dirtiness to his laugh. He's the exact kind of (someone else's) husband she ends up in bed with. The risk of this occurring becomes more pre-carious around drink four. Flora finishes drink three. She has to find out today. If her lover — who she has not seen now for eleven-months — is still — after all this time — the one she wants.

- And this happened when?

The barman pushes a sparkling glass toward Flora.

- Dear God of fuckery please help us all!

- Ay?

- Is this ma fourth cocktail?

- Do we need to count?

- Yes.

A smile.

He lights her cigarette.

A table of lawyers in the corner drink in such a serious way. Heads up! All the better to disdain the bar. Not her legs though. Nobody is disdainful toward Flora's legs. She pulls her skirt up another inch. Give them something to make laws about. Arseholes! She turns back to the barman. He is easily ten years younger than she. He tips beer out of catch trays, shines up optics, turns back toward her whilst polishing glasses.

- It happened when the soldiers were evacuated to Edinburgh from Russia, they had been fighting the Bolsheviks, she says.

- And they march up Leith Walk with this polar bear, Baška Murmańska and you did too?

Look him straight in the eye on reply.

- Aye, all the way along Princes St. everyone was going wild!

- I bet!

The barman turns reluctantly to serve someone else.

Flora swivels on her chair.

Checks out the bar.

There isn't a man in here wouldn't go to bed with her if she let them.

Whether they would stay in it once she undressed, is another matter. If they did most would ignore her in the street later, or they'd cross the road to pretend they didn't see her and if she knew them personally — they'd hope she never mentioned it again. If she tried to bring it up they'd say they didn't want to discuss that. They would want to fuck her but not talk to her. Or be seen with her. They'd want to take her body in all kinds of violent ways in a darkened room but on the street — they would not hold her hand.

Tiring

- I should've got drunk in Leith, this place makes ma teeth appear inferior.

- I ken what you mean, it's so posh it makes me itch, he agrees.

- The thing about Baška Murmańska — is she was a testament not to war, but to love. What the soldiers couldn't give in the war to those they loved, they could give freely — to this wild creature. Baška Murmańska saved each and every one of them. Straight up. She did it for love.

- It's a dangerous business, he says.

- War?

- Love.

- Aye.

- Unsurvivable at times, he watches Flora carefully.

- I'd rather my mind was gone, she whispers.

Round tear-filled eyes, glitter in the mirror behind him. The barman has dimples and a quiet assure manner. If only she could love a man like him.

She has to do this.

Just walk a few doors along.

Go down into Luckenbooth Close, then go up to 2F2. Don't climb up the drainpipe. Those days are over. Take the stairs. Go to his landing. Knock lightly. Wait until he opens the door. Appear to be a reasonable human being. That's the tricky bit. He see's her reasonable human being and raises her a lunatic.

- Why is it a certain kind of love brings out our worst selves? Flora asks.

- That's the real one does that.

- Why?

- Dunno. It's like a poultice. Draws it out.

- The madness?

- Aye! If love can heal us then first it has to pull all our demons right up to the surface, no?

- I think you're right, she says.

Flora's eyes glow with her own brightness.

- You know what happened to Robert the Bruce's heart? The barman asks.

He pushes olives in a fancy glass jar over to her and she ignores them as they lean closer together.

- No? What happened to Robert the Bruce's heart in the end?

- They cut it out, cast it in iron and gave it to Sir James Douglas to wear in a metal urn around his neck day and night.

- Why?

- To take it on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Robert insisted.

- The dead ay! So fucking demanding. Why the Holy Land? Was it the only place able to purify his murderous heart?

The barman nods.

His eyes have flecks of gold in them.

He lights another cigarette for her.

A double flame in his eyes.

He taps the packet and lights his own, touches her hand as he drops the flame.

- I know someone with a heart like that, Flora says.

They are still too close together. She holds her cigarette in long thin fingers. They can both stay warm in this glow for a wee while more. Ignore the lawyers behind them — filing out the front door.

- Did he make it to Jerusalem?

- No, he didn't, the barman shakes his head.

- Of course not.

- I don't think murderous hearts should get absolution that easy lady, do you?

Flora takes a long drag — leaves a rim of red lipstick around it.

- What happened to Sir James Douglas?

- He died fighting in Spain along the way. They boiled the flesh from his body. Took his bones back to Scotland alongside his mates heart — in its iron-clad box.

- Fucking hell.

- Such is the way of love.

He opens the cellar hatch — someone rolls barrels in from the street.

There is a sound of chickens, or maybe a goat.

Flora triple drags her cigarette.

Such is the way. It's like a disease. Love — 80% proof. Risk of death if you drink it. Can send you mad, bad, blind and delirious. It is nothing like the no-risk companionship of loving a close friend. To decay without passion together for eternity — the traditional way. Flora would rather die than do that. She'd rather die alone, upright as a double bass, tuned to her own vibration. Companionship is for pets. Flora is not a pet. She's a wild creature. All for the kind of love that can kill you. Now that is living! Baška Murmańska knew what that was. Flora meets her own eyes in the bar mirror. It's an uncomfortable feeling. She doesn't know why but she always looks away again quickly. Forces her gaze back. Why should she not like her own reflection? Her eyes are grey and wide with long lashes. Her hair is blonde and shiny and neatly bobbed with a perfect curl on her cheek. Smokey eyes. Red lips. She is prettier than a woman should be. So what — her jaw is a little too long, her nose indelicate. These new knee length skirts and dresses are more than favourable to her legs. A man walks in to the bar and slides a pamphlet across to her.

- Nobody is forcing me into teetotalism, Flora shakes her finger.

TO WORKING MEN & WOMEN

“The Anti-Saloon League: of the United States — which has now changed its name to “The World League Actions Against Alcoholism: has sent a number of skilled organisers and speakers to our country to help the misnamed “Temperance” Associations to:

ROB YOU OF YOUR BEER

The League is supported by millionaires, and has enormous funds. Its hirelings are paid a minimum of £60 a month and expenses. Will you allow these Aliens to:

DICTATE TO YOU, INTERFERE WITH YOUR LIBERTIES, CLOSE YOUR PUBLIC HOUSES, HUSTLE YOU INTO COMPULSORY TEETOTALISM?

What right have they to meddle with our affairs. What would “Yankees” say if we sent over a swarm of paid men to lecture on their habits, and interfere in their domestic concerns?

SHOW THESE FUSSY ZEALOTS THAT YOU RESENT THEIR IMPERTINENT INTRUSION. WRITE TO YOUR M.P. AND TELL HIM THEY OUGHT TO BE DEPORTED.

BEWARE OF LOCAL “OPTION.”

She takes out the phial as he walks away. Has two bumps. Dabs a little on her tongue and it tastes like petrol. That's how they get it into the Docks, in barrels. She puts the phial away. Emboldened she turns to check herself out from every angle. Sips just one last cocktail before she hits the road. It has been exactly eleven-months now and she can still feel what it's like when he steps behind her. His breath on her skin. Can still picture his eyes in every detail. It is so utterly annoying. The cellar hatch slams shut and she jumps.

- So what happened to Baška Murmańska in the end?

- Villagers killed her.

- Why, she was no threat to humans?

- They found her swimming in a river and they didn't know. Her soldier got her when she was just a cub, he was trying to woo this woman who was into this Italian officer who had a white fox. This soldier wanted to top that and impress the woman so he goes to Arkhangelsk market...

- She still prefers the guy with the white fox?

- Aye!

The barman shakes his head.

- Brutal.

- I know. The regiment keep Baška Murmańska, they train her up, she gets a food allowance, sleeps at the bottom of her soldier's bed until she was older. Do you know a polar bears skin is black underneath?

- No?

- Aye. When they absorb sunlight it goes through all the shafts and follicles of the fur which make them look whiter than they are but they hair is just like — light tubes!

Flora has hit a slight slur.

Sit up taller.

A sway to her hips — even whilst seated.

- I should probably eat an olive.

- I wouldn't they're rank, he says.

- I know, they are manky, ay?

- Fuckin mingin.

The barman lights a tiny cigar she's taken out her purse. She takes a drag and points it at him. The barman is wearing a white shirt, waistcoat, red tie, flat cap. Flora is aware if she doesn't leave on the next drink then her night is going to unravel.

— You see the Murmańczycy, to go back to it they get their polar bear because of infatuation, but they raise her on love!

Flora hiccups.

- It can go far that stuff.

- Cpl Smorgonski tamed Baška! Highly unusual man! They arrived on the Toloa ship. 27th September 1919. It was the last day I ever dressed as a boy.

Flora crushes the cigar out.

Exhales.

She stops lowering her eyelashes and looks back at him.

- You, are far too pretty to be a boy.

- Don't be nice to me.

- Why?

- I don't like it.

Flora peers into the mirrored bar behind him. Dabs at her eyes. It's taken a long time to get this look right. She is not going to smudge it. Many components were involved! Heated Eyelash curlers — they are a bitch to use. Maybelline mascara. Cotton wool balls from Woolworths to

smooth foundation because her fingers make it too greasy. Dior blush from Fraser & Sons — that cost a bit more: fingernails just so, so red: carefully oval tipped with a sharp point, the new kind of varnish that they use to paint aeroplanes.

- My invite was hand delivered in a brown envelope with two roses.

- Invitation to where?

Flora taps her nose.

- Do I look like I'm going to my own execution?

- Aye. Pretty glamorous execution though. You'll be needing another drink fir that?

- Best not.

Flora is far more tanned than last time her lover saw her. Why her mother whitens her skin she has no idea. Well, she has plenty ideas but she doesn't agree with any of them. The more colour Flora has in her skin the better she looks, so she thinks anyway. Fuck anyone who doesn't! One more twist and turn to admire herself. She loves this new dress. It's silver. Fringed. It catches the light and dapples her face nicely.

- What perfume are you wearing, Flora?

- Mitsouko, it's new.

- Smells nice. So, the bear went home to Poland and got killed after all that! So sad.

- I waved the soldiers boat away from the docks, Poland was just newly independent. They were so happy to go back after the war! Baška Murmańska was on the top deck. I stood watching until the boat was only a speck. When it was no longer a speck, I still stood watching. When the sun fell I pulled my Auntie's fur coat around me and lit a cigarette. When the darkness came I still just kept watching the horizon.

- What were you looking for?

- Evidence of the unbreakable bond of true love.

- You found it?

- Not yet.

The two of them laugh, the delicate relief of it loosens her spine.

- Go on Flora, get yer guy, ay.

- Thanks fir listening ...

- Any time, lady.

Flora leans over the bar and kisses the barman on the cheek.

Up onto the street.

She goes into the shop for two packs of cigarettes. Then down into the Close. It is so familiar. Even just to step onto the damp cobbles hidden out the way down here. It makes her hard. Raises the knot in her shoulder. The first floor landing is jammed by two young men pulling and pushing at a huge old piano.

- Can I squeeze by?

- Aye!

They tip it up and she flattens herself against the wall to slip passed.

- I'm Archie, I'm moving into 5F5, sorry about the piano!

- Nae bother!

Flora runs ahead up the stairs, she has to get there before anyone else does. If she can speak to him for just a little while on their own — she'll know whether to leave Scotland for good or not. 2F2. Tap lightly. He answers like he's been stood there waiting ever since she left. There he is. Just like that. Eternity. His eyes are still just as familiar as her own.

- Flora, I didn't know if you would ...

- Why?

They both know why.

He lets the door swing wide.

Go past his arms. Heat. The flat smells exactly the same. Apples and oiled wooden floors.

Scented baths. Copious pots of tea. Under all of that there is the smell of him. His skin. A memory of his mouth on hers keeps her eyes averted. She does not want to think about how every time she tipped over the edge he would kiss her with his tongue further into her mouth and somehow dirtier than any of the other kisses they ever shared.

- Is your wife coming?

- Don't be crazy.

- How many guests do you expect for your private drag ball, Señor?

- A very select sixty. Will you help me with the drinks?

- That's why you asked me to come?

- No!

Flora looks around the flat, remembers places they have fallen to the floor, held each other asleep, there is still a small chip on the kitchen door frame where she threw a plate at him one time. He's finally started doing the place up though, it's not so bare as it used to be.

- Where will everyone get changed?

- My bedroom, I've put a little hanging rail in there, a mirror, it's — nicer.

A grin.

- Have you missed me, Flora?

- No.

- Thought about me.

- Not once, you?

- No, he says.

- All moved on?

- Completely.

- New girlfriend?

- Aye.

- Does she have a nice cock?
- No, she does not have a nice cock.
- That's a real shame, she smiles despite herself.
- It is.
- She's not like me, then?
- Nobody's like you Flora and fine well you know it.

Music is playing. He holds his arms out to her.

- One dance? First ...
- You need to get the place ready.
- We have a few hours. Come here, Flora — please.

To step back into his arms. Follow his feet. He always was the better dancer. His secret drag balls are the best. Select men and women across the city will be leaving their professional worlds. Dresses and suits in bags. Sparkly head bands. Strap-on belts. Nipple tassels. Stockings and fishnets and hats and eye masks and whips. All of them keening for the glitter and the release — much as she still does. Her lover pulls her waist. She is as up close to him as she can be. Looking for the first time in too long into his eyes.

- No, Flora whispers.
- No?
- Not a fucking chance.

He spins her out and back in towards him and on instinct she raises her leg and lets her head fall back.

1939

Flat 3F3

Levi (31)

the bone library

3

I work in the bone library now, my dear brother and they have done a few things differently since this war began, just the other day I got into work to find they have built a shooting range in the basement of the Veterinary College and the Vets practise down there and I suspect they are often drunk — which for armed men with little talent for shooting is deeply disconcerting — it made me feel antsy so I went down for some target practise and walked out to silence behind me. That showed them! I will not be going back down there again. It's impossible to hear any sound from the base- ment so they can shoot off as many rounds as they like, there are a great many parts of The Royal Dick Veterinary building that are like that, my good friend the postman told me there are five-hun- dred and fifty rooms — he is deeply boo coo but I like him, the postman drinks at least as much as me. He needs to. I need to as well. We all need to really. The postman went home with one of the vet's wives last year and she now has a child as ginger as he and it is not mentioned by anyone on the staff and we are all just real polite when she comes into visit with the baby and we don't say a thing. There are dissection rooms in the building and lecture theatres and a cafe but I am not

into what they cook there so much, they don't dress their sandwiches, well it's almost a tragedy, I don't think they ever seen a Po'Boy in their life, I'm missing File Gumbo (can you send me some?) I got me a serious envie for Zatarain's too — pinch the tail and suck the head! Anyway, tonight I need to make my groceries! I will cook me something good back at the apartment, I'm getting better at it and it will serve me well to keep fending for myself on distant shores. You remember that knew zy- deco band we danced to at Breux Bridge near Lafayette? Crawfish races and dancing, they don't do it like that here but in wartime everybody wants to party, they can pass a good time I'll give them that. I get interest plenty from some of the girls here but I am still a Southern gent. Well, I am mostly. This building has its own bar and distillery and there are rooms full of ancient sinks with sheep's heads decaying in them, since I've been here they've dissected a zebra, two cows, one bull, a gazelle, and a bear — there are dead snakes beautifully preserved and here is a wall of giant moths pinned to black cloth and then there are countless boxes of bones and those are my domain. I don't let no-one else in my domain. They can stay the hell out of it. I file those bones and I sort them out numerically by size and species. There is a maintenance room with a boiler bigger than all the fires of hell, I think there's some serious gris gris in that boiler, I don't want cursed so I go nowhere near it, if it ever blows up we are all going with it. In the Cube building across the way there is a room registered to Egypt and whatever they do in there, it's not legal in this country, folks go in and they disappear through a plastic sheet, then shower, I have to find out more about it. Lectures take place most days. They treat hundreds of animals every week. Mary Dick is the boss's sister but she is the one who really keeps this place running, nobody wants to disappoint her and if anyone is disgraced it's her office they have to go to and nobody wants to do that — she is quite a woman. Mary founded a scheme to treat the animals of poor people free of charge and it makes me glad to see animals go out mended. There have been two racehorses in here this month alone and each of them was worth more money than we will ever see.

It is hard to know you are all so far away.

I miss you.

Don't tell Dad or Mom but I don't use the name Wolf anymore. As if it wasn't hard enough being a young black man — what was Mom thinking? She looked in a crib and saw a child to change everything and I know she is disappointed that all she got was me. I go by the name Levi now so don't tell her but I always thought my middle name suited me far better, I'm more of a philosopher than a wolf — I see myself as more of a Ptahhotep or Plato or Aristotle, lofty I know and Mom may not have wanted me to be anything less than a lawyer but all I want to do is think — it is a transgressive act and don't we need so much more of those in times like these? The sons and daughters of hatred make me weary. Remember how we were all so bemused as to how Hitler had got into power, weren't we? At first it seemed like a joke and nobody took it seriously or thought someone like that would get in and then he is in and inch-by-inch he brings in The Dictation Act, four years of free reign to do anything he goddam wants literally — then the Sterilisation Law, hundreds of thousands of people are going to be sterilised without consent, anyone who is considered mentally ill (if you don't support the Reich that is evidence enough they say) I suppose I'm still more interested in law than I'd like to be but where is fairness? Where has it ever been? I get comments here of course I do. Where are you from, no where are you from really? I miss being able to walk down a street without a second look and it is hard for me to think about what is going on at home, I know you will write to me about it and little brother you will be more political than I ever was, I have no doubt Dad will have you hanging the signs on Main Street — I see them in my bad dreams and I still have many of those *A Man Was Lynched Here Today* I can still hear those signs creak, I'm not sure if it is why I ran away to finish my studies but I think of the NAACP with nothing but respect for what Mom has done there. I think of my niece walking home. I know she looks like she has not a care, but she is often terrified under her smile even in broad daylight and along beside her on a thousand other roads are other girls just like her, hands held loosely by their sides, heads up, clothes pressed and fitting just right and fear steps right in beside them don't it? It accom-

panies them every bit of the way. I hate that I can't check on her at the end of the day. See what words got snagged in her hair. Pick them out for her. I'd like to sow the field behind her house with poppies and listen to her tell me about how she dreams of zombies and that they are eating the brains of the precious poor and how chalk is the greatest invention, I miss her — brother, I have sent her a parcel, I forgot to put a letter in though, will you let her know it is from me? I pray for her every night as I fall asleep. The building I live in here is strange. It smells odd. It is very tall. It ain't nothing like our shotgun houses at home. You access it down a tiny street that stinks of piss and they call it a Close and I sure wish they built them wider, apparently these narrow streets running down from the High St (all called Closes) all used to be ankle deep in shit.

They used to throw their piss and shit out the windows!

And they claim to be so civilised.

It was an organised thing apparently.

The daily shit slinging.

They had hours allocated so you would not take a walk — while hundreds of pots of crap were being tipped out all the goddam windows. People must have been real happy when it rained back then to get the streets a bit cleaner, apparently the shit flowed downhill toward Nor Loch, then they'd hang their laundry out of the windows to dry — No. 10 Luckenbooth Close is as tall as a skyscraper.

They call it a tenement.

It is not too skinny and there are nine floors in our building, plus a basement and an attic, there's other buildings nearby what have a good fourteen floors and the basements are damp and they lead into catacombs, if you go into the catacombs under this city you won't be seen again, this is no exaggeration, they used to take bodies through the catacombs to sell to lecturers at the Royal College of Surgeons, I don't know how much they got per body and I don't know how many bodies they wheeled under the streets but the poster boys for murder-to-order trade in bodies were Burke

and Hare. They have a pub named after them now. As you may be able to tell the sense of humour here is dark. Even Princes St. which is so grand and pretty would have bodies getting wheeled underneath it, the good medical students needed corpses to cut up, they are mostly rich kids and if rich kids need dead bodies to dissect then that is what they will get — education is a huge industry in Edinburgh and I do not use the word industry incidentally, no I don't.

On the way to work today I saw a fishwife.

They are all over the city.

They come from Newhaven.

It's down by the sea.

They say it is a sea but it is not a sea, it's an estuary, a big river that is kind of sea like, you couldn't call it an ocean, the fishwives are tiny, they carry huge wicker baskets on their backs with a strap on their forehead to hold it in place and they wear such old style clothes it's like they are existing in a whole other time alongside us they wear long skirts, shawls, they spit, they smoke, they pray, they swear and I wouldn't fight one. A fishwife marched past me today going up a hundred stairs twice as fast as anyone else and not only was she carrying a basket (about as least as big as you) filled with fish — she was knitting! I think she was about a hundred. Fast as hell. Her hands just battering away — double stitch, pearl and whatever. I was so impressed, I called after her to have a good day Ma'am and she raised a hand and kept right on walking. When people talk here they can sound angry but often they are not and I have gotten used to it. Every morning I hear water being poured upstairs in a sink, a little while later the stair door closes below, everything arrives and departs at No. 10 Luckenbooth via the stairwell — news and gossip, fear, post, furniture arrives, or is taken out, lots of bags of coal. The stairwell steps are made of stone and they are worn with footsteps from decades of wear, so many people lived their lives here, children, old people, friends, lovers, unwanted relatives, a dog on a string, a doctor, an undertaker. How many bodies have been carried out over all that time? As the building gets higher the apartments get smaller. The residents

less wealthy, I should be on the top floor really, I'm only staying on the third floor because my employer leased it to me whilst his nephew is away but further up the building they have four apartments on each landing and if you took off the entire front wall of No. 10 Luckenbooth Close you'd see the basement, stair, floor, room, light, ceilings and repeat for nine floors. None of us would be surprised by the other's habits. The man on the fifth floor (as he is doing right now) plays his piano on a Sunday, his wife's parrot is allowed to fly around their apartment, there would be different wallpapers, at least 23 beds, a few tin baths, fireplaces, rugs of assorted design — there is a prayer group meets on the sixth floor on a Wednesday, a card game is run from the landlord's fancy apartment on the first floor and he is a pale man the colour of bread — except for his nose which is red as Claret. I walked home last week and found him carving a pictograph at the front door, it is a tiny goat girl, he was drunk and it's his building! I guess he can scrape goat girls into stone if he so feels like it, he has a stonemason doing work on this building just now and I chatted to him just the other day — his name is Jim Kane, he tells me he plays records in a local bar and I should go in so me and the post- man will go along for a dance and a drink there sometime soon — as I say I want to think but some- times I just want to talk to a good looking woman and sink rum and coke and wake up with a feel- ing of overwhelming dread.

On each floor of No. 10 Luckenbooth there are patterns of behaviour.

A kettle whistle goes on a stove on the fourth floor each day at 7am, 11am, 1pm and then again at 3pm. Mince and tatties are cooked on a Thursday, it makes the building stink. Tatties are potatoes. Aye, means yes. Noh, means no. I dinnae ken, means — I'm so terribly sorry I just don't know what you are talking about at all. I had no idea they didn't speak English here! Unless they are posh, posh people speak English with an Edinburgh burr and the accent is softer in Edinburgh city centre than it is out of town. I went out of town last week and I didn't understand a single thing said to me by anybody the entire time, I just kept nodding and hoped I hadn't gotten myself married off to some man's daughter or into illegal gains of any kind. It is fish on Fridays. I try to stay out

that day. I tried haggis. They store it in the stomach of a sheep. I have no idea what's in it but it's spicy. Everything smells of smoke in this city. Even my pants. Since the winter kicked in I find the woodsmoke smell comforting, I love building fires, I love wearing scarves, I love closing the door on night time and putting a lamp on and sitting down in a warm glow to write to you, or to think, or read. These buildings tell their stories — in sound — like a well-oiled clock. Noises are passed from floor-to-floor like notes passed in school to inform tenants of each others indiscretions, inabilities or, occasional talents.

The building plays us like an orchestra.

There is something deeply wrong with her tuning.

I have not figured out why yet.

I still like the big bands and Minnie the Moocher! I miss Louisiana. I miss our childhood home. I miss the heat. Fireflies in mason jars. I miss wooden porches. I even miss the threat of an alligator. It's strange the things we don't notice at home or don't care for and how they can change so much in our minds when we leave so we see home is not at all what we thought it was when we took it for granted, I miss a church that welcomes me, I miss knowing where everything is, so I can walk down any street — without a second look, I miss muskrat and civet cats, I miss woodcocks, mottled ducks, I miss the Delta, I miss Jambalaya made with anything, but especially boar, I miss hearing songs in Creole, I miss the coal skin and the slender glass lizard, I miss you. I smile when I remember us learning how to handle a snapping turtle and how to kill and cook them too, these things have changed in my memory now I am far away. I do not miss toads, or frogs. I do not miss red fire ants. I do not miss the yearning to be elsewhere — that I always feel when I was home and I just know if I come back again now I will feel like that again no matter how nostalgic I am from a distance.

This city often has the most beautiful skies.

Pale blue or pink and when it cloudless it is breathtaking.

Sometimes the sky races in such a way it seems there are two skies from two different worlds entirely — rushing at each other in opposite directions, layers of cloud and dark moodiness — a hint of stars.

It is dizzying!

One day I will look back fondly on this ancient building, No.10 Luckenbooth Close stares down the city day-after-day like a slutty girl with a God complex, I know you thought I would find myself such a thing, no such luck yet. I would come home but I am not ready yet. It is difficult to travel because of the war and whilst I complain about it, I like it here really. They say that makes me dour, it's Scottish for miserable as hell, they have a single word in Gaelic that means 'my eternal doom is upon me' I can't remember it right now. They are an old nation. They have a great wit here. They need it just to survive the damn weather. When it rains it comes down in sheets. Everything turns grey. Sometimes there is a yellow light through the grey like aliens are inspecting the cobbled streets and I think about aliens a lot lately, I can see how they could be real and if they came down I would go with them gladly.

If it ever happens I advise you do the same too.

One of the women on reception at the Dick Vet talks to me a lot.

She is a member of a coven.

I like her.

She says all across the covens are gathering to spell cast against Hitler, pagans and druids and witches are doing all they can. What is happening in the world right now destroys me, all the news seems bad, we are on the eve of destruction. Chamberlain is intent on making sure the Germans are stopped at all costs! Even the Canadians have gone to war against them! They never go to war against anybody! Why didn't the world learn from the last world war? It is going to cost the lives of so many good people. The Spanish Civil war was bad enough. How long until we learn?

How long did it take to get the KKK down from four million members to what, 30K? Then the far right just lurch up. Why? Claim some new justification for their hatred. Why? I try not to be political. I do try! I look at this world with total horror every morning within five minutes of being awake. I try to do other stuff at least half of the time. I need to so I can just cope with being alive. I like to read the DC comics you sent and I'm jealous you went all the way to the first World Science Fiction convention in New York, I will write to you until I have no thoughts left in me. It could take a while. I am studying bones all the time and maybe all any of us need to do is become an expert in just one thing? Also, I found out No.10 Luckenbooth Close is called that because of an old word Lucken - Buith, it's what they called the first locked booths for trading, they used to drag carts to sell silver and other things but they'd have to cart them back and forth across the city and I tell you brother the hills in this city are no joke, anyway, eventually they asked the council if they could lock their booths and that's how the word came about. Also — a Luckenbooth is a piece of jewellery, worn either as a brooch or a ring that can be given to a fiancée — it is pretty — a silver heart, with two hands holding it.

Yours, until soon.

Levi.

4

Firelight dances around Mr Udnam's library. A ragtime 78 spins on the gramophone. I am focused on both of them. Her eyelashes are tinted. He has freckles on his arms. His thing is huge. I don't want to look at it. Shadows chase each other around the room like an audience surrounding a deadly play. They lunge — then pull back. The fiancée's tongue flicks. He moves toward me as she holds me by the arms. Somehow it feels like the most natural thing.

- I think you might be happier living somewhere else in town, Jessie.

- When?

- After. You could visit the child a few times each year.

There is no word for yes, or no, in my mother's tongue. I have nothing and no-one. She slips her dress off. Her waist has two small indents above her arse. He touches himself. She moves his hand away to do it for him. He wants me to watch. It does something for him.

- You like to read, Jessie?

- Aye.

- We should give you books when you're in containment.

She pulls down my dress until I step out of it — my skin bathed in the glow of firelight. My nipples are erect and a pale pink colour and I can see blue streaks of veins on my arms.

- Touch her there, he instructs.

- Like that?

There is only this minute. It is all there is. Yesterday won't bother me here. He is inside me quickly, and she turns to kiss him, then me. His eyes have been taken out and replaced with hard gold coins. There is a perversity to the fiancée's smile. It makes me want to please her. I close my eyes, see a stile, tree, fence. Startling flowers. Tiny and yellow. Hard little breaths — through my mouth. We are so far out — in this warm glow. I could smoke that pipe forever! He arches up. Looks like he is dying. The nubs on my temple burn so hot — I want to take my hair down and trace my horns with her fingertips, I am losing time — all regret is gone.

What feeling is this!

Falling.

Chattering elves.

Shapes.

Bright squares, coloured light — the room re-solidifies around me.

There are only embers in the fire place.

- Are you awake, Jessie?

She is whispering to me. I don't know when I passed out. Elise looks tired and wanton. They are either side of me. He snores like a rhino. I have the blanket up around my shoulders. I place my hand on my stomach.

It has grown hard already whilst I slept.

- It worked!

- Let's hope so, she says.

- Look!

Elise stares at my stomach.

- Is your kind touched Jessie?

Worse than touched.

I daren't wonder how much my father told them when he traded my body for a half-human heir? One he knew would be raised in wealth with the best education money could buy. His grandchild will be raised with all the privilege possible. I know why my father would want his grandchild to have that level of power. So it could go out and destroy this world — he has always envied its beauty. He didn't tell them my mother grew me in three days. My brother in three days. He didn't tell them most islanders refused to look us in the eye for all of our lives. The devil's blood does not need nine months. That's for humans and they are better than we. I hoped I was more my mother but the minute he died these horns grew out like they'd been waiting for him to leave so I could take his place. She traces my cheek. As if to settle a child. Rests her head on my stomach — her hair falls across us.

- I could live in this library.

She giggles.

- You are a curious creature, Jessie. He —

Elise points and pulls hard on her pipe, nods at him.

- He insisted I read everything. So when we travel he can talk without being bored.

- You still bore me, he says waking a bit, eyes still closed.

- So far, I like Jack London.

- You liked Gertrude Stein.

- That's only because she was so nice to us in Paris, and she has all those painters in her salon. I don't understand what she writes but she introduced me to a man they call Picasso. They say he is going to invent some kind of new painting, something to change everything.

- Picasso won't do a fucking thing! He's in Spain with a lover, not painting!

Mr Udnam sits up and takes the pipe.

- I like Baum — what's it called, that book? Elise clicks her fingers.

- The Wonderful Wizard of Oz! It's shit.

- No! It's a great story! I don't rate all the things you like! Sudermann, Apollinaire, Henry James. All tedious as fuck if you ask me, darling. Chekhov, I suppose, had a few decent stories. I don't see what the fucking fuss is about personally.

She says it to me, not him.

- What have you read, Jessie? He looks at me.

- The bible, three times in full and a chapter every Sunday.

I stand before them naked and curtsy.

Mirth dissipates.

They both gaze at my stomach.

It has grown four inches since I slept. Noticeably round. A fine dark line trails down from my belly button. I am not sure how they are going to take this but I am pretty sure the child will be here by Wednesday morning.

- Did you hear the Earl of Bute is going to fly a plane? He designed it himself.

Elise tries to distract him.

- We're not meant to fly. Think of Icarus. Jessie ... what's happening?

My stomach rises half an inch.

- How long? Mr Udnam roars.

He pours a brandy and looks at me with red-rimmed eyes.

- You're a witch?

- No.

I am close to tears. It is so unlike me.

His fiancée steps away from him and holds her hand out to me. His eyes blacken.

- We will sleep in the Lady's room.

He nods.

I am led down the hallway like a feeble child.

Inside me forms a heart. Legs. Ribs. Feet, nails, skin, a brain.

Elise's hand is cool.

- Come on, into bed, that's it, rest on the pillow. I've wanted a baby for so long, we won't let him ruin it, okay?

Nod.

She takes a seat in front of three mirrors on her dressing table and opens a pot of cream.

- It's almond oil and benzoin, I use spermaceti and lanolin to make my skin clearer too but you don't need that, do you?

My belly button pops out.

- What did your father die from, Jessie?

- The consequences of evil.

She glances toward the Consulting room. There are loud crashes. She takes a small key and locks the door as if she has done so many times before.

- He'll pass out soon!

Elise opens dry shampoo and combs her hair.

- I wash my hair once every three weeks, it's why it is so shiny!

The dimple in her cheek disarms me. She lays down on the bed beside me. We sleep and wake. She sends the maid out for food and has her deliver it to our door on a tray and then she is

dismissed. We hear Mr Udnam go out and Elise keeps him away from me and I watch my stomach grow bigger and bigger. Trapped now. Can't take it back. Life finds its way. On the third morning she wakes me with coffee and places her hand on the bump. A small elbow or a foot slides on the underside of my skin.

- Three days ago Elise, I took a bottle of tinct iodine — washed it out and stoppered my secrets.

- Aye?

- Aye. I placed it in the sea. I like to think my secrets, in a bottle, right now they will be passing under migrating whales. I hope they turn under the moon. Or the shadow of hammer head sharks twist below it. I hope an albatross crosses it with her huge wing-spanned shadow. I hope barnacles adorn its bottle neck. I hope seahorses swim below it in shoals. I hope they are giant sea horses with ornate trunks! I hope someone finds the bottle. Sees that it is pretty. Takes out my letter. Puts flowers in it and drinks tea from a china cup and saves my secrets in a box for someone else to read in a hundred years.

- Did you have a funeral, for you father?

- Aye. There is an order to things on the island though. As soon as someone dies you snap open the window to let the spirit out, then close it again so it doesn't come back in. Then you throw a blanket on the mirror so they can't stay and preen themselves. Spirits are vain creatures. You tip over all the kitchen chairs so the spirit cannot sit and refuse to leave like a child in a huff!

- What else?

She is rapt now.

- You stop the clock at the time of death.

- Why?

- The dead's time is done, time won't move on for them again.

- Harsh!

- Press white wooden teardrops into the front door, so the funeral crier will be notified by a passer by. He calls out. Seven women leave their homes. The women only came to host his waken out of goodness. The men only took him on their shoulders to make sure he was gone.

My stomach strains and a clear foot outline passes under my skin.

- Women prepare the body?

- Aye. Twin fates. Life and death. Women's work. We bring life into the world and we take it back out again. One woman brings the dead rags, we wind them around the body after cleansing — every area, knotted rag up his arse, so he doesn't leak! If the dead person is liked, they get sung over tae the other side.

- Did they sing for your father?

- No, he's lucky they weren't swearing at him!

There is a thud from the Consulting Room.

- He's back, but passed out!

I want to take down my carefully wound pompadour. Show my horns. I have two heart beats inside me. Four eyes to see. One set for this realm and the other for the underworld.

- Then you bury them? She asks.

- No, then we perform Kistan. We lift the body — as one — into the casket. During the waken we take turns to watch over it so the devil can't take their soul. In my father's case I only carried that part out for the facade of tradition.

- You think the devil didn't want his soul?

I smile at her, bitterly.

- Three days later the women do first lift. Take the casket on our shoulders and carry the body out feet first so the soul can't come back in. Then the men take him. They're drunk by then. They've been drinking fir three days. Sometimes they get in a fight on the way to the kirk. Some-

times they lose the body. Can't remember where they left it. They dropped my Dad over a clifftop and left him looking out across the North Sea. I'm pretty sure they were just trying to make sure he was dead.

- Your stomach is hard as rock, Jessie. The skin has stretched, do you think it's coming?

- Soon.

She takes a long drink staring at me.

- What are you thinking about?

- The taste of flesh in my mouth.

- What else?

- How my horns grew the minute my father died.

- What else?

- There was still soot in the grate.

- And?

- I was glad he was dead.

- How did you know the men dropped him down the cliff?

- I went to find him.

- Why?

- So I'd know he wouldn't cause chaos anymore.

- That's what he did?

- Aye.

A hard kick to my stomach and I bend over in pain and sweat pours off me. The contractions are like having my insides tore apart by a thousand rats at once. I don't know how anyone lives through this.

- Help me stand!

Elise pulls me to my feet and water sloshes onto the floor.

- Let me get towels!

- I can taste blood.

- We'll get through this!

- What if the baby has no face, Elise?

- Stop it.

- What if he's no head because of me?

- Why would the baby have no head because of you?

- I've done bad things!

- It's okay, the baby will have a wonderful head and it will have a face, and a head to put the face on and a neck below that. It will have everything! Head, face, neck, the whole fucking kit-and-caboodle. Dinnae panic, Jessie! The baby will have all of the things. Are you listening to me? It'll have aw the fingers and all the other stuff too, toes, teeth, everything — I mean the teeth will come later.

- What if it has horns?

- We'll hide them under a bonnet!

- I'll nurse him! You've not had time to get a nursemaid, let me nurse him?

- It's a girl, Jessie.

- How do you know?

Elise looks back at me and I realise the pretty witch in this apartment is not in any way me.

There's an animal roaring.

A beast.

Cloven hoofs pace underneath the city as I grab onto a metal bed frame.

- Bear down, Jessie. Push!

- What if I want tae keep the bairn?

- Part your legs further, Jessie, come on, stay upright, it'll make it easier, I can see — a crown, it's coming!

She has not mentioned horns. That's good, she is not coming out horns first. I don't want my little girl to come out horns first!

I could weep.

Crown!

It's a crown she can see.

Something is stuck and my body judders.

Elise's arm is inside me then — turning the baby — I am screaming with pain — begging for death — her delicate hands do not falter, they belong to a woman made of steel. I have never been so grateful for another woman's presence in my entire life.

The baby whooshes out.

There is not a single solitary sound.

- Smack her feet!

- What?

- Elise, smack her feet — she's purple, smack her hard!

She has wrinkles.

A nose.

A perfect cupid's bow.

Squashed face, wrinkled fat, tiny fists unfurl and Elise smacks her feet and I cannot breathe nor hear a single thing until the baby finally wails.

We are both crying!

- I am going to cut the cord, Jessie, is it okay, I don't even know what I am doing, do you just cut it?

- Aye! Are the scissors clean?

- Aye.

Elise turns away from me with my baby in her arms.

Does she see something?

There is blood on my thighs and my hands. I glimpse in the mirror and it is on my face — she wraps the baby in a towel.

- She is so perfect!

Elise does not want to let her go. We eye each other. Mr Udnam appears in the door. He is as high as all the kites.

- It's a girl?

- Our daughter!

The two of them inspect her and I bite down hard on my lip.

- The renovators will be in soon, they are stripping out the flats above us Jessie. I own the building you do know? We can put you in another flat once they are ready. All the walls are open just now. I need to find a way to tell people that we have our baby!

Eyelashes long and dark as her grandfather.

- I want my child.

My arms ache, my breasts. The baby turns her head looking for me, she can smell my milk across the room, there is only one person who she wants. If they don't give her to me I will kill them both.

- Give her to me, now.

- It won't be appropriate for you to hold her outside of feeding time though, Jessie.

- Oh, no?

She does not belong to him yet.

I have not taken a fee.

I take her in my arms — she smells clean — skin like velvet. She suckles like she's done it

all of her many lives. This is not the first time we have met, her and me. I settle down into the little parlour chair with wings. Elise takes a tiny hat out the drawer for the baby, booties. She has been waiting for this moment for years. It hurts her to leave the feeding to me. Run my hand over my daughters fuzzy dark hair. It looks like a gentle caress but if she has what I have we will have to go as soon as she's done feeding.

I would have to steal my own child or they would kill her and me.

- How can it happen in just a few days like that? He asks.

- It's a blessing! Elise replies.

- Is the infant cursed?

- No!

As they argue in the hallway I coo to my baby. I won't live in another part of town — visit once a year! My mother didn't ever lay with my Father other than to have us. She said it was worth it for that. He went with women on all of the islands. Fought their husbands. Burnt down barns. My mother had no fear of him in the end. After he beat her she went to lay with the Priest. The Priest loved my mother (witch or not). He was the only man my father ever feared. She came home and taught my brother and me what she learnt in his library. I can't think of my brother even now without a hot spear of loss. He would have adored her so much. A niece to love. To wiggle his ears at. My mother soaked up every thing she could about maths and geography, history, philosophy, religion, English, art, chemistry, physics. Her most passionate subject was — women who do extraordinary things. She must have known. A granddaughter was coming. My mother read to us at night. Tales of Ching Shih, the Chinese female pirate who commanded a fleet with 80'000 outlaws, Boadicea and Joan of Arc, the Virgin Mary, and Eleanor of Aquitaine, Jane Austen, Ada Lovelace, Angela Coutts, Mary Wollstonecraft, Josephine Butler, Mary Shelley, Mary Seacole, Cleopatra, Elizabeth Fry, Mary Anning, Catherine of Siena, Hypatia, Sacagawea, Nely Bly, Catherine de' Medici, Isabella Bird, Aphra Behn, Artemisa Gentileschi, the Pankhursts, Sarah Breedlove, Prophet

Deborah, Mary Somerville, George Eliot, Murasaki Shikibu, Clara Schumann, Beulah Louise Henry, Aisha, Yeshe Tsogyal, Sophie Blanchard, Emilie du Châtelet, the women on this street, on roads at night — all of those women were beloved to my mother.

I can see her looking out of the croft.

Watching those skies — storms coming in low and high at the same time.

My father hammering coffins together.

Sheep up on the hills.

Rock grey and hard and rubble and all the earth a hard unforgiving seedless place.

He is still in that crevice.

Staring out all the way across the North Atlantic swells to me.

My coffin bobs on the docks.

I've got blood on my mother's only good dress.

Elise will have to loan something to me.

My hands pause caressing the babies head.

Two nubs!

So small — only I know they are there.

I will call her Hope — she is so warm and perfect.

She lays heavy and happy on my chest, sleeping, dreamless and fed.

This will be the most blissful sleep of her life.

Those tiny fists make me hold my breath.

In Elise's three way mirror — I see them both watching me at the door. My own horns grow long as my child suckles. Sharp and curved they bend up toward the light and I feel them heavy and strong on my head. I bend to kiss my daughter and they glint in the light. It may be some time before Mr Udnam tries to take her from me.

1928

Flat 2F2

Flora (35)

After — everyone arrives.

5

She should not be sitting at a party thinking of a dead polar bear. It could make her appear pensive. It will be bad for her cheekbones. Each knock at the door makes her jump. It's not the police! It's not a raid! They are not being dragged to the cells in their finery. If they were they'd be the most glamorous prison population in the country! It's a risk. They all know it. They all come anyway. Such a beautiful thing! The courage to turn up. Everyone in here has it. Flora grabs a handful of peanuts. She has to eat. Alcohol meets truth. Not something to peddle before midnight. Her ex-lover is chatting to another woman. Why did he even want her here? Love is a cage. If there ever was a key, he swallowed it. Love as a trap. Love as a fox fur. Love as a riddle. Love as a contract killer. Love as a shadow. Love as benzocaine. Love as novocaine. Love as cocaine. Love as a light bulb flashing on-and-then off. Love as a hummingbird. Love as a leather glove. Love as a recurrent dream. There is nothing that can be done about it. Feelings are so awful. Just one cocktail before she lays on the floor and weeps for eternity. She eats three pickles. That has to constitute a meal somewhere. She feels a tiny bit more able to keep drinking now without ripping off her clothes and screaming until the building falls down. No. 10 Luckenbooth Close has a melancholy that fits her psyche usually. None of it is apparent tonight. It shimmers with dancers and lovers and thinkers and

friends. She can't move for bumping into a writer, or actress, or lawyer. Flora far prefers her local with her pal Jock. His most consistent earnings are from putting a six-inch nail up his nose for a pint. Jock hasnae paid for a drink since 1903. Her lover glances at her across the room. Despite the injuries accrued it appears she still has a heart and it is beating.

- Hi, mind if I join you?

- No, hello, I'm Flora, you don't need to introduce yourself — you were just at the Theatre Royal, in Glasgow?

- Aye!

- I've seen you so many times, your acting is amazing.

- Thank you, is that Nan?

His eyes flit around the room, he fluffs up his purple wig.

- I think so, I've never met her.

- Her poetry makes me die every time I read it.

- What's the new director like at Theatre Royal? She asks him.

- Cruickshank, he is efficient! He's partner in his Dad's builders firm, they built King's Theatre.

He sips champagne.

- Were you in the Cameo last week, Flora?

- Wolf of Wall Street?

- Aye!

- I knew I'd seen you somewhere, he says.

- Are you still ...

- In touch with Clara Bow?

He raises his fingers to his lips. Someone calls his name. Flora reclines on a chaise. Behind her there are four women in suits, no bras, breasts on show when they lean forward. The glimpse of

a nipple. Laughter. White teeth. Each is smoking. Perfect real-looking little moustaches on. They sit with their legs spread wide. The way men do and women rarely dare. Mr Torrance has admirers gathering. A small group of men flutter around him. They all wear leather. Eyes sparkle. People arrive in two's, threes. Some of them go into the bedroom to get changed. There is a long trail of glitter down the hallway. Stockings are pulled on. Lipstick is blotted. High heels stood up in. Legs elongate. Cheekbones materialise. Eyes pop. Tits rise. Over in the corner a circus vixen — in a diamond encrusted bikini — flirts with a girl in a half-moon hat. Rubies dangle either side of her ears. Three jewelled strands sparkle between her eyes, heavily lined in kohl. There's a girl in a pumpkin mask and orange striped stockings. She has a promising bulge. Could do with bumping up against her later. Cleopatra starts a hand jive. Lips red. Shiny black hair. Her lover is at the door, he says hello as each person comes in.

Flora watches him the way she used to.

The social butterfly.

A maestro.

She wants to go up and touch him. Kiss his cheek. That is not allowed, no, no, no!

Flora goes to the bathroom.

Takes a small bump of cocaine to help her stay awake.

Another to sparkle.

One for luck.

A fourth for our Sainted Mary, mother of God.

Two touches for the Father, one for the Son, another for the Holy Ghost.

There's no reason to be cheap, is there?

She does one for Snow White and another for each of the Seven Dwarves.

It takes a long, long while of gripping onto the bathroom sink before she stops feeling like her heart is going to explode across the walls.

- Done too much! Done too much!

She whispers it to herself.

His bathroom is like something out of a magazine, that's what to think about. Just keep counting the things around her until she has an actual heart attack, or — goes out to dance until dawn. White floor tiles in small hexagonal shapes. Black ones line the edges. Sink with turn on H + C taps and a tiny faucet in the middle. Two silver poles hold up the basin. Plant on the side. There is an art deco lamp on wooden towel drawers. Flora twists her signature curl around her finger repeatedly. Lays it on her cheek. Just perfect! Turns to the bathroom cabinet. He has no idea. All this luxury! Her area is still going through the Leith Improvement scheme even now! It's endless in Leith. Rebuilding! Old businesses closing down! Men from the council walk around with clip-boards being total fannies. They won't stop. Not until all the Leithers are out ay Leith. They'll keep hiking up rents until that's what happens one day and it will be this city's total fucking shame when it does. Flora rearranges bottles. There is a massive bottle of One Night cough syrup. That looks useful. Ingredients include: Alcohol (less than 1%) Cannabis Indica, F.E. Chloroform, Morphia Sulph. Half a teaspoon three times daily. There is Farben Fabriken's — Heroin. What a very pretty little bottle! He's brought that back from New York. How many coughs has he had lately? Cocaine tooth drops. He has never before complained of toothache! Her lover once got a bottle of vintage Vin Mariani. 11 per cent alcohol and 6.5 mg of cocaine in every ounce. Leo XIII gave it a gold medal. Robert Louise Stevenson wrote Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde during a six-day binge. If it was good enough for Jules Verne and Conan Doyle and Queen Victoria and The Shah of Persia! Before the war her lover's mother, no less, used to get a kit in Harrods called *A Welcome Present for Friends at the Front*. It had everything! Cocaine, morphine, syringes, needles. Of course it all has touch of the bad reputation about it now, which makes it all the more fun. There is a tin of Johnson's baby Talc. Perfume by Yardley and hair clips. Close the cabinet door. Flush the toilet three times — just for the novelty of it. There's a cough and a scrabble and a snigger. Flora pulls back the shower

- Did ye do too much, hen?

- Bite me.

The taller man pushes the other one down onto his knees and takes his cock out.

He pulls Flora over and kisses her deeply.

The man kneeling in the bath runs his hand up her leg and caresses her arse and she parts her leg just a touch.

She shouldn't!

Although ... Greig will have had countless women and men in the last six-months.

It's wrong ...

Which is why it feels so good.

On the way back down the hallway she fixes her dress.

Flora looks into his empty bedroom. There are so many pairs of men's shoes. All lined up. Suits neatly hung. It looks like a fancy shop changing room, not someone's home. The vanity is covered in debris. All his furniture is stained green. Her hips move. It's jazz riffs. Need to dance! Glasses clink! Move down the hallway back into the lounge. She is more than buzzing. The last seven bumps definitely were not necessary. It's a fine line between sparkle and psychosis. She's tipping.

- Can ye lock the front door, doll?

- Aye, why?

- I just had to pass some neighbours in that stair, I got dressed before I came — it was, just a time thing, I'm sorry!

Flora double locks the front door. The doppelgänger of Josephine Baker but far taller and even more lithe takes off her coat and is absorbed by a group of women hugging her. The gramophone cranks up louder. A girl is doing a striptease on the kitchen table. She swivels her hips. Turns

to show a real pony tail high up on her arse. A man in a top hat puts a bit in her mouth. An armchair is writhing with arms and legs — a sexual octopus of subversion. Flora can hear her lover arguing with somebody.

- Mc Diarmid is a genius!

- He's not.

- Yer away wi the fairies, Paul — he is the best writer in the country!

- Nobody wants tae read writing in Scottish, Greig! Get a fucking grip ay yersel!

- Whit about Burns then?

- Tepid.

- Mc Diarmid is ahead of his time, I quote him like this: 'the Scots vernacular is a vast storehouse of just the very peculiar and subtle effects which modern European literature in general is assiduously seeking ... it is an inchoate Marcel Proust, a Dostoevskian debris of ideas — an inexhaustible quarry of subtle and significant sound.' Stick that in yer pipe uhn double drag it, ay ya fucking prick! Come on! Then he writes Sangschaw! Fucking ay! Don't tell me he doesnae ken exactly what he is talking about.

- Are you quoting me?

- The man himself, Chris, I didnae see you there!

Her lover's voice has so much tinkle when he sees the writer that the chandelier grows visibly depressed. The writer moves right on of course. Instantly bored. Girls in flapper dresses mix Tom Collinses, bras stuffed to the tip. Greig is behind her then, she feels his breath on her neck before he touches her waist lightly.

- Flora.

- Hello.

- Are you enjoying yourself?

- No. I should have known all the writers would be here. The literati only ever come here to

feel edgy you know that!

- Always so harsh, Flora. They come to have fun.

- No, they don't. They come to forget that they are cardigan wearers. They think that we are just queers and cocksuckers whilst they are geniuses and thinkers and never the twain shall fuck.

The twain don't fuck. We don't, do we? Greig? Why are you looking at me like that?

- What about all the queer ones?

- Not those ones, they are good, they are ours but you are all over Chris or Hugh or fucking whatever he wants to call himself lately, and he has no time for you whatsoever!

- Are you jealous?

- No! I could handle any of them being here if they sucked dick half as good as I do — or in fact at all — but they don't. This isn't a zoo. I am not fucking interested in anyone else's voyeuristic trip.

- You are jealous!

- Dinnae flatter yerself, Greig.

- You think of me, don't you Flora, when you ...

- No.

- Liar. Every single time I still see your face ...

- Every time you cum you see a different face below you, Greig, that was always the least of our problems as well.

- I'm sure you are not doing sexual sobriety, Flora.

- Of course not, why should I?

- My beautiful girl.

- I am not yours, Greig Heatherly and don't you forget it.

- You've always been mine.

He leans back, crosses his legs at the ankles.

- Oh fuck off, and the Scottish Literary Renaissance can suck my balls. You are all over them like an upright citizen! Middle class people drive me crazy. You're all so fucking two-faced.

It's fake. It fucking is!

- Come on Flora, you know where this kind of fury leads us ...

- I'm not going to bed with you.

Realising the whole time they have been talking, they have moved further in toward each other.

Their love is a carousel.

Endless circles.

It has been this way now since forever. Who can change it? Unlike him she can do solitude though. Always could. Flora was brought up in a small flat with many people. She knows about the anonymity of a beating heart. He has never been alone properly in his entire bloody life and he is totally incapable of doing so.

- What were you?

- Flora, don't do this again.

- When I had to tell my Officer that I had a cunt as well as a dick where were you?

- Baby, please.

- They examined me with ten men in the room!

- I know.

- They put me in the nuthouse because my body scared them!

- I hate them for what they did to you!

- He has tears in his eyes.

- Where were you?

- Here.

- That's right. When I needed you, you weren't there.

- What do you want from me, Flora?

His eyes blazing then.

So easy to ignite that, just ask anything he can't answer. All around them the party swells and pulses. A girl grinds down on another woman's lap. The men in leather trail off into the bathroom. Someone runs the shower. He bends across the table. Kisses her. Cups her face in his hands and kisses her cheeks and her nose and her forehead and her mouth. He traces her lips with his finger. Sticks one in her mouth until she bites back. He places one hand around her throat with just the exact right pressure. She kisses him. Everything is spinning — the flat, the people dancing and touching each other, the bar — the entire Luckenbooth rotates its way through night like a mirror ball with them all — safely contained — for a short time, in the glitter.

- I thought you were never going to sleep with me again, he whispers.

- I'm not.

- Really?

- I hate you.

- But you miss me.

Him pulling her in, holding her — their hearts beating right next to each other again, want like this, doesn't go away — no matter how much she might want it to, it won't.

- Fuck me.

She whispers back into his ear quiet as a spell and just as true.

- Gladly.

There is a hard bang at the front door. The record is slid off. There is a pfft-pfft-pfft pfft-pfft sound as the record table rotates with nothing on it.

- Oh, fucking hell! Sssh, everyone! Be quiet, shut the fuck up, for a minute, please. Her lover holds his hands up for everyone to be silent.

In the door he has drilled a tiny hole.

So clever.

He walks over barefoot and elegant and feline and he looks quickly to see if it is the police on the other side.

- It's MISTER UDNAM! Open the door now Greig or I'll have the police here in minutes!

- Let me, Flora says.

She pulls her dress down at the cleavage, leaves her stockings on show — she opens the door.

- Flora, why are you here, what is going on?

Keeps her body in the crack.

Everyone is stood up against the wall behind her but he can't see them.

- I am so happy to see you Mr Udnam! My Ma speaks so highly of you — she said your charity helped us out so much, do you remember visiting North Fort Street? You came after those fires. Spent lots of money. The community was so grateful. My Ma said a man like yourself changes the world only for the better, Mr Udnam. I need your help to be honest.

- You all know who I am!

Mr Udnam strains to call it out over her shoulder as the entire party holds their breath.

- I am an upstanding member of the community and a CHRISTIAN!

- I can see that, Mr Udnam, truly!

- I won't have sin in my building!

- No.

- I do remember your Ma. What's a nice girl like you even doing here, Flora?

- I know, it's just, I have had such a terrible time, trying to — better myself and I try to pray, properly, across the road, at St. Giles but I just can't quite get the words right. Would you, help me open my heart to Jesus?

- Yes ...

He seems uncertain.

Flora grabs the first fur lined coat she can find.

- You want to go now?

- I fear, Mr Udnam, that the absolution of ma spirit — depends on it.

Everyone in the room is covering their mouth trying not to laugh. Arts types are so useless.

How many of them have had to act because their actual life depended on it? Fucking tossers that's what they are. Every last one. Flora closes the door firmly. Steps out into the cold stair. Mr Udnam stares into her then. His eyes are rheumy. She feels colder by the minute. He turns and walks downstairs slowly. Flora follows him in silence.

1939

Flat 3F3

Levi (32)

the four horsemen of the apocalypse

6

Well, dear brother — if my workplace hasn't gotten stranger! They load animals in the back courtyard and I work to the sound of chickens, dogs barking, cats, elephants, zebras, strange birds, even the odd bear going down the hallway. There is blossom on the Meadows in pink and it flutters across the paths — it's so pretty, students go there to sit in the summer and I am told it is a graveyard for plague victims. Remember I told you I found a room in our building registered to Egypt? I heard the staff go in via a big blue plastic sheet, after that they can't be seen. They remove their clothes in a sealed room, shower, then get into boiler suits, then go through more sealed spaces — to get into a laboratory. I have looked into it and when they are in that room they are definitely not working under UK law! They are definitely working under Egyptian law. What is more acceptable under Egyptian law? I am no expert in that legal area specifically but what kind of work also requires people to remain in a sealed unit and to have a full shower on arrival and then again when they leave?

It is cloning.

I think they are trying to clone the first animal.

In the cafe the workers from the Egypt room have their own table and they don't talk to any of the rest of us, if they find a way to clone animals, then it will be humans, it sounds science fiction as hell but it is going to happen. What next? No humans needed? Just machines running the whole world? Machine horses. Machine penguins. Mechanical animals performing sacred rituals? Cloned humans working every job in the world and telling the great un-cloned that we were merely the makers of bad history and now we are to be replaced? They are playing God in that room in Cube building and it is a dangerous game. Why would you clone a human when you can't even look after the humans who already exist? I have been reading about futurists and the lost generation, apparently futurists attended your first world science convention this year in New York and they thought they were better than everyone — if I had met them brother I would have shook each one by the hand and informed them that no science fiction fan is better than me — I can outthink all of them, did you see them there? I am ignoring what is going on in Cube and the rest of the world this week and having nothing to do with the dark soul of this city — I am getting on with my work. I am still studying my bones all the time, did you know they had oracle bones in China? They would engrave questions of the day on the bones and then when they split it was thought the spirit world was divining answers, the oracle bones were mostly made from oxen scapula or turtle plastron, they called their form of divination pyromancy, scapulimancy was the term they used if it was an oxen scapula and plastro- mancy if it was a turtle, they would carve in oracle bone script, asking deities to bring answers then they'd heat them up until they cracked and the diviner would read answers from the cracks, they mostly used oxen or turtle but human bones were found too. I think about human bones in relation to animal bones. Did you know if your finger bones got longer and longer you'd have a similar bone structure to a bat? If you took out human leg and arm bones — we would have the same skeletal structure as a snake. I spell out words with bones, I drum with them, I draped jew-

ellery around a beaver skull, I am filing the skulls I have found most fascinating, they include:

Crow.

Horse.

Bugle bird (I don't know what it was doing here).

Red fox.

Bobcat.

Bali starling.

Black stork:

Grey Legged Douroucoulouli.

Lowland Nyala.

Hamerkop.

Scottish wildcat:

Waldrapp Ibis.

Red squirrel.

Deer.

Seal.

Swan.

If only we had a unicorn, its Scotland's national animal which makes me like them more. I want to see a wolf skeleton. In my bone library I have to keep lots of collections in sturdy brown boxes, I found out that Owls regurgitate entire animal skeletons. It's a thing! I arrived in the bone library minus my heart. Isn't it always the way? I wasn't sure how I had ended up in a place where bones are so insistent on rigidity, it made a mockery of my click-clack vertebrae, I have been building things I shouldn't — when the Professors aren't looking — specifically, a mermaid. It is the most majestic thing I ever made in my life! I used whale bones, a dormouse, half a dog, a lot of weasel, cat, a few horse bones and if the postman is right in what he says — there are humans bones

in her tail, I am sure it is not true, he was so drunk he thought it was a real mermaid, he is so drunk he thinks he's still in the navy. I like to think about the 260 human bones — skull, jaw, cervical, thoracic, lumbar, sacrum, ribs, breastbone, scapula, clavicle, humerus, radius, ulna. Sometimes I hang bones out to dry and they clink in the breeze.

I slide the drawers closed in the bone library.

It is very satisfying.

They glide you see — then click shut. A fine cabinet maker built them.

My filing is immaculate.

When I fall asleep at night I am always thinking of carpals, or metacarpals, or phalanges, or tibia, or fibula, or tarsals, or metatarsals. I dream of a piano with long bones as keys. There is an irregular bone in every single one of us and it is not for conforming with the rest brother, mercy, mercy, mercy! There are osteoblasts, osteocytes, osteoclasts, osteolight. I've been dreaming lately about a man who has finger bones instead of teeth and he bares them like a whale in the great blue deep. I could have felt bad about building my mermaid out of bone but — some kind of siren is calling to me — I can feel her somehow in no. 10 Luckenbooth Close and every night when I go to sleep it is like being lured out to the rocks by her singing.

I have begun to do things without thinking.

The other day bought a bunch of medical texts on the human skeleton. I have been looking at it each night. I feel a density every time I lay down lately. If I was superstitious — I would say I feel a gentle indent at the foot of my bed as I drop off each night. As if someone is sitting there watching me sleep.

I try to think about good things because the light feels as if it is fading.

There were penguins in the Dick Vet today.

I had to rebuild a horse.

The skeleton is going into a cabinet downstairs. I became obsessed with him. Two-hundred and five bones. The skull alone had fourteen major bones. My favourites: temporal bone, zygomatic bone, palatine bone, parietal, sphenoid, vomer, pterygoid. I have built a skeleton horse so good she could win the damn Derby. My horse has evolved over 55 million years! They carry foals for eleven months and that four-legged elegance comes out walking and talking and running from day one, don't tell me we are the most evolved species, we are just the most upright ones with irrational levels of delusion.

They should put horses in charge.

I am sure it is a glitch of evolution that we are dominant.

When you think about it horses were the very first animal to give us our personal freedom and what happens to them? I sat with my horse skeleton most of the night and I cried, brother, something in this place is getting to me. Since I moved into No. 10 Luckenbooth Close I have gradually felt more and more weak. I thought about my horse getting up and galloping across this city, I thought about my ghost riding her over to the other side, I thought about how our animal instinct is something any horse can smell, how we can't hide our fear from them and how they recognise it on sight.

My boy is a Trojan Horse.

I found out that they used to call trains curious little fire horses!

We calibrate our machines in horsepower.

How much weight can a steam engine pull?

What is its horsepower?

A long time ago people could only date someone on their road.

Or a village they could walk to, or across town on foot.

It was only when the first wild horses were tamed — that love and humanity and all the humans in the world opened up a much wider map. The circle of our hearts' hope grew exponentially.

I have travelled far.

Perhaps it is because my person was not anywhere near our home?

She is waiting for me.

It was our ability to travel on horses that allowed us to lay in places far and wide. The DNA of the human race began to change. They dragged us into the future.

The four horsemen of the apocalypse are coming brother.

They have set divine judgement on the world and show us the apocalypse and how it will begin. We are already there, are we not? Right at the start of it? The prophecy said each horseman represented one part of the apocalypse. There was Pestilence, War, Famine and Death. A white horse whose rider spoke of people in constant war. A red horse whose rider had the power to make men slay each other. A black horse whose rider spoke of famine. A pale horse and its rider was Death. Hades was behind him. He spoke of plague upon the wild beasts of the earth. What plague is coming, brother? Is it one we ourselves are setting in motion now? A girl who works in the library has begun to talk to me. It turns out she lives upstairs at No. 10 Luckenbooth Close. I will write again as soon as I can. I can verify now — thinking — is the deepest act of transgression, we can change everything in our mind, synapses, programmes, ideas, thoughts, false histories, unobtainable futures — it is dangerous and it is not good for me but I won't stop doing it for mermaids, or sirens, or dictators, or racists, or creeps, or nobody.

You are in my thoughts always,

Levi.

7

There has been no two-room croft to clean. No byre to build. No drywall to stack. Malevolent skies do not roil toward each other violent as a cauldron. Endless fields do not remain barren each morning. Winter does not last a whole nine months. There are no islanders to watch my every move. The paths are not littered with sheep skulls. No blackened gorse to snag my skirts. Fallen rocks to stumble over, or worse, draw blood on the way home. What starving animal might catch the scent of such a thing? At night time the light does not come only from stars or oil. No smashed eggs stolen from eagle's nests to incite my wordless fury. I don't have to feel my mother's unremitting sorrow. Giant birds do not circle me on the way home. The coffins are all gone! Elise's sisters have accepted the child as hers. The pipe is always filled. There is a choice of not one but several fine sofa's in our apartment. There is art in all of the rooms. I often stand barefoot and look at it with a glass of wine in my hand, or gin, or whatever it is I want to drink. Mr Udnam's library has more books than a person could read in a lifetime. My child sleeps on Egyptian cotton sheets. I should be grateful.

I am not.

Roll a cigarette.

The smell of Elise is still on me and it is more than soothing.

I have taken to standing in the hallway in the morning with my horns on show so he see's me when he comes out of his room. He hates it. The maid has been told to only come into the apartment and clean when I am banished to our parlour. I have been naive. Elise has kept the worst of it from me. I spit out a strand of tobacco. Put our little tin back on the bedside cabinet. Light up. Hope is asleep She is so beautiful. A cherub with fat fists and a smile to heal the weary. Smoke curls up into the room. I can hear the maid sweeping the hallway out there. She will be gone soon. Usually Hope is out there with Elise in the mornings but today they are with me. He has done it to appease us. Last night! He dragged Elise down our hallway. Locked them both into the Consulting Room. When she came out she couldn't look at me. I washed her. I combed her hair. I put ointment on the areas that will bruise. I held her until she fell asleep. I lay awake. I listened to her breathing. I stood at the window and stared out at a dark city. Felt the creatures that walk underground getting restless. They could hear me if I called to them. I know it. I would not give my father such satisfaction. The whole situation makes me feel scared of what will happen and Elise and I cannot continue this way.

He won't touch her again.

This morning the scent of tobacco still seeps into lavender, it is liberally doused on our pillows. I have a white rage in me. It is still as a great lake untouched by the wind or even the ripple of a fish. I imagine a great white lake that is the shape of giant tear. In the middle of it a single drop of blood unfurls and disappears.

I bury my face into Elise's hair and breathe deeply.

She sleeps beside me fitful and tear-stained.

Mr Udnam keeps his eyes trained on Elise at all times now.

We eat dinner in silence each night.

It has been three years.

He is so very far from good and it will never be in him to see that remotely — let alone closely.

Mr Udnam has a truly terrible sense of his own greatness.

He has the serenity of a man without conscience.

There are no end of other people for Mr Udnam to blame for all things. That is all he does. He will pay, bribe, bully, cajole, compliment or — get as many people as possible to owe him — publicly, the more he can hold over other people and all the more publicly he can masquerade as a decent human being — the better. His self-wonder borders on psychopathic. It leaves no ripple in the water either. I can see that great tear shaped lake in my mind's eye and it has a coffin bobbing at the side of it.

The police do his bidding.

Lock doors for him.

Make sure people do not go down corridors he does not want traversed.

Elise has pleaded with him to not make me go away so many times now and my daughter screams like she is opening a portal to hell each time I am sent away. If they send me away I'm pretty sure Hope will open a portal to hell. All the creatures I have chosen not to call upon would come to her aide.

There is no nursemaid who can soothe her when I'm gone.

She is mine.

Nothing can change it.

I kiss my daughter's forehead.

Closes the shutters.

Select an ornate umbrella from the hat stand. The maid has clicked the front door shut.

I ease the door open quietly. No sound from the Consulting room.

Mr Udnam is passed out.

In the hall mirror my horns shine now.

Rubbed with oil.

So pretty.

They have neat ivory rings all the way up them.

Deepened into a blue-black shade at the base.

Like sheep or goats they will keep growing for the rest of my life. Most species only have horns on the male. I tip my head this way and that. Such a waste — when a female wears them so well!

All behind me down our hallway are stags heads.

He is hunting with a frenzy.

They are mounted with glass eyes.

Long antlers.

I put my bonnet on.

It deeply bothers me each time I do it now. I am less myself than I was a second ago. I won't meet my own eyes in the mirror when I have it on. There is a huge long picture frame opposite the stag heads. It is filled with butterflies.

Gossamer wings.

Some are so fine they are see through!

All staked through their body.

Pinned to black velvet.

They have been collected all over the world. I have learnt to read the names neatly printed

below each one. Tortoiseshell. Swallow Tail. Red Admiral. Blue Morpho. The Mourning Cloak. Admiral. Peacock. Dogface. Queen Alexandra Birdwing! Montezuma's Cattle Heart. Trans Aedan. Dead Leaf Butterfly. Glasswing. Viceroy. There is a Giant Owl butterfly right in the middle. My brother used to catch beetles. Put them in a glass jar. Freeze them in the stone store then pin them to the outside of our croft.

- What are you warning the winds against little brother?

- You.

- I'm not the one we need to worry about!

- I'm not worried what you will do, Jessie, I am worried what he is going to do to you — Da is scared of you, you know that, so they ...

He had pointed at our croft with beetles pinned all over it.

- urr they eyes of the dead. They'll see what's coming before we do and they'll tell me first.

- What will you do?

Her little brother had looked at her so levelly.

- I'll kill him.

Bang, bang, bang!

The front door is being hammered so loud the ornaments rattle.

I don't want them to wake Elise or Hope!

I yank it open wide.

- Hello.

- Alright Jessie, we urr here tae see Elise.

There are five of them, red-haired, they stand shoulder to shoulder, short to tall, the complete spit of their sister.

- She's asleep.

- Is he in?

- Aye.

- Can we see him?

- No.

- How long are you going to watch over fir them, Jessie?

- I'll leave when Elise bids me to do so.

The little one steps forward and looks up at me — whilst the eldest lights a fag.

Every one has identical amethyst eyes.

They are not the kind of girls you'd want to fight. Elise was not wrong when she told me there is not a posh bone in her — truly, in the best possible way.

The girls crane their heads to try and see down the hallway.

-Where is Hope? I want tae see ma sister.

- Elise is letting her sleep in the big bed with her, I've an errand to run, youz'll huv tae go.

Pull the door firmly closed.

I don't let them into the apartment ever and barely do they get even the briefest sight of Elise.

- Is she okay?

- They are both fine.

- Are you?

- Aye.

I go down the stairs slowly enough to make sure they are trailing behind me.

It is a magician's trick.

Look at this hand! Over here! Look at me! Don't go in there and look at them.

They are even worse than ever, lately.

Fighting!

Elise can't have been off the pipe a day since last October. The girls march away home.

They eye people suspiciously in this part of town. I walk up the High Street. Breathe in clean cold air. I love mornings like this. The errands must be done while they are sleeping. Everything is on account. I never pay. I go along George IV bridge and then down Chambers Street and cross over into James Thins bookshop. I like it in here. There are a parcel of books waiting and I've no time to browse this morning and I wish all things were not like this and Elise and I would have a tiny book-shop somewhere and it would have four cats and a pot of tea always brewed and Hope to play at our feet, then when she was bigger she'd take the place over and we'd make jam and kiss each other and be glad for each of our days alive — so we'd get to spend them with each other. I have got all the messages my love will need when she wakes. An orange, freshly peeled, so she can smell something good before she opens her eyes, a tiny perfume bottle, her books and then just a brief stop at the candy man's basket — Elise has the sweetest tooth of anyone, she is like a child in a woman's body.

I pick up a small box of Turkish delight.

- Flavoured with rose!

- Braw.

It is the only thing I pay for with cash. I hurry back down the Close. The building is almost finished now. He's been years at it. I hurry into No. 10 Luckenbooth Close. Run up the stairwell. I tip my head back every time — look up at the cupola all the way up there. Imagine all the people who've walked these stones steps. For hundreds of years people going round and round the stairwell like the cogs of a clock. Past and present and future passing each other by. The dead, the living, the barely living and the cowards and the ordinary and the brave, all winding round each other — through time.

I love this stair.

Now I'm just a part of its history too.

The devil's daughter and his grandchild, passing through, just like all the other people who

have gone before us and who will come after. Mr Udnam has put lamps in. Gas is out. He has ripped the building apart and put most of it back together. Soon tenants will come back. It was far better for nobody to be there for Elise to be able to go into hiding. Then bit by bit she began to go out until everyone around them has just saw Hope as her own. He has left a few of the walls open though. They will need closed up. Perhaps they are still open for the plumbing, they have that all over the New Town.

I go in and click the door shut.

The apartment is silent.

Lay gifts and messages by Elise, kiss her cheek, take Hope and lay the child heavy onto me. We have a fancy stroller for her, she walks most of the time but it's handy for busy streets. Elise insists I bump her down the stairs when we go out. Keep my coat on and settle our girl. I bump her down the stairs so carefully she doesn't feel a thing. I will let Elise rest awhile.

Hope wakes up on the High St.

I offer her my hand to squeeze when she wakes up.

The child wraps her fist around it.

It's all she needs to descend to the underworld. One hand to hold onto like a balloon back in the real world. It can lift her back out again should she need it too.

They turn right onto Victoria Street.

Pass the cheesemonger, the tailor's, the lace petticoats and linen, wooden brushes and down toward Bow Well — the smell is rank.

I need to be somewhere old.

The city has stood her ground so long and today I need it to hold me. Hope can no doubt sense all the executions that happened at Bow Well. They even hung the hangman in the end. Locals lynched a Captain. A hundred Covenanters had their spine snapped right there. Maggie Dickson got

hung then woke up in her death carriage! They hung her for having a baby without a father. It is how it is. Men decide what goes in women's bodies and what is taken out. How and when and in which way things go in and out of them.

At least the law couldn't hang Maggie Dickson twice.

I want to be in the most haunted place that will serve me above ground level.

The spirits will protect Hope and me a wee while.

We duck into the White Hart.

Nod at the barman.

Let the wee one eat a bit of orange and then she falls asleep again. A feeling that the winds are coming in. All the way from my Da's croft to No. 10 Luckenbooth Close. Think about my Ma. I couldn't protect her from him but I won't make that mistake again. What to do next time Mr Udnam does it? My Ma said — only love a man who reads books and understands them properly. If they don't read books don't go to their bed. Ever! It wasn't them she wanted, it was what they knew. My mother thought if she found out enough, one day she'd come across a way, to turn an evil man good.

I know better.

A small glass is slid across the table to me and I smile without looking up.

Pick it up and drink.

- I have a dagger in my stockings if you want to kill him.

- What are you doing here, Elise? I left ye asleep. Yer sister's called.

Elise kisses me.

She peeks at Hope, joins me at my side of the table, nods for two more drinks. Elise takes my hand and places it on her thigh. There is indeed a dagger. She grins so wide and wicked that I may have to marry her before sundown to save our immortal souls.

- We'll have to go this time, we can't let him do that to you again, I mean it, Elise.

- I know.

- Are you sore?

- I'm okay.

I know she is lying to me so I don't feel her pain.

- Where will we live?

- In a boat, middle ay the sea. Ye got a boat, Jessie?

- Not a boat, no!

- What ye got?

- More like a small vessel. If it's still there after all these years.

- Grand.

- I'm not sure three of us will fit in there, Elise.

- We can squeeze up!

- It's not appropriate fir raising a respectable young family this vessel.

- It's the right one fir us then!

She is looking directly into me then. We have both been avoiding the truth of our situation.

He numbs us with things to smoke and wear and sleep and eat and time passes. We think of Hope and how to provide for her somewhere else and we stay another day.

- It can't go on, Elise, I won't let it.

- I know.

Elise's eyes are purple until the iris and then they are navy blue, like the line of the horizon.

I can see us sailing into that blue in my old coffin. No white tear drop lake with spirals of blood. It would be clear skies. One healthy, funny, crazy toddler and Elise up front, catching fish. I would show them tides and moons, skies and seas, we can seek another shore to take us.

Three police men in uniforms appear at the front of the bar.

Mr Udnam's spies.

We can't ever tell who will say if they've seen us!

Elise pulls me quickly through the back and the dishwasher man lets us out into an alley. The back of Edinburgh Castle looms away above. Hope sleeps — her feet splayed. We take an end of the stroller each and lift her up the steps. Elise's pretty mouth offers words — proclamations — spells, incantations, she is speaking in tongues, ranting at all that is wrong, her soul focused only on escape. In the apartment she unwraps the binds around my horns, then settles Hope into her bed, returning.

Brandy.

Pipe.

She tastes of alcohol and smoke, pulls me in toward her — slows all of time — her fingers trace the fine points of my horns — I slip down onto my knees between her thighs — we do it quick and hot like this — I feel that same complete exhilaration as Elise moans out.

He pushes the door open.

Stands.

I look up at him.

Unsheathed.

The way he least likes me.

I haven't seen him since last night and he doesn't even look guilty. Elise is up fixing her dress and saying she is going to get Hope who is awake again and screaming like all of hell has opened every gate and portal and every spirit is rushing out toward us.

I see the knife then.

It is silver.

Mr Udnam turns it one way, then the other, a practised move.

- You can't kill us.

- I'm not going to kill them, I'm going to kill you!

- Why?

- You are an abomination!

He points to my horns.

Every time they are exposed I fear for the nubs on Hope's head.

He steps forward.

All the spirits in the building and the underworld flood across the city.

Up stairs.

Into the room!

All to see the devil's daughter fight a mortal man.

It is not in my want to kill though.

I realise this at that moment with a great embarrassment and disappointment in myself.

It is in my want to cure.

Who greater healer than the devil's child?

One who has true evil running in her veins but who will never turn to it?

My heart is pure.

There is a tear-shaped lake made of that essence of purity.

All the goodness of people flows out to it. Still, I have a wife and a child to protect.

I lower my horns and look directly at him.

- What the fuck are you thinking, Mr Udnam?

He points the knife at me and it is sharp as anything.

- I don't want to do this Jessie, I have no choice! My wife lays with you in that bed, my daughter turns to you, my house vibrates with your energy in every corner the whole building does!

I am taking it back for me, my family, my future tenants. Luckenbooth is no place for the likes of you. You have horns on your head — that let me know every single day — you, Jessie MacRae, you

I laugh. It's fucking ridiculous. What he is he says other people are — over and over again.

- You've left bruises on her, you've hurt her again and again. Now you want to do the same to me, don't pass this off as some fucking mercy mission, Mr Udnam! I'd advise you not to touch me — in this life or the next!

- You're a witch!

- No! Your fiancée is the witch, I'm the devil's daughter and I have no fear of him or you!

The child cries out.

I turn to tell Hope to go back but she is running toward me down the hall.

Mr Udnam jabs forward and stabs me as hard as he can right through the heart.

He grunts.

Fat red hands shake with rage.

The knife is still in me.

I look up.

Hope runs into the room barefoot — tiny feet — thud, thud, thud — blood billows across the floor at my feet.

I whisper it low ...

- I curse you and your precious Luckenbooth for eternity!

Elise runs toward him with her dagger raised!

Hope has got hold of my skirts, she is tugging and tugging, she is roaring, face red.

- Mama, mama!

I thud to the floor as Elise stabs him once from behind.

He turns.

Mr Udnam stabs her again, again — Hope is screaming, my hand reaches out to hold her back from running to Elise, her heart is gone, I feel it as my own flickers — out.

The infant shakes.

My father appears at the door.

Mr Udnam raises his knife.

I see Elise's spirit rise up from her body as our child's throat is slit.

- You can't have her!

I roar!

The building is shaking — the limbs of Luckenbooth lock together to try and contain my rage, I curse him, I curse him and everything he touches to eternity — I curse those who protect him, I curse those who demand my silence for his statues — I rise up out of my body — turn to see it on the floor behind me.

Hold my hand out for Elise to come to me, away from him.

My daughter has stepped out her body, easy as if she were getting out of bed.

I lift her up.

- What did you do, Jessie? This is your fault.

My father says it from the door.

Still I roar, I roar and I roar. A noiseless vibration to take down all things. Timbers are shuddering. In the body of the building insects appear in larvae. One day they will take it down. I put a sickness into Mr Udnam. I don't even look at my Father but before I turn I note there is a cavity still — in the centre of his chest.

- I want her head!

He shouts it at Mr Udnam and then points at my body.

It lays on the floor surrounded by a red-black sticky moon.

Skirts billowed.

Every wall spattered in blood.

Horns even longer and sharper in death than they were in life.

8

The church is so pretty. Flora has not burst into flames. The young Minister is lecturing nobody at all because it is late. He appears earnest and clever. Candles are lit all through the main hall. Mr Udnam gets on his knees. Prays. It goes on for so long she fears he must be praying for absolution of all their souls one by one, the entire world or something. Candles flicker. Saints look down on her. Like they are so perfect! Jesus holds his face up to his mother's breast. Eventually Mr Udnam gets up and sits back down next to her so the pew creaks.

- Did you pray already?

- Yes, I did Mr Udnam, I prayed for forgiveness.

- For what?

- Everything.

- Good, we need to keep our house in order, give them less filing to do when we get upstairs.

Did you know I'm going to make No. 10 Luckenbooth Close the first housing association in our city?

- What does that mean?
- Cheaper rent, maybe even a tenancy agreement.
- A noble cause.
- That's what I do, I support others, to better their lives.
- So I have heard.
- I founded seven charities in this city now all under one name.
- Is it your name?
- No.
- What is it then?
- Hope.

As he says this there is a flutter of cold air like the door of St. Giles cathedral has been opened but Flora turns around and sees it has not.

- I am on the board at eight organisations.
- How fortunate for them to have your expertise, Mr Udnam, I hope they appreciate it.

Flora turns her head to the left.

While Mr Udnam stares into his own tunnel of person might and victory — where every second step there is another statue to his might — she inclines her head and sniffs a bump off the back of her hand — she has got so good a this — even the Virgin Mother looks down quietly impressed.

Flora puts the phial back in her pocket.

Picks up her glass.

He didn't notice her carrying it all the way down the stairs.

Only sees his own name in history.

Nothing more!

She sips her Tom Collins. It is so good. Extra strong, the Minister looks down toward them and she half raises it in a cheers to him and his big house and his fancy black frock. The things some men have to do, to feel comfortable in dresses.

- I am the most moral, upstanding, philanthropic, God-fearing man that has ever been known in Edinburgh. I could call the police on that young man and have that party locked up. I could do anything I wanted. I know his Father but I know everyone. You can't move in this town without someone who knows me and ADMIRES me! I am not bragging. Only failures do that. I am just telling you how it is. Those parties HAVE to stop. I will give him an eviction notice! I do not want the authorities

He coughs until his face turns purple.

- I don't want them ...

- It's okay, Mr Udnam they won't come out. We don't do it again!

- I can't ...

- Yes.

- Do you hear me?

- Aye, he won't do it again, I promise!

There is spittle around the edge of Mr Udnam's mouth.

He stares at Flora like the fires of hell are in the pit of her stomach and only the power of God will put them out. When he looks at the Minister it is with a side glance. Then back to the front. There is a feeling of more than repulsion. He wants police in that building even less than they do. Flora feels like she has to leave here right now. It takes all her will to remain seated. The man nods at four people going out and then the Minister as a new one comes to takes his place. Mr Udnam will get his statue to himself in this city. Of course he will.

- Can you smoke in here?

He shakes his head at her in disapproval.

- But the incense, they'd never notice!

Puts her tobacco back in her purse. Windows cast tunnels of moonlight down the main hall. There is such a big moon out there tonight. Illuminating every crevice of this city, it makes her feel wanton. There are huge pillars. Stone arcs and archways look exactly like a house God would design if there were such a thing — instead it was just human potential built it all and they can't even see it.

- You know he designed you, just perfectly.

- What?

Flora gets a shiver down her back.

The Minister who is leaving his shift has said it in passing.

Long chandeliers of candles are hung from the beams. Light flickers and jumps in the eaves. The ceiling is painted a spectacular blue. Like the skies on the day she saw Baška and met the only man she has ever loved. The holy man is right. She was designed exactly as she was meant to be and there has never been a thing wrong with her mind, or soul, or body — what a thing to realise, she feels peaceful, like there has been an epiphany of some kind to change how she feels in all the coming days.

- Will you remarry, Mr Udnam?

- I never married, my fiancée left me and ran away to New York with our maid, you might have heard?

- I'm sorry.

- I'm not!

He booms that out.

Quietens his tone as the older Minister looks back at both of them from the pulpit.

What is he doing up there?

He's not making a roll up, she's sure of that, although God knows she could use one!

- I serve God and this city and its residents without distraction now, it is better this way.

- I'm sure it is, Mr Udnam.

- Women are different these days!

- So I keep hearing.

- It's since you all got the vote, Flora.

- Amen.

- Not in a good way young lady. It was bad enough when you could vote over the age of 30, now any woman can vote! It doesn't even matter if she's educated or has a husband or is god fearing. It isn't practical. It helps society in no way whatsoever. Then there's women walking around dressed — like you!

Flora nods.

Mr Udnam closes his eyes and he is lost again in prayer.

By the smell of him he's already doused in spirit.

He will be here for quite a while.

Flora tiptoes away.

She needs to walk for a little while.

Mr Udnam won't go back up to Greig's again tonight. He won't call the police. She doesn't want to go back until later. Outside she lights up. Goes down past the Tron. People are out eating and drinking. Across the road and up passed Old College. She goes on to Nicolson St. then down around the corner until she can see Arthur's Seat. It is the best big old dead volcano that could ever be right in the middle of a city. Her favourite time to see it is when the sun is going down against the crags. They look like they are on fire. The entire thing turns rose gold. Then it disappears and the clifftops are black and moody again. Lean against a building. Light a smoke. There are advertisements all over the wall opposite. Camp Coffee. HP Sauce. Sunlight Soap. Those crags look like the jagged faces of ancient men glowering across the city. They always have done. They always

will. When this was all water and ice and then plants and animals and eventually people and cars and motion and fashions and food and those that have and those that will never have. They've watched over it all. Up there to the top of the crags. That's where she is going. Hard rubble underfoot makes her unsteady but she knows this path too well to stop and she knows what she wants. Flora climbs the rocky path of the crags until she can see the whole city skyline sparkle before her. The lights across Edinburgh are tiny dots — like human souls. Like each soul has it in them — to ignite another one. As if they really are all linked — even if it rarely feels like it. Like all the freedom they are trying to find in the twenties, is just a light that so many other people will snuff out. Flora's thighs hurt. Her shoes are so wrong for this. She doesn't care. Right up to the top of the Crags is where she can see again. The sea is a steady dark blue in the distance. It is dark but she knows exactly where the island is. Big ships will be sitting out there on the Firth of Forth. Sailors will still be drinking in the Port of Leith. Flora can see all the church spires. One for every pub they say. The outline of Edinburgh Castle and Holyrood Palace down at the bottom. Her lover is in among those lights, in his tenement, dancing. The whole city sparkles best at night. It is when she comes into her own. It is worth the risk. All of it is. The drag balls, they need them. Where else can they be properly free? Her lover used to go to drag balls in Harlem when he was working in New York. He told her sodomy stopped being punishable there in 1861. Then it was life imprisonment. Flora rubs her hands on her arms to try and warm herself. She begins the descent. Thinks of how in 1885 they changed that to Clause 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act or the Labouchère Amendment — to protect girls from prostitution with a side clause against sodomy between men specifically. Two years in jail, with or without hard labor. Flora nearly goes over on her ankle and picks her way down more carefully. What kind of a world locks people up for loving? Hard labour for sodomy or oral! Oscar Wilde got three good years for it. Flora does not want to be touched like her lover does, though she'd defend his right to be touched in any way that makes him feel good —

as long as he finds partners of legal age and willing. What act is really perverse then? None is, sexuality is weird and ugly and strange and terrifying and real and beyond the realms of actual reason and right now she doesn't care about any of it, all Flora wants is to be held and to get into bed and read quietly next to him and to make a cup of tea in the morning and sit together in silence.

It has taken no time to get back.

In the front door and straight to the bar — the perfume smells stronger than it did before, cigarette plumes have coloured the air blue-grey. Lights are turned down lower. A circle forms around the outside of the room. Another circle inside it begins to rotate the other way. Flora meets her lover's eyes across the room.

Still that gladness to see his face.

- Baby, come here.

Over to stand beside him, an arm draped around her shoulder, a drunk poet to the right points at a man in a black suit.

- Is he from the Spec Society? I thought they only met at the university. There's another two over there ...

- He is, Flora says.

- How do you know? The poet asks.

- I fucked him in the William Playfair room and he cried afterwards like a baby. There are no female members in the Spec society.

- No, the poet says admiringly and skulks away.

It is a beautiful room. Deep teal wallpaper. A girl is down on her knees now. A woman is strapped to a chair. Legs parted. The whole room is a mass of flesh. A man has his cock sucked. A woman and man kiss his neck. Another woman steps over his face and sits down as casually as if she were in a fine dining room.

Her lover's fingers slide up her legs and he is licking her. She arches her body up toward him despite herself. He looks up from between her thighs. Flora drags him up by the hair.

- You're such a hideous prick.

She takes him by the hand over to the bar, flushed, both dress straps down, stockings gone, lips flushed as are her cheeks.

- French 75, ta, doll!

Flora adds three parts Edinburgh gin, one part fresh lemon juice which she squeezes out by hand, a spoonful of sugar powder, then Champagne. Tops both glasses until they fizz. It is so cold and crisp on the tongue. The feeling of her lover's kiss on the nape of her neck pulls her in again. They kiss — hot and cold — lemon and gin, champagne and tobacco.

- Come on, into my room, I've got it clear, just for you.

He unlocks his door and they disappear into the familiar dim. Sit down on the edge of the bed. All the shoes and suits are gone. He looks sad. Concerned.

- I'm unsteady without you, he says.

- No, yer not.

They lay down, face-to-face, noses touching, small light kisses.

- I've done worse than just hurt you! I know. It doesn't feel okay, Flora. You are not someone I will get over. Not ever. Not now, not in ten years, not in twenty. I love you so much I don't even understand it. I know I wounded you. I did much worse than not turn up.

Flora can't speak.

They have never done this conversation.

He whispers to her so quiet, as if to a child.

His eyes are blue-black in the dim light.

City is falling asleep around them.

All those lights, from all those souls, just so fragile, needing tended, protected, cupped in two hands. A huge moon slides down toward the horizon. The glow of each of their lights, reaches out to each other always. From one part of the city to the other. Even over the sea. Through time. The light people come from — what souls emanate and society can't yet see — is what they all reach for and miss when it is gone. When a person's own light is dimmed — when a soldier takes a polar cub to a woman to try and see light in her eyes but she has already found her light in another or when a polar cub protects light in hundreds of soldiers — is able to restore their light to them — or to keep it flickering longer — until they go home to their children who too hold their own light — when someone lays in a bed with the wrong one — and they miss a light they feel they might never know. Sometimes on a street — or in a bar — or in a bedroom — those first bits of light separated out — find each other again.

1939

Flat 3F3

Levi (36)

fear fir the mermaid

9

Dear brother, something has happened that is bad, strike that — a series of bad things have unravelled, do you remember I said there was this indent on my bed at night? Like a ghost is coming to watch me sleep? Well, there are two. Actually, I believe there are three, the second one is heavier and it feels exactly like when Mom used to sit on my bed holding you. I am not hallucinating! I drew three anatomically correct skeletons on the wall behind my bed whilst asleep. Two women, one with horns, a child of about two or three years-old in the middle. Every bone was marked and filed absolutely perfectly, I don't know what I was thinking! I'm damn spooked brother I can't remember doing it and when I went to sleep last night that indent on my bed was so pronounced and I fell asleep thinking of my mermaid and then no more thoughts until I woke up and stood at the end of my bed and saw the two skeleton women and the child drawn out perfectly — they were just looking at me. I am not a superstitious man overall brother but I feel too disturbed to sleep in that apartment, it is drinking my energy. Nothing in my life has been right since this morning. The four horsemen of the apocalypse are pounding down my dreams. When I go back into the world of sleep

I fear I may fall so deep and hard I may not come back out, it does not help a man rest easy, I am tired and I pace — I feel like death is near me. I open the door to the stairwell and just stand there. I am missing something! I do not know what! It is driving me crazy. I am agitated all the time. I hide so many things. I am so used to doing it. I thought I had that skill set down to a fine precision. I didn't notice before but there is a basement in our tenement that has a big lock on it. When the air raid sirens call we don't use our basement. We have to go down to the blackout bunker in Mary King's Close. It is like going back in time brother. The arches down there are damp and it smells of something I can't even articulate. I am a man who has just been found by the head of the highly esteemed Dick Vet College in bed with a lot of random bones — oh it is so bad, brother! I mean I made the mermaid! She is mine. I won't let the other men take responsibility, I'm not that kind of man!

Something has taken my soul.

No. 10 Luckenbooth Close is the reason I cannot sleep.

Even as I write this can you see my handwriting gets so much smaller? That day started much like usual. In the morning at the Dick Vet there was a group of penguins walking down the corridor, they are cute as anything, we had a lot of budgies in, there were the usual dogs and cats getting treatment, some spiders, a mouse, three chinchilla rabbits. It was happy chaos. It always is in the Dick Vet. There was a Sun Bear from Edinburgh zoo. Also, the beginning of a series of lectures by a Professor who was up from London, they were set up to be held in the room next to the bone library, the Professor wanted to see how I file bones, wanted to see all the books where they are accounted for, I had to hide the mermaid when he was in so I just threw a blanket over her.

I was harassed, you may as well know that from the start.

Things have got hard here and I should have got out weeks ago, it's why I have not written! It all started with this old woman who was drunk and screaming at Mr Udnam about her daughters,

says she had six and that they are all dead because of him, all red-haired girls apparently and one of them had been engaged to Mr Udnam like seventeen years ago, then a year later her five daughters, started a petition to find their missing sister — then they all die in a house fire — all of them — the smallest were just wee girl! She was shouting and shouting and he got into her face and said something and then she ran off and half an hour later we heard the sirens. She was found dead near the back steps to Waverley Station — it was a busy day but nobody saw her jump and I just kept thinking brother, I don't even want to write it down but did she jump? Did she? Mr Udnam was going back into the stair and I swear he had shit himself. I didn't see it at first. There are two cities in Edinburgh. There is one above ground and one below, one in the centre and another on the outskirts and the one in the centre seems to be able to do anything it wants and the one on the outskirts can only take it, it all seems so damn familiar. There is the Edinburgh that is presented to tourists. Then the other one, which is considered to be the real Edinburgh to the people who live here. There are the fancy hotels and shops and motorcars and trams and places of work, then there are the slums, starvation, disease, higher rates of addiction, prostitution, crime, little or no infrastructure, no plumbing, no clean water, no rights, if the council want to go and take their homes down, they do, this is all on streets just ten minutes walk from the fancy city centre — when will these things change, everywhere brother? When? All fur coat and nae knickers. That's a phrase the postman told me. It embodies this city. They keep children without families in a home on the other side of town and they train girls up as maids and sell them into the households of the wealthy! Boys get trained to sweep chimneys and then they get sold too. I had no idea! The area where the sisters died in the fire is notorious for early death rates — although not often from something as horrific as that, I thought my day couldn't get any more awful, then my neighbour Greig in the flat below begins shouting — his wife has turned up! We didn't know he had one! She follows him through the flat accusing him of living with a girlfriend there and of course he has had for a long time but none of us knew he had another home with a wife and kids in it that he lives in half the time. The wife tries

to stab the girlfriend with a fork! Police come out. They take the wife and girlfriend away. Mr Udnam has a fit! He thinks the police are there for him! He stands at the door shouting he didn't do it! That he helps the poor! That they are not getting into his building. He reels off every important person he knows, he is frantic! I've never seen a face so lined with guilt.

The police just leave.

My neighbour in the flat below packs his things, hands Mr Udnam his keys, says he won't be back in this fucking city again. I don't think he will be either. He walks off shouting about Indonesia and sending for Flora. We have a moon so big it's making the entire city feel like a film set. I have déjà vu every second of the day and I won't be able to sleep in that building ever again. Do you know how long rats can go without sleep before they die?

Thirty-two days give or take.

I am a lot bigger than a rat but I can't see me making it beyond a month.

Since all that happened I was trying to drink myself unconscious to sleep at work and I hoped to pass out and sleep for a week in the bone library but I did not have a chance to do that because — they fired me.

The bone library is my domain no more.

I am heartbroken.

Don't ever go see a mermaid on the tip of a blood red moon.

Far less after the Buckfast, ay! It's a drink made by monks — the drunken fuckers know what they are onto, each barrel has a sediment and the lower you get in the barrel the stronger it gets, I think me and the postman got through four bottles each as potent as could be — we didn't know what we were doing brother, it's the weekend, most of the staff were away, we were singing, then we went into the labs and turned the taps on, we let some rabbits free, they went off hopping down a corridor, we had a quick turn at the shooting range, went to the distillery for more supplies. The postman took a photograph of me surrounded by sheep heads — not yet decomposed — all of

them smoking. I was found asleep this afternoon by the head of the Royal Dick Vet College — in bed with my bone mermaid. When he asked me what I was doing with her — I told him we'd recently wed. Even as I write this can you see my handwriting gets so much smaller? I don't know where I will be by the time you read this. I am going to try to sail my way home. I am thinking of offering to work for my passage — all the way to New York if I can, if I can find any ships down at the Docks that will have me, I have been thinking and it's far harder to tell you about that.

There are many ways to fight evil and I have those in me.

Bad men are always coming.

Especially for people like us — the good ones.

I think a lot about all those invisible lines we crossed at home because of white men. Any car journey can cross from just sitting having a conversation — to going over one of those invisible lines. The conversations stops mid air. You pull the car over. People on the street look the other way. They look the other way and that makes them fucking complicit brother!! Does it not? They profit from men like those, and that means they endorse those men's racism. We must pick our wars! I have more than one to fight, I finally want to come home and I want to change things, I will sit my bar exam and I will stay the fuck away from monk brewed alcohol and bones and mermaids, what has this city done to me?

I will focus on inequality in education.

I will teach a class on ideas, and ideology.

How ideology is sold to us as a fixed thing that every infrastructure is based upon but they are all just based on — ideas, those ideas were created so people could find a way to control billions of other people, a way to profit, a way to order society, a way to warehouse humans, I will enter the system from the inside and work my way out.

Who says it can't be done?

Humans must learn to respect all bones.

I am leaving those skeleton drawings on the wall whatever it is they mean!

We must file our history differently and put the clones to bed. There are no different races of humans there are only humans and we are all made from stardust and we are one race and there is no God there is only good and evil and every shade of possibility in between, who will listen to my thoughts, brother, but you? Wherever I end up over the next few months, on a ship, or in a cell, I will write to you. I will do it on this pad and if it is taken from me then I will write them in the dust on the floor with my tongue. They say we are helpless, they say we are weak, they say we are nothing, they are liars! Life is so short. Who would have blood on their conscience? Blood of humans, of animals, of the planet? Who would arrive into the next world with all that blood on them? There is no God wants murder in their name, not a single one, humans made that up to compensate for our own bloodlust, to sanctify it, to make it holy, to refuse the gallows, to avoid the cells — we keep our silence and do not act in ways we want to because men with money pay poor men with guns to kill other poor men or women, or luck us up if we dare too loudly to think let alone speak well I am thinking brother and I am ready to speak, and not in a letter to you and not in bones and not in code — there can be no peace, or change, in silence.

I hope with all my heart one day to see you again.

your big brother

I love you— always,

Levi

PART II

IO

The Night Witches fly in formations of three. Yevdokiya Bershanskaya is the regiment commander. Serafima Amosova is her deputy. Irina Sebrova has flown more missions than anyone else. I am obsessed with them and I know I can't jump into a bi-plane like they do, to avenge my brother's death but still — I can try, can't I? Every morning I still place a glass of milk by his door just like I used to do when he was home. Dad drinks them for me and he leaves the glass by my brother's door and I take it away later on. Neither of us mentions it and we try not to let my Mother see. At night I wear my brother's pyjamas and over and over again I bake his favourite cake so badly he would have enjoyed it just to see the utter sight of me. I take the cake out into our back garden and put it on the wall where he used to sit and eat his lunch. The foxes eat it at dawn. My brother was blue-eyed and happiest when he was out dancing. He would try to lie to our parents but he could never pull it off — I always could. I write tiny notes to him and leave them under his chest of drawers where he kept his cigarettes. I taught myself how to smoke using his stash. I do target practise every

morning on a range in our back garden. Dad set it up for him. My parents don't say a thing when they see me going out there with his pellet gun. I go out when it is sunny and when it rains. I have stood out there in sleet and snow. I go out when my stomach is cramping from my period. I go out even if I am sick or I have a cold. I have become such a good aim it is scary. I am aiming for one person each time I shoot. The person that ordered him into a camp. They claimed it was for them to work out their remaining days in the war. In my heart of dread I know it is not true and one person ordered it and when I lift up his weaponry it is between the eyes of that person I aim for. My brother was the best side of our family. I am one half of a circle now. There are photos of us all over our house as kids. We look out at the present day with no idea what was coming. My mother named me Ivy after a girl she went to school with back in France. I have brown hair and grey eyes. My teeth are uneven. I have a heart-shaped face. I apply make-up every morning, I sing out of tune and it is true I will never bake like a wife. I have urges other people would find horrifying. I have been working in our boutique in town for three years. I am seventeen, which means I am old enough to take this mission.

Outside it is clear today.

I polish up old brass keys on the till.

Boil the kettle.

Place a new mannequin (in a top and trousers) on display in the window. Ask anyone from here to Fountainbridge — I dress a window nice as the ones in Paris. My mother takes me there every year. I am good with mannequins. They appeal to me. I have stuck many bobby pins in their eyes and not a complaint from one! I am not proud of my urges. I know they are bad but that does not mean I can't use them for good! They have sent out hundreds of thousands of good people to kill other people to win this war. Murder has been paid for and issued by governments all over the world forever. Why is it okay for young men to do so and be heroes but if a young woman has an

urge in her to kill — she is reviled? I want to serve my country. I want to see fear in the eyes of bad men when I take their life — it is clear to me now, I want to kill Nazis and as many as possible. It may not be the moral high ground but I have little care for that. Killing will not be my official job description. I have read everything the Recruiters have given me. Imagine, just a shop girl — in Paris, armed and drinking with Germans.

Everyone has a calling.

I refuse to feel bad about my urges anymore.

I am slight.

Look innocent as a church mouse.

Pretty — I'm told.

Rummage around in the shop drawer to find a measuring tape.

On a pad there is the word — *RETRIBUTION* — written in red a hundred times.

There is much space between the lines. I don't write in full sentences anymore. Only single words.

HOPE.

GOD.

ANGELSANGELSANGELSANGELS.

EVIL.

RETRIBUTION.

There is only one really hard thing to leave behind and she is my heartbeat.

If my brother was the better side of our family then Morag is by far the best side of me.

Tonight Morag and I will go dancing at The Palais.

First time I met her she was standing at Cupid's Corner (they only sell fruit drinks but you do get a great view of the dance floor though) I was smitten on sight. She was with an American

and he was trying to leave the country, he worked for our landlord. Morag and Levi had been seeing each other since he brought her home a bath tub.

I danced hard that night try and impress her and two weeks later I moved into her place and I've been there ever since. Levi is gone now. Our happy threesome of cards and drinking and hunger walks is over but I have kept Morag safe and happy since he left and he asked me to do so before he went.

I exercise daily.

So should every aspirational killing machine.

I'll do what I'm told.

Whatever it is — no matter how dangerous.

It is the killing I really want to do though let's be clear on that.

I like knitting too but I'd rather raise a gun.

Are there any heroic knitters?

There are bound to be!

Girls are not meant to think this way.

So they say, don't they?

They tell us what we are meant to think.

They never ask us what we actually do think — without telling us first — what it is we should be thinking. If we are not thinking what they have said we should be — then they say our thinking is wrong. If we tell (men) what we think — they correct our thoughts. Thoughts leave our brains — exit via our mouths — hang in the air, ready to be shot down by their artillery all day long! We say we think a thing and they (men) ignore it or they (still men) say we just don't fully understand it. Then they expect silence, or an apology. If none is forthcoming they look away. Perhaps they walk out a door. What they do with each act like this is — rewrite the words that come

out our mouths — by teaching us — to edit them inside our brains. No? They train us with these actions — to actually go into our minds and begin to — rewrite the lines — correct them — before we even we think them. It's so clever. There are sanctioned thoughts. There are unsanctioned thoughts. There is sanctioned body hair (your head) unsanctioned body hair (mostly anywhere else). Girls having power of any kind is not sanctioned. Until it is. When they need to use it for example. The Night Witches are proof. Teenage girls have as much courage as any man. They would rarely agree (men). Even if they see us commit acts of complete courage and heroism ... they will write it out of their mind immediately and condescend us to fucking hell and back until they feel good about themselves again. Magazines let us know where our thoughts are going wrong. Also our faces. They really do let us know what is wrong with our bodies! None of us are getting the having a body thing right!! They show us in photographs, film, advertising and fashion — just in case we aren't getting it. I'm bored of selling dresses. I have strength to spare. I am young. I am not stupid. My years make me more brave if anything. I do not need my lines rewritten nor my mind manipulated to replace my own thoughts with ones written for me.

Killing is a good vocation for me.

I will be efficient and mercenary given the right training and just one or two people to believe in me and I have found that and I feel fucking lucky! Why is it so rarely afforded to a girl to choose who she is? Am I getting it wrong? Are these faulty thoughts? Are they just another-something I can't possibly understand? How about this? Have the government asked — these kinds of questions — in their most recent informative social surveys?

1. How often do you think about killing on an average day?

Please circle.

1-10, 11-20, 21-40?

Life is a series of ever smaller lassoes thrown by those who censor.

They land around our thoughts.

Drag them along the back of a horse until the thoughts are dead or scattered so far behind us we can't see them when the sun goes down.

My mother is obsessed with amphetamines.

After my brother died she stopped getting up, or washing, or brushing her teeth.

She did nothing.

It was her most interesting phase.

The doctor came.

He sat down gravely in the living room and ate Battenberg she'd baked.

He insisted there was only one thing that could help her.

Amphetamines — two grams per day — to invigorate her blood.

My mother's blood is very weak.

Not so anymore — they said it would help focus her time and energy once again and it has done that and then some, she cut our garden lawn with nail scissors when the lawnmower died and she sleeps upright in the living-room armchair with a duster or magazine or cocktail in her hand and our house is so clean it squeaks, there have been issues — yesterday I found her in the kitchen with her ear up to a silent radio.

- Maman, it's six o'clock in the morning!

- Is it? I should get up.

- Go to bed!

- Ivy, mon cherie — can you tell if this radio is the kind that gives housewives hidden messages?

We both looked at the radio.

- I think they all do, Maman!

My answer did not appear help her agitation any.

These days she's thinner than a whippet and does a fuck-of-a-lot of brass polishing.

Maman only speaks in French.

She does not like Edinburgh: or its weather: or its people — or my Father — although none of us know why. She likes smoking and amphetamines, and nice shoes and brandy and plastic. She is very thin and very French. She could out French anyone across this entire city. We do not have my brother's body. I want to bring it home and lay it at the back door for my mother so she might one day sleep again. So she will stop rattling around like a wind-up tin toy. I know it is a stupid want! Aren't wants so often that way? My father speaks French offensively poorly and only to irritate Maman. Amphetamine truly is the ultimate patriarchal tool. Men are cleverer than us — it is quite clear. We do the cooking and cleaning and everything else for them and it is all for free. Then they give out amphetamines to keep us thin and efficient and more neurotic than ever? My Dad is steadfast about educating me but he still thinks I will just get married. He doesn't know how many of his papers I read, nor the war journals. I read every bit of political information I can get my hands on. What girls are able to do is limited. Right now we are holding down nearly every kind of job in this country though! The war is presenting a window of opportunity. My Dad talks about that. He talks about the progression of science. He is a nice man. I won't lie. Everyone we know says the same. I think like him but also I think slightly differently. He finds it hard to kill spiders. He'd like me to find a nice husband and have children. It is quaint. My aspirations are — different. Why not become a deadly killing machine?

The shop door tinkles.

A woman places her broly in the bucket.

Her coat drips on the shop floor.

Death.

Counterblow.

REVANCHE!

If good people don't kill bad people — the bad people will kill all the rest of us without guilt or a second thought — that's a fucking fact and then they win.

No?

I want death on my belt.

If I have a natural inclination toward it might as well be — properly used.

The female Recruiter always browses the tea dresses for a good twenty minutes before she comes over to speak to me. I like Violet a lot. I don't know what she has done in the war because she won't tell me. Her footsteps in my shop are my favourite ones. I have given notice to my landlord and in three days time I will leave no. 10 Luckenbooth Close and not return. I prayed to God to give me an opportunity to try and he has granted it to me. They sent my brother to a work camp and the Recruiters explained to me what that means and now I can go to war clear of conscience as to exactly why I want to do this. My brother is not the only person we know who is gone. We had an Aunt who was building bombs in the factories in the Highlands. She lost her hair and then all of her teeth. Her skin began to blister. She died at the end of the summer. It has happened to a lot of bomb making women in Northern Scotland. Our neighbours have lost three boys. My old English teacher was killed in service. So was the man from the chemist. In Edinburgh (just like all over the country) we count up our dead as the year goes on.

Like a flood — the numbers keep rising.

I will be fine!

Other girls do this.

The Night Witches fly in twos.

There is no room for parachutes and they do up to eight missions per night.

One plane up front. Another two either side — just behind it.

Polikarpov-U-2 biplanes are made of wood and they hold only two bombs.

Idle the engine on approach so only wind noise can detect them.

The Nazi's say it sounds like witches broomsticks over head.

It's said they only hear them at the very last minute — just before a bomb hits.

They fly at a different speed to the Nazi planes, much slower and it makes the Night Witches hard to shoot down. I wonder what they do after a night of bombing? Do they singalong to the latest record they love? Do they dance in the mirror? Does all that stop? Do they gouge little strikes for all of the dead on their head boards? I would. I will. I will tally my death count up on my headboard, or carve a mark into the underside of my shoe.

The Night Witches are the 588th Night Bomber Regiment of the Soviet Air Force.

I am not Russian or Ukrainian so I cannot join them.

I am half-French though.

Raised to speak best in my mother's tongue.

It's why the Recruiters came to see me, I can pass for wholly French, I usually do.

They have sent shop girls from all over the country to live in France and appear innocent and pretty and find out anything they can from the German's or — like me — take actual missions when they are sent. I go behind Violet and space out dresses along the metal racks. There are three new polkadot designs. A dark blue Lindy Bop. Pockets on a peasant dress. Seven mustard tea dresses. Two black halter necks. Parachute silk knickers. Seamed stockings. Wrap dresses. Four pairs of high waisted jeans. Pussy bow blouse. A-line skirts. Pleats, tucks and shirring. Shoulder pads. Candy tops with a sweetheart neckline. Belts. An Evergreen playsuit that I love so much I would fly a plane eight times just to see it in my wardrobe. I am shallow. My brother always told me so. I told my mother. I am going to help out a friend in London.

Violet goes up to the counter with a top and she looks like a normal person.

Every time I see her she is teaching me how to do this.

I go and get behind the till and nods so I know we can talk quietly.

- Violet, what if Nazis want to sleep with me?

- Say you won't until you are married!

- Who will train me next?

- F-section will train you as a Field agent, you've already been cleared for security purposes.

We talk quietly at the till — just a young shopgirl talking fashion in a tiny boutique on a beautiful Autumn day, that's exactly what I look like to anyone passing by and it is my danger but it also my strength.

II

She has ectoplasm in her purse. It is a thick, clotted, mucous-like substance. It came from a vagina. It mustn't be exposed to light (the ectoplasm) she has to dispose of it the right way. It didn't actually come from a vagina, the fraud just kept stuffed it there. A common scam. The ectoplasm is paper and egg white, mushed down with chemicals. A fake medium swallows it and regurgitates at will during her seance but this one had no gag reflex. She had to be stopped regardless. It's hard enough for anyone with genuine skill to be taken seriously. Agnes is entirely with Houdini. Track down frauds. Get rid of them. Agnes had thought she'd be sick at the table this morning. Pretending to be a sitter! Watching as the woman lifted her skirts and flung out ectoplasm, expelled it into a bowl, brandished it around wildly.

Agnes stayed behind after the seance.

- I am a member of the Spiritualist Society.

- Aye? What the fuck d'ye want?

Agnes is small but she was raised with nine brothers on a worse side of town than this one.

- The government has repealed the UK Witchcraft Laws, Agnes stated.

- Fucks sake, does that mean they'll no burn you?

- To deter fakes, like you, they've passed a new Fraudulent Medium Bill.

- Are you trying tae say you've really got the gift?

The woman laughed and Agnes tried not to clench her fist.

- Members of the real Edinburgh Spiritualist society are warning people like yourself — that practising as a fraudulent medium is now dangerous, they'll put you in prison for it.

- Where'd you live, Agnes? I bet yer no in a slum. You go out on Leith Walk and take a look at ma sons! Only three ay them have shoes, ye see that washhouse up the street? I cannae get in there without money to pay fir it! We wash with every cunt else in our tenement. I am sleeping with eight, in one room! How many rooms have you got? You got an inside bog? D'ye shite on yer own pan? I bet you dinnae have to go into the fucking outhouse freezing yer tits off every fucking morning, noh?

- There are other ways to get money than conning people in their grief.

- Well my cunts broken and my mouth is tired ay being nice tae men and I couldnae conjure up a real fucking spirit if you held a fucking gun tae ma heid — the factory is full and I've nae other fucking skills, every single day of ma life I wish ma useless husband was dead — so I dinnae have tae worry about him coming tae ma door at night and knocking me up and down in front ay aw the bairns so what exactly does your Spiritualist Society want me tae do? Conjure money like fucking magic?

- I'm sorry. But getting put in jail for a fraudulent medium charge isnae going tae help any of yer kids — is it? Here, take this, and no, don't think I'm rich! I'm in a housing co-operative and my husband's sick but I bring spirits to me all day bloody long even without the will to do so — it's just

how it is. You girls are taking our trade and making it unsafe for us tae practise. I dinnae want tae go to jail cos you cannae stop tricking people and then they think I'm as bad as you.

The woman put Agnes's coins in her bra.

Lit a fag.

She'll be practising again but maybe a bit more canny with it.

Agnes puts her key in the door to her flat glad to be home after this morning's events.

Down the hall to the kitchen.

It must not be exposed to light (the ectoplasm) and it has to be disposed of in the exact right way or she is for it this time.

Place it on the bunker uncertain what to do next.

- Is that what I think it is?

- Aye, Archie.

- If you block the kitchen sink with ectoplasm one more time — I'm fucking leaving ye!

She surveys her husband coolly.

He is ten years younger than her, still in his very late mid-life crisis — a bright crimson teddy boy coat is draped over the sofa and creeper shoes kicked off by the telly.

Place down a J&R Allan and Peter Allan bag.

Agnes has got a few boxes of sweetie cigarettes for her nieces at the weekend, four Atlas comics for them and brightly coloured yo-yo's.

- Are you really gonnae dae another seance, Agnes?

Agnes puts the kettle on.

Her husband is in his armchair staring at a blank telly.

- The telly is off, Archie.

- I just like tae look at it! Is that alright wi you? Fucks sake.

He tuts and inhales his cigarette furiously, keeps staring at the blank telly.

Beside him there is a newspaper article.

- Another news story on the city planners, Agnes, they are fucking this city up the shitter, making it a wee toy town fir tourists!! Edinburgh isnae a big city, it's a large village, there are already too many cars! That City council should listen tae me. They'll end up getting smog deaths ay, like they did in London four years ago, how many died there, Agnes? Thousands!

He triumphantly concludes his point by grinding his cigarette out.

Archie's quiff is lacklustre.

There is a half inch where his trousers ride up and expose thick white socks.

Agnes dreams of a man who listens (like she does) to Miles Davis and John Coltrane. One who buys her silk headscarfs and bracelets that jangle. Who takes her to bed after a brandy in the early afternoon.

Someone who could make her feel — seen.

She wants a man who really, really — looks at her and sees her.

Men go after women with such conviction then when they have them they are discarded in plain sight and just like Bluebeard — they keep the bloodstained keys of their women's souls hostage — whilst coveting any other women they now think they'd like to lock up in their rooms but the one at home better not go anywhere! Her days as a free person are done. Agnes feels so discarded by this man she is legally bound to spend her entire life. He won't even leave her. She just has to live with being nothing to the person she is most often around — Agnes has to go to spirit lately — just to feel like herself.

- So is the fake medium gonnae stop her Fraudulent Medium Act whatever it is then?

- No. I blame Helen Duncan.

- I blame Winston Churchill.

- You blame Winston Churchill fir everything, Archie! Even our blocked sink.

- The man's a fucking Druid!

- I have no issues with Druid's!

- Aye, but we dinnae need one running the fucking country — do we?

- Helen Duncan should have stopped practising when they tried her under the UK Witchcraft Laws, she's been at it for years! Churchill was right to abolish that law! Getting tried as a witch in the 1950s! In Britain! All that cheesecloth and theatre makes a mockery fir those of us who genuinely huv the gift! We've had the Fraudulent Medium Act instead of the UK Witchcraft Act Law fir three years, Archie! The fakes ken they shouldnae be practising. I've had enough ay it.

Archie hovers over his telly dial with a haze of smoke around him. Even although it is early there is already an empty tin of lager by his slippered feet.

- Any jobs this week?

- No.

- Are you just gonna sit there watching Billy Bunter, Andy Pandy and the news?

- *Gies a fag!*

- Did you have to teach the damn parrot to say that!

Agnes pulls her headscarf from the parrot's cage. Its eyes are pure black with a bright yellow ring around them. He has a plume of vivid blue feathers which he preens most of each day. He pecks at her through the bars.

- I'm only keeping myself amused Agnes, fir fucks sake!

- *Fir fucks sake fir fucks sake fir fucks sake ...*

- Say pretty boy, come on Ovid, say pretty boy — fir Mama!

- *Fir fucks sake!*

- The seance will only take an hour Archie, something is trying to get through hard this time and I can't stop them.

- So, who's coming from the real world?

- Dora Noyce.

- The Queen of Danube Street! The most famous Madam in town, ay! What an honour.

- Dinnae pretend you're no goin down there Archie, we both ken you do.

- Only fir tea and sandwiches!

- Aye, and the place really is just a YMCA with benefits, okay then.

- Can you blame me, Agnes? The last time you touched me was in 1932.

- We did it in 47!

- You were passed out, I dinnae think it counts.

Archie hunches back into his chair.

Ovid pecks at seeds.

Drinks as noisily as it can from a glass tube.

The wind brings them sounds down the Close, buses, trams, people — all going about their day, Ovid wobbles his head from side-to-side and steps from claw-to-claw.

Agnes places two tapered candles on the table.

She unwraps a soft velvet black cloth and takes out a heavy crystal ball.

- Seers were just like chemists or mechanics in their time, Archie, I don't know why ye make a fuss.

- Bollocks.

- We just provide a link between this world and the other one. Sometimes it is required. Like your trips tae Danube St.

- It's dangerous, I have to put up with how worn out it makes you, we have to worry the polis will come and convict you, I ken you dinnae think I care but I do, Agnes, is this the lasttime?

- Aye, it's the very last one, Archie.

She opens the drawer and takes out her ouija board.

Places it centre table and arranges the planchette (a tear dropped shape wooden pointer) in between YES and NO. There are two semi-circles above. The first is numbers 0-9. The second semi-circle holds the letters of the alphabet. GOODBYE is at the bottom board.

- It was the Fox sisters in New York made these you know, Archie, in 1848! They asked the first board what it should be called and it spelled out OUIJA. When they asked what it meant it just spelled out GOOD LUCK.

- What time will Dora be here?

- Any minute, she's been tae London to visit a painter called Bacon who brushes his teeth with Vim apparently!

Agnes talks a lot before it happens and they can both feel it already, it's a wee bit like when they tried getting high a few times, a buzzy coming-up sensation that something is started that cannot be stopped for some time.

The spirits never stop visiting Agnes in 5F5 No. 10 Luckenbooth Close.

Not since they moved here over thirty years ago.

Even when she doesn't host a seance for months (to appease her husband) they're always waiting, trying to get her attention, perched on his armchair, or sat on the loo that Agnes is so ridiculously proud of — when she drags out their tin bath and fills it — spirits get in before she does.

The door goes.

Footsteps down the wee hall.

Archie hangs up Dora's lovely fur coat and settles himself down in case they need him.

In his cage the parrot starts clicking up and down.

Agnes settles herself at the head of the table.

Dora Noyce sits opposite, the Ouija board in the middle.

Wind picks up outside.

The wooden shutter slowly creaks itself half open.

- Are ye good, Dora?

- Aye, Archie, I am, and you?

- Great, aye, nice to see you and Agnes doing the ...

He makes a circle with his hand toward the board unable to pronounce it.

- I'm hoping fir a message, Archie.

- We're aw hoping fir a message, Dora, it's God himself who decides what we get!

Agnes tries not to visibly despairs at her husband's verbal shite.

She takes Dora's hands across the table.

Their hands form a circle around the board. It's nice to do a board with Dora because they've known each other forever and the woman is so intuitive — she just lets Agnes do it. Agnes can feel herself drifting part way out in the universe already, collecting particles, where all things are bodiless. She imagines her husband turning on the television and seeing her out there — gathering different coloured strands of energy. A feeling of luminosity is replaced by impenetrable darkness — it raises a vermillion flush to Agnes' cheeks.

Blindness in one eye has never stopped her seeing.

There was always the other one.

Her third eye too — it can look right out of this world and into the other one.

Agnes is so adept at it (has been since she was a little girl) that there is long queue of people from the other side — who know of her reputation — or who have spoken to her before and often try to come through again. Dora Noyce opens her eyes and looks over at Archie and he blushes deeply.

- Dora!

- Archie.

The women take hands even tighter and Dora closes her eyes again.

Agnes ignores her husband's guilt.

She instead begins to shriek.

It's like an alarm.

Higher, higher, louder, louder!

Archie knows better than to touch his wife at this point.

The planchette spins around. The energy in the room is so dense that Ovid's cage is beginning to rattle. Archie forces himself to go across the floor to see what the Ouija board is spelling out. The two women are staring at it in silence now. Agnes' shriek still hangs on the air like a harbinger of what is about to come.

The letters spell out the same thing over and over.

J

E

S

S

I

E

M

a

C

R

A

E

I

S

C

O

M

I

N

G

She knew our sister, she has something to ...

S

A

Y

There is an almighty hammering on the front door and Dora is alert then, as ever — for the police but it is Mr Udnam, wheezing at the door — the old man shoves past Archie into the living space where the women are sat at the table and his face falls as he looks at the board and back up at the women's faces.

- They're just playing, it's a board game Mr Udnam, can I get you a drink of water?

Archie tries to distract the old man.

- Are the sisters coming?

Mr Udnam asks it of Agnes but she ignores him and his answer is spelled out on the board.

Y

E S

- Dear spirits, this is Agnes, I want to thank you for coming, how many are there of you?

F

I V

E

- Is there anyone else?

Y

E

S

- Do you need to ask something?

Y

E

S

Agnes opens her eyes and looks straight at him.

- I have some people here who want to speak to you, Mr Udnam.

- I can't.

- If you don't speak to them through me — they will come straight for you, it will be less pleasant for you, there are five-red haired sisters in the room.

- Jesus Christ.

The board rattles violently.

- Someone else is coming too, a few more, they know you are here.

Pipes clang loudly in the walls.

Mr Udnam begins to pray as the front door locks and bolts itself.

- The sisters are all barefoot, the youngest is six-years old, the next is twelve-years old, the third is nineteen-years, as are the fourth and fifth. Let me listen ...

The planchette spins.

- They're looking for their eldest sister and she is twenty-one years old.

- Elise?

- Yes.

- I need to sit down.

Archie pulls out a chair for Mr Udnam.

- The sisters say there was a fire, Mr Udnam?

- Liars!

The coal embers in the open fire glow bright red.

- They say you sent someone to light a fire at their home to stop them from finding out what happened to your fiancée — their eldest sister, Elise?

- They're fantasists!

- I don't believe they are, Mr Udnam.

- Delusional!

- They say you ken fine well exactly what you had done to them.

- Wicked liars!

- If you don't tell them exactly what happened to Elise — they won't let ye leave here today!

Mr Udnam claws at his shirt like he can't breathe.

The two women around the table are in a deep, deep trance.

Agnes' eyes are clear as a highland seashore.

One-by-one five sisters appear.

Each of them are barefoot, in long cotton night dresses, identical long curly red hair, they hold hands and stand in a row — the youngest steps forward and scuffs her foot — she raises her arm and points at Mr Udnam — she is going to be the first to speak.

12

He calls this his Rothschild suit. Bill is smoking. His spectacles are thin-rimmed. His shoes are worn at the heel and the leather is cracked. One hand rests in his pocket. It is a grey three-piece. A thin black tie: bright eyes: lined face: pointy chin: slim outline. Long fingers and a fedora. He is ashen as the city. Sea-har creeps along the streets. Edinburgh is relentless in her gloom when she chooses, a city of endless night, in this mood the ceaseless grey is enough to numb an optimist. Pea soup! It is hardly an inventive description. Those who describe Edinburgh's vampiric soul as thus are not his kind. They are no starry angel headed hipsters! Twin-souled city. All the darker for the light and to find himself back here in secret is thrilling, he just wanted to come back and hide for a few days.

Bill keeps doing it.

Hoping to find himself somewhere else that makes sense.

So far it is not working.

Tendrils of sea mist wisp around a corner off to eat another street and just like that the grey lifts!

A sky appears above in blue as if it was there all the time.

He can return to his young man soon.

Can't stay away too long.

Who would want to? So few have his kind of soul. Rarity is sought by the poet — in intimacy and art. His young gent has no reliability or money. He has little airs or graces, he is in fact uncouth but he has never short changed Bill on the muse.

First the poet will attend to what must be attended.

Morning rolls.

It's a thing they do here.

Soft warm blackened bread things and sometimes it is eaten with square sausage. The poet does not eat often. Simplicity in food appeals. The other revelation is a white sausage supper from Brattisani's seasoned with salt and sauce. Local chippie sauce is particular to Edinburgh he has discovered it this time around. A brown sauce drowned in vinegar. That meal is enough to keep an addict going for some time. It is good at intermittent occasions to refuel. Of course he has not gone to the bakers for rolls or milk. The milk cart and horse trundled by some time ago. It was the money exchange he was after. No.10 Luckenbooth Close hovers over him. An old spindly stone giant. The poet counts out four notes. Places the rest in his back pocket. He pushes a scuffed front door open. His favourite graffiti is still there. It's a pictograph of a devil child. Bill takes out a knife. Adds a cigarette to her slender fingertips. He is bereft without a decent gun at his side. At least he can carry good hunting knives here still. The lock on the front door does not click closed behind him. A skylight at the top of the stair is cracked. Leaves cling sodden to the glass. It looks like a child's dolly pram is on its side up there too. The weather — mercurial as it is — had one of her hissy fits a few

days ago. Rearranged the detritus of this city on a whim. She has been known to rip stone masonry from buildings. A waitress died from such a thing. Quite a temper tantrum the weather has here, once a year there are winds so strong a lamp post will be hauled down, or the Forth Road Bridge on the Firth of Forth closes itself to lorries.

Bill is most at home in a storm.

He stands on the bottom landing torn.

Go up or down?

Sobriety is less illuminating than supposedly educated people insist.

He pushes the basement door gently.

He's not hiding this from John per se.

Just best to do his own business in private.

It's his way.

They met last year — after the International Writers Conference. Bill always smiles remembering that one. Writers leaping up like jack in the boxes declaring themselves homosexual. Demanding one cut his long, long hair off. Someone asked Trocchi (on stage) (in a rammed room) what his inspiration for literature was.

- Sodomy!

- Trocchi, you beautiful creature ...

MacDiarmid nearly spat all his teeth out when that was said and Bill fell a bit in love with Trocchi there and then. Afterwards — on a walk home — through streets with puke and takeaway wrappers and empty bottles (excessive people here) (he likes that) cleaned before the tourists wake (there had even been a pair of man's pants covered in shit) — he walked to Mary Queen of Scots bathhouse.

He considered moving right into it and writing a book.

Not that anyone would let him!

Bill would have lived there forever though.

William Burroughs, Fairytale House, Holyrood Palace, EH - fucking -whatever.

Does the queen have a postcode?

The old bath house is tiny, ancient, with a crooked chimney and small barred windows.

They could just pass him drugs and cigarettes through that.

Across the street a young man had been asleep on a park bench. Bill sat next to him. Lit a cigarette. The man woke. Smiled. Held his fingers out for a cigarette and it seemed that they were already part way through a very long life together already when they met, the awkward part of getting to know each other — never occurred.

There will be time to climb up the worn stairwell after he's sorted himself out.

His love will be drunk as a long-eared owl.

Intoxicating to have him to go to!

That time with one you want to be with more than anything else.

Never thought he'd feel like this again!

Bill has left all he has ever believed in or cared for — many times. Arriving is a form of leaving. He cannot seem to quit. Finding a way to leave behind everything and start over again — has become a way of being.

Non-attachment, authorities don't like it.

Who wants crooks and drunks and junkies to seek tendrils of free thought?

Send them out multiplied.

A relentless octopus of free thought to descend all depths. Gain incandescent light! Grows more pods. Become a deity with sharp tiny teeth. Grow ever longer tentacles. The great octopus cult of the future! Authorities would not like that one. Bill has known for a long time — endorsed crooks, drunks and junkies have one label for their power only. They call themselves — govern-

ment. That single word seems to be used as a get out clause for literally anything. Those crooks and junkies and drunks — dispute the right of any other human — to think in any way that could be considered free. There is a click behind him as the basement door closes. Bill descends. There is a dim light. The air grows mustier. It is laced with urine and something darker he does not want his psyche to even detect, his nose (finely tuned) seeks out a faint vinegar smell, an odour like vitamins, sometimes there is no smell — other times it is weirdly like band-aids. His nose is always trying to detect it. Everywhere he goes!

The basement room has a low ceiling, rubbish and needles litter the floor.

She is in the corner sat in lotus.

Wizened as a monkey — they call her Little Mama.

Looks up at him with luminous eyes.

- Bill.

- Little Mama!

She grins with darkened teeth and eyes hunched under bone and a jukebox glows merrily beside her.

- We hacked into the electrics since you last visited.

- I see, more lights and music!

- Someone's electricity bill upstairs will be huge for this! We made sure it was ran off the councils bill, a just retribution, no?

Bill nods.

Picks his way across to her.

His hat skims the roof.

He takes it off and holds it in front of himself respectfully.

Holds out the money.

It disappears.

- Pick a tune, Bill.

He goes over to the jukebox. It has circles glowing in blue light under the glass dome. Drops a coin in. The record arm drops down. *The End of the World* by Skeeter Davis — lilts through holes in stone walls and travels off down into the catacombs below the city.

- My favourite young poet, just a blink of an eye since you were last here, no?

- It feels like that, Little Mama.

- Doesn't it?

- Always.

He's walked out that door and had a year elsewhere or that was just the dream and he has been here all the time. That's how it feels. He nods. He wants to do it here. Little Mama gets her accoutrements together.

- Are you living here now, Little Mama?

- Aye, still got the same supplier, they live up in the Gods — seventh floor. They take their cut, and stay out of sight of police, I stay high, win-win. I fall asleep here sometimes. I've got a flat down in Granton.

She waves her hands around the basement like she is in the Beverly Hills Hotel.

- Did you go back inside, Little Mama?

- Twice.

Little Mama looks like a little child fixing up.

- You remind me of my ex-wife.

- Aye? Why d'ye think yer back here then, Mr Burroughs?

- All things happen for a reason, Little Mama, we live in a magical universe.

- We sure do kid.

- I got love in me.

- Oh really? For me? I hope you don't cut yer wee finger off tae impress me?

- Bill smiles.

- That's sick.

- Why, thank you, Bill!

- It's why I like the people of this city, you are nothing if not dark in your humour! You know they say I cut it off to impress my lover but it was demonic possession. They would have locked me away for longer if I'd told them. Why do you think I got so good at scrying?

- You curse those who cross you?

- Damn right I do.

- I bet you do a good curse, young man.

Bill sticks his stumped finger up at her and she laughs with glee. He selects another button on the juke box with it. *Be My Baby* by the Ronettes spins.

- When ye going back to London, Bill?

- Probably in the morning, or maybe Sunday, or Saturday, I don't know — it depends on what happens before then.

- Be careful, things are tight in Scotland the now, clamping down on all crime hard.

- Is that right?

- Aye, they just hanged a man.

- Where?

- Aberdeen, few weeks back.

- What for?

- Killed his girlfriend, she had a husband and a kid, it was a bad scene, Bill, he kidnaps her when she goes back to the husband, drags her away on some hell car ride, fucking kills her, men, youz can be so shit!

Bill sits down next to Little Mama and takes his coat off.

Rolls up his sleeve.

As she cooks — candlelight hooks her nose and crags the caverns of her eyes.

Little Mama empties the needle into her vein.

Inhales deep.

The spoon is hot and ready — it glides toward Bill.

He drops his needle into the liquid.

- He killed her for going back to her husband?

- He killed her because he was a psychopath, there's never any other reason than that.

- Sometimes there is.

- Aye, well, they hung him on the new gallows. Two-hundred people waited outside. The thing is Bill, and you know this — wealthy men make mistakes. Working-class men commit murder! Then they get hung. Not as a deterrent tae murdering women, noh, they have little reason tae try and deter that — fear ay that and rape helps keep women in oor place it's why they hardly ever convict them firrit — they hung that man tae warn the great unwashed — tae warn other work- ing- class men — watch yer fucking step ay — we can just fucking hang your kind!

- Excessive.

- Isn't it?

- Yes, Ma'am, it is by far. So, my precious, wonderfully dark little Mama, why are you still wasting yourself on this place?

Bill gestures around.

- What am I gonnae do ya great big arse? Be a poet? What wummin poets are you little beat boys supporting?

He laughs, eyes crinkle.

Little Mama is the only woman Bill has ever met who relentlessly calls him out on his bull- shit. There is something highly comforting in a woman seeing who you are — without judgement.

Just saying how it is — whilst not compromising on clear sight. Little Mama is a warmth in the glow. They are in the place beyond. No usual constrictions on a human mind. Hours pass. Songs spin. Walls breathe. They cook. Spike. Nod.

- I can feel this building, Little Mama.

- Aye, ye will.

- Dangerous isn't she?

- Aye, something in her history that gies me the creeps.

Little Mama points over at a wall to where an ancient work bench sits, above it there is a rusty double toothed saw nailed to the wall.

- If only I could translate the language of an ancient building?

Little Mama shakes her finger at him.

She is yellow.

Nods in lotus.

Eyes closed.

Bill gathers his coat, puts his hat back on, bows to her — unseen.

Up the stair, to the door of his rental place on the sixth floor.

Knock softly.

- I thought you'd never get back, where's the rolls?

Bill kisses him on the cheek.

- What blessing is a barely dressed angel for a wretch like me, on days like these?

Follow him down the hall. Bill discards clothes as he goes. Shoes off. Socks gone. Wriggle long bony toes. Hairy line on a concave stomach. All around the floor are cut-ups. Words circle their feet. Snipped out from newspapers.

- No rolls.

- Fuck's sake, what do ye want fir breakfast then, Bill?

- To get high and fuck. Love, lust, want — what a way to glide through the cosmos!

- That's it?

- After that — just words. It's all I want. Words. I want to infiltrate and disorder meaning.

Rearrange the fabric of existence in 26 letters of the alphabet. 27 if you include the ampersand.

News papers are stacked up.

Pages gape where whole sections are missing.

There is a round white plastic television in the corner. Two aerials stick out the top giving it a humanoid appearance. A brand new tape cassette player sits on a low wood-effect sideboard. It has seven tapes. Bill brought them from America. This young man commandeers his space, time, location with ease. Two egg-shaped armchairs face a sash window. It is a tall window three-panes wide. The living-room has been cut in half with a cheap partition wall. There is a narrow bedroom and long living-room out of what must previously have been a good-sized lounge. Bill places a glass on the floor and lowers his ear to it.

- There is a sound coming from under the floorboards.

Downstairs there is a low repetition of words and hymns and curses and ancient secrets that could be recited by a human.

- Voodoo?

- It's a parrot. It belong tae ma neighbours Archie and Agnes, down the stairs.

Bill lays out spreadeagled and naked — on words all over the floor.

He appears to be wearing marigolds.

The poet cannot remember putting them on. Marigolds are a new thing. He supposes he must at some point have been offering to do the washing. Time is strange in this city and even more so with his lover.

- Why does a parrot go on like that?

- It had a psychotic break, after what happened tae Archie's wife.

Bill nods.

His young man is handsome in an unkempt way, and he's dark haired with a voice to die for. John is getting him to stroke his skin with marigolds on. Kink. Plastic, oil, he must have placed these on his hands whilst he was nodding and Bill is not going to judge him, he's going to fuck him.

Later, when the buzz eases.

John is very naked.

He is the most naked young man Bill has ever seen.

His eyes have flecks of real gold inside them and John is bending over him on the floor — Bill wonders if he took too much — his racing heart!

John is going to speak.

Waiting for something to come out his mouth is terrifying.

- Are you okay?

- There are 3.136 billion people in the world, John. We could count up how many legs that is, how many livers, how many arms and fingers and toes. Of course we'd have to account for all the toeless folks, it does no good to ignore them.

- It's too many, Bill.

- Fir what?

- Democracy.

John lays down beside Bill.

- I took some LSD, I put some in yer tea unnaw before you went out, it should be working.

Bill, how can all of the people on this planet have a consciousness?

John curls beside him soft and gentle as a cat.

- Some of them don't. Not my neighbours back at home. Or their dog.

- Consciousness radiates fae you like fire, I uhm sorry ye've been cursed with so much of it.

- Amen.

- It's like loving a volcano, a sage. One day you will be very famous Mr Burroughs and I will still be an undertaker and we will still be living through the strangest days, you think I'm using you but — my love is true.

- I know. I'm sorry.

- I'm not.

- What we need to do is devote a day solely to thinking up new inventions.

- The world needs that!

- A day that should be spent considering science — not poetry — I am a poet and as a whole we are a suspicious people — what we all need to look at is the anti-matter.

- Bill, d'ye want a cup ay tea with just sugar in it this time, nae LSD, maybe milk and two?

- Do I want one? Would I like one? A question, I see. You are going to brew, tea?

- Aye.

- At a time like this?

- Like what?

- Well, we are declaring our feelings are we not? It always seem to happen to me in Edinburgh. Like last year — all the writers gathered publicly. They spoke and fought. Arrows have been slung — there will be repercussions.

- Are you talking about the Writers Conference?

- That does indeed seem to be what I am referring to.

- Do you take sugar?

- I do.

- How many?

- At least ten, or eight if you're running low.

- Do you like it strong, or weak?

Bill stares at him.

- You probably don't even know how the hippos were boiled in their tanks, do you, John?

His lover comes back out of the kitchenette. There are cut-up lines of poetry and prose bluetacked all over the walls. John picks one off the wall and reads it.

- *Telstar Marilyn!*

I3

Climb up onto the kitchen table. Adjust the rope above my head. I tie the rope tight. Pull on it to see how much weight it could take. Turn it over in my hand. If I placed it around my neck the rope would burn and if there comes a time when I have to do this would it be rope or a bullet? I'd take drowning if it came to it. There would be no memory after that. No. 10 Luckenbooth Close has some kind of purple memory vibrating through it like an endless hum. A little girl wanders the entire nine floors every night. It is only me who sees her. Let the rope go and the laundry maid swings above me, free of skirts. It's breezy in the kitchen. Windows are old and rattly. At least it helps things dry. There is a fruitcake in the cupboard, I made it on Sunday and for someone who can barely bake I'd call it a triumph. Morag and I will have some before we go out. The wood on our kitchen table is unvarnished and it is rough under my bare feet, we have laid plate after plate on this table, tea after cup after pot after saucer. Wine and vodka. Cigarettes and purses, we have laid each other down on it and all the other things and I want to leave just one memory for her to remember me. Whilst I wait for her to come back I splay my toes trying to touch all of those memories so I

don't lose them.

Morag opens the kitchen door.

She leans on the frame and smiles at me.

I pull up my skirt.

Slowly, inch by inch so she can see my thighs appear, further up.

Turn to show her my legs from the back and then turn around — sway my hips, pull my top down a little — it pleases her when I dance for her on the table, I'd do most anything for that look! She is smoking. Always, that's how I see her. Her blonde hair is curled and bobbed short and it's almost dark brown at the ends. I like to think of her in the cinema with all that light on her face and to me she always looks like a silent movie star.

- Exactly what are you doing, Ivy?

- What does it look like I'm doing Morag, mon chérie?

- It looks like you are hoping to seduce me?

I pull my skirt all the way up and nod with my breath held like it always is just before she touches me. She places her hands on my thighs. This will be our last time.

Morag parts my knickers to the side.

Tilt my hips — up to meet her tongue until I have to grip the rope hard in my hands.

I've dated boys and not one made me feel like this.

I think of words left behind in closed rooms.

In drawers.

Single.

In groups or clusters.

Help me — I need you — I don't know how to love.

Her tongue is warm and fast.

I like it when her fingernails dig into my skin.

Thoughts do as they will. I see another woman step behind her. The Recruiter — Violet — it's a fantasy I shouldn't have and so I have it all the time — in my mind's eye she straps on an antique dildo and fucks my beautiful girlfriend from behind really slowly — stroking her thighs as she does it, kneading her arse, I feel Morag's tongue quicken as if it were true — I am helpless in that moment I would agree — to anything at all. I can feel the orgasm building and I try to catch it, the feeling — I imagine I am bound to a chair with my legs parted so wide I can't close them — the Recruiter sliding her hands down over my nipples from behind and kissing my neck and pulling on my hair, I imagine Morag kissing the Recruiter with tongues and it makes me jealous and she knows it and so she buckles up and tells me to open my mouth and suck her pretty dick, she tells me to do it well — looking down on me at the whole time ...

- I'm going to cum, I'm going to ...

Morag pulls me closer in.

I shudder all the way down my back — my legs, are shaky.

Lean down to kiss her.

She is cat-like.

My girlfriend is beautiful and strange and sweet and innocent.

Like some underworld Queen.

God has no problems with our love. He created it. The church holds issue. It's why I don't go there. Morag pulls over a pot of strong tea. It's lukewarm. Pours it into the saucepan. Takes out her old make up sponge. We always used to get ready like this. It's how it started between us. Levi watched the first time she did this to me, before when we couldn't get stockings — we will get ready like this tonight for old times sake!

Morag dips the sponge into the tea.

- What shade do you want?

- Light brown.

- Do you think women will do this in the future?

- Stain their skin? I don't see why. They'll have cheaper tights then.

- Is it the last time, Ivy?

- No!

I lie to her so easy it's like my tongue was made for untruths. Morag leaves a lipstick ring on her cigarette. Smoke spirals up toward me. The radio plays quietly. *I'll Be Seeing You* by Bing Crosby.

Rain patters off the window.

- It's the longest night of the year, Ivy!

- We should light all the turnips when we come home. I can't believe you carved all of them for little me!

- Of course I did! Aye, let's light all of them, definitely.

- It's creepy enough in here half the time Morag, you'll need the candlelight when I'm gone.

- I know! Did you see Mr Udnam is putting up a new housing association plaque? Aye.

There's some big honour being bestowed on him by the city. I keep seeing him getting all these things but how come he's doing this and we *still* can't afford to live in the city? One day nobody will be able to afford to live here but rich people. They'll live elsewhere most of the year! It'll be an ancient city that's just a playground for posh cunts. We'll travel in by bus sometimes to look at it. The buildings will all be empty. They will be full of silence.

- Imagine us marrying men and living on the same street, Morag?

- Raising our children at school together?

She taps my leg.

I turn.

Watch the rain.

Say nothing.

We can do pretty much everything without speaking.

She is my favourite quietude.

Both of the Recruiters came here to see me the second time.

Commented on how innocent I look.

They said Germans like French girls who flirt. I acted it out. They seemed satisfied. Left.

When Morag came home she had no idea who had been sat here a few hours before. She fell asleep.

I laid with my hand splayed on the bedroom wall. I imagined that little girl's hand splayed on the other side of the wall.

I knew then.

I won't come back to no. 10 Luckenbooth Close.

I will live out my life somewhere else after this war.

There will be an after! There has to be. I look over at the sideboard. Our carved turnips — are so pretty! Acorns are strewn around them. Some have been covered into tiny ornate flowers — a miracle — turnips are hard to carve! Another is covered in tiny moons. One turnip has a long root at the bottom of it like an elephant trunk. Morag has drawn eyes on it and topped the hairy turnip lid with a tiny bowler hat we use in the clothes shop. She painted three small turnips black with silver stars. One turnip has been painted black and hollowed out and inside it — she has made a tiny scene. There is a forest floor. A little carved turnip wolf is stood on a miniature boulder stone. He howls at a fingernail moon. There is moss on the turnip floor and long twigs make it look like a forest in the night. A sound of drums begins to pound down low out on the street. Hundreds of them! Pagan drummers marching down the High St. It is Samhain. The white witch will be given her ritual sacrifice on Calton Hill. There will be fire breathers up on the hill and a bonfire and tiny sparks of light flying off it.

- What is that?

- Beltane drummers. Did you see that new guy for a lunch date today?

- Might have.

- Morag, you are so cheeky, how many of us are you in love with?

- Just you! We can fit in one more film before dancing at the Palais, Ivy, please? They are playing *Pride and Prejudice*, Alduous Huxley did the script.

- Aye, I'll buy you popcorn.

- How come you have so much money all of a sudden?

Shrug.

She sharpens the kohl.

I turn to face the window.

Morag runs eyeliner from the top of my thighs all the way down to my ankle. Straightest line in the world, it is even more perfect than a silk stocking seam, she does the second line so my left leg matches the right.

Images flash through my head.

A dog barking at me in a river and walking across bare fields covered in snow. Soldiers in pursuit.

- I fucking hate this war, you know that?

Morag never swears. Has she has guessed where I am going? I have caught her reading my books. All the papers Dad has in his office. The worst are so hard to read. Eugenics and racial cleansing were the last one I found her going through. It's horrific. She cried a lot that day. Morag would not be against it if I told her where I was going in the morning or what I want to do I know she wouldn't but she'd worry about me and I won't have that for her — I hope she stays in this country forever and lives out her days — happy and beloved to someone, I love her more than time and If I can take even one action to keep someone as good as her safer — I will do it.

- Nothing has been right since they took France.

- I know.

- Do you know what I read, Ivy?

- No.

- I read that it says above one of those camps — Arbeit Macht Frei — Work Makes One Free. Those people are imprisoned by others, and they are working them to death, aren't they? I've heard even worse things. They are doing experiments. Trying to work out how to create a perfect human and then sterilise everyone else. It is so creepy. There are kids in there! Families! How can they do it, Ivy? How can a human do that to another human being? What is wrong with them???

She is crying.

I am numb.

I hold onto her and rock her gently and stroke her hair as lightly as I can to soothe her.

- I don't know, Morag, some people make no sense whatsoever to me.

I want to tell her about the tickets in my purse and that by the time she sits down to Christmas dinner I will be in France. I have heard so many worse things about what they are doing in camps and my brother went into one and he did not come back out again and I can feel only a white rage down in my stomach like the beginning of a kettle whistling and instead I swallow the lump in my throat — I am not telling her one thing.

- That man is so insane!

- I know.

- Why do the papers publish his propaganda?

- I don't know.

- Why is he allowed to have that much power? He is just one person! Is it because they agree with him? No Jews! Whites only! An Aryan race? Are you kidding me? We got through one World War already for this horror? The world better not let anything like this ever happen again, Ivy,

I can't take it, please don't leave me and go away. I don't think I can take that either. Why can't you just stay here?

I kiss her on the lips.

- Have you written back to Levi?

- Aye.

- Is he okay?

- He's good, he says he is anyway. I can't believe you are both going to be gone now!

- Don't worry, you'll be okay, and I killed the mouse.

- You did?

- Yes.

- It wasn't a bad mouse.

- You can't know that, you never met any of his friends, that mouse might have been a total asshole all its days.

- But it was so small.

- Small mice can be assholes too, Morag and it was riddled with disease and it was sitting on the back of the sofa last night when you were sleeping on it.

- You killed the mouse whilst I slept?

- I don't know why you are so upset, Morag fir fucks sake!

- How did you kill it?

- I picked up a glass bowl and put it on top of it, then it tried to shoot it's skinny arm out with that little pink paw thing and I slammed my hand down on the bowl because I thought it was going to get out and it broke it's arm, snapped it, clean in half. It was bleeding on the floor.

- Gross.

- So I took the broom and stood on it and it crunched a lot for such a tiny thing.

- You can be so cold, Ivy Proudfoot.

Smile with a touch of pride despite myself.

She has no idea.

I don't tell her I watched it before it died, it lay on its side and its heart was beating so fast the whole ribcage was just a huge indent of oxygen going in and out and in and out. She wasn't asleep either. She was in the bath. I was as quiet as I could be so she wouldn't hear anything. At least I know that I can kill something now and everyone has to start somewhere, a little thing and then a bigger thing — I didn't know the Recruiters would come to me today and give me a phial of poison and tell me my mission would start before I even left this city.

- What we need is music and dancing, have you got your ID cards, Morag?

- Aye! The polis from St. Leonards asked for mine the other day. I asked him what he was looking for and he said they had to check to make sure I wasn't a spy, Ivy! A spy! I think he was flirting with me like but really! Have you heard anything so ridiculous. Do you think I'd make a good spy?

I return her gaze, light and easy, kiss her on the cheek, tuck her hair behind her ear, run my fingers down her neck.

- No, but I think you'd make a fucking terrific wife.

- Oh, well, fuck you very much.

- Morag! You are not built for things like that, you're too good.

- Right then, Rudolf Hess! Just because you worked on the SOE listening stations, and you're a trained FANY wireless operator, just because you're going to live with your Aunty down south and get all qualified to do things I don't know anything about, there is no need to get all above yourself, Ivy Proudfoot!

I go through to the little bedroom because I don't want her to see me cry.

Archie is playing his piano upstairs.

Someone is cooking meat. It smells like three weeks worth of rations are being blown on one massive meal! It makes me hungry. Fruitcake and tea! Maybe some cheese and oatcakes and peppered mackerel and pickles or just a boiled egg with salt and a tomato, then a brandy, or a sherry, or a gin and tonic or two before we get to Cupid's Corner at the Palais.

- What time are you leaving in the morning, Ivy?

- Early!

I go into the wardrobe — the bottom of my bag is false.

When I got this after graduating from Training 1 I knew it was becoming real.

All the items are there.

In my head I only speak in French already.

For me it has been like that for months.

I dream in it. I

will not speak one word of English after I leave here tomorrow.

Not even through final parts of training.

All those years with Mum speaking only in French at home and she never knew one day I would use it to go and make repairs — of even the smallest kind — for what was done to her son. Morag and I have slept in this bed for a year. Flirted in the same bars. I have had her back. I held her when any man left her. I have been there whenever she wanted me and even when she wanted to share me with Levi I was happy to do so— to his delight. He sent her a letter. I know they miss each other so. I will hold her later. Naked, it is the best way to sleep — held close, then later — to be able to reach for her in the night. My favourite kind of touch is when we are both still half asleep, to kiss each other blindly, fall into an abyss where it is only want and touch and sweat and both of us warm from sleep. All those hours together during blackout where we didn't go down to the air raid shelter. Just closed the shutters, curtains too, not even a line of light to come from any

window. Our whole apartment felt totally closed off from the entire world — what a way to love!

- Life is now, Ivy.

She stands at the bedroom door, nails painted, dress on.

- You look stunning.

- Are you going to miss me?

- Every single second.

There is a lump in my throat then. I have to turn away because we won't ever do this again.

She is so dear to me and it turns out you truly never really know how much you care for someone until you are about to walk away.

- Can I write to you where you are going, Ivy?

- Aye.

- Will you leave an address?

- Yes.

- I love you.

- Stop it!

Morag laughs. My inability to deal with emotion! A man is not a mouse but the principle of murder is the same. I can do this. The Recruiter said he would be at the Palais and they have shown me a photograph. He will be talking in English and covering his accent to pass as a soldier from down South and I am exhilarated and frightened that my urges will not see me through, that they are just the terrors of a child scared of its shadow and I will be unable to kill him in public without being seen at all and I will have failed at my first mission after all.

Morag goes to finish getting ready.

I love the sound of her wandering around our flat.

I have memorised the codes I need.

I know how to tap and tap in the night, in tiny rooms — send out messages on (hopefully) unassailable waves. I will ride a bicycle in France. I will go out to a railway line at night. My job is to be less about spying and more about sabotage. The Recruiter is pleased with my progress. To hinder Germans in any way possible. To send back any and all information. I met three other SEO women on Training 1 and each of them was clever, funny and brave. Two were such good actresses they could hide the pain of leaving a child behind. I admire them with everything I have. The Recruiter has not pretended. We will have a survival rate of roughly 50% except wireless operators for whom, the percentage is much less. The pipes in the walls clank hard again. The little girl in the walls is warning me. I ignore her. Always have done. I open my bag, and check it again. I am good. I can do this. I place my travel case back under the bed. Ignore a feeling that the little girl in this building is watching me begin my mission. That it is her who is clanking those pipes in the walls right now warning me not to go.

I hope that she looks out for Morag when I am not here to do it.

- You really do look totally stunning.

- Thank you, Ivy Proudfoot.

- I fucking love you, you know that?

- I do.

Take my girlfriends hand so we can go out for one last night together, open the door — ready to meet the night.

I4

Black clouds race like war horses pounding the sky. Pink electric lightning splits the darkness. Luminous clouds roll under darker ones above and there is a low roar of thunder several miles away.

Lights go out.

Archie clicks the lamp on at the plug and there is nothing.

Mr Udnam laces his fingers together to pray. Dora gives herself completely to the seance. Her and Agnes have gone through so many of these now. The parrot steps back as far as he can into his cage. The room sheds its floral wallpaper. It is bare and empty. There is only a chunky wooden joist exposed as the ceilings are being replaced. Workmen have placed it on top of two big metal barrels ready to put up later.

The first girl appears on the left of the beam.

She kicks her bare foot at least five inches above the table below.

Agnes and Dora look like they are praying before dinner.

The child is tiny and she doesn't seem six-years old yet but she is.

Her name is Mary.

She holds out her hand so another appears from the ether to take hers.

It is followed by a pale freckled arm attached to the body of a boyish twelve-year old with curly hair and a pointy chin. Her name is Olive. Four bare feet swing now. In the middle a third girl appears, nineteen-years old, her name is Rose. All three girls look to the right expectantly. Two girls appear at the same time. They are also nineteen-years old. The twins were born the same year as their older sister. Long curly hair down their backs. The same simple cotton nightdresses as the younger sisters. The last two girls stand on the beam and look directly at Mr Udnam. The twins are called Bessie and Clementine.

His face visibly pales.

Over at the table Agnes' one blind eye turns white.

Her blue eye is luminescent.

Archie grips the sides of his armchair.

- May I ask if there any sceptics among us?

- No, Agnes, we are with you, Dora says.

Archie nods his head reluctantly.

- I welcome the dead into my home with the same warmth and respect I would offer the living, it is the positive energy of the sitters that is required to maintain this connection.

Dora squeezes Agnes' hands.

The planchette moves slowly around the ouija board. A glass of water on the table falls over, drips of water drop onto the wooden floor. Agnes keeps her back as straight as she can and takes a long slow breath.

- Spirits we are here to receive you.

- Amen.

The sisters talk in unison.

Agnes can clearly hear them, as can Mr Udnam who is now crossing himself and praying in mutters that make no sense. The smallest sister Mary shoots a paper aeroplane from the spirit world toward him. It is the tiny children who are always able to see everything. Like children and animals in the living world they are still so close to the other side that they can flit between the two with ease.

- What we have here today is highly unusual, there is not one presence in the room as of yet but five.

Archie rolls his eyes and slams his fist on the armchair.

The two eldest girls swivel their heads around to look at him but he can't see them.

- I welcome each spirit into the home of myself and my husband, may we serve you the best we can.

- Amen, amen.

Dora falls deeper into some kind of alert sleep.

- We wish to speak to those blessed with light.

- Mercy.

- We hope you may communicate with us today in truth, if you are present in the spirit world can you indicate your intention?

The piano plays five high notes all by itself.

- I feel a powerful presence in this room. Dora, I have to ask if you are ready to continue and I need your assurance that you won't break the circle no matter what occurs?

- I am ready Agnes, I'm here to support you.

Archie has tears in his eyes.

There is an electric energy in the room.

Agnes appears beatific. Kind and ageless, this is where she is most herself. The bells at St. Giles Cathedral toll up on the close. Rain thrums hard. A steady rumble of thunder moves further away now as black clouds race toward hills in the distance. Mr Udnam takes off his jacket, his hat, his tie, loosens his shirt, he looks like a caught man — one who always hoped his past — and the truth — would never catch up with him.

- There are five sisters with us in the room. Dora, Archie, I want you to send these girls only love and light. I can see them in the middle of this room, back some time ago when the whole building was being renovated — that's what it looks like — am I correct Mr Udnam?

He shrugs but the veins on his hand are pulsing and purple and his lips are red and his face is sweaty. Each of the girls stands up on the beam and jumps on it until he shudders and he looks up able to see them because the guilt he has in him is an energy the girls can use and they do.

- The building was renovated yes, in 1910!

- I know you girls have been trying to reach me for some time, I have felt your presence.

- Agnes, are you sure you want to do this?

Her husband hisses it across the room and the girls look back at him and he can't see them but he can feel their intent.

- I had to know I was ready to receive what you have to say.

- You won't be ...

Mr Udnam mutters this and sits back in defeat.

- I have seen the youngest sister before.

- Mercy, mercy.

Dora crosses herself as well.

- I have heard your treads on the stair behind me for years and I am ready now to listen to whatever you have to say? Let us begin.

Mr Udnam has his head in his hands.

Each of the girls heads swivel toward him in one motion.

Ten green eyes blaze.

- Who lit the match, Mr Udnam?

The oldest girl leans towards him, her spirit calls him to look at her and he does.

- Mr Udnam may I ask if you can hear the girl's for yourself or do you want me to spell out on the board what it is they are trying to say?

- I can hear them.

The empty water glass rights itself on the table.

- Are those of you in the spirit world in distress?

- Aye.

- Has a wrong been committed against you?

- Aye.

- Is the perpetrator of that wrong in this room?

- Aye.

- Can you point that person out for me?

Agnes looks up at the wooden beam — she offers a soft smile for the girls who are there — she has a silk scarf wrapped around her head — she does not cover her all white eye but occasionally she blinks to see them more clearly again. Her skin is soft and lined. Archie's face is wracked with worry for his wife. He cannot intervene but he can tell this is far beyond the normal Sunday seance's they have held in their home and some of those knocked her out for weeks. Dora Noyce's face is set with determined strength. Each of the five sisters raises their right hand at the same time and points directly at Mr Udnam.

- Mr Udnam the girls are pointing at you, can you see this?

- Yes.

- I believe the message that is coming through today is for you, are you willing to receive it?

- No, no, no, no, no!

The old man roars at her and the parrot pecks at his bars — he is wide eyed and pacing.

- Mr Udnam there is only one chance to hear the truth.

- I don't want to.

- We do it in this world — or we do it — in the next ...

- I'll wait.

- If you do it in the next when you've been offered a chance to repent in this life — you will be treated far more harshly for your sins.

Archie intervenes on behalf of his wife.

- Can you afford that, Mr Udnam? How bad can it be? Just take the message, this is causing my wife distress, her health suffers for this!

Colour has drained from the old man entirely.

- I don't know what to do!

- You are an old man, ready to pass soon yourself — do you not want to show you have at least tried to hear the truths against you before it is your time to seek the light?

- Yes!

He spits blood into his handkerchief.

His chins wobble down to a long turkey neck.

His head is bald.

Mr Udnam's eyes are sunken with folds of skin in a darker shade underneath, dark age spots mottle his cheeks and he coughs into the handkerchief again. The girls note this. Nothing goes past them where he is concerned. Agnes was trying to contain the huge energy radiating down from that beam but realises she cannot. There is a feeling in her that if she does not keep it together right now the very haunches of the building will lock into each other and glide upward. An undeniable sense

that this whole building wants to stand up and walk away from an unendurable sorrow. Mr Udnam's eyes grow darker even than the spirits. It is clear to Agnes that if he does not hear this then he will pass from here to limbo. The man says he is open to hearing but he sees no wrong in his soul.

- We have been following him for years, the eldest twin says.

- We need to know who lit the match?

- Our mother was asleep.

- You had us murdered in our beds because we kept coming to your door, looking for Elise, did you not, Mr Udnam? All five of us would come here smartly dressed before church on a Sunday and again on a Tuesday, sometimes on a Friday.

Bessie says this quietly.

- We only ever had one question and you did not answer us then, did you?

He looks over at Bessie and Clementine.

They hold hands.

Watch his face for a reaction.

- Who lit the match, Mr Udnam? Did you know our mother was the only one who got out?

Did you know she could not pay for our funerals and had to let us go as paupers, you did know that it was in all the papers that you bought up all over this city — all the people you know in those papers who report things in the way you say. You know our Mother jumped from a bridge not two minutes from here because you murdered us, don't you?

- I am so sorry, Agnes whispers.

- Her son went first in birth, then five daughters and another missing.

- Our sister left home before us Mr Udnam.

- She was beloved to all of us.

- We didn't want her to go.

- She came here to live with you.

- Engaged tae be married we heard.

- To the very Minister of Culture, our mother was so proud!

- A step up, that's what she said!

- All the steps up!

- She lived here with you downstairs and you had her dresses made fir her and hair done at a fancy place and you did everything you could to make her look like a lady but she couldnae bring you a child could she? That's why you got Jessie, did you think we didn't know?

- What did you do to her, Mr Udnam?

- Is that why you killed us?

- Because we kept coming to your door to ask questions?

- You were scared we'd ask them on the street, where's our sister?

- Did you kill us because she left you?

- And eftir what you did, we don't know what it was but we will not stop following you until ye let us ken so ye might as well dae it right now!

Olive slams her hand off the beam to emphasise her point.

- Did you kill us because she left you and you didn't want us to know why?

- Where is our sister, Mr Udnam?

Mary asks it in the smallest, nicest voice she can muster.

Rain has softened into rivulets on the windowpanes.

The man stops rocking.

He takes his head out of his hands.

Archie is staring at him, unable to hear anything of what is going on he somehow understands it all, close to his wife, much more so than she knows. Dora sends her strength out to every-

one in the room understanding innately — female energy and how it must be raised — by the older women — to the younger. Agnes's mind and heart and soul are totally open to these girls and their heartbreak and she will not stop now until they are heard.

- We died on a Wednesday.

- Five of us in one fire.

- The fire was in Leith, I remember, it's you?

Agnes asks this.

All the girls nod.

Archie wipes tears off his cheek, he looks so worried for his wife.

- I am so sorry.

- Don't be sorry, we don't need pity Mrs Campbell, we need answers from him.

- You must answer them Mr Udnam, you will only get one chance, you do know they have come to escort you from here today?

- Escort me where?

The girls smile.

The little ones begin to play a hand clap game to keep themselves amused whilst the older ones do the talking.

- Our wrongs — always escort us when it is our time to seek judgement, Agnes says.

- I am not ready!

- You are not the one who decides when you are ready Mr Udnam. Did you think retribution or repentance only occurs in this life? It rarely does. You will be served for all your sins. There is one chance to tell the truth and account for them whilst here in human form and I suggest Mr Udnam that you try for the sake of these girls to get — at least that right!

Agnes's one blue-eye swivels toward him.

The pure white one is swirling.

There is ether in there — the other side. It is present inside her. She is a portal and a gate. She is a high priestess. Agnes has no fear of what is occurring although she can feel a darker presence grow near.

- They can ask me, I'll answer.

His shoulders slump.

- You may address him directly now, girls.

- Where is our sister?

- Who lit the match?

- Which do I answer first?

- Did you pay a man to burn us to death in our beds as we slept?

- Aye. I did. He was a tenant of mine, on the second floor, he used to shoot the 1'o Clock gun every day and he was owe me, for decades, for something only known between me and him. I told him if he didn't want to go to prison he must do just one thing.

- Our little sisters didn't die from smoke inhalation, Mr Udnam.

- They died in the fire.

- In the newspapers it said we all died from smoke inhalation, that we were all dead before flames touched our skin, it wasn't true.

- You told them to print that kind of horrific evil lie didn't you?

- Where is our sister, Mr Udnam?

- She went to America, she left me!

A heavy tremor goes through each floor of the building.

- We don't believe you.

- That's because you are wicked! Liars! Fantasists! Delusional! How do we know you are not evil lying spirits?

The girls speak together in one voice.

- So says the man who murdered us in our beds.

- I am confused! It was a long time ago, I cannot remember, it wasn't that bad!

- That's what every evil man says!

- *Can't remember.*

- *It wasn't me.*

- *Don't ask me or you — are wicked.*

- *Leave it in the past.*

- What has to be gained from bringing it up, girls?

- We've searched the world and the ether for our sister and she has not appeared yet, we have come to escort you from here today.

Agnes looks up at the girls.

Each has the bitten lips of an angel — just a step out of the light.

Some of their arms and legs and cheeks are heavily scarred with burn marks.

The two little girls stand up to join the older sisters now and all of them take hands in a row.

Angel wings poke up above their shoulder blades.

Feathers sway down by their thighs.

They hold hands tightly.

- You don't get to choose which angels come to escort you on your way!

- Dear Mary, mother of God, please forgive me!

- It is not her forgiveness that you are going to need. We will only ask you this one last time

Mr Udnam, where is Elise? What happened to her? You burnt us to death in our beds so we would stop asking questions, why did you need our silence if she had gone to America? Did she drown on the way? Where is Hope? Where is Jessie? We are taking you to the other side today, Mr Udnam, we have to go with you any minute now, where is Elise?

Mr Udnam stands up.

Agnes looks from him to the girls.

Her husband is crunched over, crying, catching as much of this narrative as he can from what his wife says. The parrot is stunned silent and still pretending itself to be dead. Dora is wide awake.

- I don't know where they went after!

- What do you mean, they?

The Ouija starts spinning and the planchette spells out.

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Agnes looks up at Mr Udnam.

- Jessie MacRae is on her way, I can feel her coming down the levels.

- No.

He shakes his head.

- Is she alone?

Olive asks it sadly and her sisters look at her worried.

- No, there are two others, an adult and a child.

- What did you do to them?

The smallest girl flies down from the beam to scream in Mr Udnam's face — her feathers flutter around her and fall to the ground — the sound of cloven hoofs progresses slowly — down the hallway — as he turns pure white.

William Burroughs (49)

take me to your word maker so I can plead for my pitiful life

15

Bill turns his head so his ear is pressed against the floor. It is entirely possible to slip through the decades in between these floors. Travel forward or back in time. There is the voice of a woman. A girl child and an older sister maybe, it is hard to work out. Someone should let that parrot out the window. A bird is not fit to see these kinds of thing. The past is superimposing itself on the present. He could try to work out what the great unconscious is trying to convey but there is no logic in it. His lover is going through all of his collected futurism images. He throws his fingers out. Still tripping — he holds them up in front of his naked body. Waves them back and forward. Selects another image. He holds up each picture for Bill to inspect. There is a family on a boat. The mother has an antennae growing out of her head. Then there is a glass house, it is split level. His tackle sways as he raises each image. His lover looks so serious as he raises a picture of great domed worlds with trees in them. He stares for a long time at spaceships that look like electric jellyfish in the great black deep. There is a hospital using centrifugal force to counter ageing. Spaceships to fly home

from the opera. A self-driving car whose humans look out the windows forlornly. There are networks of multiple tube trains under cities, and telephones where you can see the person you are talking to. His favourite is a tall tattooed woman wearing glass space helmets. He looks at it for a full ten-minutes and then lifts it up to the daylight.

- Tomorrow land is going to be so bright, John!
- Skies of fire, space invasions.
- Robots everywhere! We already have those you know.
- Where?
- Your clock, that was the first robot.

John looks across at the kitchen clock as if seeing it for the first time.

- Or the washing machine, all the gadgets designed to do jobs we don't want to do are robots. They are building cars, fixing brains, they'll be writing all the words for us next, retraining us to be like them — robot poets to replace the real messy imperfect originals like me.

- Bill, do you want to go tae the movies?
- Why are you whispering?
- Am I?
- You are John, yes, we will go to the cinema but I am too high right now. Is it true?
- What?
- They used to bury cats in these big old walls?
- Aye, they did that.

His lover gestures wildly at the wall.

- Why?
- To ward off evil.
- Funny way to ward off evil if you ask me, not that I love cats, I really don't.

- I want to take you to the Dominion. It is a nice cinema. Mr Burroughs, would you like to go to the movies and hold hands with me?

- What's on?

- They are playing a movie version of *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

- The Harper Lee novel?

- That is the very one.

- I do want to hold hands with you however films of novels make me uneasy. They're trying to steal words and put them into boxes. It's not where the worlds of novels are meant to be. My words exist in here you see, in my mind. Then they exist in your mind. Nobody else gets to see how they pass between us — it is a form of alchemy! Of all the art forms writing is the most intimate and strange. I'll never see how you see the world I've created. You can't ever really see what I see either, no? Still we somehow meet each other in there or recognise in the other person that they've been there too?

He lays on top of John, bares his teeth.

- Is that a yes, Bill?

- Films are often just moving adverts for fuckability.

- You have that.

- So does Monroe, but I don't want to watch her mutilate Miller.

- So harsh!

There are words stuck all over the television.

- Words belong out in the ether — out in the programme — they are the very first virus.

John sits in between his lovers legs and rest his head on his thigh, strokes his ankle and smokes.

- They infect us. There are ways to go back into that original programme — to experience freedom from all these things we have to do in our bodies each day.

- I like the things we do in your body.

- You are too complimentary.

John watches him pensively.

- Is it true?

- What?

- Ach, it doesnae matter.

- You want to ask me about my wife don't you, if I really shot her dead?

- Not, if you dinnae want to talk about it.

Bill does not want to go there.

- *Let's do our William Tell.*

- Balance a glass on your head?

- *I'll trust you with my life.*

- Don't be dead on me for so many decades!

- *Why Bill?*

- It's a dagger to the senses, Joan.

Whenever he is in this building she is on his mind and he doesn't know why.

- What do you want to know, John?

- How did you learn to live with it?

- I didn't.

Bill takes off his marigolds.

- They're for keeping your hands dry when washing dishes, Bill.

- Not for jerking you off?

- That too, he smiles.

- But humans are waterproof.

- It's so you can make the water more hot.

The poet looks up at the ceiling and his eyes are watery. The air around them changes. Outside there is a fairground somewhere. Buskers and a band play on the street. All of Edinburgh is alive and pulsing just outside their window. The day has done what it always does — it has passed the humans onto night so it can take a shift. There have been four seasons in one day. This early evening has brought an azure sky.

- I did do it, yes.

- And they put you in prison?

- No.

- Why not?

- Because I come from a wealthy family and they don't punish people like me, what happened was a mistake, that's all, a hideous, and highly regretful mistake.

Takes his hat off.

He looks older without it on.

John hands him a cup of tea and it is perfectly brewed now.

Tears.

Eyes.

- You are the most precious form of kindness, John.

The words of cut-up running alongside them on the wall — all begin with the words, I Am.

I am Nixon.

I am an industrial robot.

I am the first teacup to orbit Earth in an American.

I am but you're not.

I am a word, but words have birds, birds are the words and I am birdy.

I am the arse snake — you are the idolator.

I am Maker and Melody and Plan.

The younger man traces his older lovers hands and stops at the lower part of one of his pinkie's which has been entirely cut off.

- Where is your fingertip?

- St. Louis.

- What's it doing there?

- Just being a fingertip. I don't know, maybe they buried it, farewell small digit! They put me on the psych ward for this you know. I delivered it as a young man to my psychiatrist one day and he did not appreciate it.

- He clearly never had a cat!

- Quite.

- Okay, Bill, how about music instead of the cinema? Shostakovitch is playing with the London Symphony orchestra, he has eight cellos in his ensemble. I think I prefer Vishnevskaya. I used to play Shostakovitch when I was preparing bodies at the cemetery — it's meditative.

- All they want to know is what he thinks about Stravinsky and to concoct some story of a rag and bone boy done good — Europeans are obsessed with that kind of stuff — he's a nervous man and talented, they should leave him alone.

- I wish that parrot would stop screeching what the hell is going on downstairs?

John thumps on the floor with his foot but a cacophony of thumps and noises and squawking only appears to keep building.

- The media is used to hound and censor free thought.

- I'd agree, Bill.

- The problem with mind control is finding ways to create enough distance so that even for a short time, you can see it quite clearly for what it is — I find putting my brain in the middle of the

universe helps immensely.

- How do you know it is in the middle?

- Can you hear that parrot?

- I can hear the parrot.

- You know, John, when I was receiving ever more criticism and they wanted to ban more of my work — I decided to go and visit an old friend in the desert. We went up to the top of an old volcano. We took something similar to LSD. Not your garden variety girl next door kind — this is a special hybrid similar to peyote — it's called DMT — the spirit molecule — I won't go into right now because your beauty is distracting me, but we were ready — the night was dark and all you can see out there in the desert at night is stars — you can see the actual curvature of the earth rolling down the hill — when I laid back I was — falling into the sky. It is only ideas that keep us here. Brainwashing from the machine — makes us think our bodies are places that house us until we die when in fact they are just a rental space and we could go on vacation from them any time we want —leave for other dimensions without a passport or a permission slip. Do you want to come to other dimensions with me young man?

- I want to go to the cinema, it's all I could handle — right now.

- Where is your sense of adventure?

Bill laughs, kisses his lover on the neck, runs his fingers down his legs.

- To go where, Bill?

- Nearer to our real home, not this here illusion of life.

- I like illusions, especially if they are comforting.

- I like the way you taste.

- I like the way you kiss.

- I like your cock.

- How very delicate of you!

They grin and dance slowly together around the small apartment. They have pulled the futon out so they can lay on it. A lava lamp in the corner gives a warm glow to the room. The parrot downstairs has quieted down. John places one hand very gently on his cheek.

- You want me to be your partner in the cosmos, Bill?

- Yes, I would. If you'd like to do so.

- I could dig that.

- Everybody could dig an astral companion my friend, if you find the one you truly love above all other then it makes every second so much better — utterly mind blowing in fact — so just last week — I am out in the universe, having a little time out from the our earth grounded gravitational axis and the stars and universe — were just flying in through my left ear — see this big one?

John snort laughs.

- Uh-huh.

- All of that universe was flowing in here and right out through the other side — I was totally bodiless — headless even — I experienced sensation but I can't tell you what form I was in out there.

- It sounds terrifying.

- What I do know is the programme were fully aware I had left my body at that point — they could tell that I was infringing on territory hitherto not often fully unexplored by the two-legged mammalian variety — not only that but I was open to staying.

- What did the programme make of that?

- It was unnerved.

- Why?

- Rules my friend. Like the rules of this building we are living in.

- The stair cleaning? Nobody does that anymore.

- No, can't you feel the energy of this place? All those other decades are tugging at our coats. Every time you walk in here it pulls at you, frays whatever it can get a hold of — at the edges. This building is a psychic vampire — it drinks human essence. It leans psychic tendrils into your aura and takes a long, hard, hit — it's why you are weak, it's what vampires do, they make you think that siphoning off your energy is normal!

- Why don't they take yours?

- Because I'm a time binding machine — time travel is literally at my finger tips. I exist here in this room with you right now, but I also exist in other rooms right now — with other people — at different times — people who I have not met — who I will never meet — those people are reading my words right now — in their own personal way they make those words come to life but they have travelled from me right here — to them right there.

- You're making my brain hurt, Bill

- I meet them in some way in other dimensions. My worlds travel in and out of homes I will never see. They go through minds and cars and buses and boats and planes. They interrupt happy events and broken hearts. I send my worlds to those places. Other people seek them out! I don't go in person but I pass through other souls and leave something of my imprint but those readers — they are in those worlds too — and they leave something of their imprint. In that way — there is a world created out there that none of us can point at — something invisible but ever changing. Many of us have been to it and left something of ourselves there and took something for ourselves out of it.

John pulls on shorts, curls under Bill's arm.

The three-bar fire burns merrily.

- I love your voice.

- That's kind of you to say, John but my voice is best in words, in writing, that is where people meet me and I meet them. They bring their memories, tastes, the smell of food in their kitchen

as they walk through it reading my book. Or the feeling of sorrow ripping out of them. Or the way their head turns caught by some pretty thing that just flew by their window. There is a me that exists both here in the space I am in with you now — but also in the space where I was writing those words. Then I left a time continuum. Those words end up within the inner dimensions of strangers. They might pick up a world I made. Take it through their own time travel. Get on a plane: attend a funeral: ignore their lover — flirt with a stranger — my worlds are in their possession for those times. They are not mine anymore. In art we can compress the present and the past into a time capsule — pass it forward into the future. It can be done via images but words do more. There is a level to them. There is an imprint within them. We alter compositionally in relation to that interaction. The virus of words is not outside us — it is wholly within us. It holds the key to unlocking our inability to metamorphose. Kafka had it absolutely right. Gregor Samsa awakes one morning without the ability to speak — he is only able to screech like some kind of ungezeifer. What kind of a monstrous vermin has all language removed from it? Gregor Samsa has no ability communicate by blinking, or talking, or writing, or drawing — without that facet he becomes reptilian to others. With no ability to trade our intent or ideas or affiliations — we are atomic meat parcels — flesh covered skeletons — shit dripping parasites. Even with the ability to communicate — most of our race struggle to transcend because we have been wholly programmed by language. Think about garbled political speeches — they cause confusion — whilst exerting some kind of terrible and powerful psychic and material control over billions of people!

- But a silent person is not an ungezeifer?

- No, not at all, nor is someone with no ability to communicate — in traditional forms. Society won't have that as a truth though, will it? What would we do without the distraction of words? Would we more clearly see the actual mechanics of the machine out there and inside here? All around us and in every atom — we are trained like Pavlov's dog — to respond to an endless supply of fake and essentially empty reward based systems. We seek approval of things that are not even

real. If we ever see the machine clearly for what it is — all structures that have been built to manipulate us into believing that they are the powerhouse — that they are the mains supply — they only way — that if they are disconnected all the lights will go out — that they are the only word and reason and hope. If we ever truly managed to see that monstrous machine — that ungezeifer — clearly for what it is — all the structures would fail.

- Every one?

- They are failing already my friend.

- Society can't continue like this?

- No. You mark my word, all the structures are going to come down, one by one, like this building.

Bill pulls his hat down over his eyes to nap.

John lays down beside him on the futon, the two of them tucked under a blanket. The poet never makes any attempt to touch him unless he indicates in some slight way that he wants it first.

- Thank you for not, expecting anything from me.

- Why would I expect anything from you? I am not one of those predatory homosexuals John, I find them such a bore and to be honest, lately, I'd rather just have company, sex is not everything — is it?

- No.

John physically drops his shoulders in relief.

- It's not that I hate to do it, Bill.

- It's just that you, hate do it?

- I do.

- It's okay.

- Do you think I'm a freak?

- No, I think you're a divine being of complex and nuanced wonder.

John gets up to make more tea.

- There's biscuits, or benzedrine?

- A little benzedrine is always welcome, I do have opiates that are a touch stronger though. I may have to imbibe again soon but not if it bothers you?

- No! My friend will be here soon, he'll bring wine. He's probably been held up by the celebrations, some festival in town, not as good as the book festival that year. I'd never seen anything like it! Me — just an embalmer of the dead — sitting in a bar with all of you. Real writers — I've only ever read or seen in the papers and never thought ...

- That one of them would be offering to suck your cock at half past ten on a Thursday morning in a rainy city — where bagpipes play alongside trumpets — and thinkers demand their platforms — because thought is everywhere and should be spread far and wide for the benefit of those that should be free?

- Aye.

- You are quite beautiful.

- I would have let you suck my cock that morning you know.

Bill waves his hand dismissively in the air. John bends down to kiss the poet. He cradles the man's face in his hands like an infant. For a long time they are just two sets of souls staring into each others eyes. It is gentle and intimate. More so than touch. More so than the heat or the want or the violence — although there is time in the night yet for that. The face before John changes as he stares into it. He sees Bill as an older man with a much thinner face. He sees him as a Viking. As a fisherman, it's like he can see him in all the other lives he has been incarnated through and he loves him — in every one.

I6

The booths sell silver jewellery. I gave Morag 4d and she is standing in a queue at the phone box. A man holds the phone down whilst people shout at him. Clearly he is expecting a call. Run my fingers over silver earrings. Stop at the rings. There is one with a heart held in two hands.

- That's a Luckenbooth design, it was gied as a gift tae a fiancee.

- It's pretty.

- Aye, what's lesser known is it was cried a witch-brooch, protects its wearer from the evil eye, a kind ay talisman.

I pick one up. Hand it to the sales assistant. Slip it on my finger. I pay the assistant quickly. Morag waves at me through the phone box window, she's finally got in. I see them across the other side of the road watching me then.

Recruiters.

They cross over to speak to me.

- I thought I had passed all the tests, Violet?

- You have, I just want to make sure you really want to do this tonight?

- Yes.

I look like I am just standing next to a tourist who is looking at St. Giles cathedral. Morag waves. I wave back. I remember I left her in a bar at the bottom of Leith walk once because I had to take my brother home. When I walked past on the way to work the next morning she was still there, she had out drunk everyone and was having a bacon butty with the cleaner. I turn and Violet is already gone. The night is clear now. Can even see a few faint stars. Touch the cold Luckenbooth ring and get a horrible feeling. Morag opens the red phone box door. A police car pulls down the street. All things slow. Time is not going to be the same anymore. Already it is different. Morag looks left and right. Crosses the cobbles. Presses her cold hand to mine. Takes my arm. She always puts hers inside mine, same with her hand, her side of the bed is right, we think in opposite order to each other.

I must think of ordinary things.

It will keep me calm.

- Look, Ivy, there's Mr Udnam with the Lord Provost.

- I see!

Mr Udnam holds a booklet. *Edinburgh — The War Time Guide*. He brandishes it in the air. The men laugh loudly at something. A car waits beside them with its engine running. They are no doubt going out for dinner somewhere fancy.

- You know it was the Lady Provost's Comfort Fund paid for that, Ivy?

- No, I did not.

- Aye, I used it tae find the address ay the Citizen's Advice place, it's got a guide to Sleeping Accommodation for men in the forces, they can go tae the American Red Cross on Princes St, the YWCA, the Gunner Club, the Royal Scots Club, lots ay other places and they can get fed at Church

ay Scotland Canteens, or the Granton R. N. Trawlers Club, the soldier I went out with last week took me there.

Giggle.

- What else does this fine publication recommend?

Mr Udnam and the Lord Provost show two women into the car. They wear glittery dresses. Faces over-powdered. Mr Udnam makes a great point of his own dignified exit off the street. He slips down into a plush leather interior.

- They have addresses fir cinemas — Garrison Theatre on Clerk St, New Picture House on Princes St. the Usher Hall fir music. It mentions the polar bear pool at the Zoological Park. There's a quote fae Walter Scott in it, next tae the Scott's monument, it says — "(He) stood for his country's glory fast, and nailed her colours to the mast." It recommends the public Baths on Infirmery St, golf courses, Central Library, Fountainbridge library — all the usual.

We walk quickly through the city. Entirely in our bubble, inured from cold. Approaching the Palais we can see there is no queue.

- Okay, baby girl — let's do it!

Morag wears a silk scarf tied in a bow and twisted to the side. Palais de Danse is best after midnight. We are early.

- D'ye think he'll be here?

- That yin fae the gang?

- Aye.

- Morag, ye can do better than him! It'll be US air force and local lads, same old. We should line up with the girls. Let them dance with us.

- No!

- Aye.

Say it firmly.

Hope she doesn't notice.

We turn onto the pavement outside just as a boy who looks like my brother walks by.

- Oh, Ivy!

- I know.

- Just like him!

Shake my head, numb.

- Craig had such a beautiful face.

- Like yours my lovely, Ivy.

- He was the bravest boy I ever knew.

Morag pulls out a wee bottle of gin and hands it to me.

Take a tot.

- Did you ken Craig was born too little?

- No?

- Aye, he weighed the same as a few bags ay sugar. That tiny wee thing grew strong uhn wily uhn fearless.

I will train harder than a girl has ever trained before.

Tonight is my biggest test so far and I am ready for it — my skin feels electric.

I see the boy across the dance floor.

He looks just as young as Craig did when he left for war.

The recruiters got here before us.

They are in the middle.

Dancing happily and they do not look at me and I glance over them like everyone else. They say that boy is thirty, he's been here for three months. I didn't think it would happen like this. I am meant to be doing this in another country! I am still the me I was before. I am not changed yet. It's

okay to see he is a person and it is okay to discount it. That separates me out from them. There are those who are good and do not hurt others and then there are those who do so deliberately because they are full of hate. My hatred is based only on what is right and what is wrong. I am to leave a little of my good me behind me forever on this dance floor. I prayed hard to God to give me strength. I did not want to let my heart be filled with hate for fascists. It did not work. I hate them with every fibre of my being.

Does it make me no less good?

- Ivy, you look so serious, what are you thinking about?

- Liliias Adie.

- Who?

- The last Scottish witch pulled out from a church congregation. They tortured her and then drowned her face down in the mud flats ower in Fife. Her head is on display in St. Andrews.

- That's horrific!

- Only scientists see it.

- I'm not sure that makes it any better ...

- I went to see Liliias Adie's resting place.

Morag pulls me onto the dance floor. There is us. The recruiters and there is him and there is my need to keep talking and watching every move without appearing to have any concern. I smile to tell her the rest of the story.

- Where is it?

- Torryburn, I went to see where she lay in the mud flats, they put witches down that way so they could not get back up again and seduce mortal men fir the devil.

- You could seduce the devil himself, Ivy Proudfoot.

She pulls the small of my back in a little closer.

Smells my hair. It is so beautiful to think of us like this, or in the bathrooms when we've locked ourselves in a cubicle. Spin her around. See the man behind her again. I have been called to this by fate. Watch him. Smile at her. Think of how to progress. I must be as clever as I can be. I will underline all of the things I need to learn. Say them in my head. Then out loud in secret. Then test myself. Plot. Plan. Train. If I do not act — then I am complicit. Who can refuse their own moral obligation when a war like this is going on?

- He's handsome.

Morag spies a young American soldier smiling at her.

- Very.

Two of the big Edinburgh gangs file in and take their walls — away from the US soldiers and the Scottish ones, the dance floor is busy — I have to still watch the man — he is at Cupid's Corner buying a drink. Just one more minute like this. It feels so good to have her in my arms. I am not particularly tall. I would not say I was overly clever. Yes, I do have a little bit of a limp — especially when it is cold. The Recruiter said in France I will be able to make it work for me.

- Do you know what I heard, Ivy?

- No.

- Up and down the country witch covens are gathering en-masse to spell-cast against Hitler.

- I'd like to spell-cast him with a bullet and a vat of boiling oil; some poison and a stake — then an electrified bath for good measure.

Nod and watch the German spy skirting around the dance floor.

His eyes fall on me for a second and my blood runs cold.

The devil hides in mortal men. He does not deserve a clean death. Perhaps do to all the Nazi's what they used to do witches in Scotland?

Torture first.

Starve and interrogate.

Humiliate and parade for everyone to see.

Then drown them all face down in the mud flats on the Firth of Forth?

Cut their heads off.

Then drop a huge slab of stone onto their back.

- What I don't get Morag, is how come men can be so evil and ignorant they get like — entire countries to play with? But women — well we get a fucking wart on our face and they drown us?

- Not totally!

- Not far off, if we had some kind of disability, or maybe we just smelled weird then before you know it they are hauling you out of your lifelong church congregation and put to death in front of everyone in the most inhumane way possible!

- You make me hate men sometimes.

- Not all of them, not Craig or my Dad, they can't get away with all that either but those other ones, they can murder millions and get medals! They can commit the most heinous crimes and everyone around them is set on nothing but protecting them as if they are good and righteous and all of them pretending they are not just fucking despicably evil! They get gold bathrooms and private chefs, it is not right!

Morag kisses my cheek so gently and grabs my hand.

She gets cigarettes out the machine.

We go back down into the main hall and I go over to the bar where he is.

He is next to us now.

I position Morag so he is looking at her only. She smiles at him. He is not looking at me. Men never look at me when we are together. Now I see the use in it. I point at two fruit cocktails behind Cupid's Corner bar. He has one with an umbrella in it. The barman makes two more identic-

al. I am in my purse. Putting down coins. In my bag I am unscrewing the little bottle with one hand.

He is talking to Morag now. I don't hear words. I hear the room as if it was a swimming pool. The band sound like they are playing under water. A warble of so many voices and feet tapping and clicking and hearts beating and slipping the liquid down into his drink. He takes it without looking — he is still spellbound by my girlfriend and he drinks it, fast. I don't want to drink our drinks anymore because I panic I got it wrong and so I spill them both

- Ivy!

- Sorry!

- Are you okay?

He leans over and I do not want to look back into his grey eyes but I do.

Nod.

Grab her.

- This rotating dance floor is so good! There is never a break between songs!

He says it to her and we walk away. My entire body is shaking. The music comes back in so loud again now. I hear everything crystal. Like I just came up from a submarine. One band spins off the stage. The next one comes on playing even faster and wilder. There are girls on the balcony upstairs, foot on the railings, looking over, pretty dresses, air smells of perfume. I don't look back.

- Bathroom.

- Okay.

We make our way around to them, they are our favourite room in the Palais, so decadent and huge. I throw myself down on a chaise, light a cigarette, pull her down onto me, grinding into her until the whole place shudders.

Floor.

Ceiling, chandeliers, then we walk back out onto the dance floor.

As we walk out there is a fuss in the corner as the man falls to the floor.

Other side of the room.

Someone rushes in.

He is put in the recovery position. Pale. Another member of staff looks frantic. Morag is saying something. I am nodding. The man is carried out of the dance hall. He disappears from sight. Dancers reconvene in the space where he collapsed — as if he was never there. We join them. Ivy spins me back out and in.

It was as easy as I thought it would be.

I dance — as if I won't sit on a tiny rickety little war plane flying out of England tomorrow. The engine so loud as we fly over the French sea. A stranger beside me keeping an eye out for German fighters. Flying low down over an area where I have never been in my life. I dance as if I won't strap on a parachute. Jump into a blue sky. As if there won't be utter panic for a second before I pull the paracord. As if I won't be flung back up into the sky, before sailing down into France like a white fluffy dandelion flowers being guided by a warm breeze. I dance as if I won't utter a word again — unless it is in French.

That's what will happen this week.

In the future ...

I dance — I have a sense of what will come so I dance — as if I won't be shot at one night whilst walking home from an explosion that was laid by my bare hands. I will think the bullet only grazed my head but it will in fact be lodged in there — without me even knowing — for years. I dance — as if when I am caught and repeatedly drowned to almost the point of death — when they ask my name again — I won't still refuse to give them it. I dance — as if I don't already know — that they will give no recognition to a woman like me. I am not rich, or middle-class, or educated. I don't need that anyway. All I need is to keep seeing my brother's face and knowing one day he walked into a camp and never came back out again. I am doing what I can for my girlfriend, for the honour of my family. I dance — as if I don't know that no matter what I do — when I utter my last

words in French, as an old, old lady and when they celebrate so many of the British spies, many, many, many years in the future — the name Ivy Proudfoot will not be mentioned at all. I dance — like when I die — the other Night Witches will come for me — in a wooden bi-plane — fly me out in formations of three.

Agnes Campbell (63)

the devil's daughter, her lover & the child

I7

Thunder rumbles across the Firth of Forth. The sea is black. Whorls throw up seaweed and drift-wood. Waves slap off Port of Leith harbour. Masts rattle and shake. There is a whistling sound where boats funnel wind. All the pubs in the city are closing. Bar staff hunker down for a lock-in. Those still on the streets hurry. Coats over their heads. Umbrella's torn back spikes exposed and useless, abandoned on streets and bridges and bus stops. The trams have stopped. Soon they will be taken down for good. No trains will run tonight. Buses swerve on slick wet streets. The Water of Leith has burst its banks. The colonies in Stockbridge are flooded. Residents evacuate lower levels. Fire services are on high alert. The hospital emergency room at the Infirmary is overwhelmed. A man mops the floor continuously so wet shoes don't make someone else slip on it. Under the city the catacombs are still. Down in the belly of the city there is scratching. Rats scurry out of the tunnels. From down on the street — golden lights at No. 10 Luckenbooth Close go out one- by-one.

It is the third time in ten minutes that this side of the city has blacked out.

Archie finds his wife's massive box of candles.

His hands shake.

So does the flame.

He strikes match after match. Each nook and cranny of the apartment becomes bathed in light. Shadows flicker. Archie could swear he sees the shadow outline of five angels for a second but he has never had the sight his wife has, nor Dora with her openness to it — or Mr Udnam stricken with fear and guilt. Archie sits back down unaware that his wife is listening to the sound of cloven hoofs walking down through the building.

Agnes steadies her breathing.

Collects every bit of experience she has from all the seances held before.

The sisters wait on the wooden beam, each head is turned toward the door.

Mr Udnam clenches his fists.

Dora is meditating as deeply as she can to hold Agnes in a space of strength for what is coming. The sisters begin to hum a song quietly. It lilts in and out of the footsteps, another set behind them and a third, smaller. They seem to be coming up from the belly of the building, from the guts of the basement and an echoey spider webbed attic — all at the same time. Mr Udnam shakes. Agnes nods at her husband to give the man a throw. He cannot pass out yet. Archie awkwardly drapes a woollen shawl around the man's shoulders. In all the years she has practised. In all her days! It turns out there is only one place in our life where we are truly in our calling! For some it is a love affair, limbs entwined. For others it is their child, or a house that meant more to them than any other, a job. Saving someone unexpectedly or overcoming fear. For little Agnes Campbell — it was a natural born skill that had all the other children not wanting to play with her. It made her afraid in every class she ever sat in — that one day she'd be pointed out and dragged from the classroom and taken to prison or the mudflats. She has practised year in and out regardless. Let people know

through her work — this world is far from all there is. Energy resides in flesh only as long as the earthly plane ties us to it. Those we love or miss or need or hate or want answers from — are not gone, they are just not here in physical form. Agnes has played her part. Healing those so weary with grief they cannot go on. She can feel last remnants of thunder rumbling across the dark crags of Arthur's seat. Little kids unable to sleep, faces pressed to windows or under the blankets on their bed. She wants so much to hold the two younger sisters. You can't do that with spirit. What she can do is hear them. Do whatever she has to do — to allow this to play out. She feels other spirits coalesce. Those who have looked after her all through her childhood. They too are gathered in this room and worried for her, Archie's ancestors stand behind him, Dora has her people it is how it is — all of the ancestors convene but most especially when we need them. A light appears behind the sisters that leads all the way back to the one light.

- Dear God, let these girls finally reach their true home tonight.

- Amen, says Dora.

Archie crosses himself.

He never does!

A peaceful feeling settles over Agnes. Not all who claim to possess her powers are fake. It is indeed worth risking jail, or her husband's disappointment. For decades his lack of understanding has left her more than lonely but what great thing is achieved in comfort? The little sister clutches her elder sister's hand so tight. Her fists and arms are still dimpled. Her tiny feet are so perfect. Two tears slide down Agnes' cheek. The entire sky flashes light pink and then black again. The footsteps are now so close.

- Where has she been, Mr Udnam?

It is the eldest sister, allowing him one last opportunity, to save his soul.

He shakes his head.

Archie sits further back in his chair as their living-room door appears to open by itself. The parrot tucks his head under his wings and stays prone on the floor — shaking. Rain rattles the windows. It flows down the gutter outside. A rumble builds so deeply it feels the entire building could split in two.

- Jessie?

The littlest sister Mary, goes to run forward and is stopped by Olive.

- W a i t ...

Agnes looks up.

Mr Udnam turns toward the door and right in the middle of it is a young woman with black hair and bright eyes and two perfect horns on top of her beautiful head. She steps into the room. Raises her long skirts. Reveals perfect cloven hooves — a gift — from the ether. She offers a hand behind her down the dark hallway. It is taken by Elise – delicate as she has ever been — still in love with her Jessie — more even than ever in spirit it seems. The two women stand in the doorway. Between their legs, emerging from under their skirts, is a tiny little girl, no more than three-years old, with her own tiny perfect white ivory horns, a contrast to her Mother's long dark ones — and she has dimples — much to the delight of the younger angels.

- Hope!

- We never stopped looking for you, not all these years, he wouldn't say where you had gone!

- Olive, Mary, Clementine, Rose, Bessie.

- Elise!

- Did you hear what happened to us?

The five red haired sisters look at their elder mirror image who is wide-eyed with emotion for her younger siblings.

- I heard, I couldn't come ...

- Why not?

- Mother didn't make it in the end, you know that too?

- I know.

- Is she with you?

- She's in the in-between place, for now.

- Is that where he's going?

The twins point at Mr Udnam.

- No.

- I thought I was being escorted by angels?

- Angels don't get to go where you are going, Mr Udnam.

Jessie carefully says.

She turns and curtsies to Agnes, at her table, all lit up by candle light.

- Thank you, Ma'am for having us in your home, we have waited a long time, to get this opportunity, we've been unable to make contact properly with anyone since we passed although we have tried! It feels like we will never move on from this building ...

- What did he do?

Clementine asks Jessie for an answer.

- This is a trick, it's witchcraft you hear me? I can have you put in prison!

Mr Udnam points at Agnes and Archie stands up ready to go for the man if he moves toward his wife.

- No, it's not, Agnes states.

- Elise went to New York when she left me! This is not real ...

Elise turns to him.

- You would lie to my actual face after what you did to me?

A dark energy warms the room.

Agnes levitates slightly.

The sisters rise up into the air.

Wings flutter. A breeze lifts papers on the sideboard. The sisters voices are like bells, Mr Udnam recedes — all of their eyes are on him.

- We can smell blood on your skin!

The sisters say it together. Around the walls five sets of wings open as shadows.

- You can't feel pity for her — she's the devil's daughter!

- We can't pick our Fathers.

- Elise loves a monster — she is evil! Not me!

He points at Jessie.

- My father sold me to him, Jessie says.

- Why?

Agnes asks it quietly.

- To give him a grandchild that would be raised with all privileges possible.

- Why?

- So his children could destroy what God made, the world and all good people in it!

Hope clings to her leg, peeping out at him.

- She's scared of me!

- My child is not scared of anyone.

Jessie's horns are even longer and sharper than they were in her mortal life.

- Mr Udnam — you murdered my sisters, because they came looking for me ...

Elise does not shrink back in spirit. His back against the wall. His heartbeat pounds at his

neck and temples, he tries to swallow. Jessie's horns glint in the candlelight. Agnes prays for all of them and the sisters join in as the layers between the worlds peel back.

- Dear God, thou art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive those who trespassed before us, for thou is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever, amen!

The smallest girl, Mary, at the end closes her eyes, arms out, she is feeling something that none of the rest of them can quite see yet — the youngest child is open to visions past and future in a way none of her sisters are.

- There's a big knife and he's running up to, Jessie!

She says it in a very quiet voice.

Agnes has a burning sensation in her.

Pain like she has never felt.

Wind howls through the floors, she is trying not to panic, the energy it is taking to let the spirits all through and to speak — she looks over toward Archie and he is terrified, chain smoking, not knowing whether to get up and close the door or go near his wife and she feels fear then too. Looking at the sisters Agnes begins to realise they are reminding her of a girl she used to sit next to at school — their mother. She is sure of it. They played hopscotch. The woman has sent her daughters to her home and it is their right that they should be allowed, all of them — Jessie too, and her daughter, to move on.

- Tell me what you need to move on?

- We don't get to, Elise snaps.

- The girls can though, if you can encourage them that will help at least, Jessie says.

- I can see him walking through the rooms, he has a knife, my sister's blood is on it and

Jessie's and Hope's, the walls are open — he has a huge saw in the hall, he planned it. It's just him in the building with three bodies. In the hallway to his parlour downstairs there are stains on the wood like tears of blood.

- You killed them!

Clementine lands in front of him and shakes her wings out.

Agnes feels one side of her body go entirely numb.

Mary puts her arms down and opens her eyes, she looks at Mr Udnam with such hatred and confusion, he steels himself against it, his eyes turn black, reveal his reptilian skin, his deep hatred! Agnes watches this as the other side of her body goes numb, she can no longer understand words properly, the light is fading, she grips Dora's hands even tighter and the woman opens her eyes — realising her friend is in danger.

- Send them to the light!

- Who?

- Girls, all the younger sisters, I can't do it for Jessie and Elise but the younger ones can still go — there's a light there, look, see ...

The sisters turn. A light comes into the room from the storm outside — clouds swirl through it — the smallest one looks at Elise and she nods, emphatically, Mary turns — it is her job as the youngest to go first.

- He took off her head and it is still here, they are all still in this building.

The youngest sister turns to lead her sisters out of this realm.

- Agnes, you're not breathing properly!

Over at the seance table Archie touches his wife, she is not seeing anything at all and she is stiff on one side — he reaches out to her.

- Let the girls go into the light!

These are the last words that will ever come out of Agnes Campbell's mouth.

The infant runs forward — as her angel cousins all pass — one by one — up into the light.

- Come with us!

They call back to the youngest cousin Hope.

- She can't!

Elise is frantic. As the light begins to dim Mr Udnam hits the floor — his breathing is ragged. Colour drains from his face. Jessie stands over him. Her horns are silhouetted in his black eyes as the light goes out in them.

Jessie and Elise, Hope — they too are fading.

Archie opens the front door wide and shouts down into the stair ...

- An ambulance, somebody, please, please! My wife! Agnes needs an ambulance.

Dora is up, over the table, knocking the ouija to the floor.

There is a blue light flashing on Lauriston Place as an ambulance pulls out from the Royal Infirmary, the huge Victorian hospital windows watch it go, the windscreen wipers barely able to stop the rain lashing off it. Dora Noyce is stood at the entrance to no. 10 Luckenbooth Close ready to wave them down and take them upstairs to her friend. Tears pour down her face in the rain. Upstairs a man's body — is inert and gone. Agnes's husband Archie holds her like he never did in life. Knowing he got it wrong and he should have held her like this every single day — howling at this cursed building — for taking his beautiful wife away.

Agnes drifts.

Angels above her — rise up and up into light.

So beautiful!

That moment of freedom — when souls are no longer tied to human pain!

What an awful and terrifying and wondrous mortal coil!

The angel sisters hold their hands out to her — so do all the other spirits she has helped over all these years — they are there too — lines and lines of them — leading up to the place of ances-

tors — it is so beautiful! Wanting to follow them so badly! Somewhere far away — her husband shouts in a stairwell and footsteps pound up stairs and No. 10 Luckenbooth shakes — it dissolves the fabric of time, and for a second — she sees exactly what Mr Udnam did to them and her tiny circle of vision goes out entirely.

William Burroughs (49)

this building is a psychic vampire

18

As late evening approaches the city requests that sound soften itself down but it has its garish bursts. Street lights on Princes St. and Queen St. come on at once — all the way along the Royal Mile and down the hills to Stockbridge, the New Town, Leith and the South Side and over at the West End, Dalry and Gorgie. All the lamp-posts create their moon glows for creatures to walk home. All of this whilst the poet stands at the window never more content than with his lovers arms wrapped around him — just to hold — and be held — this is the only place he is wants to be.

- So, if that's how it works then do you think that the very first human who spoke — was just the first person infected by the virus of language, as it were, Bill?

- I think the written word came before the oral tradition.

- Surely we spoke in grunts, or noises?

- I'm sure we did but on the walls of caves we carved pictographs and symbols — moving images — those symbols were telling stories before people were chit-chatting around a fire — they were our first poems — our first way to impart knowledge — to teach — to learn — to comment —

to show others what we thought and see how they'd respond — we were writing words before we could walk upright — we used to carve them on the floor — language is an ancient and deadly form.

- And now, it's your trade.

- It's my way of being.

- But ye can't leave it once you've started?

- Some can.

- You can't?

- I can't, no, I couldn't leave it if I wanted to.

- Why?

- For those of us who have fallen — into the affliction of addiction — to a virus sent to humans from the origins of time — we don't understand exactly how it simultaneously rewires our hearts, souls and minds — or how it is allowing us to evolve a part of the mind barely understood yet — we can't explain even to ourselves why we would steal for the time to do it — but there is no doubts poets and writers have died for this, sacrificed their lives for it, those few — born ones, they will do anything at all for it.

- Would ye get arrested for it?

- Yes, they've banned my work in plenty places.

- What is it that addicts you?

- There is an energetic imprint of the original source — that travels via words.

- God?

- I don't like that idea, necessarily but I couldn't refute it, no.

- You think that words are a kind of time traveller of an imprint of the energetic light we originally come from? The light source, the God source some people would see it?

- Exactly that, you've got it.

- I'm gonnae be having some interesting conversations at the morgue tomorrow.

- I see it like this my beautiful, precious man — it is the written word that was the first virus and it made the spoken word possible — maybe the word virus is wrong, don't quote me on it — maybe if it is a programme within the wider programme we are all residing in — a code if you like — if that is true and this written form is the most ancient of arts then think on this — codes are there to be broken — when that happens they lead us to truth — perhaps words are the only thing that can lead us to truth and those willing to go into the programme completely can bring truths back out of there that they barely understand.

The two men hold each other.

Stand at the window watching lights come on all over Edinburgh.

Bill's fedora is sat atop the television aerial and all around the wall the words appear to move by the light of the lava lamp.

- If language came to us from the origins of time — then it has travelled space and ocean and air and touched every single heart and mind that ever walked on this planet — it has been more ferocious than the whip on the back of an adulterous woman in a village square in Lebanon — it is passed from Father to Son so they might loathe and fear what it is they desire — whether that thing carries a uterus or a penis — it labels all things — *other* — as something to be destroyed — the flesh knows its own queer predilection or its lack of normalcy and it denies it — all of our urges and want and knowledge exist in the subconscious first and foremost — so called reality lies to itself and to everyone else — it is weapon and trap — liberator and monster — we are all at the mercy of and malleable to the programmes that raised us — whether they be religious, or class based, or gender biased — all structures are implemented through an underlying violence and brutality particular on this planet.

- Do you think I'll still understand this when I've straightened up, John asks.

- Aye.

- You tried Scottish!

- Badly! Thing is John, creatures like us, word travellers — we download transmissions via twenty-six letters of the alphabet, or twenty-four in the Greek alphabet, three thousands characters of the Chinese alphabet, twenty-eight in Arabic, twenty-three in Latin, eighteen in Gaelic, twenty-seven in Spanish, seventy-one in Japanese including diacritics, thirty-six in the Africa alphabet that forms the basis for Fula, Ewe, Hausa, thirty-three in Amharic which originated as a consonant only alphabet so Ethiopians could write in Ge'ez, there are twenty-two in Aramaic, twenty-seven in Spanish, thirty-two in Icelandic, there's Cherokee, Javanese, Mongolian, Ersu Shaba, Nüshu, Ogham, Sinala, French, Italian, German, Balinese, Burmese, Armenian, Khmer, Thai, Lao, Tibetan, Dravidian, Cyrillic, I could go on for days because we have over 7000 living languages and about only half of those are written, yet somehow your country persuaded the world that English was the only important one, you publish all your books in it, you are still scared of even accents!

- That was the neighbours more than us to be fair, John says.

- You blame everything on them!

- They've a lot to answer for — so, if all of languages come from an original virus, or programme, the light source, the primordial matriarch as it were — what are they doing to us?

- Altering our chemical composition, our molecules, energy imprint.

- It gets into our chromosomes?

- Every single one, it gets into absolutely everything, it changes the patterns of the brain — it exists here — see where I *write it on the page* it is simultaneously out in the universe where my mind expanded last week.

- I love you.

- I love you too, John.

- Is it crazy to love someone you've only spent seven days with in person?

- No, it's crazy to love someone when you've known them for years.

- So, if scientists are right and every particle has another particle with exactly the same mass but an opposite electric charge — then it's possible two people can fit together like yin and yang, noh?

- My understanding is that when matter and antimatter come into direct contact, they annihilate each other, they just totally disappear in a flash of energy — it's what should have happened directly after the big-bang spunked its guts out — when matter and antimatter meet they leave nothing behind at all — so really we shouldn't exist.

- Perhaps we dinnae exist.

- What they do know — is there is one extra matter particle — for every billion — matter- and antimatter pairs — somehow — just that extra one — means we aren't totally zapped into the stratosphere.

- One sole particle can change everything, Bill?

- Yes, if one sole particle can change everything then so can a person, no?

- Then one thought could?

- One day the right thought will my lovely John. Any person walking around this planet today could land upon a thought that would change the evolution of the human race. I mean most of them won't because evolution has been careened through space and time mostly out of religious extremes, right? Our needs for Gods to give us permission for whom we hold hands, or how we work or live or lay in our beds. It's all been geared to favour men though hasn't it? I don't need a fabricated deity to raise me in some archaic programme so I can feel okay about being a moral man in a universe without explanation — however I am free — so many men are diseased and by that I mean they are dis-eased in their own masculinity, in their desires both homosexual and heterosexual, they are so twisted by it the only answer they have is to try and control literally everyone —women,

children, dogs, trees, oxygen, space, other men.

- Language?

- You've got it.

Bill and John grin at each other.

- Keep talking to me, I could listen tae your voice forever.

- Some people got hit by good cosmic rays and some by bad ones. Antimatter constantly rains down on earth. It arrives as cosmic rays, energetic particles descending to earth, they can be seen more during thunderstorms and sometimes you can get 100 cosmic rays per square metre all containing anti-matter so how does that pan out for the person on the bicycle cycling through them in the rain? A gram of antimatter could create an explosion as big as a nuclear bomb, we can only produce a tiny amount, it costs too much — they haven't figure out how to do it properly yet — however someone is walking around with their particular programme of language and science and in their own particular unique imprint — one day — all those things coalesce in their brain and they will find a way to slow antimatter down so they can study it and unlock all it has to teach, and for that they will use the virus, the glorious virus from outer space, language, the territorial tyranny and wonder of words! Antimatter can diagnose cancer and one day treat it, all things will be treatable in the end but we have to discard — much — of the programmes — if we are to evolve to the next level.

- I didn't know poets were so well informed, Mr Burroughs.

- Don't trust poets unless they are scientists.

- I wish I'd studied mair science!

- Poets are not the only people trying to unlock and deconstruct and prove the great secrets of the world, all poets write about people, why are we still so barely evolved in some ways and so utterly astonishing in others. People are like matter and others are anti-matter — there are those who want humanity to evolve fully and their opposite is a source that seeks only to keep things the

same or turn them back toward the dark ages — to stall or deny or destroy progress so they might for that sneakiest or seconds that makes up a human's whole life — they might fool themselves into thinking — that by controlling — dominating — torturing — colonising — segregating — raping — murdering — that they managed for a period of history to fix time to them — that they won't die — that anti-matter is not destined to destroy them — that death is not imminent and cares not for power or wealth — that none escape it.

- To control their fear ay it?

- Impose themselves on matter and particle.

- Maybe humans want to make something that can annihilate everything — much in the way death annihilates us all — as a way of denying their own place in the void, their utter core of nothingness.

- So why don't we change it. Bill?

- I blame the God programmes.

- Even Buddhism?

- Yes.

- Wiccans?

- I do like those but yes, we don't need religion — we need reality — a good solid 24/7 three-hundred and sixty-five day of the year exploration on reality — poverty, domestic violence, rape, child abuse, intolerance, bigotry, racism, tyranny, all of those religions are just programmes structures if you like, so is class, wealth, racism, they are things people in this world just don't need anymore — they are holding us all back — what we need is every human fed and educated and told to question their own programme — every single one — to know that the real idea of why humans are here — can belong to this generation — that we could explore it on a daily basis until we find a way to replace bad men with good children — to overrule archaic modes of human intervention

over the fates of others via totalitarian brutality.

Bill is crying.

John puts his arms around him.

- I think we should have some tea and then we should go and walk all night long, I'm going to take you on a train tomorrow, out of the city, just for the afternoon, it won't be like California, it will be cold!

- Good, I loathe the sun, unless it's falling.

- We can walk along North Berwick beach, go for a pint or two, I'll take you to the lobster shack before we come home, you can see where they burnt all the witches then we can get back into town well before your reading starts.

- That sounds perfect, I'll meet Jim beforehand, it was so good at that conference, I'm not sure they'll ever top it again.

- When all those men began jumping up to say they were queer, I felt proud to be from Edinburgh, to have all that energy here and that handsome Dutch guy wanting someone to baptise him!

- We all wanted to baptise him.

- What about the Sikh guy, saying queers are incapable of love and hermaphrodites can't cum and hair down to his waist — I wanted to chop it off with scissors.

- Quite the conservative you are, John!

- You were getting along well with Miller.

- It was civilised.

- The press had never seen anything like it, it's been reported on everywhere since you left!

- I know.

- You'll be so famous, you know they love it when you talk.

- I can't think of anything more hideous.

- But how will anyone know that language is a virus and how it works if you don't send those words out into the world?

- True.

- Mary McCarthy said how much she loved Naked Lunch.

- She clearly has taste.

- Perhaps we should go sailing, together, Bill.

- Into the sunset?

- Something like that, John grins.

- I once knew a man who sailed for 23 years without an incident and just after he had bragged about it, that very day the ship had an accident and killed him and everyone else on board. That evening I heard another bulletin on the radio of an aeroplane that had gone down over Florida, Flight 23, everyone dead and another Captain with the exact same name — by this I mean to say it is like what MacNeice articulates in his poem called Snow.

- Which is what?

- Here we are in a room and it is light and small and warm and we are held by it — despite the carnivorous nature behind this building's facade, however the carnivorous nature behind the building's facade is the same of that in snow — where life is so much more than we can manage it to be, it is so much more sudden than we are able to understand.

- I feel that.

- He says how the world is so much more than we think, so much crazier than we think, it is too drunk and too various.

- I need a drink.

- John Glenn circles the world three times in Friendship 7 — he is a man in space — traveling through time, polaroids are going to do colour prints that will develop themselves within 60

seconds, the civil rights movement has to see young black men in university and women too, The

Cold War is getting worse, they have assassinated Kennedy and they are threatening nuclear arms.

All the time we are on the brink of the entire planet's destruction at the hands of crazy, powerful men! They want to put a man on the moon before the decade is done. There is an army of hippies with dogs on strings who will put away their linen trousers into non-recyclable bins, cut off their long hair and burn them, they will scour out their brains with bleach, learn to sit in chairs in square rooms.

- We won't change anything?

- It will need to be changed and challenged again and again! The hippies and thinkers will mostly quit. They will sit on chairs in square rooms and talk to other people in square rooms. They will collect their pay check from a square box. They will go back to other square rooms. Smaller ones this time, where they will fold clothes and find their fridge without milk or cheese and they will go to another square room where a man with some things to sell them will do so and they will go back home to put their food in square boxes. They will still think about why we all obey these men who have given themselves a catchy covers all trademark in one single word — government but they won't keep standing up to shout about it.

- It's so desperately bad! John says.

- The people in charge are not Plato's apostles — they're rich boys on a power trip — I know this because I'm a rich boy who came from rich men — my people have been generationally institutionalised to believe this world and the people in it are theirs and they don't care about cosmic rays and all they do with language is manipulate it so they can get more!

- I hate it!

- More power. More wealth. More war. Those men do not carry the guilt and sorrow of a woman's non-beating heart — I do to my great, great shame, so what I am trying to say, my handsome, lovely friend, is I can't think about it anymore, lets get the train to North Berwick in the

morning, lets walk on the beach and hold hands and fall in love and forget and may all the cosmic rays may be upon us even if only for one day!

The door goes.

- Archie? Are you ok?

- I am John, are you alright? I didn't want to disturb you so late it's just I'm out of milk and my dear wife likes to sup tea before bed and I don't like to leave her in the flat in her chair.

- Of course, do you want biscuits, snacks?

- Hard drugs?

Bill offers the last — appearing behind him as John goes to get milk.

- No, thank you good man, those are not for us, a cup of tea more than suffices!

Archie is so old now that it takes him a minute to just accept the milk in a mug and smile, balance it and walk slowly down the stairs.

Bill and John stand at the door until he is gone.

- So sweet, his wife had a terrible stroke ten years ago, you know he looks after her every day, plays her music, looks eftir her insane parrot, bathes her, buys her soft cashmere jumpers so they are kind tae her skin, he dotes on her, she can't speak, cannae say a word, often doesn't seem to understand anything but she never wanted to leave this building so he's caring for her here, she's not been out that door in ten years and he barely leaves her side.

- The course of true love!

They close the door. Pad back into the warm flat. All the way down on the street — the lights of No. 10 Luckenbooth Close glow warmly in the dark air. Rain begins to spit again on the street. Some of the buildings curtains are opened. Some are closed, a few have gaps. A lot of the shutters are now nailed back or removed. In No. 5F5 a parrot called Ovid is scratching in the bottom of his cage. He unintelligibly mutters one word. *Walls. Walls. Walls. Walls.* The only one who knows why he is saying this is Agnes but she can't even blink properly any more. In the window

she sits looking out at the city. Her husband combs her hair. In the window above Bill and John have their arms wrapped around each other — they too are staring out at the lights of Edinburgh and even the ones which sparkle away out there across the water — the long dark line underneath of the Firth of Forth — they turn toward each other and kiss for the longest time — atoms and particles, words not better than feelings — in their kiss for just a minute — there is no yesterday and no tomorrow — no fear, no pain — cosmic rays shower secondary particles soundlessly all over the world.

PART III

I9

The girl on stage can't be more than fifteen-years old, stiletto sandals, ribbon snaked around her ankle and tied in a bow at either side of her knee. Her skin is pale and unblemished. She turns back to smile at the small audience of men — undoes her bra, holds it out and lets it drop.

Her older sister has just come off stage.

She has blonde hair and blue eyes as well, she sashays down a narrow hall towards the toilets — where there is a small nook for lap dances. A man walks behind her and they disappear into the recess as the big double front doors to the Red Room are pushed wide open.

The sister's mother looks up from behind the bar as they walk in.

Stand in a row.

Drinks poured in silence.

Four whisky's slide across the bar top.

No money changes hands.

The Original Founders are rarely seen.

Spoken about in whispers in most of this city — they speak a language entirely of their own — it is said to be a cross between gypsy, Doric, and Manc. The men wear tailored trousers, braces, silk lined waistcoats and heavy stopwatches of twenty-four carat gold. Each has a delicate chain with a St. Christopher, and Sovereign rings on every finger. The look is topped with fine expensive bowler hats from the milliner at Lock & Co hatters, London and each holds an identical bespoke cane. Bee commissioned them. They are beautiful works of craftsmanship — tailored to clients instruction. Sometimes it's a family crest or a personal inscription to a loved one. Bee requested cane heads that twist off so each can slide out — a long thin dagger. She sips a drink. Tear drops tattooed below large eyes. Shaved head. Fringe. Dr. Martens boots. Black tights. Red lips. Black nails. Vel- vet shorts. Her shirt is white — she wears a tie. There's a lipstick in her bag. It has a Stanley blade inside it. There's wet wipes from looking after her babies, cigarettes, Tampax and a small but solid cosh. On one wrist a feather tattoo. On the other a Celtic tattoo from the Icenii tribe. They call her Boudicea. It's not her real name. In close company she is referred to as Bee. Only a few strangers do actually know her real name and it is not good for them if they do.

The Red room is quiet. A cluster of regulars, a few local business men, two tourists.

There is a subtle shift of energy and focus. Men nod at The Original Founders. Look quickly back to the stage. The room is dimly lit. Bathed in a deep red glow. A mahogany bar top. Above the optics a selection of whisky, brandy, gin. The girl's mother wipes down the counter, then the till, and the fridges.

On stage the girl dances so slowly the entire bar goes into reverse to accommodate her moves. She slides down onto the stage and grinds her hips to Like A Hurricane by Neil Young, the smell of alcohol, cigarettes and weed — softens the dense air as she reaches one strong arm and leg

up, grips onto the pole. She is upside down. Spins gracefully to the floor. Lays with her elbow out, head rests on her hand, she stretches one leg languorously up and notes litter her feet like flowers. She twists around. Sits up on her knees. Hips wide she pushes her legs as far apart as she can. Tips her head back. She is all ribcage. Pink nipples. Long blonde hair shines under the light. The Original Founders nod. Until she comes of age nobody will touch her whilst they are here. The infamous pubic triangle is made up of three separate strip bars at a busy junction leading down to Lothian Road. Whilst the Red Room's youngest star can dance and make money she's not to be disrespected. This only makes every man that frequents the Red Room want her more. Strippers in the other two bars forming the rest of the pubic triangle, despair at her untouched prettiness. Before long another will take her place. For now she seems like the only girl in the world who can wear such tiny knickers, suspenders and stockings and look somehow wholesome. The mother keeps one eye toward her elder daughter, who has come out from a private dance with a red glow to her cheeks. The younger sister finishes her dance and steps off stage, she gives a quick smile to Davie, the eldest of The Original Founders.

- Don't even fucking think it.

Bee says it without looking back at her husband.

- I never said a thing, Bee. Is it time?

- Yer fucking right it is.

Bowler hats are laid on the bar in a row.

A cellar hatch behind the bar is opened and the mother goes down a wooden ladder, a smell of damp wafts up, spilled lager and cider and the cold metal of kegs. An electric light-bulb sways illuminating the upstairs bar for a second until she is back. Closes the floor hatch. Slides four boxes across the bar counter. The Original Founders each take one. Walk out leaving empty glasses behind them.

Push double wooden doors open onto a street lined with snow.

Flakes cascade down through the sky.

As each member comes out they put on their mask.

There is a Ram with long curled horns.

Zebra.

Wolf.

Fox.

They walk down the middle of the road.

Canes click on the cobbles underneath the snow.

Bright coloured lanterns are strung along the ancient West Port. They go down by antique bookshops. Fox gazes at one or two covetable titles. They pass the tattoo parlour. Dress shop. No police pass them.

The sky is a heavy dense white and little light in the city.

Snow makes everything sparkle.

Along the West Bow and up onto the High St. At the top of the Mound they go to pick up some weapons. Look down across the brightly lit fairground and ice-rink in Princes St. gardens.

- What's Santa gonnae bring ye this year, Bee?

- A man's head in each hand.

- Nae body?

- None.

- How many do we kill?

- All of them, if we have to.

Bee wears the Fox mask, her husband Rab is the Ram, two broad shouldered men make up the Zebra — Davey, and Wolf, for his younger brother Ali. They walk up the hill and down past the Court. A street performer painted entirely silver with a wizard's hat — appears to be levitating. He

does not blink as four animals dressed so fine walk by him. The Original Founders turn onto Luckenbooth Close. Rab raises his cane as if to knock on the scarred old door of no. 10 Luckenbooth Close. The street is all quietude. All sounds are softened by snowfall. A light goes on in the second floor. Then it goes dark. The street has chip wrappers on it. Bicycles are tied to railings. Two have had wheels stolen so only the frames remain. Bin bags squat around the door. Rab pushes the door but it has been fixed with a shiny intercom plate. He inspects it, his horns casting a shadow on the door as he tries the Service buzzer but it doesn't work. Rab takes one step back and kicks the door in with a hard boot, wood smashes on stone, the sound reverberates and he takes a bow, gestures with an elaborate flourish — that the entry is indeed now clear.

- Don't kill them all until there's no choice, Bee?

- Of course, Rab.

- Promise me?

- Cross my heart and swear to die.

She crosses her chest and her husband — tries to contain himself because there is always something magical about Bee, even now in her fox head — snow falling around her, there two babies tucked up at home, all their fights, the angst, the days she hates him, despite all of it he is as drawn to her as he ever was. It's not that she still has a beautiful body although even after twins, to him, she does, what get to him most is her absolutely unrepentant spirit and Rab has long learnt to accept she is uncontainable.

They disappear from the street.

Leave footprints barely noticeable in the snow.

The stairwell of No. 10 Luckenbooth Close is garishly lit. It smells of poppers. There is a big clunky plastic light on each landing and it appears to glare at the chipped paint and worn steps. They look at each other their eyes animal-like behind their masks. The brothers Davey and Ali are the hardest boys around. They are easier to identify in their Zebra and Wolf masks, otherwise they

are so identical nobody believes they are not twins. Ali was born exactly nine months after Davie and they are essentially the same person with different personality traits. This has been problematic. Most especially in their personal lives. They have eight children between them. It is uncertain who is the real biological father to which. Ali has been sleeping with Davie's girlfriends, then wives, since they were teenagers, he will pretend to be his brother if it means he can get away with something — it is almost impossible for anyone to tell them apart, they are both huge, dark-haired, Italian looking.

Don't say that in front of their Da.

It won't go well.

There are many things that cannot be said in front of their Da. The brothers learnt everything they needed to know about their father when they were six-years old. He parked them in a car with lemonade and crisps and went in to the pub for a session and when he came out it was getting dark. Another man stoated out behind him, there was a shove, their Da turned around shoulders squared.

- Ye fucking hink sae, aye?

The two brothers, six and still six (almost seven Ali was) watched in silence. Another man was at the bar door and he made any witnesses go back in. The boys had the dread in them then. Both in the front seat. Crisp wrappers strewn around their feet and the laughter of a minute ago all gone. They had stopped playing with the steering wheel unable to look away as their father head-butted the man until his face was a bloody-purple mush — they could hear the crack of bone on bone.

Both tiny boys hoped that would be it.

He was walking toward the car when the man said something.

They will never know what.

Their father strode back to the man on the floor and gouged his fingers into pulped sockets.

Pressed down until an eyeball popped.

He then pulled on it slowly and deliberately so the man could see — he kept doing it until the sinew snapped altogether. Making sure the man was still watching — he put it in his mouth. Chewed. Swallowed. The guy is still alive. Lives three streets away from them. He wears an eye patch. The brothers did not ask their father for a chippie after all that night. They went home in silence. It is not discussed in the family. There is never a good time to comment. There has been no appropriate point for it to turn into one of many humorous myths in the Davie, Ali itinerary of fucked-up-things-to-laugh-about-later. Like his Uncle's wake. The family got so wasted his Aunty forgot her husband was dead. Dry humped the corpse in front of everyone until her sister pulled her off. When they all woke hungover as hell the next day — someone had put a cigar in his Uncle's embalmed mouth.

Just another family party that got out of hand.

Or then there are fights at funerals.

The McBains are notorious for fighting at a funeral — so much so their Father adopted a rural Chinese tradition. Inviting strippers to attend a funeral. He claims it's done over there to get more people to come along and bless the deceased. Over here — he thought it could encourage peaceful relations between mourners. Hence the sisters from Red Room have done six funerals this year. There has not been a fight at a single one. There are other things. His father swears he met the devil's daughter in the White Hart. Claims she used to live with a Mr Udnam — an old man who owned half the city in the end. The city has a big statue to him. It often wears a traffic cone on its head due to the pathetic inability of most students to commit any proper kind of crime. The story goes the devil's daughter told their Father neither son would make it to thirty. He claimed she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. That she wore a charcoal 1920s style dress and she still drinks in The White Hart with her pretty horns on show — even to this day. To be fair all their cleaners have quit. Nobody talks about it. What isn't haunted in this city though? This cities ghosts

haunt all babies from the womb. Real Edinburgh people are part otherworld — it underlines their particular brand of crazy. Their father responded to this premonition. Trained the boys in boxing and weapons from the age of three. Once an older laddie on their street battered Ali. His Da went mental. Smacked him. Put him out the house. Said he would not be allowed in again — until he battered that twelve-year old senseless. His Da locked the door. Left him on the street in the rain. Ali knocked and knocked. Eventually he found the boy. Battered him until he couldn't speak. Went back home again. He was seven years-old.

Ali looks back at Bee and Rab and he does not smile.

The basement door is covered in graffiti.

YLT.

YCD.

JUNGLE.

YNT.

Chinese symbols are carved into it too and there are four long marks which look like a big cat has gouged the door.

- What are you doing for your birthday?

- We'll go for a pint or two, Bee.

- It's your 30th, you've got tae do something better than that!

- Are you ready? Ali, Davey?

- Aye, Rab.

Davey pulls out a wide sword and Ali clicks the lock off on a double-barrel rifle.

They walk up the stairs in silence.

At the seventh floor they stop.

Nod.

Open the landing door and go down to the end.

- What did Dora say, Bee?

- She said the girl was still missing.

- Who is she?

- She is Dora's third cousin, on her Mum's side.

- My Da still calls Dora, Georgie, did ye ken they went to school together? Ali asks.

- Aye!

Bee looks over at her husband much in the way she did when Rab first met her at Dora Noyce's three years ago. Rab fell in love with Bee over tea and sandwiches. She had whispered to him later that she thought it was sweet of the Madam to call it a *YMCA with extras* and then giggled and covered her mouth and he had thought it was just a matter of fate where any man finds his wife.

Since that morning there has been a ring on Bee's finger.

Dora was mighty pissed off with Rab for taking her most talented girl.

He owes her.

Dora has always had issues with street gangs trying to muscle in, and now shitty new saunas with no class and no rules to protect the girls — which really, really pisses her off. Last week one of her girls disappeared and it is rumoured the boss of a most recent Triad faction in the city — has arrived and he has not been adhering to his own people's rules, he has offended the oaths he took in the most serious way, that he in fact — has a rogue unit that is in no way endorsed by Triad factions in Hong Kong — or anywhere else and that this boss was the last person to be seen with that girl and none of the true syndicates are going to tolerate trouble returning to them because of someone who no longer has the right to operate under their protection. Boudicea has her own personal vendetta with traffickers. Ali and Davey cannot tolerate frauds of any kind. Rab knows what certain

men have done to his wife in the past and he is against the recent new drug trade coming in as well.

There's a lot of unspoken heat between The Original Founders as they reach the seventh floor landing, push it open.

- We didn't expect a welcoming committee, Ali says.

- Gentlemen!

Bee smiles at the men waiting to greet them.

Outside 7F7 there is a tall handsome Chinese man. He wears a black leather bomber coat and expensive leather Chelsea boots, it is certain there will be a gun stuffed into the back of his trousers and behind him a younger man wearing black flare corduroy trousers and a tailored brown jacket with long lapels, plain t-shirt, tattoos on show — holds a small bow and arrow casually by his side.

- We heard that The Original Founders may show us a Christmas Eve visit, how very kind.

He gestures through the open door and they all turn to walk in.

20

If she opened her front door right now the tenant in 9F9 would see two legs dangling from the hatch on her landing. Then — disappearing — as the attic hatch on the top floor of No. 10 Luckenbooth Close thuds shut. Only footprints would be left on the walls. Size 11. Ivor is not a small man. He hauls himself up onto the attic floor eyes bloodshot and hangover giving him the heebie jeebies whilst his stomach muscles burn from the effort of pulling himself up here.

It's been a bad day.

Ivor lays back breathing hard.

The cavernous attic is covered in tall grass.

He stands up.

It grows almost up to his chest. A cold breeze ripples through it reminding him of hay fields swaying in the wind. On the far wall there is a huge old open fireplace. Next to it there is an armchair with burst foam and rusted springs exposed. There's a makeshift table out of an old suitcase.

On top of it is the indecipherable remains of what might have been a squatters lunch. On a dirty window pane someone has drawn an outline of a monkey. There is a little single gas-cooking hob. It's the kind that would be used for camping. It has rusted too. Ivor tramples down grass. Flattens a route through to the chair and fireplace. He looks down. The woman in 9F9's water cupboard must be just below here. A wee bit of light filters up where her door is open. He could drop right down into her flat from the attic. Ivor has heard about that. People living in other people's flats in cupboards or other unused nooks, eating their food whilst they sleep, watching their telly, taking a bath, sneaking down their hallway passed them in the night — for decades. Ivor read about a woman who was found sleeping in someone's airing cupboard. The woman claimed she'd lived there for over thirty years and so could not be evicted — she had wired into the mains and had a wee telly in there and everything. Ivor feels lucky that he will never have to do that at least, or sleep rough, where would he have gone otherwise really? His sister has taken him in without question. This morning he left his wife, this afternoon the doctor gave him a diagnosis he has never wanted, the coal mine he has worked in all his life is going to be closed down. The doctor has verified he is officially a man who can't work in daylight — so Ivor is doing anything he can to feel useful to anybody at all right now — two floors down his sister and Esme are waiting on him coming back to report on noises they've been hearing from the attic.

- You've no fear, have you, Uncle Ivor?

- None, Esme.

- It's a tapping, every night, it's driving Mum crazy, isn't it Mum?

A nod from Rhona as she popped two Tramadol and lay down on the couch again.

- I'll go find out what it is.

- Okay, and if you see my wee pal, will ye give her this?

Esme held out a wee teddy.

It's in his back pocket — he places it on the broken armchair.

His niece's wee imaginary pal is becoming a bit of a permanent fixture. He won't question it. It's her room he's sleeping in, bottom bunk, he's brought his records with him cos they were the only thing he took but he's got his clothes folded in the hall cupboard and nothing else of his is in her room — it's Esme's manor — she's the coolest person he knows and he does not want to infringe on her space any more than he has to, his niece is eight-years old, tenacious as hell and wise-as-a-fucking-owl!

The air is cold up here.

Ivor is glad of the layers he always wears.

It's a habit from twenty-six years working down the pit.

The doctor said he should show his workmates the note to prove why he can't strike ...

Funny fucker his doctor.

He'd rather his workmates (boys he was born around and played with his whole life and went to school with and saw get married and have kids, men he's spent much of his life more than six-feet under with) he would rather they thought he was a scab than the truth which is he is completely fucking mental.

The doctor asked him didn't he.

- What do you do?

- Coal miner.

- How many years?

- Since I left school.

- No other trade?

- I helped my Uncle out at weekends renovating houses but noh, my Da was a miner, my Da's Da was a miner, my Da's Da's Da was a miner, his Da was a butcher, everyone before him wiz a miner, ma Uncle's are miners, cousins, ma brother, ma pals. Every man on ma street is a miner

and in a few weeks every one of us is out of work fir good.

- The Iron lady has much to answer for. The doctor listened to his heartbeat.

- Community is going already, doctor.

- Aye.

- The young laddies who would ay been working wi the rest ay us down the pit by now —
are sniffing glue in the park!

- So I've heard!

- Next it'll be Aids in Midlothian.

- Uh-huh.

- I dinnae think anyone's got it there yet.

- No.

- What do you think, Doctor, do you think Aids is more of an Edinburgh thing?

- It doesn't discriminate Ivor, most illnesses don't.

- They're calling Edinburgh the HIV capital of Europe, ye ken that?

- I do.

The doctor had nodded sadly.

- This panic that you are experiencing Ivor, how long has it gone on for?

- Since I was wee.

- What age?

- Always. My earliest memory is sitting on Porty beach with a box on ma head.

- A box?

- A cardboard yin, it was the only way for my Ma to stop me greeting.

- I see.

- I could hear the sea, she would hold ma hand to go paddling. I was the only laddie on that beach with a box on his head. I tell ye, everyone knows ye at Porty, the whole ay Loanhead was there when it was sunny fir the day. I felt like a total fud.

- A what?

- It means vagina.

A smile, a nod, the doctor checking over his arms and back, tense then.

- What are these marks from?

- Ma work, gets nuts down the mine.

A blank stare.

The man did not believe him.

What's the point of saying fuck all? He's never going to let Joanne take another dig at him anyway.

Ivor sits down on the bust armchair.

He does not want to think about the doctor's final diagnosis.

It's still too hard.

This grass is dry at least.

All the attic eaves are dusty and dirty and they crumble to touch.

The roof is punctuated by toothy gaps.

Missing tiles and slates — expose insipid city stars overhead.

Hope Housing association doesn't give a flying fuck what happens in their buildings anymore, the tenants are getting wilder and more feral and they don't come out to check on anything anymore, it's all new builds they are investing in now, whilst the tenements slowly decay then they'll sell them back on the private market. This attic is not what he expected though. It's a mystery. How did grass even get up here? It's so tall and green at the shoots but yellow at the top. Something crawls over his wrist. He slaps it off his skin. Ivor is a broad-shouldered man. He is not

bothered by bugs and darkness is his sunny day. He went to Woods the Barbers this afternoon and got a shave and his hair down to a no. 1. It feels clean. He looks like a monk. A punk monk who is still more into The Dead Kennedy's and Black Flag, and Hüsker Dü and the Slits and The Exploited and X-Ray Specs and NOFX and Nirvana and Minutemen and Sonic Youth and Lydia Lunch and Joy Division than he has ever been into anything else. He will let Esme listen to all his records. Teach her a few chords on bass guitar. He can educate her on the difference between punk and no-wave and new-wave and grunge and metal. Maybe she'll start a decent band one day. It wouldn't surprise him. Ivor stands on his tiptoes in the corner and looks out the first broken slates. He can see all the way across the city of Edinburgh — over Princes St. gardens and the outline of the New Town and a hulk of Calton Hill, the Balmoral, all the way down the city until a navy belt divides the city from the Kingdom of Fife — a sea view.

At some point a long, long time ago someone was squatting up here.

It could have been fifty-years ago or a hundred.

Time is passing everyone by, that's what it is doing.

All over the world clocks tick, both in and out of time with each other. Ivor's favourite is an astronomy clock. It is in Bohemia. It's 10pm here. It will strike midnight over there soon. Death will appear. It will beckon to a Turkish entertainer. The figures of vanity and greed will glide out. Spin on the dance floor. Twelve Apostles will flash from their windows. The Earth is centre. Sky is blue or black. There is Ortis (sunrise) Occasvs (sunset) and Crevscvlvm (twilight). There is Tropic of Cancer. It has all the signs of the zodiac. Three arms rotate their way through existence. One holds a moon, one holds a star. There is a sun. A golden hand. It has been eighteen hours. He has left his wife for good. Time is behind them and before them. They are sat on the hands of time going around and around in opposite directions. The astronomical dial on his favourite clock was built in 1410. The sun passes over Arabic numbers to indicate Babylonian time. The moon hand tells lunar time. Star hand indicates sidereal days, shorter than regular ones by nearly four minutes. He

pro-posed to his wife in front of that clock. When she dies he will go there and get drunk to celebrate. He will see her six-feet under one day. Ivor will recommend another three feet minimum, possibly another nine — if he can bribe the gravediggers. Just in case. It's best to take no chances with his wife. Pure bile in the woman's veins yet she'll swear on their kids lives its fucking honey. She did four sessions of therapy and now proclaims she's enlightened. All she has really learnt is a few key terms to bolster her own deluded sense of being a victim. Ivor's wife believes — she is the most caring person on the planet.

He can say whatever he wants.

She doesn't hear it.

So, why when she has systematically taken him apart for so fucking long — is he missing her — like some idiotic puppy who has run away from the fur traders but is pining to go back and get petted for a few minutes before it is totally skinned? That's what she'd do in the end. That's what people like her have in them. They can't help themselves.

He can hear it ...

Tap, tap, tap, in the walls.

The roof has rotten beams.

He sticks a finger into the wood and it falls away, the building is sick.

- Terminally ill doctor, it's not going to make it!

He's seen this kind of thing before when he was working with his Uncles on house renovations at the weekend but this is way worse than anything he saw on those jobs.

Tap, tap, tap.

In the beam above Ivor's head — one tiny deathwatch beetle — head butts the wood.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

He knows what it is now!

It's a mating call.

To lure a fuck from the darkness.

An efficient system as within a heartbeat hundreds-of-thousands tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap. In all the limbs of the buildings deathwatch beetles mate, wriggle — scurry. Do they suck — fuck — clatter — spit? Each insect flies along wood on furious tiny spiky legs. Ivor has worked on houses with deathwatch beetles. Untreated the whole fucking building will get eaten. Beams tattooed with boreholes from xylophagous larvae (around 11mm long) they'll emerge on graduation (thirteen years later) as fully grown *Xestobium rufovillosum*, the Deathwatch beetle (what the building has now) is 7 millimetres long.

That tap, tap, tap, tap reminds him of being down the mine shafts.

Overalls on, hard hat in hand, whistling.

His place.

Torch switched off.

Eyes like a cat — the boys always say that about him.

Descending down into layers of the pit, further down into the earth, the smell of it, coal underfoot, wooden joists holding up the tunnels, a feeling that something was disappearing just out of vision. In the corner of his eye a disappearing motion. Just like in this building. On every floor something is just out of sight. Esme knows. It's why she's getting the nightmares. It's nothing! He needs to tell her that. Men get it down the mine. Hear songs being sung. See wee kids running away. A bright yellow canary flies by. Things are strange further into the earth you go. Ivor has a feeling that right at the core of the earth — there is a heart — withered as a walnut. It is the Earth's heart. A tiny eternal thing — sending out it's own faint beat toward everything. Ivor touches a beam and it is rotten already to touch. The rest of them are going to go in time. If he had money he'd move Esme and his sister right out of this building, it's only going to get worse.

This building is too many things.

Too tall, too run down, too many floors, it's so high, it is rare, even for an Edinburgh tenement. Ivor peers across the attic eaves. Can see all the way through this eave into the next building. The attic eaves lead into every other tenement for three streets. Sometimes they are used as a route for burglars. Or a penthouse for rats. Burglars get into eaves via the attic hatch in a stairwell, or they climb onto the Chinese takeaway roof and shimmy up a drainpipe. If you don't know how many floors a burglar can shag his way up (via drainpipe) to sniff your knicker-knackers or pawn yer paltry diamonds for porn and cocaine — then it is twelve. There are many reasons to never leave dirty knickers on the bathroom floor. Encouragement of knicker-sniffing burglars is just one of them! After the doctor had diagnosed him this morning — Ivor had bought a dictionary from James Thins and went to Rutherford's for a pint and sat in a corner and went through as many phobias as he could. First up he looked for natural deterrents to a vocation in burglary. These included achluophobia (fear of darkness), domatophobia (fear of houses), anthrophobia (fear of people), leukophobia (fear of the colour white), galeophobia (fear of cats) or koinoniphobia (fear of rooms) rarely medorthophobia (fear of an erect penis) or hadephobia (fear of hell) — lutraphobia (fear of otters) holds back no robber — unless they do country Estates.

Otters (incidentally) are related to wolverines.

Ivor would still rather be a werewolf than a vampire.

What kind of a grown up is he?

Maybe fear is a punishment he must carry for the sins of some other life?

He goes over to the hatch quickly, lowers himself down. Out-with a multitude of phobic afflictions robbers righteously raid the homes of capitalist children (known in slang terms) as apathy's muse. Burglars adore apathy. That's the thing to think about. Ivor has been considering this. With absolutely no skill set whatsoever other than being a coal miner and a firm diagnosis from his doctor that lets him know his lifelong phobia of light is not going anywhere — that trying to live his life in darkness whilst nobody else notices is still his main goal of existence — what the fuck *is* he

going to do for money when they close down the pit? Every man he knows will be out of work. It's been bad enough getting through the strikes. He wouldn't rob from those who go without of course. Ivor would only rob from those who don't go without. He's not a total cunt. He would in fact only rob from those who will never in fact go without, even if he fucking robs them. As his feet hit the ninth floor landing he hears Esme scream.

Pounds down the stairs.

- What is it, Esme!

In the living-room his niece is howling and his sister is totally passed out.

- It's ma pal Uncle Ivor, she's gonnae be stuck in this building forever!

- Come here, come on! It's not real, Esme, it's just your imagination, it happens to boys down the pit all the time, just ignore it! There's nobody trapped in this building but us and that's just cos we're poor, Esme! Do you know what Granny used to call me? A Brollachan, a brilliant shapeless creature of the night and I used to think of that down the mine, I'd hear a cockerel crow down there! Once I heard kids playing hopscotch fifty-feet below the ground! You feel something in this building like I used to do in the mine.

- I'm not a Brollachan though!

- No, yer not.

- I'm a wee girl and I see things that you won't ivvir see at all and when I say so ye think it's a lie!

- I don't, darlin, I promise, I don't think it's a lie!

She sniffs.

Ivor lets her climb up on him.

Esme is like a wee monkey she is when she clings on and he hushes and rocks her until she falls asleep and his big sister is comatose beside him and the deathwatch beetles are tapping like crazy all through the limbs of the building now — the illest of omens.

21

All across Edinburgh tourists party. Local pubs are jammed. Nightclubs are heaving. Thousands walked these streets with torches burning just a few days ago. It's enough to give a girl a complex. Police sealed off the city centre. Dot had to get passed barriers without a pass. She used her — *lady with a baby* — routine. Pushed her stomach right out. It was enough. People's niceness is so exploitable. There were skaters at Winter Wonderland. A brightly lit wheel. Fairground rides cast brightly coloured tracers across the sky behind them. The german market were wanting an arm and a leg for a fucking doughnut. Smelled good though. She'd consider giving them it. Here is my arm. Here is my leg. Please can you feed me your doughnut! There was a maze of Christmas trees and when she looked down all you could see was the top of bobbed hats making their way through pines. There will be kissing at the bells. All the uglies are out and hopeful. Norway donated an extra large Christmas tree to the Mound. There's not an empty hotel room in town. A choir sings Bach and Handel up at St. Giles. There is cheering out on the street. There is dancing. People meet and fall in love. Scuffles break out. They drink far too much. All of life is happening. A girl holds onto her friends hands and the two of them spin around. A fairground trails all the way along East End of

Princes St. gardens. There is a hammer lit up swinging with people screaming on it and a circular wall spins — the swings high up above the buildings spin out like a skirt and there is a smell of perfume and candy floss and the big bands are setting up to play in the next section of gardens where there is a bandstand and fans wait for the music to start — fireworks are being safety-checked one last time before they are lit up and send a cascade of light over the Castle rock.

Silent drums ripple through city catacombs.

Revellers interrupting the murdered, the lost and damned, the homeless or the cold and hungry, the addicted — those weary of living this life. These are Dot's people — if there have ever been any to call her own. It's where she comes from. Still is. Always will be. It's no wonder she has never fit in.

Dot slips off the High St.

Down the Close.

Losing noise and wanting the fuck away from it all as quick as she can — the building is bent over — looking down at her — it's a giant and she is tiny. Around this part of the High St. all the other buildings stand proud whilst No. 10 Luckenbooth Close bows to the city — ingratiates itself — what self respecting building would ever do that? Dot understands how tiring it is to straighten a spine. Hers is twisted. The building does not stand up like a time-lord that houses the souls of humans. It is curving over. Sub-ordinance is not for architecture. It's not remotely safe. The housing association have put scaffolding halfway to the sixth floor. A sign reading JMB scaffold flaps.

It sounds like someone clapping sarcastically.

Dot glances back up the street just as the wood gives under the weight of her shoulder and allows her eight inches to slip into the dim. So grateful they've not put a metal door on the front yet. It has been five months squatting here peacefully and she cannot leave yet. Dot pulls the wood behind her. She stands listening. Lights flicker. The building's batteries are almost fully drained. No.

10 Luckenbooth Close is breathing its last shallow breaths.

It might not make morning.

Pulls her beanie further down. She takes out a long kitchen knife. Begins the ascent. This building has the feeling of Penrose stairs. Walking up could just as easily be walking down. After a while it is hard to tell. It's a long climb to the ninth floor. Someone has spray painted an alien on the second floor. There are notices everywhere. For the housing association tenants. About when they would be evicted. No attention paid to health and safety. Hope housing association is run by psychopaths. Much like the city council. Somehow in amongst all of that the building has been calling out to her. Sending smoke signals.

Dot stops and pulls out a roll up.

Liquorice papers.

She has her hair on top of her head in a bun.

Her nails are painted black.

Polo neck.

Jeans.

Hi-top sneakers.

Touch of mascara, lip gloss, it is Hogmanay after all.

Eyes bleary — she is still coming down from clubbing in the Vaults yesterday. There was an amazing guest DJ over from Berlin, techno and proper MDMA like the early nineties. All the Sativa drummers were battering skins. Those drummers push back at the demons. A fleeting sense of intense belonging — that she has never once felt on the street. A pure touch of love in that room. This building is fucking freezing. She will apply for actual housing again in New Year. It's just a few more days until the council open their offices again. No. 10 Luckenbooth has given her something nobody else has these last few months — a home — Dot sings as she goes up the stairwell — notes rise up ahead of her — a lullaby she sings every day — to a derelict building from a broken soul. A

cold wind runs up towards her from the bottom of the building. Hairs on her arms rise. It can hear her and it has been waiting — this building has been sending out smoke signals for a long time has it not?

Just one puff — to wisp ineffectually out at first.

Then another smoke ring curls up from one of many chimneys.

For how long?

It has been calling out to her since before she was born that's what it feels like. As if she could hear it before she knew what language was, before all the things happened that led her to here. She put it all down at the job centre last time she was in and they stopped her benefits for the hundredth time. Under life experience — she put — astral travel.

- Any vacancies?

- No.

If they make her go for a disability benefit interview she will tell them she is a key in the cosmos. A being of light. Just another cosmic agent, thanks. They will keep refusing her money. She will come back to this building and shoplift for food and not tell anyone she used to know that her life has come to this.

The trick is to accept things.

It is just how it is right now — the smells, dust, cracks on ceilings and windows.

Going up past the sixth floor.

A sound of cloven hoofs steps in lightly many floors behind her.

No. 10 Luckenbooth Close pulls close.

It inspects the purity of her want.

Evaluates the depth her longing.

It's lonelier than she is.

No. 10 Luckenbooth Close is arthritic. It creaks often. Groans wretchedly when it rains. It's

elbows are knobbly. Knees buckled. It is old. How old nobody on the street seems to know for sure. It's not as old as Moubray House (1477). St. Margaret's Chapel up at the Castle sashays by at (1130). John Knox sniffs at them all regardless (1490). St Giles Cathedral (central pillars 1124 — the rest of it is — complicated). The dark wee Close leading down to No. 10 Luckenbooth — has been here as long as any of them. Nobody sees it. No matter how many times they walk by. It's unseen. As she is. It doesn't belong either. It's an ootlin. Dot has been an outsider in any scene she found herself in. It's not like she hasn't tried at times to reach out to those who seemed like her own. Artists and writers are everywhere here though. So confident! They have very different backgrounds to her most of them — even although they all shout loud and pretend to be from rougher places — they are not. Big personalities! All style no content. Clanging their own fucking bells all day long, all year long, all their lives. It's so tiring to watch. There is little art in them or so it seems to Dot. Much posturing and sense of self-importance. Every stage is their own that's how all those middle class kids see it and they'd steal your heart, soul or story and pretend it was theirs in the first place and smile at you whilst they do it and they won't even see how badly it is wrong. Even in her awkward and unpleasant year at art school — she dropped out just as soon as she could.

A vile place.

It made her feel even more dot-like than ever.

The arts! Middle-class kids are raised to own a space. Keep others from infringing on it. They are so very successful at it. Edinburgh — makes a show of herself on that point at every possible opportunity. Siphons money from punters. Keeps her truth tellers under the vaults. As if they are diseased. They are all the same sometimes. Councils, funders, those who try to keep the arts hostage — bang their drums and say — this is our space — we own all of it!

Fucking arseholes.

Dot is not about owning anything.

Not a moment.

Seconds come and then you let them go like pretty balloons — that's how it is meant to be.

Dot puts her hand through her letterbox and turns the latch.

Goes into her hall.

Hangs up her coat glad to be home.

No. 10 Luckenbooth Close has an outsider status as true and fucking righteous as her own.

Neither of them have anywhere else to call home. Nobody is coming to save them. Dot is into the weirdly romantic splendour of its faded curtains. Stories tucked away on every floor. She goes looking for them. There are signs to be found everywhere. How many people have lived here? Been housed here? Lost their minds, or hearts or if they were lucky — found a time in their life to be safe! Ah, for such a thing! Dot goes through to her room. She has drawn the entire building out on the wall. She sleeps next to it. Adds notes. Wakes in the morning and stares at it whilst smoking. It is not certain what she is doing. It's instinctual. Looking for what? That's what she doesn't know entirely.

It's something.

No. 10 Luckenbooth Close has a spiritual lock and she is in some way — key.

Happy to be it.

Dot pours herself a brandy coffee.

Life is now.

It is so much stranger than anybody says.

They are always trying to normalise it! Make it normal. Make it normal. Make it normal. It's like a mantra for the mad. Making things normal seems the goal of modern society and it is so tedious, like spinning on a ball in the middle of an unexplainable universe is just so — ordinary. Like being made of stardust and having no fucking idea about mortality, is something nobody should be discussing! Life is distraction. Online talking to strangers all the time or living in boxes paying money to unseen others and trying not to stand up and shout on a crowded train —nobody loves me! Stay busy. Die quietly. Don't ask fucking questions. Please. It will be better for you if you

don't. Whilst all these heart beaters go around experiencing the miracle of existence. They are all living on a planet where dots don't stand up.

Dot wants to stand up!

She fell in love with this building and thought of how in Japanese Kintsugi an item is only truly unique when it has broken and been rebuilt — it is then far more beautiful for the cracks not despite them — which is why they fill them with gold! Eastern philosophy of aesthetics could better the West. They keep old earthen bowls holding the grain of years, oil from fingertips, memories of time — put them on little dark alters and when candles are lit gold cracks reveal their truth. If Dot were to pick a religion hers would be wabi-sabi! In all of life there is decay and beauty in imperfection. The building called out for a Dot who has also been broken. Perhaps she is the gold it needs. It is ancient as a child. She goes from floor-to-floor. Room-to-room touching all the left things. Dot picks up a mug and needs another drink right away so she goes through to the kitchen.

In the entire nine-floor-tall tenement there is only one human heartbeat.

She puts the kettle on.

Walks through her hallway.

Painted ancient symbols adorn the floor and walls.

A black moon with a cross below it.

There are three protection sigils by the front door in colours red, blue and gold.

Aramaic incantations inscribed around the hallway — trail towards the bedroom.

Babylonian spells stand like sentry on either side of bathroom door.

Hebrew talismans guard the Hoover cupboard.

There is a painting of Lilith in the hallway.

Dot looks at her every time she goes by.

Lilith was Adam's first wife, left him in the garden of Eden to have an affair with the archangel Samael, when her first husband followed her he told her if she did not come back to Eden

he would curse her for all of history, he would kill four hundred babies in her name each day, he would have her vilified in all the religious texts and then almost entirely written out of history. She was unphased. She did not go back. Lilith was rumoured to have a tribe of lilitu, female demons and she could seduce any man, cause his death with mere thoughts, in Dot's drawings of her Lilith's thighs are wide and strong, legs taper down toward three-pronged talons, long and yellow. No shoes required or available for such design. Her ears are lightly feathered and peaked. She has thick dark eyebrows. At either side of her stand two three-feet tall owls (companions to travel every realm) they blink long and slow. If Lilith was sat at a bar — they'd rotate their heads all the way around — ensuring all but the truest-of-heart stay the fuck away.

An icon to aspire to.

Dot likes this feeling of knowing in all the floors below her there is nothing but empty rooms. Puts on a radio. Lights a joint she left in the ashtray. Thinks of the signs and the symbols and the left things in other floors. Dirty marks where pictures hung on walls. Smudges of hand prints. Fingerprints. Single pane windows. So much unopened mail. Straw remnants of a spider plant. A plastic Yoda alarm clock. It goes off every morning in 1F1. Half-empty shampoo bottles. Bathtubs with tide marks. A huge parrot cage in 5F5 and seeds all over the carpet. A piano with no song left in it. Damp socks in the bottom of a chest of drawers. A small box of unused sex toys. A teddy dropped in a hallway. Fridges switched off. Airless plastic cavities breed a multiverse of bacterium. In a flat on the eighth floor there is a neatly made bed as if the owner might return any night now to sleep here. Mould spores congregate in bathrooms. Books have nobody to tell their stories. A radio is switched ON but its batteries are rusted. Orange brown stains seep out. In the basement there are used needles with traces of blood and heroin. There are roaches, condoms, burnt spoons. In the basement an old jukebox is plugged in — its arm extended — record poised — ready to drop down forever.

Even junkies don't break in here anymore.

The others are all gone.

Dot's flat is like living in a tall cupboard.

Flat 9's saving grace is the huge sash windows even if they do only look out on brick.

Twelve feet-tall ceilings — all the better to think!

Ornate cornice's and ceiling rose.

It's taller than it is wide to be fair. Each night the walls inch forward imperceptibly as she sleeps. One day she will wake to find the entire building a coffin. Dot ignores her unmade bed. Goes through to her living-room. Pulls out matches. The smell of a burnt sulphur soothes. It flares. Drops it into the fireplace. It's why she picked this flat. Still a working fireplace. Whoever was here didn't let them put the central heating in. No gas fire like on most of the other floors. Dot burns found things. Other peoples bills mostly. It's satisfying. Red light flickers. It warms her skin only a tiny bit.

Dot opens the shutters to look up at big old gargoyles — they keep her company.

What if it doesn't get workmen in here for a bit longer?

She could heat only this one room and stay here until Spring arrives or the building falls. It's uncertain which may occur first. If they were able to bury the building whole it would do everyone (but her) a favour. A graveyard for buildings would be amazing! The gravediggers would have to be giants. The tombstones vast graffiti'd walls. No.10 Luckenbooth Close's has been eaten by some kind of bug that taps at night and now — during most of the day too. It's not just that No. 10 Luckenbooth Close is about to die and be reborn — nor that it will be wholly gutted and rebuilt from the bones up — it is the death of all the secrets. That is what keeps coming to her the more she stays here.

Washes her hands in a cold sink. Brushes out long hair.

Stares at gouges on the wall in her bathroom.

They were not there before. She traces them with her fingertips and they are rough and deep.

Like somebody dragged a knife down there. Or something sharp, it has to have been when she was out, there is a clatter somewhere down in the building and she jumps — heart racing.

Candles burn.

Flames lilt this way and that.

Shadows reach out for her from the bathroom walls, they chase each other around the roof and nudge along the side of the bathtub. Long shadow noses peer. City streets snake around the building like a noose. Spirits will be awake all night. The spirits of the netherworld feel as neglected of love as she has always been.

It is why they come to her and it's why she goes to them.

It's always been that way.

She has no judgement.

Dot pours a whisky into this coffee, she'll be down to Bucky soon.

The hoofs ... are back.

They take clear steps up toward her from the floors below.

Her fire crackles and spits.

Dot finishes the whisky quickly.

She goes down the little hallway as the stairwell door to her landing creaks open. The steps toward her door are precise and determined. Smaller ones behind them sometimes but not tonight — Dot prays — she will finally be able to see who it is, they have done this every night for a month. Dot waits. The footsteps halt just on the other side of her front door. Dot puts her eye back up to the peephole. The lights flicker off. All she can see is black. Feels a hand up at chest height — where her heart is. Dot breathes slowly. Enough to steady her heartbeat. The lights flicker on. On the other side of the door there is a young woman — beautiful as anyone Dot has ever seen — she has red lips and dark hair — two huge ornate curved horns on the top of her head — the woman looks directly at her — as the lights go out again.

22

The hallway is black. There are little gold-fringed lights on the wall. The living room has an emerald velvet corner sofa. There is a formica kitchen in the corner with a coffee machine still gurgling. Across one wall a large tropical fish tank lights the room. Ali peers in. A swarm of thin Neon tetra with red bellies and bright blue backs flash by. A large catfish emerges. Long whiskers unfurl on glass like strands of black spaghetti. Two women are standing completely still at either side of the window. They both have long shiny black hair, bell bottom jeans, black polo necks, rings, sneakers. One of the women has a tiny monkey — on her shoulder. The Triads clear their throat. Stand legs wide. They face The Original founders in a relaxed manner. A giant ceiling mirror reflects two groups surveying each other — over a shaggy purple rug. Davey picks up a copy of the Joy of Sex from a sideboard, turns it over, puts it back down.

- Could I possibly use your bathroom?

One of the women nods affirmative to Bee, so she lights a cigarette — turns to stroll down the hall. They all listen in a respectful silence as she begins to sing Rip Her To Shreds, it is her favourite tune lately and it's one she often conjures before everybody dies. Ali and Davey glance

toward Rab. There is the sound of a loo being flushed. Taps turned on. Bee noisily hauls a towel down to dry her hands. Silence then. Still no sight of her. She is reapplying lipstick, touching up mascara, putting her Fox back on. In the living room Bee stops — feigning surprise to see them all waiting so nicely for her.

She grinds out her cigarette on a tall ashtray.

- Nice spa bath, whirlpool?

- Yes.

- The pump is prone to problems, the older Triad adds.

- Ah, not so good, but it's fun right? You got the 1968 water jets?

Rab looks to the Triads who appear a touch confused — then over to his wife in approval.

- Yes, the water jets, it's fibre glass, top of the range, best money can buy.

The younger man steps forward.

- Easy! I was just saying, it's nice what you've done with the place and someone's left a bubble bath through there, please do not interrupt your plans for us ladies, I presume it's for one of you?

The older man assesses Bee with a sneer which annoys Davey on sight.

- Dinnae gie it the big yin fuckpus, she's just making conversation.

The older Triad looks at him.

- Can you not speak English, Mr Zebra?

- I uhm nay English, pal.

The taller man smiles when Davey says this and he keeps his hand close enough to take out the gun stuffed down the back of his trousers.

- No, please! Gentlemen. We know! I'm just, fucking with you Mr Wolf, Mr Zebra, we love yer radge gadge, uhm urnay, ye urr it's kind of quaint but you know — expressive!

He fist pumps the air like an excitable amateur dramatics student.

Ali's eyes blaze under his wolf mask.

- A sense of humour costs nothing, gentlemen, it is just a joke.

- Ma language isnae a fucking joke, Davey says.

- No.

- It's one ay the auldest in the world, Ali adds.

- Quite.

- We're no in the casual witty banter trade, it's true, Rab states.

- What trade are you in then, Mr Ram?

- Lately it's been murder mostly, what can you do, trends change, we must move with the times.

- I see.

- We like to keep it simple.

- Always a good business plan.

The smaller man folds his hands and waits.

- We want Dora Noyce's girl back, breathing uhn that, walking, talking, in fair fettle, Ali says.

- Ah.

- Is that gonnae be a problem?

- Yes.

- Why?

- We don't know where she is and to be fair, this is not your part of town, Mr Wolf.

Boudicea steps slightly forward, and there is only ever one indication that her temper is rising and that is when she begins to speak in an exceptionally — steady and slightly posher tone.

- It's all — our part of town.

- That's a load ay shite — as you would say — in yer non English chit-chat.

- We dinnae speak non-anyhin uhn you boys have only been here fir two months, dinner bother spraffin yer shite, we know the history of every Triad gang in this city going aw the way back to 1952 and you are not any part of any of Triads who came before you, in fact it's proving to be a bit of a mystery tae everyone in town why you are still claiming that title as yer privilege ad protection, no?

- Go home, Mrs Fox.

- That is just not very polite.

- Nobody wants to see a lady get hurt.

- Oh? D'ye think I might — break a fingernail?

Bee asks it in her best little girl voice of fey horror. She is as coy and concerned as a psychopath in a Fox mask can feign to be. She scuffs one boot behind her other foot and it raises her skirt another inch exposing slim thighs and her shirt is open a touch too low, always.

As usual — she looks stunning.

The Triads grin at her.

- You have spirit.

- I wouldn't even shed an eyelash, you boys don't really know what you are dealing with here, do you?

- You have quite a mouth for a woman.

- That's why my husband proposed the very first day he met me, at Dora Noyce's.

- We have no issue with you, Mrs Fox, nor Dora.

- There's always a fucking issue. Since Triads got here in 52, there have been issues, no?

- Yes, a few, nothing to worry about in the long run, no?

- My Dad was in the first gangs in Edinburgh you know, his Dad before him, we did always sort things out, I know, he'd tell me about those battles in graphic detail — over hot milk and diges-

tive biscuits — just before bed every night. He never really rated Roald Dahl or you know Enid Blyton or that my Dad. Then he'd tell me about those exact same battles — all over again whilst he braided my hair in the morning and then he'd kiss me bye at the school gates.

- Okay, so it goes back.

- But you don't go back gentlemen, you are a lone faction.

- We are connected! Look, how about we don't hire any more of Dora's cousins, would that help relations?

- Give us back the first one.

- We can't do that.

- Why not?

- Our boss — has got attached to her, it's become personal.

- She's dead, isn't she? Bee says.

- No!

- You have no idea why we are really here, do you gents? Rab asks.

- You want Dora's cousin.

- It would have been advisable for you to never go near any of Dora's family — not for business purposes, or fir personal purposes, that was a mistake.

- You are beginning to tire my patience Mrs Fox, you don't know anything about us.

Ali holds up his shotgun.

Davey grips his sword.

Rab rests his hand lightly on the top of his cane.

Bee is relaxed.

She begins to talk in the low seductive voice way she does — easy — like a long morning in bed with nothing but rain outside the window and silk sheets and handmade chocolates and Champagne for breakfast.

- I know one or two things, Bee purrs.

- What?

- You used to be a Red Pole.

Bee holds up one finger for a first point noted.

- Conjecture!

- I know you think you are a right hard cunt and you've underestimated us from the start or you'd have far more men here to help you out!

She holds up two fingers.

- That's not how I would phrase it.

- I know you and your boss only sleep with white prostitutes, and you only like three positions — and none of those are nice ones for the girls — am I right, I am right, don't answer!

She raises a third digit.

Both of the Triad men begin to look uneasy.

- I know you used to work for a man that cut the throats of more than forty victims.

- Excuse me?

- Three of his wee pals were executed for it.

- I ...

- Rumour is you killed the one that did it, Bee states.

- Who have you been talking to? The older Triad has pulled out his gun.

- The actual story goes — that you and yer wee pal Raymond over there have a very pretty price for delivery of your head, did you hear those stories lately, ladies?

She looks over at the two women and holds up seven fingers one for each point.

Closes her fist.

Smiles.

Bee has the room's full attention.

Her Fox whiskers are long so they can see her mouth move in red below it, her eyes flash intermittently green but they turn almost black when she begins to anger.

- I know your money goes into movies, Bee says.

- We like to support the arts.

- Snuff films.

- No, Mr Ram!

- Yes, and more importantly some commercial films, that's where your passion is, no, you liked to see Triads looking good on screen, we do too, my husband and I have watched every brilliant director over and over, we understand you invest in the films and you enjoy watching the fights, the clothes, the music, the girls, the bars, the whole swagger of it! I understand it! It's a part of your — more romantic side?

- You think that's us being romantic?

- If ye've seen as much death as I have Raymond then aye, I'd say it's quite sweet.

- Thank you, I think.

- You don't show the films of you taking girls out of clubs and we hear you've been up at the Red Room — looking around?

- Just taking in the view!

- Don't, Rab says.

Bee raises her hand and takes over again.

- You know in yer wee Triad initiation ceremony, when ye sacrifice a fucking goat or a chicken or whatever, then ye drink some ay its blood with the wine — then yer alter is cleansed with incense and after ye say yer wee oath — and then that gets burned, it doesn't mean it is forgotten?

- No.

- No, it's not!

- Bee clicks her fingers as testosterone begins to heat up the room.

- You won't kill us, Boudicea.

- Ooh — d'ye double dare me? Bee whispers.

- If there is nothing more, we must ask you to leave.

- What if we kill every fucking one of you even the fish — even that fucking monkey!

Bee points at the tiny primate and it scrunches up its face and runs up the curtain to sit on the long wooden pole looking down at them.

- We have taken your questions.

- Give us back Dora's cousin or we just can't leave.

- We can't.

- Is she in a snuff movie?

- No. You don't know who we are, this is conjecture ...

- Ah but we do. We know everything — whilst you so readily assume we are just ignorant working class Scottish rades who are not only ignorant but stupid as fuck — as is always so very readily assumed of our kind — we happen to be as thorough — in our business endeavours as any other organised syndicate!

Bee runs her fingers over her Fox ears and poses.

The men giggle and she joins in.

At first the Ram looks at his feet in despair and then he stamps his cane on the floor twice — so they all straighten up and get back to the task at hand. Bee begins to talk quietly and calmly with no expression at all on her face.

- You — Raymond, are thirty-three years old, a Gemini, your mother still lives in Macau where you grew up, it's the most densely populated place in the world!

The older man pales.

He indicates his partner should not raise his gun.

- Your mother is very sweet, Chen, I met her a few weeks ago, I was only in China briefly — for business.

Bee nods quite sweetly.

- What business?

- Well, first I went to Zhuxian Park. I visited the temple and the caves. Then over to Nanpingzhen for some lunch, I had delicious street food, Jiaozi, Bing Tanghulu, I found the donkey meat sandwich particularly delicious!

Bee pats her ears as if to tell the women in the corner to cover the monkey's.

- Who are you?

- I met your mother after, she made me white tea, it has a very delicate flavour.

- It does.

- You should get her an apartment lower down the building Raymond, fourteenth floor D — it's a lot of stairs to climb. Also, your mother does not have a bathroom as nice as this does she? Or a decent couch? I might send her a postcard, she has such a pretty address — Rua De nam Keng 444, EDF Flower City-Lei Fung, 25-AND-M Taipa.

- I know my home address!

- Did you know the landline has been cut?

- It has not!

- Ah, but it has Raymond, she can't phone out right now.

The man is visibly beginning to panic and the ammonia metallic scent of sweat and fear begins to permeate the rooms as Bee nods her Fox head gravely.

- My husband came with me on the trip.

Rab nods his Ram horns gravely.

- What did you do there? Raymond asks.

- 租一个白人外国人，相当交易！

- Bee answers for him.

- And exactly — what was he rented to do — as a white foreigner?

Raymond is getting shaky.

- Well!

- Well!

Husband and wife smile at each other affectionately.

Bee continues.

- You, young man, Peter, I found enough time to visit your sister, Rose as well, in Hong Kong, I had all the news about her boyfriend, your Father's disappointment in you — so sad — your early training, the 36 oaths you took to help free a fellow gang member if you inadvertently got them arrested?

Peter pulls out his gun and unblocks the barrel.

- Except you got a lot more than one prior gang member arrested, didn't you Peter?

- No!

- They are very annoyed, in fact they said you are a really naughty boy and I only have two good methods for dealing with those, do you want to hear what they are?

Peter shakes his head and nods at the same time.

- Well, my dear husband here — the Ram as he is for tonight — actually that's often how I think of him — if he has been a naughty boy, if he for example has been down to the brothel and had a little three-some with the girls and come home without any money for me — well — I bull-whip him ...

- With a bullwhip?

- Big one. Six-feet long. I have to wear heels to really crack it, I'm not so tall!

- She's an expert.

Rab verifies.

- Really?

- Yes, Peter, that's the first thing that I do to punish naughty little boys, the problem is — my darling husband — likes it way too much but after a proper whipping and all the other accoutrements — he doesn't look at any other girls for a good — long while.

Rab refuses to meet the amused glances of Ali and Davey.

The two women laugh under their hands.

- What you actually want to know Peter, is what I do to *really* naughty boys, right?

In the Fox mask and with her tight clothes and boots — and her soft voice — Boudicea is hypnotising the entire room — she whispers so they all have to strain to be able to hear what she is going to say next.

- I put on this — latex catsuit.

- You do?

- I do.

- And then ...

- Well, then I have them oil me up in it — I keep them naked in a collar and leash — I make them rub oil in to every crevice until it's all slippery, do you know how nipples feel through the finest, thinnest latex?

- No, I mean, no.

- Hard — slippery and smooth, all at the same time.

- Then?

- They often beg at that point ...

- For what?

Both young women are stood by the door listening.

One has poured herself a gin and tonic.

The other one smokes a small joint.

The monkey tips his head.

Rab is trying to contain the erection he has but he has never been able to hold it together around Bee — the woman unravels him — she can do it to almost anyone, Peter gazes at the Fox adoringly.

- To touch them.

- They do?

- They beg me for all kinds of things at that point.

- Like what?

- I don't know, a cock that I wear you know, hard up inside them, or they like me to slap their face whilst I sit on them, punch it even, or place their face between my tits, or their dick, sometimes they want a hard ball gag in their mouth so they can suffocate to the point of passing out just as they cum, or they want me to spit on their balls and drag them around and humiliate them, it's disgusting.

- That's no way to be with a lady, Peter says.

- That's right. I don't like it. In fact I have a very low tolerance for men other than my husband. Dora Noyce's cousin did too, she only punished them, which is why we know she didn't come to make films with you willingly. Also, to go back to your initiation ceremony — it says — correct me if I am wrong — if you ever break one of your thirty-six oaths, or worse, let one of your blood brothers go to prison for one of your crimes, you would be struck by five thunderbolts, did they not?

- They did.

- Well, Peter, sweet man, today you can call me Zeus!

Bee's last whisper is replaced with the sound of a blade as she glides the head out of her cane and stabs Peter in the throat, five times rapidly — two blood tears slide down his face — she spins and sticks another blade between Raymond's eyes and as both men sink to the floor she grabs them by the hair — stands with one head — in either hand.

23

Esme is still asleep on him. Footage of four tanks comes up on the telly. The news reel reads — Tian'anmen Square, Beijing. The footage is unbelievable. One solitary man stands in front of four huge military tanks. They face him. Guns up. The man refuses to move. The rolling bar at the bottom of the screen says estimates are — over a hundred thousand students are taking part in protests. Hunger strikes. Mass gatherings. The man in front of the tanks has a bag in each hand. He was on his way home, maybe. Had enough. Of watching ordinary people suffer. The reel says students want economic liberalisation, democracy, and rule of law. They want to be treated respectfully. That's what they want. It says that Hu Yaobang — who stood for freedom and democracy — resigned and died. The students protest twice as hard in his name. Seven demands are made.

1. Publish the income of state leaders.
2. Campaigns against spiritual pollution are wrong.
3. Stop press censorship. Increase funding for education.

4. Affirm that Hu Yaobang's views on democracy and freedom are correct.

5. End the restriction on demonstrations.

6. Provide objective coverage in the media.

7. Ha Yaobang's funeral took place. A hundred-thousand students come to protest at Tian'anmen Square. During the funeral inside the Great Hall students call for an official to address them.

None come out.

Two days later rioting breaks out in Changsha and Xi-an.

A few days after that another one-hundred thousand students march to Tian'anmen Square. A million Beijing residents demonstrate in solidarity. They bring troops in. Armies come in every direction to Beijing. They shoot expanding bullets. They expand inside a body. Create a bigger wound.

Tank man stands in front of the tanks — now.

One tries to go around him and he stands in its way again.

He climbs up onto the tank to talk to the man driving it — human-to-human.

Ivor sits in silence.

Telly on mute.

Tears.

It is all wrong what is going on this world.

He pulls a blanket up over Rhona. Face too thin. They stopped her benefits again and he can't get any if he's not attending job interviews in daylight. It'll be bar work probably. What else can he do. Esme is existing on shoplifted pop-tarts and Ovaltine. Gas will be off soon. They've had to jack the leccie meter. Meter man came to read it and they had to run the hairdryer, Hoover and all the lights for three days to try and bring the figures down.

His heart feels faint.

Sun is coming.

The same dread he feels every day he knows it is on its way.

He carries the bairn through to her bed and tucks her in, she is wearing her reversible Micky Mouse pyjamas from Ingleston market. Ivor took her there last week. She all but died and went to heaven when they did the 1 o'clock fashion show next to the burger van!

Wants to go down to the Scotsman for a pint before dawn but he can't even afford that.

Switch off the telly.

He hates all of it!

The strikes, the miners marching, the men he's grown up with — police batons on their backs, they even had gay protestors came out in Wales to support them and Ivor was making them tea and warning the boys no to say the wrong thing but everywhere it's all unrest! Brixton riots. Marches against the National Front since the 70s. Racist cunts marching for their right to hatred. Poll Tax, Nuclear disarmament, women's rights over their bodies, a right to equal pay, the Irish hunger strike, going all the way back to the fucking Radical War in Scotland. Britain claims there is freedom of press! What a fucking joke! Rich people own papers who work fir their other rich pals who all run the fucking joint. They have systematically shut down mines across every town that has had them for hundreds of years — it is a deliberate attack. Thatcher is after the enemy within — trade unions. Moonlight casts a blue glow on the living-room. He picks up Rhona's tramadol. Sits holding them. It's so tempting. So, so, so fucking tempting! Fucking Thatcher! Those who have inherited take all they can from those who will never inherit. They can't take enough! She described the miners as a danger to liberty! Refused any concessions through the strikes. Privatise the rare few pits that are left. Let the Irish go on hunger strike in the Maze and didn't alter tack until ten were dead. Even then she did it for public face. All they wanted was rights restored as paramilitary prisoners. Rights! There's nae rights for most humans. There's only rights for the rich. Thatcher wants capital punishment. Keep archaic divorce laws. Object to immigrants. Keep the support of the

NF. Make endless cuts to education. Allow those you oppress to think? No, sorry, not happening!

Even worse — challenge you in your own arenas? Fuck off. He runs his finger over the packet and picks up his sister's vodka and she opens her eyes and stares at him. Ivor does nothing. Just stares back until she goes to sleep. Rhona will think it was just a weird barbiturate dream. Ivor is shaking.

What is he thinking? He puts the tablets up high in the kitchen cabinet.

The doctor told him the word for what's wrong with him.

- Phengophobic.

- Ye what?

- It's an acute fear of light, daylight in particular is your phobia.

- Aw ma life, that's it?

- Aye, your job and your lifestyle has supported you so you can hide it mostly, Ivor, you avoid daylight most of the time but now you've lost the job, your relationship has broke down, I think you are having an episode of depression.

- I see.

- Have you had any thoughts of suicide?

- Nut.

- It is unusual to ask that just, I lost my Uncle that way and more men — well, we just need to ask.

Ivor did not tell the man that he thinks of ten ways to die each day.

He's not an idiot!

They'd have him locked up on the Royal Ed being fed mush and pissing himself before he could say — fuck it. He goes into the room and Esme is up already. Before light comes. She takes his hand. Doesn't comment. His wet face probably doesn't show in her wee starlight room. She has set up a tea party. All the Care bears except Love-a-Lot. She pours tea. Hands him a tiny pink

plastic cup.

- Sit!

Ivor struggles to cross his legs.

They stick out awkward in front of him like they belong to some other cunt.

She picks up a hanky from her dolly and casual as anything — leans over and wipes the tears from his face.

- It's not gonnae be okay, Uncle Ivor.

- You think it won't?

- No, I don't think it's gonnae be guid. No fir the trees. Or the people. It's not going to be okay for anything.

She nods.

A tiny sage with ribbons in her hair.

- It might get better?

- Noh, it winnae.

He laughs.

- It's no funny, uncle Ivor, no fir Jessie, or her wee girl, or the tall standing lady. They urnay ever gonnae be okay.

- Are they ... invisible friends?

- Invisible to you!

She smacks her hand off her forehead and shakes her head admonishing his great unseeing.

- I believe you Esme, I know there's things other people cannae see that are real!

More tears.

- They urnay invisible Uncle Ivor, Jessie is sat right there where you sleep. There's Elise playing make up with ma powder puff and the bairn — is always toddling about eftir me, I keep growing but she has stopped.

Esme puts her hand down to indicate a child only up to her waist. She holds out a teddy for a little girl that he can't see.

- Why is Love-a-Lot not at the tea party, Esme?

The little girl pouts and frowns, she glances towards the living room next door.

- Because not everybody Love's-a-Lot, do they?

- You are very wise now that you're eight.

She nods gravely. Goes over to her ghetto blaster and fiddles with a tape cassette.

- Why has Mummy never loved anybody?

- Like who?

- Like my Dad.

- Ah ken, hen.

- The other kids at school have a Dad.

- Not all of them!

- They dinnae have a Mummy whose been asleep since they were born?

Wanting to scoop her up in his arms. She won't take hugs easy though unless she's tired. It's a thing in his family. They learn things by memory, they are aw a wee bit too clever but when it comes to simple things, hugs, just you know, loving someone, being understood in a conversation or knowing even remotely what other people need — it's not something they do.

- Why urr ye no at home any mair, Uncle Cal?

- Well, I'm just not.

- She hit you.

- What?

- Jessie's little girl saw you get undressed in the bathroom and she says you have bruises aw over yer back and arms.

- Ghosts should not watch people undress!

- A big smile.

Curly hair and lots of it, wide-eyes, like they got drawn in a cartoon.

The tap, tap, tap of the deathwatch beetles is fading,

Sun drawing close.

- It's time to go back to sleep, Esme, and stop making up stories! They are why you are getting nightmares!

Esme makes a face to the invisible child.

He'd like to say he does not hear the faintest peal of laughter, female, high, more than one.

Looks to the bunk where she says Jessie is sitting.

This must be how a phengophobic finally loses their mind entirely.

- Scat!

Goes to lift her onto the bunk. She shakes her head. Pushes his hand away. Climbs up the wee ladder in a huff. Stares at him with her Goonies posters behind her. He'll no be a burglar, no end up in Saughton like her Da. He'll forget the pit. Stack shelves in Tesco. Work in bars. Whatever it is he'll do it.

Esme peeps at him.

- Sleep tight Esme, dinnae let the bed bugs bite.

- Naebody will bite me Uncle Ivor, ma best friends mum is the devil's daughter — she's got horns so long they could stake a burglar through a letterbox.

She stretches out her hands to emphasise — with envious glee.

- Sleep!

Checks under her duvet. Hot water bottle is still warm. One minute she is watching him and the next her eyes fall. Asleep within seconds. So peaceful he envies it. It's him being here that is

making her feel safe! Not some imaginary fucking horned cunt. There is a tap at the front door.

Who and what the fuck! If it's the junkies they're going to get a punch in the fucking pus. Ivor opens the door in his Calvin Klein shorts in sheer rage. His best mate is stood there.

- What the fuck do you want?

- Don't shut the door, Ivor, I'm sorry!

He holds his hands up.

- I am warning you Jake, get the fuck away fae this door or I'm gonna come out and leather ye in the fucking stairwell, I mean it!

The vein on his forehead throbs.

It's hard to close his fist and not put it through Jake's face.

So hard!

- If you want tae hit me go fir it, I know though, about Vicky.

His pal wrinkles his nose like he has done since they were little kids. Ivor knows what Vicky is like. A few drinks, a high mood, like she gets, hard to resist for anyone. His wife is the kind of woman who lights up a room no matter how fucked up she is, he will give her that at least.

- You've got five minutes and you'll have tae whisper.

They go into the wee bedroom lit up with kids glow in the dark stars all over the ceiling. Ivor sits on the bunk, Care Bears all around him, the wee Troll things Esme collects too, all the My Little Pony's with their smug pus's. Despite himself he begins to smile. So does Jake. They are the hardest men from their town and the two of them laughing for a minute at all of it.

Jake sits on the floor, offers him a tin.

- Can I smoke in here?

- Aye.

Push a red Tennents ashtray over to him.

- You've one minute, Jake.

The anger is back in his voice then, just looking at him, thinking of him touching her.

- Vicky stabbed me.

- What?

- With a biro, in the leg, it's fucking sair!

He pulls up his jeans and there is a bandage with blood seeping out.

- Fucks sake!

- Is that Hubba Bubba? Can I have a piece, what kind is it?

- Awesome Original Bubble Tape.

- I prefer Groovy Grape.

Jake chews it and looks at him seriously.

- She confessed.

- To what?

Ivor's heart really races then, a roar in his ears, not wanting the words to come out his friend's mouth — thinking of how we can know someone our entire lives and never even think of telling them our worst secrets or what has been done to us or by who and how if he'd taken those tablets they would have had no idea really why he'd done it.

- She's been battering ye, fir years, decades, since we were teenagers.

- Get the fuck out of here, Jake!

- She says yer allergic tae light like, that aw the boys calling ye a scab dinnae ken what they are talking about — ye only kept going down the pit cos ye 'hink yer gonnae die in fucking daylight!

- Bullshit!

- For once in our entire fucking life Jake, let me in!

The emotion is way back down, deeper than the coal mine, earlier than lifting up a card-

board box to put on his head and feeling like a freak, earlier than when he got married thinking it was better him taking the blame than Vicky.

- I hate you, Jake.

- I know man! I deserve it. Just dinnae shut me out! I'm not having them say yer a scab anymore Ivor, and I'm not having yer kids think it is you lifting yer hands anymore! I uhm nay! You are the nicest guy in the whole fucking world and it's not fair! It's time mate.

- Time to what?

- Tell the truth!

- Aye, that'll no be fucking happening.

Ivor reaches into his pals top front pocket, where his fags always are. He takes out a Regal King size. Sparks it. Offers the pack to Jake and he takes one out and lights it too. Ivor feels as sick as he has done every morning and he doesn't know how to explain that every morning feels like facing a dinosaur — one that is pounding down the streets looking only for him. The two men lay beside each other awkward in silence on a single bunk. Tips of their fags glow red — like the sun on the horizon.

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Dot opens the door. There is a small hammer on her mat. It looks antique. Reluctant to leave what warmth there is in the flat. Pulls her beanie down. If she is to spend the bells following spirits — she's glad of having had a drink already. The hammer is in her hand. It works by itself almost. A feeling of being a conduit, willingly, she goes into her bathroom and raises it above her head. Claws into plasterboard. Dot gouges off a bit of the bathroom wall. Musty cold air wafts up from inside the building. Dot's hand fits inside the cavity. Just cobwebs and dust. She tries to be gentle. This building has endured enough. A sickly patient! Dot — some kind of mad psychic doctor come to cure its rickets! That's one to put on her CV. Dot — whose cracks are lined only with gold — fated Doctor of the Underworld. References included — solely from the spirit realm.

The interviewer described her as non-able bodied last time.

Dot isn't a non-anything.

Fucking non-entity that woman was, her own mum was too when she thinks about it. Dot's mother was always disgusted at her faulty child. Not arriving exactly as she should! Not doing what was expected at every single moment! Saying in her terse tone that she wouldn't let Dot ruin her life — oh no — she was far too strong for that — she wouldn't let anyone ruin her life! The woman endured, piously, the terrible hardship of her presence.

Dot sniggers.

At all of it!

A happiness in her — even if nobody else ever does, she is getting to know herself.

Fuck them all!

Tap. Tap.

Tap. Tap. Tap, Tap, Tap, Tap, Tap.

In the attic (her temple) thousands of death-watch beetles stop what they are doing.

She knows who her disciples are!

Dot has looked them up.

Hacking into WiFi from the Witchery up the street — it is very satisfying.

There is nothing Dot can't do with technology.

It's like she was bred for it.

After much research and finding various dead specimens to inspect more closely — it turns out her only other living companions in this building — come from the order Coleoptera, in the super order Endopterygota. If that doesn't make her Head of an Underworld she doesn't know what does.

Wood all down throughout the building creaks.

Metal echoes somewhere.

There is a shudder.

Dot stops — hammer in hand — guilty as charged — is the building going to fall?

With her in it?

It is a very fragile fucking building — there is nothing to say she will not be buried whole by tomorrow. It's a risk. Everything is a risk. Dot claws another hole out! All the insects pause. Hundreds-of-thousands of deathwatch beetles take a collective breath. She taps. The beetles tap back. Dot stops. They await instruction. Her beetles clearly consider this tapping — to be that of a new and great mother. She is a giant Death-Watch Beetle Princess. They rejoice! What good fortune to live in an entire tenement of oak-rot-donkiopora! The beetles most favourable conditions cultivated by endless gutter leaks, abject building neglect and hundreds of years of damp Edinburgh weather. Mass-colonisation wins. Dot taps again. The spirits don't want her to stop looking. They don't want her to leave them. They need her. They would be competing with the living except there is nobody alive who wants her — the other world is fighting for her presence — hard.

- You want me?

Wind echoes up the buildings cavities.

- For good?

Who do the living hold on so hard?

- Take the tablets, Dot.

Her friends would say that if she had any.

Bloody useless things other people!

Dot lights a joint.

Exhales a small row of smoke rings.

Decides to stop and drink the rest of half a bottle of wine before doing anything else.

- Come on little Dot, take the tablets.

No. 10 Luckenbooth Close used to draw itself up to its greatest height on this hill. A tall observer of the city away down below it. It was watched. Fairground being assembled in winter. Stages going up or down. All the roads running down into the New Town. Its views from city to sea

— all the way across the water. In summer sometimes golden fields of hay over in Fife catch the light. Or there is a haze of green hills on an icy morning. At night away over the other side of the Firth of Forth a glowing dash of red lights up as Mossmorran bolts fire up into the sky from the ethylene plant away over in the kingdom of Fife — a place often ignored (or derided) by the many snobs of Edinburgh. It's so pretty there. Seals swim out from Inchcolm island. Fat white or grey seal cubs pop up every year, all black eyes and whiskers. In winter the hills across the water are snow peaked and majestic.

Coolly noted by Edinburgh.

All of the middle-to-top floor residents of No. 10 Luckenbooth Close would have been witness to the changing vista all year round. Pink skies. Yellow dawns. Drunken women out on hen do's singing. Street performers trying to make money. Comedians seeking out fame. Bin lorries trundling down cobbled all grim in the wee hours. Protestors going on marches. Dark cars driving politicians to places where they can't be seen. Steamy buses. Folks from all over the Lothians come into work in town, or go out to dinner, do business, or drink, or shoplift, or visit the council, or take buses to the airport so they can fly the fuck out of here. Bodies found. The upstairs and downstairs, the rich and poor, they won't ever stop its darkness. It's lack of investment in communities that creates it. It's all seasons and movement — space, breadth — modern, ancient — rich, poor — experiment, tradition, conservatives, crooks, academics, bakers, curators, beggars, all the many graves seen and unseen — it is a most uncompromising city and she is entirely alone in it and nobody wants her!

Dot smiles to herself sadly.

She has love in her heart for this city.

No matter how many bad things have happened to her here.

It is her home.

An errant daughter who always returns.

On the outside of the tenement two stone faces on the belfry sneer at all of it (stone features all bashed-in by the North wind). A feeling she might be the last to see them. Those gargoyles have held that pose for hundreds of years. Up on rooftops all over this city there are angels and cherubs and saints and sinners and gargoyles and little stone creatures. Dot is more for them than the humans. Get rid of the humans. Planet — take yersel back — let all this shit decay! Dot picks up a marble. Sits it on the floor. It rolls quickly away from her. The building is sliding forward too quickly. Fireworks bang outside. The bells will be here soon. Tomorrow will be cold. There will be no bright sky. She can feel it in her bones. Even the cars appear forlorn in that kind of grey. Every year around March, or sometimes April there appears a fear that Spring may not come at all.

Often she arrives — late and unrepentant.

She is as brass as only a goddess who brings forth new life can be.

The city is seasonal.

Primeval, tired, corrupt occasionally brilliant, true.

Dot is from here.

She does not question why summer has commitment issues.

An Edinburgh summer is a skittery, lying, drunk, untrustworthy foe — her legs are always spread — elsewhere. She is elusive and unreliable, a bit of a fucking pisshead. The next day she pretends she's still far too poorly to make an appearance.

Locals loathe the erratic, elusive and often absent entirely — Edinburgh summer.

Talk about her endlessly — will she, or won't she?

Look out windows expectantly each morning.

They buy flower seeds just in case.

Resentfully they keep out all items of their winter wardrobe.

She loves all the anticipation, doesn't she?

They hate her.

It's an entire country in an abusive relationship with the weather.

She drives many to despair, or drink.

However, if she does arrive!

All is forgiven.

Couples kiss each other on the Meadows, lay down amongst the daisies and rejoice in the plain exultation of living! Holistic practitioners talk craniosacral therapy — outside — over multiple shots of coffee. Kids play football, or rounders, or Mario, or skateboard, or do wheelies on bikes in the middle of the road. People get pierced in Cockburn St, or tattooed. Buskers sing songs a wee bit louder. Art is made happily on the street. Even the Jakies nod and dance and say fair play tae it. Posh people cruise out to East Lothian in hatchbacks stashed — for this one glorious day! Girls with legs rising up to very tight short, shorts — go out fir cocktails — in the early afternoon. Beer gardens fill with drinkers chatting football, or gossip, or philosophy, or music, or sex and death. They all turn up for summer. Stick by her until she goes. Dot puts the joint out. She is not going to be here much longer.

This nostalgia is pre-empting her exit from the entire place.

For good!

It's not safe in here — the flat door gives a good impression of security but in all truth — its screws are loose. Dot can pull the letter-box back with little effort. Stick her arm through. Turn the latch to let herself in. So can anyone else. Dot can hear something in the lower levels moving around. Traces her fingertip over the smooth cold metal hammer. That stairwell is a horror movie whose longest and most dedicated audience are ghosts. She doesn't normally go through this building on her own at night. Locks herself in here. There's a clatter below. Sound of a door slamming. She bolts upright. Heart batters off her chest. Then there is nothing. It was just, it was nothing. Outside her flat door (and in all the floors below) there are absolutely no human sounds.

The peripheral noise of others has gone.

No boiling kettles: no bare feet in hallways in the middle of the night: no bumping into things whilst going to the loo with the lights off: no running taps: no brushing teeth: no low moan: no quiet sob, no cursing all-of-fate when warm flesh sits on a freezing toilet seat. At sundown there is no click of lamps going on up and down each floor. No running for the morning bus and slamming the stairwell door. No Sunday mornings in hungover pits. No middle of the night waking soaked in existential dread. No turning the radio up. No dancing without anyone there. No looking out of the window. No drawing the curtains, or the shutters, or doodling in the margins of a diary whilst blinking at the TV. No diarrhoea after a shock or too much rum, or a wheat binge, or gastric-flu. No waiting for death. No texting an ex. No getting ready to go out. No being happy to stay in. There are no ignored phone calls in between bath-time and tears. There are no other tenants not at dawn or dusk, nor any of the hours in between.

A scratching sound draws near.

Rats.

Likely it is rats.

She turns the broken snib on her front door — so quiet!

Dot looks out onto the landing, keeps one foot inside her own hallway.

It is freezing.

What if rats are flocking here from sewers and catacombs. Rats the size of wee dogs? She could wake to find one eating her toes. Dot sleeps with her boots on. Something is circling in the building and it's not fucking rats. It's moving in and out of cavities unseen. Dot places two feet out in the cold stone hall. Grips the hammer in a sweaty hand.

Ear cocked.

Blood cold and hot at the same time.

Something *is* in here.

It belongs to the building just like she does.

Each floor is so quiet. The building is listening back to her. So are the ghosts. They're closing in. Not much time left. The stone steps are so worn each dips in the middle. The pipes clang. She's not running taps! Faint. Dizzy. Whatever she fears is not real. It isn't real. It is not. She tells herself this just like people tell themselves they will never be the one to go mad on the street one day — to not recognise themselves — to not even know their own name!

Not me.

Not I.

It won't happen.

Until it does.

It will.

Then it will be far too late to do anything about any of it.

What if she tore her clothes off and ran from the building on Hogmanay!

Probably nobody would pay attention.

The tourist board might be issuing a statement on her — homeless woman refused disability benefit or housing is found murdered whilst squatting in a derelict building. On Hogmanay! This is really not the look we are going for!!!

Heartbeat too fast.

Felt at .102 above the normal setting for human existence.

Do spirit doctors hearts beat like other mortals? Maybe a robot stuck a needle in her earth mother in the womb.

- This one comes from the dream world boys — a pure one — earth angel — lets curse her to a life of yearning — a goddess — born with fangs and a unique pattern to her limbs.

Dot knows who it is down there.

Horns.

The building croaks and groans and she flies through the stairwell.

Kicks in the door at 7F7 — it is wrong!

Dot will know what it is when she finds it — through another floor — marks on walls, old carpets — Dot slows down on the fifth floor landing and goes down to a flat door already ajar.

Pushes it open.

- Is anyone there?

A horrible fear.

There is a creak on the wooden floor.

Dot steps into the long hallway, there is a bathtub visible through a door on the right.

- Hello?

Into the living-room.

An old empty parrot cage sits on a stand and seeds are scattered over a patterned carpet.

Can feel it.

Evil.

It's not the first time Dot has felt that presence.

Hauls her hand back and gouges a huge chunk in the wall. Kicks plasterboard and drags huge chunks off — throws them on the floor behind her — claws again as dust rises — bang, bang, bang — fireworks out on the street — a shudder through the entire building — she has taken off nearly the entire wall — cold air flies out from the cavity — a long-low howl rises up from the bowels of the building.

Dot screams!

Steps back — drops the hammer.

- Fucking hell!

Reaches out and then snatches her hand back.

Steadies herself again.

Two skeleton torsos — hold hands, and in between them both is a child.

The infant is the only one with skull intact.

Outside on the street fireworks crack and there is cheering as bells go off.

Tears in her eyes.

- I'll be back for you, she whispers.

Dot lets them stream hot across her face and she knows without needing to why those women are in there — in a rage she goes through every room she can find until it is only the basement left — East Wall, old lathe is easily taken apart — the catacombs just there and all the undead gathering — she opens up a small altar — two skull heads look at each other — one has fine long horns.

Santa baby, please put a sable under the tree, for me.

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Reflected in the ceiling mirror is a pool of blood. It spreads out on a large round white shaggy rug. Ali lowers his shotgun as Bee wipes her dagger off on the rug, she stands back neatly — to assess her handiwork.

The two young women watch her, one exhales a joint.

- 圣洁的狗屎, the young woman says.

- Holy shit indeed, Bee agrees.

The other woman opens a bag of crisps and takes a large handful.

- What? I'm hungry!

Davey stands at the window looking down towards the street.

- There's police coming into the stair!

- You fucking what?

- What do we do with the bodies?

- Bathroom, and we need candles, okay? Ask those women to come through here, Bee snaps.

- Okay!

The shag rug is rolled up and shoved down the back of the fish tank. Two slim men's bodies are taken down the hall into the bathroom. Both of the women stand at the door looking at Bee as if she's made whilst she takes her clothes off.

- I need you, you, yes the pretty one, take your clothes off.

- You are not my type!

- I want you to look like you've been in this bath with me, hair wet, towel, come on!

The whirlpool bubbles up on full jets.

- Your friend must pretend she is taking care of the boys through there, if they search us and find these two idiots, we all go to prison, what are your names?

- Bai.

- Audrey.

Both girls nod.

There is a knock.

Audrey quickly wets her hair and pulls a towel around herself and goes to answer the door.

She opens it slowly and looks up, half-wearing the towel, her hair is dripping.

- Oh, we're sorry.

The police officer glances down the hall.

- We heard there was a disturbance.

- Oh, no? Actually, that could have been me and my girlfriend, we were, getting carried away, too many drinks at the Christmas office party!

Audrey pulls on the end of a strand of hair and smiles at them.

- Do you live here?

- Yes, I am a student and I work as a secretary at Edinburgh University, so does my girlfriend, we were at the office party earlier.

- What are you studying?

- Terrorism.

- Okay, well, we just want to have a quick look, we won't take a minute.

Audrey whispers ...

- My girlfriend is in the bath, waiting ...

The policeman pulls himself up.

- Well, we won't take long.

He steps in. The bathroom is barely lit by candles. The whirlpool is full volume. In the centre of the bubbles rises Bee and she sits up so they can see her entire upper torso, she looks as shocked as she can manage and at that minute another flat further up in the stairwell blasts out heavy metal music.

- Can I help you, Officer?

- There was a disturbance ...

- Oh, that was upstairs, we heard it too! They are always playing that music, it's not at all festive!

- We'll go see what's going on, ladies.

- Thank you!

Audrey closes the door after they leave.

Turns to look down the hall.

Ali, Davey and Rab walk silently down the hall and look in the bathroom door — Bee sits up silently, drains the bath and pulls bodies of the two men up from underneath her into a sitting position, they are still clothed.

- Peter has an erection! Ali says.

Bee towels herself dry and hauls her clothes on and gestures, annoyed

- Maybe if you are hard when you die, then, you know.

- I think he's going to cum.

- It's becoming one of those days, I've still presents to wrap you know!

Bee takes out a little glass phial and an even tinier silver spoon.

A wee snort up each nostril.

She can see them all behind her in the mirror, a quiet ragged breathing sound causes her to come out of her daydream as they all fall silent.

The corpse of Peter blinks.

- La, la, la, la, rip her to shreds

Their ears are all tilted for every sound — the police coming back — their own blood pumping around their veins, in their ears, a television downstairs with darts on, a familiar whumpf and thud as the darts are thrown — the presenter promising gifts, an audience claps but all so far away, there is a helicopter flying somewhere outside in the city and this horrible ragged breathing sound coming from a freshly dead corpse.

- He isn't dead, Ali says.

- He's dead! They can still move and shit fir up to twelve hours.

- Fuck off, Rab!

- I'm telling ye, they piss, shit, blink.

- Get laid?

- Look, it's just what the human body does! It's only gross if you make it like that, Bee says.

- The stages of decomposition are just not happening in order, maybe?

Audrey adds this and she is eating her crisps again and she appears not only unflustered by the events of the last half hour but actively amused. Ali checks his watch.

- I think by the time you've staked the cunt he should not be breathing likesae, this cunt sounds like he's making a dirty phone call.

- It isnae right, Davey says.

- You stake him, he stops breathing, you drown him, already dead — then what? Three-seconds later he's breathing again? Ali asks.

- It's this place, this building's cursed, every cunt knows it, Davey says.

- It is, Bai agrees.

- We hear things every night, the building has bad energy, Audrey says.

- I've had two men's dead bodies under me in a whirlpool, people — I think I'd know if either of them wasn't dead, strip the rest of their clothes off them, they'll need to be wrapped in the rug to get them out of here. Ali and Davey finish undressing the men and lay them down as respectfully as they can. Raymond's eyes are closed but just as Ali goes to close Peter's the corpse blinks very slowly and then appears to ejaculate — just slightly.

Ali crosses himself.

- Fucks sake!

- Can you get pregnant from a jacuzzi? Audrey asks with wide eyes.

- He's dead, it's just some fucking random thing!

Ali is shaky and him and Davey are jumpy now.

- Fuck you, Bee.

- So — stake him again!

- I think I might shoot him, just to be sure? Ali says.

- I heard of a woman who gave birth once, after she died, she had a heroin overdose and she died then a little while later — out pops the baby! The people with her were so high they thought it was a hallucination.

They all turn to look at Bai.

- You two don't seem that freaked out by any of this, Audrey, Bai?

The bath drains.

Bai and Audrey glance at each other, and Bee stares hard at the two women.

- What do you do?

- Nothing.

- Why don't I fucking believe you?

- Perhaps you are a cynical woman, Mrs Fox?

Ali and Davey have taken the corpses down the hall by the feet to roll them in the rug. Rab is walking ahead of his wife into the living room. Bai walks barefoot behind both of them pulling out two gilded daggers in complete silence.

- We need to get home for the kids, lads can ye take care of the rest of this?

- Aye, Davey says.

- Something doesn't feel

Boudicea turns on instinct just as Bai spins down low on the floor and takes her legs out from under her, she stabs one dagger into each eye killing her instantly — as Ali lunges for his gun he is stabbed in the groin by Audrey, she turns his gun up to his chin, puts a cushion on top of it then blows his head off — feathers fly up into the air — she spins around and slams her hand hard up into the underside of Davey's nose — bone travels into his brain — killing him instantly.

The roar from Rab is savage — he rushes toward Audrey and she kicks him back onto the sofa winding him completely. The man sits trying to breathe and looking at his wife with complete pain etched over his face, he has aged years in the last few minutes, his hands shake by his side as Audrey gently pulls any weapons out of his reach.

- Do we have to cut their heads off Bai, what do you think?

Audrey looks at all the corpses.

- Just their ears, or balls for the men, they deserve a rusty knife those two.

She points at the Triads rolled up in the rug and now turning blue.

- Should we make them eat them, Bai? I mean leave their balls stuffed in their mouth, obviously they can't eat them! It would look good, right? It would make a statement?

Rab is in shock looking at Audrey and then Bai and then his wife and Ali and Davey and his shoulders begin to shake.

- I don't understand what is ...

- We could take off their toes and let the rats in to deal with the rest, Audrey? If we cut a few toes off the rats will smell that good steak tartare, huh? Yummy, right? They'll be in here by the dozen. They might eat all the bodies for us? It would be a Christmas feast for them, no?

- It is not a bad idea, Bai.

- I can't believe you've killed my wife, my friends, who the fuck are you?

Rab roars and tries to stand up and Audrey points a gun at him.

- Sit the fuck down.

Bee's face is looking toward her husband, tear drops tattooed under her eyes, gold dagger in each eye. Other than that she appears untouched. He is beginning to shake all over, mourning for his beautiful wife, thinking of their kids, adrenaline running through every aorta and ventricle, even his feet shake, his teeth begin to clatter.

- Steak fucking what? Audrey says.

- Tartare, have you not had it? You need to try some of the better local culture you know!

- Just cos I eat chippies every other night!

- I didn't realise ...

Rab puts his head in his hands.

- Ah, you did not realise a lot of things Mr Rab, we are sorry about your wife, no offence, she was quite a woman but we were sent her to kill Peter and Raymond, cleanly — heads off, symbolic and all that, you turned up and have quite rudely got in our way and we are sorry but

He looks up at them.

- We have children, without their Mum they are going to need me ...

Rab can't even light a cigarette his hands are so shaky.

- Could we feed all of the bodies to the fish, Audrey?

- I don't think so.

- Would a catfish eat them?

- It eats snails and crawfish, not fully grown corpses.

- It's going to get dark, Rab says numbly.

- I think we already got to that bit, Mr Ram.

- Take your mask off.

- No.

- I don't think you are the one in the negotiating position.

Audrey holds Ali's sawn off-shotgun up.

Bai has put a large psychedelic mushroom throw over Davey and Ali, Boudicca is sat respectfully up against the wall wearing a leather jacket they have draped around her.

Audrey looks sad.

- I didn't want to kill Boudicea but we had seen her face.

- So?

- So, she wasn't going to let us out of here alive, was she?

- No.

- It is just business, Audrey states firmly.

- I am begging you both to give me tomorrow with my kids.

- We do want to let that happen but Audrey and I are both highly trained as assassins and we work for the kind of men who don't allow us to let dead men go home to their children and after

what you've seen here today, well, they will just — keep coming — if anything happens to either of us because we've made a mistake they would just consider us foolish expenditure. You won't be sitting under the Christmas tree tomorrow if we let you go. You'll have every crook in the country looking for us. Raymond and Peter here were due to die on our contract, that has been fulfilled. We have to take the glory for that, apologies to your wife. We could have argued with you about who was going to kill them but — that would not have gone any better ...

- No.

- We were not meant to come across you personally, though Mr Ram. Which leads me to believe that you were sent here by the faction in Macau, were you not? Yes, I thought so. We were sent from a much bigger network in Hong Kong. Many factions wanted these men dead, we could imagine this job was just double booked but I don't believe it was, Audrey says.

Bai hops up onto the window sill and looks down onto the snowy street.

There is a realisation in the way Rab drops his shoulders.

He pulls the Mask off.

Both women look at him.

He has a freckled face and he is still so young, clean shaven, warm eyes.

- Maybe our men in Hong Kong knew you'd go looking for Dora Noyce's cousin — elsewhere — once you realised Raymond and Peter didn't have her? They don't like problems, do they Bai?

- Nope!

Audrey fiddles around at the bar.

She has a quick gin.

Begins to fix up a drink for Rab and something totally different again for Bai.

- You are very handsome without your mask, what age are you?

- I'm twenty-six, Rab says.

He looks over at his wife with grief etched all over his face.

- Our kids are going to wake up tomorrow

He looks up.

Rab has eyes so bright and blue they glow.

- This is a bad world for all of us, it never ends well for anyone in it, no? Audrey says.

She hands him the brandy cocktail she has poured for him.

He accepts it.

Boudicea appears perfectly relaxed.

Her face is as perfect as it was ten minutes ago aside from the daggers.

Tattooed tears on her cheek shine under light from the fish tank.

Rab drinks the brandy down in one go.

- It's not how Audrey and I had planned on spending Christmas Eve, was it? We were going to kill Raymon and Peter nice and clean, go out for dinner, then the theatre, the Traverse has a great production on, then we were going to have drinks at the jazz club — a short stop in London — then fly home — take presents for all the family. I think we might miss the London flight now?

- Stop chattering, Bai.

- I know but it is Christmas Eve, and I love this time of year and I have new baubles for Mum — from Jenners and we could have got more at Harrods, it was meant to be happy! I told them, it's the wrong time to send us out on this kind of job.

- When would you prefer to do your killing?

Rab places the glass down and he looks quiet and full of unbearable rage.

- Easter, Audrey says.

- Why?

- She's allergic to chocolate, Bai snaps.

Rab's hands grip the pillows on the sofa.

He struggles to breathe.

Both women look at him with his broken heart and try not to think about his children getting up tomorrow on Christmas Day and coming down to a tree that is going to be empty, no mother there and no father there and they look at each other.

- We are sorry, Mr Ram.

- I wish we ...

He gestures at the two brothers and his wife on the floor.

- What?

- Had never had to live this kind of life!

Bai opens the window.

Audrey's monkey shoots off her arm and up the drainpipe.

A smell of city air floods into the flat, clean and cold from the snow, just a faint hint of garlic from a restaurant nearby and wood smoke from the few chimneys that still use real fires and it has begun to snow outside again — gentle spirals — Rab is slowing — things are flooding through the room — there is a Fox and a Zebra at the bar, slamming back drinks, his wife laughs loudly, parts her legs a touch, the room echoes — all of it, Audrey aims at the fish tank and shoots and water is gushing across the room — catfish swim at his feet — Rab feels like he is in a tiny snow globe — a tiny snow globe flat — in a big tall tenement and all its corpses and their ghosts — all ready to party for Christmas Eve — they are in the festive spirit — drinking and arguing — not seeming to give much of a shit about the living right now — tiny electric blue fish swim out the window into snow falling outside — Audrey and Bai pull on expensive leather gloves — a little girl toddles in and pulls off his wives Fox head — giggles — puts it on — Bee and the child play clap-hands then pat-a-cake and the girls are opening the sash window wide now.

- You're leaving the bodies!

- Yes, Mr Rab, we are leaving them with you — the police are going to think that you are insane ... can you hear that?

Bai looks out the window and down.

- No.

- It's the police, they'll get you and so they won't come looking for us. Our boss will be satisfied, it is important we keep him that way.

Audrey pulls up the double barrel that belonged to his friend, clicks it hard, twice.

Shoots every corpse through the heart again — then the head — she lets fire on the walls — she places the gun next to Rab as if he's just dropped it and he is too doped to move. Bai double locks the door and puts the bolt on — so it will take a little time to get in. Bai is up the drainpipe, Audrey behind her, the two of them all in black and unable to be seen from the street, they disappear — just like that — entirely from sight.

ain't no sunshine when she's gone

26

Ivor lays in the dark with Ray Ban sunglasses on. He isn't cool enough to be a vampire. He'll do anything to avoid sunshine. His wife has fucked his best friend in a bed he built for her no less. Ivor doesn't have it in him (anymore) to care. He never thought at his age he would be homeless or without his own place anyway. Dana's room smells of wee and My Little Ponies. It is a plastic, synthetic-haired ammonia hue.

City is waking.

Down on the streets cars trail yellow, blue, green, red.

Street lamps wink out.

Knots in his gut.

It would be better to go blind than see daylight.

That's a shameful thought.

Why anyone fears darkness he does not know.

It's a blanket.

It's a solace.

A refuge from the glare!

Turn the lights down.

Put a record on.

Walk through a city lit by little moons.

That's what Esme calls the streetlights — a whole walkway of little moons and him in the Meadows with his niece and a kite and her tugging at it with the stars behind it or him taking her out on midnight adventures or them having a picnic up Arthur's Seat lit by candles or winter when it gets dark early and he is so happy he can take her out to the ice rink in Princes St. gardens and run around in the tree maze with her and make her smile. Esme has never asked him why they don't do anything in actual daylight. She thinks his car has blacked out windows because he is cool. That's how he drives to the pit. Pulls his cap down. The walk from car to pit entrance has his legs trembling but he does it so he can just get in there and calm the fuck down and get on with his working day and without that routine to hide in and with no other way of making money underground ... he needs to change everything.

In a minute — he'll make breakfast for Esme.

His niece's morning set up at Blossom's My Little Pony stables is highly elaborate. He knows the score now. First off Cupcake and Rosedust will bitch about Princess Sparkle. They'll talk about how disappointing she is. That she can't just be cheerful like them. They will cut her pony tail off. Write all over her stable in pencil. They will steal her favourite things. Then they will act like she is a really mean pony. They will trot off very happy and smug with themselves. They'll look after Baby Half Note and Baby Tic Tac Toe. Applejack will stay well out of it. She is the plastic pony version of Switzerland. Occasionally she will take sides but only if it furthers her own social status.

There is nothing to admire in that!

A man with shopping bags standing in front of four tanks — that's something to admire. Even more than that he had climbed onto a tank when it's gun was aimed at him! Stood there so he could talk human-to-human in that exact moment. Never mind the machine. Orders. Sometimes you have to just look at another persona and see they are as human as you. Unless they are not. Ivor admires that man his dignity and courage and humanity. He has watched the footage four times now. He is trying to learn something. Anyone else would laugh to know that sunlight is a tank to him but it is no less scary. Ivor admires his workmates for every action they've taken through the strikes and for the very first time in his entire life — he feels a tiny touch of pride for himself. Not for the thoughts — those he will never be proud of but for how — he keeps all of it to himself and he still tries to do — only good.

- Do you sleep with they sunglasses on?

- Fuck off, Jake.

- Uhm just asking!

His pal stretches out beside him, rubs his eyes, reaches for a cigarette.

- I hold ma hand up, you can hate me fir life. After I did it, and I will always be sorry I did it!

- It?

- Come on, Ivor.

- After you what, Jake?

- After I slept with your wife — she stabbed me in the leg! Then she starts saying she only ever got violent in the first place cos ay you! Don't you dare think she's right, Ivor. If it was a man hitting a woman would it be alright?

- Noh, but everyone would still look the other fucking way.

- I wouldnae.

- Aye, ye fucking would Jake and if ye ever saw me, which, ye'd try and avoid doing, you'd hope I never brought it up!

Jake's shoulders slump.

- She's let your kids hate ye fir — something she did?

- The kids will come back to me — I am not going to tell them their Mother was a violent psychopath and ruin their childhood, they'll realise one day.

- Why'd you let her away wi it, Ivor?

- Cos I'm a guy!

- I'm a guy mate, I'm a big fucking guy and she makes me feel this big.

Jake squeezes his thumb and forefingers together.

He gets up.

Goes for a piss and comes back.

When he comes back he kneels over him, takes his head in his hands, one hand on each cheek — gentle as a vet with a newborn lamb.

- It's not your fault Ivor, not any of it.

- Fuck off!

Ivor hooks him.

It's a solid thud and a crack as Jake's jaw slides to the side and he'd like to say it doesn't make him feel really good to see pain on his mate's face but it does.

- I'll take that yin, I deserve it, Jake says.

Snoopy falls over, lit by a toadstool night light — a Girl's world mannequin head looks at them with her blonde hair and blue eyeshadow.

- I used to go around to Vicky's when she was a wee lassie, Jake. She was one year older than us remember? All the council houses were the same but hers had twice as many kids in it and I

could see her shadow stand up taller and darker every night when she had to go in! There's just all those scars inside her nobody else can see. Instead of healing she just keeps inflicting them again and again — on herself — on someone (anyone) else — who will take them. I feel like the BFG — want to get a net and catch her cruel acts and show her them — fizzing with fire in a net! She just dismisses it as soon as she's done something bad.

- It's funny how many total cunts have the ability to do that.

Ivor pulls his cap down over his sunglasses.

- I need tae tell ye something, Jake or maybe I'll just show ye.

Heart racing to even think of it.

Over to the window, what if he faints?

Rhona made these curtains.

He has to face this down, he has to be able to go into a playground and pick his niece up so she's not the only girl left in the playground waiting for a Mum who is always late, he needs to be able to earn money, this is ridiculous!

Slide back the curtains.

The brass hoops sound like a knife going down a blackboard.

Heart pounding fucking hard, skin hot, can't breathe, dizzy, ground feels like it is moving.

Reach out.

His hand looks like it belongs to someone else.

Watch it like an alien limb just moving toward that shutter clip.

- I am phengophobic, Jake!

Pull the shutter open. For a minute Ivor feels like he's inside an old polaroid camera with the flash — bleaching him down through his pores. It feels like the light flow into him — like a burn — — rushing through his veins, up into his arteries — scorching his bones.

He is on his knees, crying and shaking.

Ivor puts his hand up to try and close the shutter.

Can't reach for it properly because he's beginning to faint, the entire floor is falling away, it feels like he will fall through every floor of this building right down to the basement and only then—in total darkness—will he have a chance of the peace of mind he seeks. A hand reaches out above him. Closes the shutter firmly. Pulls the curtains shut and tucks them over each other so there is absolutely no light. Very, very gently she lays her thin wee duvet over his head. Pats him through the soft material.

- There, there Uncle Ivor, you don't need to do that.

- I can't do this!

- Is he okay, Esme?

- What are you still doing here, Jake?

Esme stands with her hands on her hips looking angry at him.

- I am here for Ivor, is that okay with you?

- No, it is not okay with me, and it's not okay with Princess Sparkle— it's not even okay with Applejack, I don't know what you did to my Uncle Ivor but his heart is broken, it's in two pieces and they can't be put back together— you know what I think about you Jake, yer lips move but you never really huv anything to say and I don't even need to know what you did— I can feel it hurt in here anytime I look at him right now— so get out!

Esme pats her chest bone.

- Okay!

Jake scrambles upright.

- Ivor, can ye take that duvet off for just a minute mate?

- Get out!

Esme screams it.

He can hear her throwing things at Jake, then the front door slams shut and there is a blissful silence.

Ivor's heartbeat slows. Hot shame.

It is the single emotion he remembers having longest. His most base and true emotion. Shame that others would find out, would see him like this — helpless, terrified, a child, made solely of terror. That shame is toxic. He has seen it in Esme. When her Mum is always late to come pick her up. Her pals all know. Little Stardusts and Blossoms with their scathing wee looks and their perfect wee lives — taking out all their fucking hidden nastiness out on her. Some of those days before Ivor realised that Rhona had her benefits stopped — his niece did all of it whilst hungry. The kid is fucking angel as smart and beautiful a soul as anyone could ever possibly know! All of this has to stop. It's never too late. Ever! He reaches one hand out of the duvet as elaborately as if her were the undead waking — the tiny hand of his niece reaches out to take his own and squeezes it.

- It's alright, ye can come out now Uncle Ivor.

- Thanks, Esme. You — are the best protector I've ever had.

- I know.

- Do you know what?

- What?

- I am going to become that instead — fir you.

Ivor pulls the duvet off his head and nods at her to open the curtains again, then the shutters a crack — the panic is there — it is there like high quality hospital speed — he looks at the light and it feels like he's going to spend the entire day with a giant crocodile smiling in that window at him — just waiting for him to cut a finger — or make one wrong move!

- Do you want breakfast, Esme?

- Aye, can I have cornflakes, please?

She sings it and he smiles and they walk through to the living-room.

- Do you want sugar on them?

- Aye.

Make a cup of tea for Rhona, tap her on the shoulder and leave it at side of the sofa.

- Uncle Ivor — do you think if I like could get my clothes in Tammy Girl, instead of from What Everyone Wants — d'ye think the lassies at school might let me play with them?

He gives Esme the biggest hug and tries again not to cry.

It's not good to want to go and poke the eyes out of eight-year old girls.

He does though.

Ivor watches Esme sit at the tiny breakfast bar eating her cereal. Big smile at him then.

Here's a goal he can set for himself. He will take the tablets his doctor prescribed. Beta-whatever the fuck they are and if it means he is able to do the school run twice a day in full sunlight then it will be worth it. He will start with that. Make sure his niece never has to wait in that playground on her own with her teacher anymore.

- What's that, Uncle Ivor?

- Tablets.

- From the doctor?

- Aye.

Turn them over and takes out the first one. He reads the label and it is beta-blockers first and then he takes an anti-depressant. That's what the man says he needs. Maybe he'll make this part of the day a ritual. Shower — dress — cup of tea — tablets. Roughly he swipes tears off his face. He wants to go and stand with his mates on the picket line! So what he can't tell them about Vicky! Nobody wants to hear it. It'll only make them uncomfortable when they are drinking with her down the miner's club. He'll carry it for all ay them. Keep it to himself. The details, what actually happened. He will not carry her shame anymore though — not even one more day of it.

Esme pads back through to her room.

The doctor is a good cunt.

He'll try this.

- You are undoubtedly phengophobic Ivor, I can give you a sick note?

- Thanks, anyway. Undoubtedly phengophobic!

What if he was — uncertainly phengophobic?

Phengophobic but with a lot of doubt about it?

What is he was timidly phengophobic?

Extravagantly phengophobic?

What if he was just a phengo? No obic about it.

It does not seem like an adequate word to describe this level of terror. As a boy he used to beg the moon not to go. Daylight is garish. It has gangrenous tendrils. The sun rays are tentacular. Too loud cranked up like that. Orbish. Pustulating. Esme goes to her wee plastic table. Holds her hands above her head like a ballerina.

- Time fir the performance, Uncle Ivor.

- Who else is coming?

- They're all already here already silly head

She gestures.

- Okay then.

- They've been stuck in the dark for a long time Uncle Ivor, nearly a hunner years! They can't get out but you can.

- You think so?

- Don't be silly Uncle Ivor, we know you can, it's why you are here.

- Why have your friends been in the dark so long?

- A bad man put them there.

Esme puts out the teacups and the plastic plates and he'd like to think it was just the tablets —as one cup is raised by an invisible hand — then another — they cheers each other and Esme pushes a tiny one with a straw over to a wee girl he can't see — and he has the most certain feeling — each of these women — these girls — would fight the sunlight for him if they had to and he must do the same for them — he has a long, long way to go — as he looks at the cups hovering in the air and see's the pride on Esme's face he knows that in this ether and the next — they are wishing him well.

i'm going to leave this city one last time

27

There is a huge roar and clank and groan behind her and she turns around. Dust billows up out over the High St. Dot runs out of the close with the last bits of skeleton in her arms. She has taken some of the temporary railings from Hogmanay and placed them in a square in the middle of the street and she has been taking each section of bone into there — laying them out — on the cobbled High St. for hours.

- The upper floors are falling now!

A fire-woman runs by.

Dot hides her face a second.

Sirens lilt in from all directions.

A crane comes gliding up from Cockburn St like some yellow metallic dinosaur.

- It's too late!

Some fire chief shouts it at someone else.

Nobody is paying attention to Dot.

There is a huge crash as black clouds billow up from the Close, fire services run out from it, the ground is rumbling. The yellow crane has stopped. It hangs over a statue next to St. Giles. Dot can see the sea — away down there at the bottom of the High St. where the view lifts out toward the ocean. It isn't grey after all this brand new morning — it is sparkling. Four police cars pull up. Park opposite St. Giles Cathedral. The entire street is being cordoned off. Dot is finally glad of her anatomy class at art school. Police are holding their hands out at the crossroads down at the Tron. Nobody can get into this area now. They still don't see Dot working quickly, methodically, with precision behind her square barricade. It's a useful skill. To be unseen. When needs to be. To pass without question. All goddesses need it. All girls, all boys, all the devil's children and all of heaven's angels and all the ones who never got in — all of the fallen — in whatever guise they appear on this mortal coil.

The right to pass unseen.

She lays out the bones.

Careful!

Grateful for her time in art school doing drawings of them.

She takes the first skull and places it above the torso — whoever treated them did it so well — they are preserved as perfectly as if it were only yesterday — Dot places her hand on the skull cheekbone as she meshes it onto its neck bone. She almost drops the next one — her fingers are blue-cold! Slide it carefully into place. Dot lays the arms out. Carefully places them so the lower arms hold hands with each other (she can tell by the hip bones they were both women) she lays outside arm bones — protectively around their child. She lays their legs out below their torso — placed facing forward so they can walk together — into the future. Spirits have a future if we find it in ourselves to honour them. The feet are fragile. It takes a held breath and a very steady hand — to place each bone the right way. Carefully she places the child's arms so they are folded at the hands.

Touches her lightly.

Steps back.

Her face is wet with tears as the remaining floors of no. 10 Luckenbooth Close fall into the ground.

Dot turns both of the women's skull heads.

They look at each other — just like they must have done all those years ago.

- For all who came before us and for all who will come after!

Police are busy trying to secure it, to deal with the dust and the debris, she can barely see the entrance to any of the Close's now it is so bad. Dot thinks of the long line of women behind her — all the way back to Lilith — she imagines all of them linked in some way — every last one — what they all endured — she is crying openly now — Dot can feel those women — all three of them, walking along this street how many years ago?

Dot stands.

They emerge from the dust.

First it is a woman with long red hair, clear skin, black boots, a hat, she turns — holds her hand out for a woman behind her. She is dark haired, wearing a fine dress, her horns are as spectacular in life as they are on her skeleton. The child emerges from the smoke and takes her mothers hands. The two women reach out to each other and walk down the High St. toward the cobbled square at the Tron — toward the sea.

The bells of St. Giles call out — a long loud clang and dong echoes across the city.

Edinburgh's daughters — will not stay walled in.

There are blue skies this morning.

Dot gives a silent thanks.

The building is down entirely but she did not fall with it.

Unless — she did?

The afterlife could not be as clear as this.

The crane has been hoisted up. It is meant to hold the back of No. 10 Luckenbooth Close up by the scruff of its neck — what a silly thing to try and do. Dust billows up the street all black and toxic. She hopes with every one of her own broken bones that every last stone in that whole building is brought down and she can feel the very devil himself running — through catacombs underneath the city.

An Officer points to where she stands over the bones.

She will make sure they are safe until someone else takes responsibility for them.

Dot writes it out as neatly as she can.

Places it below them.

She does it quickly as the police are coming back over.

They still don't see her!

The SKELETONS of LUCKENBOOTH CLOSE - buried in the walls for CENTURIES!

There is dust over everything, cars, cobbles, lamp-posts, street signs, Dot stands right in the middle of the street and two police are taking down the barricade she placed around the skeletons — one raises her hand and calls out — Dot turns as a splitting sound ricochets over the sky — the policewoman and Dot breathes in the morning air and looks up at the David Hume statue with his eternal bloody robes and men in statues all over this fucking city like they are the only ones who ever thought about anything. Where are the fucking women? Buried into the bones of the building — that's where the fucking women are! Buried into the building by men who couldn't tame them. The cobbled road of the High St. runs away from her — down the hill — past all the shops and restaurants and bars, by the church at the crossroads, the Christmas shop with all its different baubles and wee wooden toys and Santas and smell of cinnamon, the big hotel, her Witches shops that she likes for pads and supplies, the Museum of Childhood, the World's End pub, or the one she

likes better around the corner from that — the Waverley — where the old owner used to work with a crocodile pinned onto the wall — he was a tough man that landlord, ancient as time and tiny but nobody ever dared fuck with him — you could just imagine the man hunted down that crocodile himself and there was a room full of poets upstairs, past the fudge shop, her weakness for tablet, that cafe that does cream teas, Mexican food in that restaurant where she had her first date, coffee outlets, knitwear, silver and trilobites, the old-fashioned sweetie shop (now gone) the poetry library and graveyards and old clubs sold off for student housing and all the way down to the palace and Scottish Parliament and from up here — a flash of blue — where the Firth of Forth greets the first day of the New Year — past the tat-shop with its bagpipes and clayborns and all the way to the bottom of the Royal Mile, passed Holyrood Palace toward Arthurs Seat (perhaps go back to look at Mary Queen of Scot's bath-house — best building in this city) then up the crags to wash her face in the morning dew — cleanse off this dust and up the raggedy road, or left up at the very top of the cliffs, walk through wet grass until her throat burns and the skies — they are so vast up there! So clear! Step by step the entire appears from the hill on Arthur's Seat. Calton Hill and the whole of the Firth of Forth, the top of the palace and the high-rises at Dumbiedykes, all the church spires across the city, the big hunk of rock that makes up Edinburgh castle — she will go right up at the top and turn around and she will see the spot where Luckenbooth Close used to be — know that she is just like all the other residents in this city — or any other — passing through — temporarily — that she is a Dot who took — one building down but she is curiously stuck on the cobbles of the High St. right now. It feels like everyone is walking right through her as a stretcher comes out the Close.

- One body found in No. 10 Luckenbooth Close, just at the entranceway — as the building fell — it is believed to be a young homeless woman!

The policeman calls it into his boss.

Dot watches as she is wheeled by and understands that all of the structures are guilty and

built on a bed of ancient bones. It's time to knock down all the walls. Dot feels wind go right through her — as a hand reaches out to take hers — light cloven foot steps — she can join on the long walk home.

EPILOGUE

After we had hosted the waken, after the first lift was carried out, and his body put in the casket and the table cleared and the men had left with his corpse. After I had put the rest of his tobacco in a pouch and got a raw fish from the store. After all of that I walked down toward the clifftops — I had two small horns growing on my head. The nubs appeared the minute he died. I poisoned him. It was the least he deserved. I had to take his coffin down to the shore. I found his body rammed into a crevice where the men had dropped him the night before. My father was the devil. An evil man. He was no fallen angel and even if he was — his acts in this life meant that fact would have made little difference to me. He had risen back up on this earth every time he'd died before. I had to take my part in his history — his sins were not my own but it does not mean I was without obligation. My teeth were sharp. His skin no tougher than a goats. There was only one way to stop him coming back to those shores. My name is Jessie MacRae. I am the devil's daughter. On this day in 1910 I committed an act to stop my father from rising back up from his grave.

I ate my father's heart.

Please believe me — it was the least of my duty — it had to happen and it had to be me who did it and no matter what comes — I have — no regrets.

THE END

Luckenbooth

The Metamorphosis of a Novel (Inspired by Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*)

Thesis — by Jenni Fagan

I have aspired to write something that reflects the influence that *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka has had on me ever since I read it. It is a story that captures me on every reading. In my thesis I am going to explore the metamorphosis of writing my own novel, inspired by Franz Kafka's seminal story — *The Metamorphosis*. Stanley Corngold has translated the famous opening line: "When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin (3).

Famously, the opening line of *The Metamorphosis* sees travelling salesman Gregor Samsa awake as an undefined yet monstrous creature. Straight away we are in a world where the confines of reality are less important than the protagonist's experience. Kafka's opening is a climax, which is unusual as a narrative device. Ordinarily a story would begin, there would be an inciting incident and through the events occurring after this we would build toward a climax or resolution. This is not what Kafka does in *The Metamorphosis*. We begin this story with the huge event that is Grigor Samsa waking up to find his body metamorphosed into that of a beetle type creature. The impact of this even is then unravelled through the entire story. It was important for me to consider how many different ways we can approach storytelling as I knew I wanted to create a narrative that did not follow the rules of conventional storytelling. Kafka achieves this immediately in *The Metamorphosis*, all by creating Gregor as an ordinary man who has woken up as an *ungezeifer*; we do not build towards this event, it has already occurred. Stanley Gold argues that the lack of direct translation for the word *ungezeifer* means there has been a misinterpretation in English translations where Grigor Samsa awakes as a bug rather than the far more specific intent conveyed by the original word. Corngold explains, "Ungezeifer," a word which cannot be expressed by the English words "bug" or "vermin." "Ungezeifer" derives (as Kafka

probably knew) from the late Middle High German word originally meaning “the unclean animal not suited for sacrifice.” (57).

Gregor’s monstrous form is a pivot around which all narrative, themes, plot and characters orbit. Gregor’s shell-like body and high screeching inaudible voice expose how hegemonic bourgeois societal structures respond to anything deemed Other. When he opens the door to his room by manipulating the key with his teeth, he finds his sister, Mother, Father and Chief Clerk horrified by his new form. His father beats him back into the room with a newspaper and the door is shut on him so they can discuss what should occur. The family are repelled by Gregor. They look at him and they know their son and brother is in there but they are far more concerned with what it might mean for them than what has befallen a family member they previously claimed to love. They do not want the lodgers, or their neighbours or society in general to discriminate against them as a family because they now have the burden of a family member who appears disfigured, who cannot contribute financially or socially and who has even lost the basic power of speech.

Straight away we see the main ideological structures oppressing Gregor are bound up in his family and workplace. He must contribute financially to his family first and foremost because his Father is in debt, Gregor is working to pay this off. He must also cause them no social embarrassment by publicly displaying his monstrous form to their tenants or even the char woman. They also must have no reason to be personally alarmed by him or they will collectively abandon him as the story progresses. In his workplace he must show up on time and never have any reason to need time off. If Gregor cannot fulfil the expectations of the structures of family and the workplace foremostly then what value is there to an individual at all? Indeed an individual who is not financially serving the immediate institutions around them and reinforcing their norms — quickly becomes a repellent, horrifying — burden. We soon witness the tragicomic sight of Gregor in his new body with hundreds of little legs and a shelled back running after the Chief Clerk determined to alert him that he has no intention of letting him down and really wants to just get to work.

The chief clerk's flight was finally to turn the senses of his father, who to that point had remained relatively calm, because, instead of not getting in the way of the man, or at least not getting in the way of Gregor as he attempted to do just that, he seized in his right hand the chief clerk's cane, which he had left behind on a chair along with his hat and coat, with his left hand grabbed a large newspaper from the table, and, by stamping his feet, and brandishing stick and newspaper, attempted to drive Gregor back into his room (17).

Kafka profoundly influenced through this representation of how an individual experiences such different treatment dependent upon whether they express any aberrations of thought, action, physicality or financial contribution. I wanted to create characters whose stories all revolve in some way around aberrations of thought, action or physicality — as imposed by the hegemony of bourgeois culture. I had no desire to do anything other than destabilise the hegemonic norms.

I would do this by flipping the conventional polarity, making 'mainstream' culture Other through focalising upon so-called 'aberrant' characters so that the reader might experience marginalised points of view, or imaginatively inhabit the subjectivity of marginalised individuals, as the perspective of the Self.

My desire was to write a novel that exposes and dismantles oppressive societal structures. To do this I would base the novel in a multi-level tenement building, which could act as a metaphor for both the familial home and bourgeois society at large. The building's architecture would symbolise the hierarchical structures of culture. My intention was to knock down walls and exposed riddled wooden beams so arthritic they can no longer hold up the edifice they have supported for hundreds of years. For me, this was a personal project in which I wanted my own experience and worldview to count as an individual who grew up very much Othered by society, as a child in the care system. I understood my pull toward telling the story of someone who is Othered had very personal roots and was one of the reasons why the character of Gregor Samsa has had such a pull for me. This is one of the most striking facets of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*: its focus on individuality vis-à-vis culture-at-large, and its representation of the personal experience of being Othered by societal structures which is what happens

to Gregor as soon as he wakes up in his new form. Gregor's new body means he is unable to respond to any structure. He cannot do so orally, emotionally or intellectually in any way that can be understood. In this way, *The Metamorphosis* has been a profound influence on the conceptualisation and process of writing my own novel, in ways this essay will explore in detail. But at the same time I had no desire to emulate Kafka conceptually as a novelist or theorist. There is only a resonance of something brilliant in this work that continues to call me! I am first and foremost my own writer, in as much as any of us can be. I knew I would rather fail in pursuit of my own vision than merely attempt imitation. As Kafka himself once wrote: "The hollow high the work of genius has burned into our surroundings is a good place into which to put one's little light. Therefore the inspiration that emanates from genius, the universal inspiration that doesn't only drive one to imitation" (*Diaries* 210). Kafka writes in his diaries so very eloquently about how great works of genius have burned into our surroundings and we bring to them our own little light. That is my relationship to Kafka's work. It has burned itself into the hollows. Readers bring to it their own light. So while my own individuality as a writer remained crucial to me, in ways this essay will discuss, Kafka's personal relationship with literature was nonetheless incredibly important to me.

I wanted to write a fiction novel that showed the metamorphosis, or lack of metamorphosis of society over one hundred years. It would be a love letter to Edinburgh. It is a city I have never written about although I have been slightly in love with it since I first arrived here when I was five-years old. I needed a building to house my characters' stories. I wanted to show how Edinburgh tenements have housed the lives of people over hundreds of years while society has gone through metamorphoses in some ways, and in others it has just repeated itself.

The tenement would be like the shelled body of Gregor. It would house the residents lives but it must also, in some way, curse them. Each character would be in some way centrifugally alienated from bourgeois society, or their family. Of course, this is exactly the position Gregor Samsa finds himself in

at the beginning of *The Metamorphosis*. Setting out in my own project with such an influence on my mind was certainly daunting. On beginnings, Kafka wrote:

(The beginning of every novella is laughable in the first instance. There seems to be no hope that this new, unfinished organism, vulnerable at every point, will be able to survive in the already finished organisation of the world which, like every complete organization, strives to become self-enclosed and to exclude other things. Admittedly one forgets, as one thinks along these lines, that the novella, if it justified, carries its own already finished organisation within itself, even if this has not yet unfolded completely: thus this kind of despair before the beginning of a novella is unjustified (Cited in Sandberg 129).

Citing this quotation, Beatrice Sandberg comments on the great many stories Kafka did not ever complete. She also explores how a great beginning could stilt his ability to progress through a story. I considered and reconsidered this relationship with beginnings. I was certain that the beginning I had set my heart upon for my novel was probably only going to hold me back and I felt confident about this very early on because I had wasted a lot of time writing two other novels that were held back by exactly the same thing. I could not afford to be attached to a beginning that was not going to be right for the novel. I also had a suspicion that part of my personal literary metamorphosis in this novel might include working towards a definitive ending. I had never attempted that in previous novels preferring to aim for open-ended narratives.

I have never done that before in novel form.

So, whilst Kafka's relationship with beginnings often hindered him, and whilst in *The Metamorphosis* we open with a climax that is then unravelled to create an entire story — I suspected I wanted to open with a climax that would not culminate until the very end of the story. My narrative would work backwards toward the climax that initiated it. It would need to begin with an opening that would only full make sense at the end. The novel would be a kind of circle. It must have a definitive beginning, middle and ending. It should also drag the reader straight into my hundred-year world.

RESPONDING TO PATRIARCHY

I wanted to respond to patriarchy. I was considering men who are currently in public power who seemed archaic in their attitudes, maintaining and exacerbating the destructive, hostile, neoliberal reality of our present day world. I wanted to respond to this in my novel. I wanted to be creatively ambitious. I wanted to push my limits, attempt something beyond what I had previously thought possible for myself as a writer and not stop until I go there. Kafka achieved a true literary pinnacle in his short life and it is something I have always hoped to do at some point in my own writing life, *The Metamorphosis* is about as perfect as a story can be and I admire Kafka for achieving something so flawless. In a literary sense it serves as a high standard to aspire towards. Kafka himself undertook all literature as a process of becoming and so do I. Writing any novel, is for me, a very personal journey. The things that inspire it are intimate and often difficult to understand. All of my novels have been written during bereavement for example. For me writing this novel was as much about the process of becoming as it was of making art. Part of that becoming meant going way beyond what I had previously achieved as a fiction writer and considering Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is a way of focusing what I think can be achieved in literature — a perfect story that works completely within its own world. I had a metamorphosis to undertake and this novel was going to be the vessel via which this process occurred. I was also responding to death. There had been much loss in my personal life. I entered the first draft of this world in a blur of black and grey loss and rage. Those stories are imbued with the misunderstanding and abandonment the living feel when the dead leave us with silence.

Foucault describes literature not as a way of expressing oneself but as a way of becoming oneself. There is always a deeper fundamental reason for becoming, as certain writers do, through and via the process of writing. There is also the space where what is personal meets what is political. This is important if I am to explain my conscious decision to include the presence of my personal rage at how patriarchal, elite, archaic structures intersect with the individual. A challenge I faced was how to hone

this rage effectively while submitting myself to the creative process, and the multiplicitous development integral to the production of art because the process of writing is a process of becoming. The solidification of what the self aspires to become can only become apparent (for me) once fully immersed in the artistic process, which itself entails forgetting about programmatic rationality until a novel is finished and some semblance of clarity in thought returns.

In *Franz Kafka and Michel Foucault: Power, Resistance and the Art of Self-Creation*, Nicholas Dungey writes:

Foucault views the self-conscious use of critique, writing, and art as tools of resistance against the normalising and objectifying claims of disciplinary society, and as such, views critique, writing, and art as weapons in the individual's agonistic engagement with disciplinary power over the 'politics of truth' (xiv).

Dungey's book explores the intersection between Michel Foucault's ideologies and how Kafka applied himself to literature. Foucault's notion of becoming serves as a way to understand the personal drive that is so important to writers, even more so perhaps than the desire to be read or recognised for their work, or it certainly is in my case. This serves as a crucial underpinning for my innate sense that individuality, one's subjective experience must remain foregrounded in both fiction and in critical reflection on fiction. Human truths come from human endeavour. This includes emotion reality. Art arises from personal truth. The essence of social oppression in bourgeois culture revolves around the upholding of hegemonic structures and domineering norms over and above individuality. In this context, an insistence upon individual experience and presence can be seen as political. Dungey continues: "With Foucault's notion of resistance, philosophy and art become synonymous with combat. Critique, philosophy, and art supply the weapons of resistance against disciplinary domination" (xiv). If artists cannot respond to cultural structures in their own way there is no point to them and no need for them. Dungey, again, emphasises the oft-neglected political agency of this:

Resistance paves the way for the formation of new relations of power, which must then become directed by mode of aesthetic self-formation. Following Nietzsche in the belief that the

self is not given for us to discover or realise, Foucault claims that the self is something that must be created, that the self is actually a work of art. For Foucault, critique, writing, and art are the primary tools and practises in which human beings invent and articulate an aesthetic of life as self creation (xiv).

Dungey's book was helpful in buttressing my resolve, when faced with the daunting prospect and personal sacrifice involved in pursuing a project as ambitious as my novel. Moreover, there were other issues. I have never written a historical novel but I wanted to write a work of literature that just happened to span a vast period of history and therefore this was the area I would be developing this novel within. It needed to show the metamorphoses of society over a long period of time. It needed to be historically accurate so that people would believe in it, which would entail an enormous amount of research over ten decades of cultural, political, religious and social change in the UK and wider society. My characters needed to be integrally situated in the epoch they inhabit. Each generation is the most modern to itself — that is what I wanted to capture. Moreover, the plan of the novel necessitated that I write nine decades. Although accurately representing the culture in which each character lived was vital to my task, it is nonetheless the case that the quality in humans that transcends time and place for me is more important than anything else. I must write nine different main voices and weave those stories together whilst ensuring each one was a complete story. Dwelling on nine distinct decades and characters gave me multiple choices for point of view as well as maximising the potential of the novel to hold varying narratives, opinions and personalities. This heterogeneity meant my novel might take on something of the 'dialogical' quality theorised by Michel Bakhtin. David Lodge describes this quality:

According to Bakhtin, the language of traditional epic and lyric poetry, or the language of expository prose is 'monologic', striving to impose a single vision, or interpretation of the world by means of a single unitary style. The novel in contrast is 'dialogic', incorporating

many different styles, or voices, which as it were talk to each other, and to other voices outside the text, the discourses of culture and society at large (128).

So, the first draft necessitated a long period of research into what fascinated me in each decade I was going to explore. I also considered all the Edinburgh institutions and people that I did not want to miss out. There was Helen Duncan from Craigmillar, a medium and the last woman to be tried under the UK Witchcraft Law, which Churchill abolished after her case. I have always been very drawn to the story of Helen Duncan, a working class mother, from a poor area of Edinburgh, whose husband had been injured in the war and who made her living as a medium. Helen Duncan is compelling as a woman who is not always seen in literature. She is poor, working class, considered by the authorities to wield some power as people believe in her skills as a psychic. She is a big woman, considered threatening to men just by her size alone and her case brought about a hugely momentous legal achievement, which was to bring to an end women being tried under the UK Witchcraft Law. I have lived in the areas where Helen Duncan was from and I am a working class woman who rarely saw herself represented in literature and that was why I wanted her in there. Another character I knew I wanted to use was Dora Noyce who ran an infamous brothel in Danube St. Dora was an eccentric, tough, Edinburgh woman who had worked as a prostitute in her younger years and then reinvented herself as a madam of a brothel in a very exclusive part of Edinburgh. When I was researching Dora Noyce's establishment I met many taxi drivers or other people of a certain age who all remembered it as an iconic Edinburgh institution in its own right. Similarly to Helen Duncan I also grew up around such establishments for a while so I had to include it. There was the famous Writer Convention of 1962 attended by Trocchi, Burroughs and MacDiarmid among others. It is an event that I wish I had been able to witness personally, so many great writers were there and they were talking and arguing wildly about freedom for the individual, sexuality, tolerance and really without ever stating it they were debating what it means to be Othered in society. If I was to try and capture some of the literary energy in Edinburgh over this period of one hundred years then this was a stand out event to include. There was a great Edinburgh gang from the 1970s who dressed like characters in *A Clockwork Orange*. I grew up around a lot of groups of youths at one point,

who were in gangs that had their origins in the earlier groups in this city. There was a glamour to the casuals in the 1980's and 1990's and I was interested in seeing where that may have come from, I wanted to also try and show that just because someone is in a gang and is working class, it does not necessarily mean they are uncultured, ignorant or uneducated. I wanted to create a version of this gang in my novel that could break down some of those boundaries. There was the homeless bird man I used to see in the 90s in Princes Street gardens who was seen by thousands of tourists and residents over the years, feeding birds in the gardens. He had previously been the Manager of The Balmoral hotel and I was always taken by his story, that he left the job and took to living on the streets. Again, on a personal level, I too had experienced homelessness and it was important to me to have characters who might continue to transcend the stereotype of what something like that can mean. I followed this through with my final character Dot, who is a young woman squatting in the building. She does not describe herself as homeless but she does mention that, this is how the authorities will describe her if she is found dead in Luckenbooth. There was the Heart of Midlothian on the High Street's cobbles, a visual way to make the world of Luckenbooth more real. The White Hart in the Grassmarket is a very old Edinburgh pub and it similarly grounded the location of my world. I wanted to include places like the three strip bars at Tollcross that have been known as the *Pubic Triangle* for as long as I remember, I used to play in band venues that surrounded those bars and they are all gone now. One day I am sure the strip bars will go too, so it was important to try and capture them in this novel when they are still very much active. The slums in Leith back in the 1940s when they were being cleared were a huge shame in the city as in there was no investment in the lives of families from those communities. It was important to show the great contrast of wealth and poverty, tourist attractions and the hidden invisibility of some of Edinburgh's less wealthy residents. I wanted to mention washhouses, they were a cultural meeting point for many women and would have been an important place to socialise, get support from other women, share the journey of our inner lives without men present. Jenners on Princes St is one of our oldest stores and one that seemed very big and posh to me when I was a child. Waverley Station is of course the main train station to get in and out of town and less obviously it was named that after Sir Walter Scott's trilogy of

Waverley novels, a small nod to the literature of this city. North Bridge (which was formerly North British Bridge) is a road I have walked up and down hundreds of thousands of times and I loved the idea that a reader could go and follow in the footsteps of Luckenbooth characters through actual locations in Edinburgh. Cockburn Street is somewhere I worked when I was younger and I felt it was an important one to include, and Arthur's Seat is the best part of Edinburgh, a great old dormant volcano and nature reserve around which this city was built. I had to include certain club nights over the decades like the infamous *Palais* in the 1940s. I had read the *Palais* was a social hub where many couples had met their future husband or wife, it was also frequented by soldiers in war time and Edinburgh gangs throughout. I wanted to include a polar bear who arrived on Leith Docks with a Polish regiment in the First World War. The polar bear had never been written about. I wanted stories in Luckenbooth that could not occur today and a polar bear marching up Leith Walk and saluting the locals is certainly one! There was a 250lb bomb dropped on North Fort Street where I live and that area was also where they did a lot of shipbuilding so it felt a small nod toward it was pertinent. I could not mention the 80s in Edinburgh without having a coal miner in there. The miners' strikes and political climate was so brutal. I went to Primary school in a small coal mining village near Edinburgh and saw much of the social fallout experienced by communities who were devastated by the pit closures. Similarly the period when Edinburgh was the HIV capital of Europe in the 80s was too important to not mention. The varying drug trends over the years show some of the dark decadence that I always identify as a strong part of the nature of Edinburgh itself. A character called Little Mama sells heroin in the basement of Luckenbooth, she is a very loose nod to the Mother Superior, who also sold heroin in another Edinburgh novel, *Trainspotting*. This book was a revelation to me as a young reader who had never seen their accent or class represented in literature before. I researched the literati of Edinburgh in the 1920s (in my novel I had them attend a drag ball) and because the first library in Edinburgh was very close to Luckenbooth I had to make sure there was at least a sense of that history. I researched The Speculative Society who are a male members only group who meet at Edinburgh University and I wanted to place them in there as something that seems really archaic but still continues today. I researched Fat Sam's the old pizza place

off Lothian Road that had live lobsters to eat and a formica band of American gangsters playing up on a plinth, I used to go there for dinner in the 90s, often if it was someone's birthday so I wanted to capture a little bit of the theatrical vitality it held. I wanted to research the older stores that I did not know about when I was younger so I could really show Edinburgh changing over the decades. It felt important to get a white pudding supper in there, solely because it was always my favourite choice when I was younger and also brown chippy sauce which is specific to Edinburgh. As someone who used to work in fish and chip shops I understood why it is coveted by certain people who prefer it to store bought bottled sauce.

Meanwhile, when researching and facing up to the technical challenges of my project, I was fuelled by my personal experience, my rage. The project virtually coincided with the election of Donald Trump. It was clear we were living in an age of the father, of the fascist, of the entitled white male, of cruelty, racism, entitlement, ignorance, celebrity, privilege and unchallenged ever-rising narcissism. Oppressive capitalist patriarchy has arrived (once again) to take back all the thrones, halt or eradicate progress, and kill the planet, all in one fell swoop. A character who appeared to be the devils' daughter as my heroine was no incidental choice. I was fuelled by the political state of the world. My rage was wasp-deep and burrowing. I have always used the process of making art as a way to distil, understand and respond to hegemonic structures.

Seen in light of Foucault's account of resistance to power and the normative dimension of aesthetic transformation and self-creation, Kafka's letters and diaries document resistance in action and provide examples of how to live one's life as an aesthetic experiment: what Kafka refers to as his life as literature and Foucault calls the art of life (xii).

Kafka referred to his life *as* literature. The art of life is something Foucault saw as part of the practice of literature. My individual experience is that literature challenges my reality. I write to continue what reading began for me. Reading allowed me to understand that what I saw in the world is not all that is there. There is a prism by which we understand life. It is framed by the structures of society. Each of those systems has a particular set of ideologies. Those ideologies are ingrained into individuals'

understanding of who they are. Those ideologies seek to frame what an individual is, or what they should expect from themselves and life — full stop. Ideologies form structures. They tell us how we must behave if we are to be valued within the main societal structures — not marginalised, disempowered, abused, spurned, left without any security or safety, without a home, outcast, perhaps jailed, abandoned to loveless deaths and statistics without any security or safety at all.

How do we know Gregor is monstrous? Is it the hundreds of little legs wriggling instead of his own human limbs? Is it his inability to move his body without rocking the great big black curved shell of his back? Is it the high-pitched wheeeeeeee-noise that comes out of his mouth instead of a voice? Is it his disgust for normal food? His desire for rotten vegetables? Is it shown as his family move all human niceties out of his room and leave it bare for him to scurry around?

One of the most striking images in *The Metamorphosis* is of Gregor clinging to a painting of *Venus de Milo* so it cannot be taken from the wall! So he cannot be refused the pleasure of looking at it, at beauty, at lust or love, so he cannot be denied his humanity even if only to himself. Kafka's inclusion of the Venus de Milo is thought to have been inspired by his reading of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's novella *Venus in Furs*. In this, Sacher-Masoch describes a sadomasochistic relationship with a woman. Sacher-Masoch had a contractual relationship like this with his wife and he changed his own name to Gregor. Is there a subtext in Kafka's story regarding sexual appetite itself as a monstrous display of our physical nature? Gregor is contained in a monstrous physical form yet still seeks the beauty of Venus and wants to be as physically close to her as he can, clinging in fact to the frame so his whole body might cover the glass. Mark M. Anderson argues that this link between Sacher-Masoch and Kafka can help us to further understand the character of Gregor. "The opening scene depicts Gregor, like Gregor-Severin at the feet of Wanda, as dominated by the woman in furs. But as the story develops this domination is increasingly exercised by Gregor's family" (75). Like the dominated character in *Venus in Furs* Gregor experiences humiliation, financial slavery to his family, an inability to move, and confinement (bondage) in his body. *The Metamorphosis* resonates with masochistic themes. Gregor clings to the im-

age of this woman in furs. She may be staring him down but her picture cools his warm belly. It is the only touch Gregor has in *The Metamorphosis* that does not involve cruelty or humiliation.

We understand that Gregor is a monstrous vermin not by his body but by the reactions to him of those around him. They are repelled by his new-found metamorphosis and in their actions they show how the structures of society have raised them to behave toward anything they fear. A masochistic disgust for difference or lack of ability. His family and boss are meant to be the human Self of society yet their actions include shoving Gregor under a bed, hiding him in the dust, whacking him with a newspaper, kicking him, locking the door lest their tenants see him, talking about Gregor in whispers, running away from him shrieking, not looking him in the eye. Finally his father throw an apple that crashes through his scaly back and lodges there, beginning to rot, until he dies from the injury. Is it Gregor who is monstrous or is it the actions of those who formerly claimed to love him? Gregor Samsa is an apple pip in the core of society. He shows how ideology has raised its civilisations. Something that has always interested me most in the word ideology is that it is created from the word 'ideo'. The structures of our culture are based upon ideas, not facts or objective truths. Ideas are just thoughts people have had that create structure humans live within. Unfortunately for our own age as much as Kafka's, the individual is seen as a burden on society if not serving the main cultural structures of a bourgeois hegemony which include variables of family, workplace, government, armies or religion. As far as I can see, nothing much has changed to contradict the message of Kafka's novella: if you are not contributing you can be perceived as repellent to the cultural structures you live within — expendable, a burden. Dehumanised to the point of being disallowed any vestige of humanity at all. And, so analysing why I have been obsessed with trying to write my own version of *Metamorphosis*, it would seem to stem from my long-term proclivity to muse upon and observe the individual vis-à-vis the structures.

So there we have our beginning. That's what I started out with. The long, complex metamorphosis of *The Luckenbooth* from a series of sprawling and often slightly disconnected ideas to an actual coherent novel began. It was clear the plan gestating in my mind was going to be difficult, but Kafka himself argued that there would be little point to literature if it did not pose a challenge:

I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. But we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. That is my belief (Letters 16).

I knew with *The Luckenbooth* that I would be taking huge risks: creatively, structurally, conceptually, practically. Despite the technical challenges it would need to read as simply as possible, with a beginning, middle and an end to each individual story, and to the entire world. My previous novels I had purposefully constructed to be open-ended. *The Luckenbooth* would be the first novel I would attempt with a definite end-point. I was sure the narrative would need to come full circle because I wanted to begin my story just after a huge climax had occurred and use the novel to work toward resolving it. I also knew that my desire to respond to cultural structures and vent my political ire must not eradicate or overwhelm my desire to tell a story fully, simply and well. It is nothing if not a spiral: this endeavour of becoming via literature, and of literature becoming via the vessel of writing and personal metamorphosis of writing. As Dungey argues:

The decision by the individual to make one's life a work of art, to give to it one's values and purposes will entail a tremendous amount of struggle, pain, perhaps even a sort of wrenching violence imposed on and performed by the self on the self. To undertake such work entails a tremendous amount of violence to one's understanding of the self, one's relationship to his or her family and surrounding world (115).

PROGRESSING FROM THE FIRST DRAFT

My original working title for my novel was *The Waked*. In the first draft a momentous event occurred to begin the novel. It was a waken hosted on an island in the North of Scotland. My protagonist Jessie MacRae's father had just died. He was considered to be a horrible man by everyone who had known him. The islanders were glad he was dead. Jessie hosted a traditional waken with other women. Life and death are described as women's work. We bring life into the world. Cleanse the bodies of the dead when they go back out. Jessie felt there was no point to them sitting watching over her father's body so the devil would not take his soul. She was sure nobody wanted his soul, not even the devil. She was seventeen years old. Jessie was quite meek and she was about to begin work as a maid in No. 10 Luckenbooth Close, Edinburgh, in July 1910. I was struggling with the language. My early attempts read as overly stuffy because I hadn't caught the centre of the story. I wasn't used to writing in historical terms and so it was still tripping me up, I had to deconstruct my own ideas of what a historical novel can be. I had always felt there was often a distancing effect by reading historical fiction whereby it felt very far away from present experience and I wanted to make my characters lives feel immediate and vital, relevant in some way to any reader today. There was around twenty pages of other narrative before Jessie even got to Edinburgh. She arrived in a stolen boat. Her employer scared her and then exploited her sexually to try and sire a child for his fiancée. Jessie's story was interspersed through every decade. Structurally we went up the building in a linear fashion. Flat 1F1, 1910, Flat 2F2, 1920 (Jessie's story in flashback) Flat 3F3, 1930 (Jessie's story in flashback), flat 4F4, 1940, flat 5F5, 1950, and so on. It did not work. Going up the building in a linear fashion slowed it down. It felt like a relay race where each decade passed on the baton to the next. Jessie's story kept interrupting the other decades stories rather than weaving through it. Her voice was not strong enough. The sexual exploitation of a maid felt something that wasn't giving her character anything new. Some of my decades had brilliant potential and others were not working at all. I felt I had focused in too narrowly on Edinburgh history and I needed to

widen out the historical context in more areas. I had to cull around 100'000 words. I often find the things I am fascinated by are often just a long digression from where the story should actually begin. In all my early attempts, the opening of the story was set in the Highlands and they were about the waken. This meant there was a long build up before Jessie arrived in Edinburgh to begin her job in the tenement in July 1910.

I wasn't getting Jessie MacRae right. I knew that. I kept going back to the very real presentation of Gregor's body as reality, not metaphor. This is one of Kafka's greatest choices I believe. Where would the imaginative power be in Gregor feeling like he is a monstrous creature, when he could in actual fact wake up and find he is one? Not just to himself but to everyone he knows.

Kafka creates a certainty of narrative takes us straight into a reality that cannot possibly be real but is presented as if it is just that. If reality itself is a structure that seeks to reinforce other power-based cultural structures, say for example the reality of religion being considered the origins of our universe, or the response surrealist artists took in responding to society by making art that challenged the idea of reality full stop — using the political origins of work created during war time, when the structures of society had brought about devastation and war claiming that there was no other way, using art to challenge that reality. If you look at all of those facets together then Kafka's opening line works to challenge the idea of reality and what is seen and experienced by the individual and society. Gregor is a character who could not exist in reality. It is not possible for a man to wake up as a monstrous vermin in a physical form that appears very similar to that of a cockroach or dung beetle. However, it is the very first event that happens in *The Metamorphosis* and it is backed by exceptionally clear and steady writing, which makes the reader feel like this world is real. If I was to respond to a power like patriarchy and raise my writing up a level in this draft then I would have to make absolute choices and follow them through. A definitive ending, a definitive beginning, middle and end. I wanted to eradicate uncertainty completely from the narrative.

With this in mind, the first decision I made was that Jessie MacRae should not feel like her father was like the devil when he could in fact be the devil. With that decision she grew horns. I wanted to

visibly show how this woman could be exposed for having her own monstrous form. I also wanted to show the demonisation of women, historically, as something that Jessie does not shy away from, indeed she celebrates her horns more and more as the novel continues and they grow ever longer and more pointed. This novel was about the devil's daughter. I had to make the details concrete just as Kafka had chosen to do in *The Metamorphosis*. Jessie MacRae's father had not died by some vague intimation. She had taken the sins of her father on board, evaluated her role as his daughter, decided the only appropriate action was to kill him. This would occur before the beginning of the novel. I was taking my consideration of how to respond to patriarchy and so her father became the devil himself, the very worst of what such power has wielded. If I was to respond in any way to the horrors of what patriarchy has meant for society at certain times then I need to have the courage to be bold in my narrative. The twenty page waken would be removed so that I could have the inciting incident occur just before the novel begins. The only person who would know the events that predicate everything that comes thereafter is my protagonist and she cannot tell that story herself until the very end. Jessie would start her journey getting into the sea to row to Edinburgh in a coffin her father had built for her. He built one for each member of their family. Whilst her mother and brother had not survived she sees her father into his coffin, and then a bit later after a mishap in his funeral procession, she visits his body where it has fallen, in a ledge of a clifftop overlooking the sea, where she eats her father's heart. Importantly, however, we don't know this until the very end of the novel. At the start of the novel her lips are stained pink. She spits and it is bloodstained. She says she has done something that she will be repaid for. She feels the devil is still after her. I wanted to leave a trail of clues that the reader could only understand at the very end of the novel when this secret would be exposed. I had set my circle in motion. Somehow there would be a way for Jessie to make it back to her beginning — at the very end. With her horns grown and her age raised to her late twenties came a much tougher, more decisive personality. She arrives in Edinburgh, strides up Leith Walk. Stops at the crossroads at the Tron. A thousand men of God flock toward her on their way to the July 2010 World Missionary Conference. I started the book in a place of definite detail. Those decisions made the world real.

In retrospect, it probably would not have been possible for me to do a first draft of a novel with this approach. This was a metamorphosis all of its own. I had taken every corner, explored all nooks, continued through endless digressions in my first draft. But then again, I don't believe there should be rules for approach or execution of a novel. It is the writer's choice! As Jim Kelman once declared at the Edinburgh International Book Festival: I never felt like I needed to put my hand up and ask for permission on how to tell a story (14). I have always loved this quote. I wrote it down when I was watching James Kelman talk at Edinburgh International Book Festival. He is a writer I have looked to many times for his use of technique, free indirect speech, stream of consciousness. Just like Kelman advocates, I was making up the rules of this novel as I went along. I was not holding my hand up and asking anyone for permission on how to do so.

I write initial drafts with absolute freedom. I edit with a very critical eye. Jessie was developing well in my head for the next big draft. Her employer was a Minister of Culture, and a truly evil man. He seduces Jessie into a ménage with himself and his fiancée, very early on, they smoke opium and agree the terms by which she will carry a child for them both. I focused on clear descriptions and somehow Jessie began to feel like the centre. I felt that clarifying just her story would allow me to create a spine for the entire novel. I wrote her narrative until I felt like I was there in her life, not observing it from a distance. That first decade sets up the entire building. An event had to occur that meant Jessie curses the building for a hundred years. At the end, that curse would be fully exposed, along with the truth of what actually occurred.

Having established this, I then began my second phase of research into Edinburgh's rich history. There was a timeline of one hundred years to explore — politically, socially, legislatively and culturally. Accuracy of historical facts was important. It was also problematic. As previously mentioned, I wanted to write a work of literature that happens to develop over one hundred years. Time is what is happening around each story. It is not the point of each story. I did not want to view history from our present perspective. I wanted to take the reader inside each story. I also had to change the structures so that each story had a chance to interweave with the others. I split the novel into three parts. Each part would have

three decades. Each decade would be revisited three times. Each chapter would be 3333 words long. The format would now go: Flat 1F1, 1910, Flat 2F2, 1920, Flat 3F3, 1930. That would be repeated until each decade was revisited three times allowing the stories to weave together and to expose subplots and information that created mysteries and clues through different decades. These would alter or conclude the telling of other residents stories. Each of these combined parts would help take the reader on a maze of a journey. It would seem a story was fixed but then three decades later the meaning of it would change. Finally there would be something in conclusion that would alter the reading of the entire novel. Some of these stories would overlap or interweave in the way residents lives can in big old tenement buildings. By doing this we might realise what we thought about a character might change decades later, due to an incident recounted by another character. In that way we find the meaning of each decade and story itself can alter throughout Luckenbooth's long history. I did not want my reader to have it all figured out. I wanted them to be able to see things from different viewpoints again and again. In the introduction to *Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis, Modern Critical Interpretations*, Harold Bloom encapsulates this point, claiming we might find "in Gregor's evasive narrative the emergence of the Kafkan avoidance of fixed interpretation that itself becomes the reader's parabolic quest" (1).

In Gregor Samsa's world the apartment he lives in with his Father, Mother, sister and their three lodgers provides a stage he observes once imprisoned in his room. In some way Jessie MacRae's story must be similarly held by the building she resides in. I decided it would be on a Close in the High St. where the old lucken-buiths (locked booths i.e. the first trading area in Edinburgh) had been situated right across the way from St. Giles cathedral. I visited the High St. deciding on an actual location and focusing on details in the locality.

Creating a tenement and capturing an easily read but complicated and gripping novel — with ten sets of characters — each decade with all its nuances — still seemed like a hugely daunting thing to even try but I don't see the point in writing unless I at least try to push myself beyond my own capabilities each time I write a novel. When writing is aesthetically ambitious and politically radical, it can become an effective medium by which to challenge accepted realities in life. I have never wanted to pas-

sively accept the many illusions society claims as reality. I have always sought to question the structures of society. Bourgeois culture claims to be all-caring, good, moral, upright, benevolent. The individual is allowed that reflected glory until they fall outside of their expected role. In Gregor Samsa's story it is his bodily transformation that repels the other characters so much they can no longer even see their brother, son or work colleague — as the human they formerly understood him to be. The hegemonic structures themselves demand monstrous reactions to anything that challenges them. This is the political dynamic behind the aesthetic quality of Kafka's writing that asks: what is illusion, and what is reality? Kafka plays with this so flawlessly it is barely perceptible. In the character of Gregor Samsa we find someone whose body exposes the reality of his life as an individual that he was perhaps not seeing before. First it is exposed to himself, and it is this new black shelled body with tiny wriggling legs, his animalistic eyes, his lack of identifiably human traits that truly exposes truths about the main social structures around him. He works for the government. He has served in the army. His family demand he serve them selflessly. He must appear visibly human or they unleash a murderous rage and rejection. If he is pleasing them then he is safe. If he is not then their opinion of him totally changes. He must contribute financially or he is an expendable burden. They do not see that he is just as human as he was the day before. It is only his body that has changed but his heart, soul and understanding of all around him is profoundly impacted and endangered. The entire psychological existential experience of Gregor Samsa's journey when the structures of society close in on him is something I wanted to try and capture in my novel too.

Kafka was interested in various ideas concerning the relationship between humans and animals. In particular, he was influenced, in this regard, by the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. According to Anderson Bernofsky: "Rejecting the 'burden of history,' embracing a child-or animal-like "forgetfulness," Nietzsche fundamentally questioned the human-animal hierarchy (75). With this in mind, I began to think about lizards. I began to think about geckos and chameleons, which ultimately led me to crocodiles. I was considering the nature of narcissists. How they seem to have evolved to be predatory and entirely without conscience. How a wide-toothed smile and charm can influence so many people to not see the truth

of a crocodile. I thought about my desire to respond to patriarchy but more precisely I was thinking of abuse of power in all its forms. Narcissism seems to be so prevalent in many forms of power. I wanted to create a character who would just in passing show us something of this thematic concern very early on in the book. Animals were beginning to call to me in the novel. I had a polar bear, I referenced a brown bear, and now I had a businessman walking by Jessie MacRae in the street very early on — she looks at him and sees he is a crocodile, sees his nature, and she can riff on it: what crocodiles do in society in the guise of narcissists in scaly leathery skin with tiny protruding eyes.

I wanted to go further. I had originally been writing a character who lived on the third floor in the 1930s and he was a young black man from Louisiana who was working as a lawyer in Edinburgh. His parents still lived in the US, as did most of his family, and they were active in the civil rights movement. I did not want to create a character who as a person of colour was there to serve the narrative function of exposing truths about being a person of colour. Also, I am not a man, nor am I a person of colour, and so I had to think a long time about this character. Originally his name had been John. He was working for Mr Udam. John didn't want to do that though. I spent as much time with him as possible and travelled through Louisiana with him, and the first exploration included snapping turtles, fireflies, geckos, crocodiles, swamp life. I wondered if he was daunted by his political parents and their expectations for him. I wondered what he really wanted to do.

I decided what he really wanted to do was drink. Also, he wanted to listen to music. He did not want to work as a lawyer fulfilling his parents expectations. Instead he gets a job in the bone library at Summerhall. Summerhall was the main veterinary training school for the whole of Europe and seemed a fascinating Edinburgh building to include in my novel. I wanted my character to be able to find out a lot about the building whilst holding down an interesting yet fairly solitary role within this vast institution. His job was archiving animal bones, but his main pastime – and act of transgression in the era's context of ballooning European Fascism – was to think, freely, about cultural structures. While doing this, he began to build a bone mermaid. He was not meant to be doing that in the bone library. He meets a neighbour upstairs and has a relationship with her, (we will only see the conclusion of when she has a

relationship with someone else — one floor up, a decade later). His name changed from John to Levi. His real first name was Wolf but he was travelling using his middle name because he did not want to fulfil his mother's ideas of who he should be. I was considering the institution of family and what is expected for us within familial roles. Much in the way Gregor Samsa is expected to pay off his families financial debt, my character Levi owes a political and social debt to his parents who have been hugely active in the civil rights movement. Levi's mother in particular believes her son should be continuing the work of his parents and she has raised him to be a lawyer, something that she herself felt unable to do as a young black woman in Louisiana from a rural farming background. I needed to know what the origins of Levi's unrest were and I could only do so if I understood where his parents had come from and what their expectations were for him.

Levi's story is told in epistolary form in letters to his brother. This epistolary form allowed for a great intimacy and freedom of thought and expression entirely particular to his character, his brother knows him so well that we find Levi able to divulge his history, hopes and fears with ease. I found that my new structure of visiting each decade three times, and keeping the novel in three parts, so the reader only ever has three decades going on at once, was really helping each story to stand out but weave into every other.

The mermaid of bones had something to tell Levi, she had something to tell me. He had drawn a human skeleton on the wall of his bedroom and he felt a spirit (with child) sit on the end of his bed each night. I went back to my notes. Where are the bones? I realised the bones had been placed throughout the entire tenement building and that a curse had been placed by Jessie when she, her infant, and the fiancée, were all murdered by Mr Udnam and distributed through the building.

Levi was showing me clues as to how the sickness this left in the building was setting in and impacting on residents' lives. The building is described beautifully by Levi. It is bent slightly, bowing to the city. It is arthritic, a giant. I began to see the building as a character that was split. It was there to provide and protect but it was housing a secret that held a spiritual sickness for its residents. Nicholas Dungey describes the Freudian critic Ursula Mahlendorf's thesis on Franz Kafka in terms of

such splitting. Dungey writes: ‘Applying the Freudian strategy of psychological splitting to Kafka, Mahlendorf describes how Kafka projects the many competing parts of his self into his literature in order to engage and resolve the conflicts raging in his mind and historical context. In tune with such thought, I contemplated the idea of splitting and failure.

Applying the Freudian strategy of psychological splitting to Kafka, Mahlendorf describes how Kafka projects the many competing parts of his self into his literature in order to engage and resolve the conflicts raging in his mind and historical context. ‘Kafka describes a self,’ Mahlendorf writes, ‘whose parts are set against each other In delineating the split lines ... and forming inner dynamics into a story firm in the literary tradition of the artist story, Kafka shows us ... his failure as man and artist’ (x).

Levi believes he is failing by not following his parents in becoming a full-time civil rights activist and lawyer. Only by splitting from their aspirations can he truly find his own. Radical thought. Using thought and language as a tool that can challenge structure in a way that nothing else can. He feels the sickness of the building and is the first character to really alert us to it, to give us our first feeling of the bones in the walls.

Through my time with Levi the world of Edinburgh and so many details about the tenement building were coming together. I was interested in my characters failures. In how they split. In the tenement itself being split between its set task (to house and protect) and the horror of it housing three murdered females in its walls. I imagined how that set forth death-watch beetles, which would arrive and eat the building away for decades, crippling its beams and haunches of wood so that it would be on its way down. I wanted to take that building down. I wanted to dismantle the structures out from the inside out. I wanted to expose the bones, many of whom belonged to women and children.

In the character of Jessie MacRae I had my demon, literally a devil child. Jessie was a moral young woman who believed in autonomy and goodness, and whilst she does not explain her act my hope was that it would be easy to identify with why she did it. Jessie was becoming increasingly proud of her beautiful horns in every draft. The tips grew only longer, sharper and more dangerous upon be-

coming a mother. Was it her ghost visiting Levi each night? Animal and spirit, character and theme, all of these things were gaining greater presence and clarity. Jessie was human and demon, hooved and goat-like when she goes to visit her dead Father on the cliff-top. Kafka had seen the animal influence in many of his contemporaries. Anderson Bernofsky explains how Kafka's interest in the animal-like nature of his contemporaries was intensified by his reading of the story 'The Condignog' by Danish author Johannes V. Jensen, which had been translated into German in 1909, three years before the composition of *The Metamorphosis*. But while explaining the influence, Bernofsky stresses how Kafka's story is more radical. About 'The Condignog', he writes:

His story 'Kondignogen' was translated into German as 'Der Kondignog' in 1909, three years before the composition of *The Metamorphosis*. To be sure, the story it tells of the transformation of a young man into a giant lizard-like animal differs in crucial respects from Kafka's tale: this metamorphosis may be a subjective hallucination prompted by hunger and melancholy, and the other characters don't notice the young man's ostensibly new animal form (89).

The influence of Johannes V. Jensen's story *The Condignog*, on Kafka, also shows how truly different his approach is, unlike the lizard-like transformation of Jensen's protagonist, Gregor is no hallucination. Gregor is no hallucination. His reality is tangible. It is felt in the horrible apple lodged in his back that festers into a wound that will kill him.

Meanwhile, my character Jessie Mac Rae has no fear of the cultural structures around her, she stops hiding her horns at home. The fiancée sees the horns and loves them as she does Jessie, she allies with her lover and they silently unite against her future husband Mr Udam. In this way the establishment in the form of Mr Udam is shunned. Jessie holds her baby and stares at him with her horns out and in her mind she dares him to try and tell her to hand over the child. I felt animals roam through so many parts of the narrative all serving a different purpose. Levi talks about the four horses of the apocalypse. The horses bring death, pestilence, famine. He uses them to show how humans began to travel, to procreate, and how we could not leave our villages until horses were tamed, so that the evolution and

reach of humanity relied upon these animals. My building had bones buried into the walls all the way through it. There was a way to expose a truth. I went back to Jessie and had her place her secrets in a bottle on the shore when she rowed away from the Highlands. One that told the truth of what happened to her father. Somehow the story was working back towards this point. And so, my first draft had not failed. And yet, it was still nowhere near the novel I needed to write. Some floors were getting stronger. It was progressing. I had to go back to really focus on the characters, structure and plot — totally take it apart and start again.

DEVELOPING CHARACTER & STRUCTURE

I knew I did not want to make any of my characters particularly like me — that wasn't what this novel was about. I am always trying to create characters who are not like me. Regardless of that I do also understand that things I am interested in and intrigued by are bound to come into these characters' lives. There are a lot of choices I will make with characters so they like or affiliate with things that are absolutely not to my taste, or different belief systems — all those things help to give a chance of creating characters with their own autonomy and individuality as much as possible. Adam Sexton writes disparagingly about his creative writing students submitting characters based on themselves. He writes: "The weakest, most indistinct main characters of stories and novels that cross my desk are stand-ins for the writer himself. These protagonists aren't so much poorly characterised as not especially characterised at all" (157). By doing this the students have not considered back story. Adam Sexton writes about his students submitting characters that are mostly themselves, so they have not worked on developing them, they have not considered back story or likes, dislikes, taste, tics and characteristics the way we have to do when we write a totally fictional character. For such reasons, when I am approaching characters I often consider early on what ways are best to differentiate them from my likes and dislikes.

This concern for the autonomy of my fictional characters can be seen in the development of my protagonist from the 1940s story, *Ivy Proudfoot*. I was interested in creating a character who had little

conscience about killing people if she felt it was morally acceptable due to the victims being bad people. That is the way she thinks about it. Ivy really wants to kill and so she is trying to find a moral framework that allows her to not feel bad about it. I had to try and imagine what it might be like as a young woman to feel that way.

I really wanted Ivy to have lots of characteristics that immediately made her distinct from me and from the characters in *The Luckenbooth*. She hates reading fiction for a start. I don't at all agree with her morality that if a person is bad (in her case she is going as a spy to France where she will have the opportunity to kill Nazis) it is okay to kill them. However, I was intrigued by that space she inhabits. She says if we don't kill bad people then they just gain more and more control, until all of the good people suffer. It was a moral question that I wanted to raise through a belief that the young Ivy has firmly accepted.

Ivy is also living through an era that I am not. What pressures did those in World War II feel? She lists all the people that her family have lost, whilst we also learn that her brother disappeared into a concentration camp and was not seen again. Many stories were being told even at this point in the war as to what was actually going on in the German concentration camps. Ivy doesn't have a full picture of the camp but is aware that horrible things are rumoured to be going on there. She knows that the Nazis are committing horrific acts in the war. She wonders if they must still be viewed as human beings when they are committing such horrific acts.

Another part of Ivy Proudfoot's narrative is that she greatly admires The Night Witches, a Ukrainian bomber regiment made up entirely of women, many of whom are teenage girls. So, Ivy is playing with courage and difference, ideology and individuality. Her views challenge me to consider what my own might be in similar circumstances. Not only that but she is willing to take all consequences that may arise from her actions, including her own death.

Ivy cannot reveal in conversation what she wants to do. Not even to the recruiters who are sending her to France to be a spy for the British although she does have to show them by committing her first fatal assignment that she can be trusted to follow through on orders. At this point the reader knows,

by Ivy's first person narrative, exactly who she is and what she thinks. She is confiding to the reader because no-one else is told her inner thoughts. In that way we as readers become complicit in her desire to do good by committing an act many of us could not imagine feeling so desirable, let alone to a seventeen year old girl. I was exploring women in a very specific way in *The Luckenbooth* and this was quite deliberate. Thomas Flynn writes about the myth of 'the eternal feminine', describing the conceptualization of this sexist trope as 'a timeless feminine essence ... activity and subjectivity.

Among the myths debunked is that of 'the eternal feminine', famously articulated by Goethe in his *Faust* but, in fact, the centuries-old concept of a timeless feminine essence that stands as the model of passivity and unapproachable purity in contrast with the implied masculine essence as one of activity and subjectivity (100).

This idea of the one passive femininity is subverted many times in *The Luckenbooth*. For example, the women have strong friendships that are not based upon getting approval or attention from men, they are also not there to decorate the narrative or play peripheral, passive roles in relation to male characters. Dora and Agnes in the 1950s seance are friends for decades, Morag and Ivy in the 1940s are friends and lovers, Elise and Jessie in 1910 are friends and lovers, the two triad women in the 1970s are friends and work colleagues. Moreover, none of the women are sticking to traditional female roles – or if they are, then they are struggling. In the 1950s chapter Agnes is very dissatisfied in her marriage and with life as a home maker. Jessie not only abhors her father (the devil's) sins but takes extreme action to atone for them by eating his heart. These women are gentle and ferocious. Jessie in particular walks into the novel with small horns hidden on her forehead. She walks out of it over one-hundred years later with them long and glinting on full display.

In contrast the character of Ivor on the eighth floor, is a man who is trying to hide his phobia of light and an abusive wife. There is no point in pushing female roles beyond narrow confines if I do not to allow male characters to grow in a similar way.

In making some concrete decisions about my characters, I began to gain confidence in areas of my novel. However it was still a very daunting task, overall nine different sets of characters and

decades just felt too much. And so, I returned to reading *The Metamorphosis* again. As already mentioned, Kafka plays with illusion and reality from the opening line. Is Gregor Samsa human or monstrous? Is he beyond both class and race to have become a repellent creature to his family? Are his family's ideas of who they are as individuals and together as a collective, the actual illusion? Gregor's father laboriously sits at the dinner table night after night too tired to even polish his uniform buttons. His family and the lodgers see what a huge sacrifice he makes to provide for his family. He is a martyr! He is the epitome of a responsible citizen. However the inhumanity and rage he displays toward Gregor reveals his own self-image to be an illusion. The reality is exposed when he throws an apple into the back of a helpless shelled creature he knows is his son. He leaves it lodged in the shell until it festers and causes Gregor's death. The reactions put in place by Gregor's metamorphosis expose character both in himself but more shockingly in those around him. The potential to alter reality — and oppressive cultural structures — can only arise if an individual is willing to look beyond the confines of rules and regulations. Gregor is forced to do this because of his physical metamorphosis and the disgust it inspires in people who previously appeared to love him. It is his image that allows us to understand something fundamental about character. As well as thinking about character, I continued to dwell on plot and structure. Even though there was still so very far to go, I received some great feedback. There was a drag ball in the 1920s, for example, that had a great sexuality to it. The seance in the 1950s was proving a great way of showing lots more about Jessie MacRae's story. I had taken a risk on putting William Burroughs in the building in 1962 when he intended an infamous World Writer's Conference at Edinburgh International Book Festival. So far, he seemed to be holding up naturally within the building but despite these positive the world of *The Waked* had gone in so many directions it was impossible at times to tell what the story was really about. I didn't like the title anymore. What did it even mean? Jessie MacRae hosted a waken at the start of the very first draft only because I loved writing about a waken. It wasn't a good enough reason to be holding back the novel's actual beginning for thirty pages. I had gone in every direction my dream-waking writing state had led me but I had to allow myself to develop the story in this way. And in writing and rewriting the material, I was beginning to get a feeling for how I write

a novel for the very first time. I was beginning to understand the metamorphosis of a novel is a very specific process for me. I write everything! I follow all clues. I go in all directions. Then I sit back and evaluate the mess. Look for great lines. Try and feel for the pulse of the book. It is under all those things.

Nonetheless, in between drafts there is a lot of silence. Romesh Gunsekera's essay on silence made me keep thinking about my own metamorphosis. He writes:

The shift in human evolution from talk to writing was a shift from sound to silence. They say it happened around 3'500 years ago. I wouldn't now for sure, but the idea that someone in some Sumerian town started recording merchandise with marks on clay tablets and gave birth to writing sounds good, and like any good story, plausible (140).

When I was a child I lost my voice for periods of time. I was totally silent. I could imagine my voice as if it were on a kite attached to my body by a fine silver string. I had sent it away up high to be safe and in my throat there was no nightingale, no high-pitched little kid sound, just nothing. It is a similar silence I confront during rewriting novels. It can become ominous. Silence can be exceptionally loud. I thought of how many of my characters felt silenced by the cultural structures around them. I stared at the computer. I wanted to quit. I always do at many points along the way. I am sure it has defeated me. Utterly certain that if I ever had any talent it was merely just a glitch or possibly just other people being nice to me. I want to stop writing then. Forever!

Like many other things in life the only way to get to the end of writing a novel is to go through it. To get out I had to go in and keep doing so until it all began to resemble the novel I had originally set up to write. I knew certain things were holding it back. I addressed the linear style of going up the building decade by decade which had slowed down the narrative. In changing the structure I had solved my prior issue where stories did not interweave — it had been like passing a baton up a building but now each decade was part of every other in some way. Some of the characters going up through the building were brilliant, but others were weak and needed revision. I was able to tie in the end of the UK Witchcraft Law as abolished by Winston Churchill in 1953 and replaced by the Fraudulent Mediums'

Act to the seance in a much more successful way. I could include the story of the last woman tried under the UK witchcraft laws. I really had to look at structure as thoroughly as possible. As David Lodge argues in *The Art of Fiction* the structure ... shape and character can be imperative: "The structure of a narrative is like the framework of girders that holds up a modern high-rise building: you can't see it, but it determines the edifice's shape and character" (216). I decided to re-map the novel in a kind of table format with multiple columns. The first column stated exactly what year and floor the resident lived on. Then I wrote the resident's name and age. I wrote their occupation. I had a column depicting what was going on politically in that decade. I had a column for cultural events of that decade: music releases, film, literature, fashion. I also had a space for new inventions and trends in alcohol, drugs or food. I then drew arrows between each of the stories to begin to web how they might fit together in a much more coherent way. I also put down a column for the theme in each decade. I decided each story worked better if it was completing its own micro theme within the wider structure. 1910 was the occult, 1920 - love, 1930 - science, 1940 - class, 1950 - retribution, 1960 - consciousness, 1970 - violence, 1980 - capitalism, 1990 - metamorphosis. I decided to split the novel in three parts almost like the acts of a play. I hoped this would simplify the narrative. It would mean the reader only had to hold three decades and stories in their head at any one time. Each decade would be revisited three times. The repetition of the number three made me think about wiccan principles which state that every intent and action that you put out into the world will be returned to you threefold. This is debated depending upon the wiccan practitioner, but it made sense to me that this novel, which was developing a strong occult and spiritualist/consciousness streak, might be formed on something like this. I decided to take this to the utmost potential in the novel and so I made each chapter 3'333 words long.

The structure was beginning to make much more sense to me now and a continuity of repetition in the length of each chapter helped to begin to drive the narrative forward. I decided each character could also have a different POV or way of approaching story if it helped to make them unique from the other characters and decades. The best way to judge it was on what would be best for each character. Levi wrote his epistolary letter to his brother beautifully. Dot on the top floor was developing within a

third person stream-of-consciousness, or free indirect model, as was Jessie at times – it is a style I have often favoured. Burroughs was written like a cut-up, to try and fit and find his voice: it is largely a conversation between himself and his lover, almost like a play. I wanted to be guided by what each story and character needed most importantly. I was cutting it up and putting it back together much in the way I had with my photograph albums as a child. David Lodge argues: “The golden rule of fictional prose is there are no rules — except the ones that each writer sets for him or herself. Repetition and simplicity worked (usually) for Hemingway’s artistic purposes. Variation and decoration worked for Nabokov’s especially in *Lolita*” (94).

I wanted to keep taking risks. This novel felt like a risk at every conjecture. It seemed important to follow this through. I was taking action to move forward with my novel in a way that was born out of instinct, intellect, reason, drive, determination and tenacity. It was regaining energy. Similarly, revisiting each decade meant I could begin to play with the way each story intertwined. I created a column entitled ‘Continuity of the Building, so I could begin to plot events that would further link each story. In 1910 the original event occurs where Jessie curses the entire building. The triple murder committed by Mr Udnam is covered up by him distributing the bones of Jessie, Elise and the infant Hope into the very walls of the building. So that was a great repetition I could revisit in any decade in so many different ways. After he had murdered the women and hidden them in the walls he had gouged a pictograph of a Devil girl into the stone at the front door. Every decade’s resident would walk past her every time they entered the building. In the 1920s when Flora enters the building to go to a drag ball she passes by a young man with a piano, who is moving into the fifth floor. This foreshadows the story of Agnes and Archie, while sounds from their apartment are frequently heard in different decades. The sound of their piano on a Sunday, their parrot talking. In the 1930s Levi describes the image if the front of the building and what the image would be like if the building’s front façade were to be taken off: all the baths, pictures, sofas, fires. He talks about a boy who rolls a marble in the apartment above him and how his mother always scolds him and the residents of No. 10 Luckenbooth Close feel sorry for him. I thought about the difference in Levi, with his brilliant mind and gentle nature, also the quieter nature of Cal, in

comparison to Mr Udnam. He still represented patriarchy for me, in all its lowest forms. With Cal I felt he was almost too neutral on so I changed his name to Ivor and found ways to make his character more developed. I wanted to create a contrast between males who exploit patriarchy and those who feel bound by it in unpleasant ways. Terry Eagleton describes how feminist theory began to conceptualize patriarchy in the latter half of the twentieth century. He writes:

If it was held in place by the material and psychological benefits which accrued to men from it, it was also held in place by a complex structure of fear, desire, aggression, masochism and anxiety which urgency needed to be examined. Feminism was not an isolatable issue, a particular 'campaign' alongside other political projects, but a dimension which informed and interrogated every facet of personal, social and political life. The message of the women's movement, as interpreted by some of those outside it, is not just that women should have equality of power and status with men; it is a questioning of all such power and status. It is not that the world will be better off with more female participation in it; it is that without 'feminization' of human history, the world is unlikely to survive (130).

The point of responding to patriarchy is not about attacking men, it is about attacking power and those who misuse it. I wanted to focus on the structures of power in particular. The men in my novel had to hold a plurality of life experience. There are irredeemable characters such as Mr Udnam, and the devil, perhaps the holy men in the opening chapter are shown only to be feeble hypocrites, yet these are human traits, not gendered ones. I had to go back to feminism and my own desire to not create one dimensional characters of either, or any, gender. Yet some people are just evil through and through. I believe this. It is also interesting to create some characters who lack self-insight, it creates a tension for the reader and can highlight human issues in a believable way. I was glad to contrast that within my male characters. Mr Udnam is a man of privilege: white, wealthy, educated, bureaucratic and powerful. He has the weight of authority behind him. He dines out with councillors. There is no influential person in the city whose approval he has not tried to manipulate or use at one point or another. As a Minister of Culture he should surely be a man of high moral standing, yet he is a murderous, misogynistic power-

and-status-hungry soul-devoid chasm of a human being. This man was lawless. Who had put him in charge? Why should he profit so greatly from this city and expect a statue to be put up in his name? He appeared able to kill or maim and hide horrific secrets with absolutely no sense of what he had done at all!

Kafka famously had a vexed relationship with patriarchy, via his own father who he writes directly to using 'You' to create an intimate personal plea from child to Father. Walter Sokel cites Kafka claiming:

When I was a child everything you commanded was practically a commandment from Heaven for me. I never forgot it. It remained the most important means for judging the world and especially for judging you; and there you were found wanting utterly You, the immeasurably important lawgiver, did not adhere to the commandments you yourself had imposed on me (303).

Kafka was forever solidifying his opinion of misused power-based structures via the unfair and cruel presence of his own Father, a man who bodily was always so much bigger than him, who made him feel a failure for not marrying, for his skinny legs, his impotent desires. For me, there is an affinity between Kafka's depiction of vulnerability and resistance in his work and my own character Jessie, who hides her monstrous form, yet strides through Edinburgh with her head high, while digesting her Father's heart. As can be seen, my way through the writing process was to perpetually return to character and action. I had two of my directly opposed male characters come together for a short while. Levi is a young man, not incredibly wealthy, although he has had a good level of education to become a legal clerk. Levi is from Louisiana, a person of colour, raised by parents who have devoted their lives to the Civil Rights movement in America. He is a thinker. He is really looking out at a far wider picture than Mr Udam ever will. He is not thinking in terms of self-gain but societal progress. He is not respected by all. He is looked at twice sometimes because of racism and is made to consider what it means to be a man of his colour in 1930s Edinburgh, a city that appears to have been built in part with money from slavery, money that men like Mr Udam had no doubt profited from greatly.

Meanwhile, Mr Udnam asks Levi to do work for him in the 1930s. He tries to stop the drag ball in the 1920s. He is mentioned getting into a car in the 1940s, a man with accolades all over the city by that point. He has made Luckenbooth close into a housing association called Hope. Ivy Proudfoot is the one who comments on this, but what she doesn't know (and the reader does) is that the murdered child who wanders the building is called Hope and the infant is Mr Udnam's daughter and that she was killed by him. Ivy says Mr Udnam gives her a cold feeling. The stories are revealing the nature of other decades' characters.

The reader is becoming privy to the secrets of this building and its characters. There is repetition in how the original story continues to be revealed in different decades and how thematically each character is in some way centrifugally marginal to mainstream bourgeois culture, as I had originally hoped. Strong themes allowed me to create a repetition in thought and action that carries tropes through the entire metamorphoses of *The Luckenbooth*. For me, this repetition had something like a holy element: like a form of prayer, or mediation. As Lodge claims in *The Art of Fiction*:

Needless to say, repetition is not necessarily linked to a bleakly positivist, anti-metaphysical representation of life such as we find in Hemingway. It is also a characteristic feature of religious and mystical writing, and is used by novelists whose work tends in that direction — D. H. Lawrence, for instance (92).

This repetition of theme is something we see often in writers' work. Kafka would have said everything he wrote was in some way influenced by his relationship with his Father. His *I* is present! He always embraced it. I wanted each of my characters' personal stories to be dominant to their own section of narrative.

The repetition of visiting this building each decade allowed me to interweave different characters' lives where appropriate whilst they still carry their own personal secrets. We see Ivy carry the secret of her sociopathic tendency, or her drive to kill bad people, yet she is also loving, she spends her last night with Morag, who she lives with. It later turns out Levi had a relationship with Morag after his decade's story ended. So from this we find out that Levi did indeed return to America but not for some

years, his own desire to live his life as a thinker, as a young man in another country, overrides his intention to return home and train as an educator. The structure of going up the building allowed me to revisit the narrative even after a character's decade was over. We see Mr Udnam for the final time in the last decade of his life. In the 1950s Mr Udnam arrives at a seance in Agnes's apartment. He is an old man by then. He is forced to confront spirits who he has wronged. In this way my structure was beginning to support narrative. I could foreshadow revelations that would occur decades later. I could build so many details into each story that then changed the reader's perception of things they heard about in decades before. I wanted to use this to build suspense and tension and to make all of these intertwined lives expose one original story. In something covering such a long timescale I had to make sure it did not just begin to feel like interlinked stories. Jessie MacRae appears in this seance, as do Elise and Hope — it is the first time we find out that they were all murdered by Mr Udnam. A vital piece of information comes through that changes how the next decades characters will be experienced by the reader. The bones of Jessie, Elise and Hope were distributed through the walls of Luckenbooth. Hidden in there all this time. Any character who lives there after this does not know this huge secret that the reader is now privy too. It also raises the question, which is not answered at this point, of how the bones got there? The 1950s seance is right in the middle of the book and is setting up questions that will be resolved at the end. We are being pulled deeper into the story of No. 10 Luckenbooth Close. Decades are beginning to overlap. Each story is building toward something. I still wanted to create a novel that worked all the way back to a climax. *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka began with a climax. I knew *The Luckenbooth* had to, and every piece of action was somehow leading back towards that. I still had my original goal in mind. To dismantle structures. To build back toward an unseen climax that had occurred just before the beginning of the novel. The ending would conclude everything that brought us to this moment. Each story was beginning to support this and expose other elements of the original curse that the devil's daughter had placed on the building in 1910. It was a big decision to really want to end the novel in a way that would bring so much certainty to the text (this is not how I normally approach endings at all!).

At the end of my 1950s seance we know what happened in 1910 but we are still only halfway through Jessie's story. I realised that Jessie's story was having a traditional beginning, middle and end. It begins in Part One, we see the next big part of her journey via the seance in Part Two and it would be concluded in Part Three. No part works in isolation! Every single thing is interlinked. As David Lodge, again, argues about novelistic form: "A novel is a Gestalt, a German word for which there is no exact English equivalent, defined in my dictionary as a 'perceptual pattern or structure possessing qualities as a whole that cannot be described merely as a sum of its parts'" (230). Each section was beginning to fit into every other as a jigsaw that can only be understood when the last pieces fit in. I decided to set the last decade of Part Two in 1962. It is a long conversation between the poet William Burroughs and his young lover. In this decade Burroughs puts his ear to the floor of the apartment so he is listening to the floor below them — 5F5, and he says that he can hear some big event occurring there (the seance perhaps) and that this building shifts time, decades go back and forth, that he understands this as he too is a time traveller via words. Bill looks at his lover and informs him that the building is a psychic vampire. That it sucks the souls dry of every inhabitant. We are now clearly seeing the outcome and impact of what happened in 1910. There is an occult energy in the building. The rules of reality are less important than what is actually occurring. Much like Gregor Samsa who awakes as a bug, and Kafka himself who found that via writing he became art instead of a bug, the metamorphoses of the building and each character was unfolding in layers. William Burroughs's floor is holding the consciousness of the building in a way. This decade and its protagonist is able to explore the consciousness of humanity in a way that wouldn't have worked in the same way in 1910 but it has tendrils that also link him to Levi in the 1930s or my final character — Dot, a cosmic agent who will arrive just before the year 2000 and expose the whole story of no. 10 Luckenbooth Close and the devil's daughter.

In the 1980s decade employment for working class or poor Scottish people is much harder to come by. We are in Thatcher's Britain and the impact is directly felt. Society feels empty and barren and it does not have the richness of earlier decades visually and aesthetically. In her obituary for her lover,

Franz Kafka, Milena Jesenská sketched a modern Gnostic, a writer whose vision was of the *kenoma*, the cosmic emptiness into which we have been thrown:

He was a hermit, a man of insight who was frightened by life He saw the world as being full of invisible demons which assail and destroy defenceless man All his works describe the terror of mysterious misconceptions and guiltless guilt in human beings (Cited in Bloom 1).

My own representation of the 1980s partakes of such desolation. My protagonist of that decade, Ivor, feels much fear in life. He is phobic of light much to his own shame. He has hidden in his job at the coal mine so nobody can find out how phobic he is of daylight. He sees no future for himself. Only Kafka's *kenoma*, a great emptiness which modern society in no way assuages. The sense of despair in the eighties amongst working class communities in Scotland was so deep they knew it would impact on their future permanently. Ivor thinks a lot about time and this is somehow continuing the narrative began by Burroughs in part two. So many of the characters seem to believe that there is hope but not for them. Dot believes she can expose the bones of women who have died for those who will come after her. We realise it is too late even for her. Agnes discovers the building's horrifying secrets but loses the power of speech for the rest of her life. Ivy knows it is unlikely she will ever be celebrated or even remembered for her acts of heroism. The structures are being taken down or exposed. Nobody who is in the building seems likely to benefit directly. Time is passing in *The Luckenbooth*. It is all coming apart. The metamorphosis of the building itself is in an ever accelerating descent. Hope housing association inform that the building will have to be shut down at some point. Deathwatch beetles have infested all the wooden structures in the building and the whole thing will have to be gutted. All tenants will be given notice to be placed elsewhere.

We are almost at the final decade, but before that it is worth going through some of the other columns, specifically history and culture. Whilst I did not want to write a historical novel I was still serious about capturing the sense of a very real world. The more real I could make the details in each decade the more strength all of my stories would hold. There had been certain things I wanted to in-

clude for each decade regarding specific details. In 1910 I wanted to have the World Missionary Conference that took place in Edinburgh that year be a feature in it. Over one thousand men of God had descended on the city and I could see them all walking up North Bridge and flowing around young Jessie MacRae who had only just arrived there. George V became King in May 1910, I had him mentioned originally and then removed it. I wanted to mention Jenners which had opened in 1838 but had a huge refit after a fire in 1895. I had to consider that this was pre-WW1 as well, and consider how the war might change the world before my 1920s decade started. I looked at writers who were active in 1910. Gertrude Stein in Paris is mentioned by the fiancée Elise. Elise and Mr Udnam talk about the work of Jack London. They also say they met Picasso who was claiming he was about to start a new great art movement, which Mr Udnam scorns. Picasso did create cubism in that decade though, after this story is set. I am weaving a very real world together. In 1920 things feel they have moved on from the more formal presentation of women in 1910, other changes focus on the social climate. Fashion includes short (knee length) flappers dresses, there is the prohibition movement in the US, in 1924 a Leith Improvement scheme is going on apparently to help clear slums. The character Flora lives in Leith so she is able to bring a different perspective to the more affluent world of the High St. in Edinburgh. The wider metamorphosis of Edinburgh is already in place. Music includes early jazz, the Charleston. In 1918 women over the age of thirty had got the right to vote. Voting rights for women were extended to include women under the age of thirty in 1928 – Mr Udnam comments on this to Flora, with great disgust. Flora enjoys a freedom that feels different already to the lives of Jessie and Elise. Make up has changed. Flora is attending a drag ball as a single woman who was born with both sexes and she is happy with this, she does not try to hide it in her personal life although she is female to herself — Flora is continuing where our devil's daughter left off. Jessie did not see why she should bow her head to men, or religion, and Flora does not see why she should think of herself as two things just because society might. Writing on affinities between Foucault and Kafka, Nicholas Dungey writes: “The aesthetics of existence refers to the personal decisions individuals make about how to live and the techniques and practices they employ to realise their conception of an autonomous and ‘beautiful’ life” (113). Flora

knows that living a beautiful life means facing hard truths. It also means only acting in honour of a truly honest love. That makes up much of her story. Flora had served as a man in the war and met her lover on the last day she ever dressed as a male. They had been on Leith Walk and the Toloa Ship had arrived with a Polish regiment, who marched up Leith walk with a polar bear saluting those they passed. When I found out certain things during research there was no way I could not use them, so I found my polar bear became a means through which Flora explains and considers love, which is the theme of her decade.

In the 1930s Levi is living in a different world again. WW2 breaks out in Sep 1939. It is the great depression Era. He has come from the US where they saw the 1929 Wall Street crash, a time of civil rights activism that saw the Ku Klux Klan go down from 4-5 million members to around 30k. The rise of the far right appears to be occurring again in the build up to world war II. Progress occurs then regresses. The metamorphosis of society is not linear. The lives of The Luckenbooth's characters are already beginning to show this. Where is our metamorphosis in society? Where is true change? Agnes's husband Archie talks about the council estates they are building to try and encourage people to move into little houses with gardens as low cost post-war housing is built and whilst this does not remain in the final draft it is part of the couples back story. Agnes does not want to leave her beloved tenement. She is particularly pleased with their indoor bathroom, something that was rarely afforded to working class people before then: tenements had shared toilets in the back green, or before that it was a pot thrown out the window under gardy-loo (as Levi explains in 1930). We have our first television in this floor. Pop music gives way to rock and roll. Archie is adorning his mid-life crises with teddy boy fashion. We arrive in the 1960s: a decade where everything seems to change. The decor is barely recognisable from the tenement we arrived in just fifty years before. There are lava lamps, a round TV, futurism, cut-ups, counter culture. The Vietnam war had been going on since 1955, there was a cultural revolution in China, France had an atomic bomb, the decolonisation of Africa was under way, Harold MacMillan was now Prime Minister. The writers Hugh MacDairmid and Trocchi are mentioned amongst others, Burrough's lover takes LSD and we can't feel that drugs are in any way a new invention, nor sex, not

when Jessie was smoking opium and living in an active menage in 1910, Flora attending a very sexually free drag ball in the 1920s and taking far too much cocaine (even in St. Giles cathedral). In the 1950s Martin Luther King is campaigning, the black power movement is active, even when the actual details of wider things in the world do not manifest in each decade — I still had to factor them into my novel, so my characters could feel authentically of their own time. By the 1970s we are in a very different world again. A wider metamorphosis is present in each decade. Things are moving so fast! The very violent Edinburgh gang has a girl member who is feared by all of them. It turns out that Bee used to work in Dora Noyce's brothel and that was where she met her husband. Certain institutions in Edinburgh are reoccurring as the city changes in fashion, decor, political climate. In this decade the Triads have the 1970s flat, with a history behind them as the original Triads arrived in Edinburgh in the 1950s. In the novel we know they were supplying Little Mama in the 1960s. The fabric of Edinburgh is weaving a much more dense blanket. The violence in this decade is counter to the idea of hippies, peace and love — many cultures were active at this time. The fight on this floor flips and flips again. It was important to me to play with the action on this floor and not have the obvious trajectory of a fight where men win, or where a white woman triumphs over all and strides off to care for her children. It seems the Edinburgh gang will win this bloody fight, and when they don't, it seems the Triad men will win, then it becomes apparent the two stoned Chinese women are actually not just pretty students there for decor but deadly assassins who were sent to make sure every member of both gangs dies — we find that nothing is ever as it initially seems in *The Luckenbooth*. There are always unseen realities just below the surface. Where we saw a great act of violence against three female characters in 1910, and now we are seeing two slight women taking out two of the most feared gangs in the city and barely ruffling a feather over it. The women of *The Luckenbooth* continue to defy expectation. Ivy in the 1940s looks like just a nice shop girl! But she wants to kill: it is deep in her and she realises the war, and being recruited as a spy, will legitimise an urge she has always had, but has had to keep secret. In the 1980s things have changed a lot again. The decade mentions Ivor watching footage of the protests at Tianemenn Square in 1989, with the famous footage of a man standing in front of four tanks. *The Luckenbooth* does not exist

in isolation: the wider world community is present. Ivor wipes tears away thinking of this ordinary man commit a great act of heroism in the most humane and ordinary way. There is the feeling of recession in this eighth floor. The building is in great decline, as too it seems are many of Edinburgh's less wealthy or privileged citizens. We are in the peak of the miners strikes and ideas of what make a working class Scottish man who he is are still strong but Ivor has the most honest conversation with his friend and they break through this, at least a little. Ideas of masculinity are changing. Finally we arrive on the top floor to the world of Dot, a young woman who describes herself as a cosmic agent, another thinker to follow our traditions in Part One (Levi) and part Two (Burroughs). Edinburgh is still housing great minds, even if they are unseen. The world is now made up of so many things that would have been unimaginable in the decades before. Designer babies, mass mobility of capitalism vs neoliberalism, sceptics of government and royals, 90s rave, the internet, mobile phones, Eurostar, Apple, MP3 players. Dolly the sheep has been cloned, the Berlin wall has fallen. Similarly our tenement building that started out so grand and shiny when Jessie arrived, is now beginning to literally fall down. A scaffolding supports it on the street. All the tenants are gone except for Dot and three other females who have not been able to leave. Dot is following Jessie MacRae through the building. Can a young woman in this time finally find the secret that has been hidden in No. 10 Luckenbooth Close's walls? The walls of the building itself have to be taken down to do so. The structures can no longer hold this building up. The bones of women buried in those buildings are exposed. However, we realise, Dot was not a survivor in this life either. She has died in the building too. She leaves with Jessie, Elise and Hope. We see women together, the old era and new, women who are still facing lack of social safety even one hundred years later. Metamorphosis has occurred but society has gone in many circles. The Penrose stairs I first considered when I was building this huge world are still there. I could have stopped there but I was working back to a climax that began before we met Jessie in 1910. I was responding to patriarchy. I was considering the sins of our fathers, of societies before us, of ideologies that arose from archaic structures. It was not the end. What would happen to those bones? Would nobody ever really know the story of Jessie, Elise and Hope other than the reader? What about Edinburgh? What did she know of her citi-

zens? I wrote a last chapter that would take place in present day. It was an epilogue. There is an exhibition on in Edinburgh at the Royal College of Surgeons. They are displaying the skeletons of two women and an infant that were found on the High Street on the first day of the year 2000 — twenty years ago. The skeletons had been a mystery although it had been found they were residents of a tenement building that no longer exists: no. 10 Luckenbooth Close. No clue had been given as to more personal details until a fisherman had handed in a bottle that had been found on the Shore. It had been in his family for over a hundred years he'd said and when he heard of these women, particularly that one of them had fine long horns, he felt sure this letter must be handed in. In the letter there is the words of a young woman. Jessie MacRae. All the way back at the start of the novel, 100 years ago, when Jessie had dragged her coffin down to the shore, she had looked back and saw its line in the sand like the spine of a book. Her father's corpse had been rammed up on the clifftops looking out across North Atlantic swells. She had wondered if anyone would ever know her true secrets, she had written them down, put them in a glass bottle, stoppered them and placed them on the shore so the sea would take them. She hoped that someone would find them one day and keep them - use the bottle for a vase but keep her letter, the story that she had always known needed to be told. I decided that this was another huge digression. I wanted the novel just to end with the impact of Jessie MacRae's voice and her own personal story, not that of society or the future, rather the past that had precipitated all the events in Luckenbooth. I cut this Epilogue altogether and instead I created one that is just Jessie's original letter. In it she states that she is on her way to work at No. 10 Luckenbooth Close for the Minister of Culture. She says that she is leaving the island where she grew up. She has just hosted a waken for her Father. She says her Father is the devil. She says she had no sorrow at his death but felt more action than death must be taken to repent for at least some of his sins. So she ate his heart. Before she signs off, she says — she has no regrets. So, all the way at the end we return full circle to Jessie MacRae. We find out that she left that island having eaten her Father's heart. When she spits on arrival at the Tron, and it is tinged pink with blood, it is from that act. The story of no. 10 Luckenbooth Close is complete. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. I took the building down. My stories walked out from it.

WRITING AS A FORM OF DREAMING

The final part of my approach to the novel after months of laborious research, creating a different character for each decade, plotting how each story would interweave — was to hand the entire process over to the alchemy and flow of consciousness that creates true magic within literature. It is using language as a higher power. It is allowing the self to be absent and to enter into a world day-after-day guided only by emotions, instincts, words, scenarios. It is writing as a form of dreaming. A kind of waking dream. You have to hold yourself very carefully to be able to manage it. I have realised this is how I return to writing after a period of editing and analysis. The best words don't come from conscious thought. They come from the unconscious. By training yourself to write for decades in a way that allows a more unconscious yet highly alert part of your brain to take over. I am back to a place of no judgement for what I write. I am willing to go in all directions again but there is so much story there now. It is nothing like how I did this in draft one.

I decide one huge thing. My massive draft two endeavour where I restructured the entire novel? I had set it into three parts. Each part has three decades. Each decade is revisited three times in the same repetition each decade. You have 1910, 1920, 1930, 1910, 1920, 1930, 1910, 1920, 1930 and that is the end of Part One. The same pattern is continued for Part Two and Part Three. The waken that began the book so long ago is not there. The ending is changing a lot. Each of those chapters in draft two has been painstakingly crafted to be 3,333 words long. That is 27 chapters at 3'333 words in length. It is a crazy endeavour but it has a point. The framework gives such a huge novel with so many stories a structure that allows each decade to be more simply read. It gives momentum. It creates a familiarity for the reader who can move through one hundred years in a similarly guided way each time. They only ever had to hold three decades in their head at once.

Despite all this, I realised that while my framework had provided a necessary corset, the same structure was now holding the novel back. After painstakingly getting 27 chapters each to 3'333 words long, all based on the Wiccan principle of three, in honour Jessie MacRae — my devil's daughter, my

pagan, Wiccan, instinctive goddess of the spirit realm — it was time to just take the corset off. The thing about corset training is that once it is completed the true shape is left behind. I decided for my very last edit of this novel I would not stick to 3'333 words per chapter anymore. I did not see it as a failed endeavour because it had served the novel. If something serves the novel then I will do it. Even if that means rejigging nine decades, countless characters, multiple narratives, twenty-seven chapters and what was now becoming 120 years of history — then that is what I would do.

It doesn't matter how far you have gone in one direction — if it is not serving the novel to its best ability then you need to change it. Each chapter needed the potential to ebb, flow, extend a theme, or be cut drastically back. Each single sentence needed to serve solely the story — the structure by this point had taken care of itself. The wider structure of three parts, and each decade revisited three times would remain.

I could not let the novel be a set of Penrose stairs that continue in circles, it had to go somewhere and I had worked my way back to the ending. Having an epilogue in present day wasn't concluding the narrative circle fully. There were several reasons for this and one was that we were moving further away from Jessie and what had caused this curse in the first place. I wanted to end the story in her voice. I wanted the reader to travel around a nine decade long circle and find out exactly what happened in the beginning of this novel, the event that we did not see, when Jessie MacCrae was on the cliff top with her father. How would I make that happen?

In the novel's final version, on the top floor of the building in the 1990s we find ourselves seeing *The Luckenbooth* in a way it has never been seen before. The building is so sick and weak from Jessie's curse that it is completely uninhabitable. At the very final chapter of the last decade my last character and my first meet face to face to bring about the conclusion of ninety years of history between both of them.

This was a point I was not sure I was ever going to get to. I had wanted to quit so many times. Even at this point I had no way of telling whether the novel was a failure or not, what did it even mean to fail?

Of course getting toward the end of the novel brings up the topic of failure. Had I in any way achieved what I set out to do? Was there a metamorphosis of Edinburgh over 90 years in this novel? Did the characters exist as if each of them were real and vital to the text? Was it still a novel tied together by one main event and protagonist? Was there a personal metamorphosis in taking down those walls and exposing the bones of women buried in them for all that time? Is it possible to even succeed when you write a novel? The answer to that is no. Julian Preece discusses how Kafka can be associated with ideas of artistic failure. He writes:

One obvious form of failure is not finishing. Kafka finished none of his three novels and - relatively (relative to the number he began) - very few of his short stories. True, unfinishedness may be viewed not as a failure but as a virtue; Romantic poetics makes a virtue of it. The unfinished text is one still under way, in process; unfinishedness is appropriate, truthful (16).

It is impossible to know whether your novel reads truly well to another person or not. They might say it does. How is the writer to know? Writing a novel is a long anxiety-ridden, unpleasant experience with moments of complete joy and freedom along the way. I don't know if this novel is a success or a failure but unlike Kafka I was getting to the point of being able to say — I had finished it. There always comes a point when I know I cannot take a novel any further. When it can no longer be improved. That's when I stop. That's when it is time to let it go. The way I write novels means that I must allow alchemy to be the most important part of my approach. It was incredibly daunting to step inside a world this big and attempt something I had waited many years before even considering I could be a good enough writer to manage the task — to hand the main reigns over to the wakeful dream that creates fiction. I can never entirely understand the wakeful dream that I write in nor should I really even attempt to do so. I drew the entire tenement building out on my bedroom wall — floor to ceiling. It had every flat, character, their job, their personal metamorphosis, cultural, political and social facts for each decade. I entered into the dream state I write in and drive forward by staying very focused and alert, it is a way to encourage all the most useful parts of my consciousness and intellect to meet the truth of emotion. Whether it

has worked, or failed, is not something I can really say. I started a journey and three years later I got to the end of it. The real value of the story can only be judged by its journey into the world now — its final metamorphosis. As a writer I imagine my own trajectory can be summed up in a manner similar to how Nicholas Dungey summarises Kafka's: "While Gregor Samsa may have turned from a man into a bug, through his writing, Kafka, the man who often felt like a bug, became Kafka the artist" (xi).

There is no end to this process.

Perhaps the life of a novelist is itself a Penrose stair that never ends, only moving in circles to different layers and floors. If we are lucky the view changes around each bend, time passes and nothing stays the same. Metamorphosis will occur more deeply when we give ourselves to it. There can be no conclusion. There is only the words which I put down one-by-one and send out to sea.

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