The Flexible Persona
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It was smoke that killed him, after all. Though I did not want to speak of the dead. I wanted to speak of what I felt this morning after waking up unhaunted, for a change, by strange nightmares. I wanted to speak of cool water on my face, of greeting Askar as he opened the door for me, of the moist air along the river below the GWB and how I stooped to pick up a wine cork and a piece of glass before reaching the deli and ordering my bagel and coffee, dark, one sugar, with lite tuna salad on the bagel. The cashier winked at me; he looks Peruvian: the dark straight hair, the aquiline proboscis, the rainbow strings of his bracelet. Our fingertips touched momentarily as he passed me coins, a dime, a nickel, two pennies now rubbing in my skirt’s pockets against the cell. There were three missed calls: one from the gallery (Rafael reminding me of our lunch meeting with Mr. Alfred Stein), one from my daughter, the third from a man who I do not particularly want to see again. The call from Sofi, my daughter, was actually a text message. It read: Mum, worried abt u plz call luv & a hug, Sofi. After I read the message I spotted a cigarette butt on the ground beside a twist of wire. I used a tissue to pick up the butt, put 1972, the year of my marriage, into my pocket. And before I reached the studio I spotted a red ticket stub, likely a movie ticket, and remembered the film I’d seen with the man who I cared no longer to see but picked it up anyway, just as I’d chosen the cigarette despite the fact that it was smoke, or likely smoke, that killed D.H. and plunged me into months of mourning, seasons of unbearable heaviness that hound me still, that I must with great effort shake off, relegate to that gated area in my psyche where one must rarely tread.

Beyond the studio windows elaborate buildings sprout, twenty stories and Mondrianesque
when the lights come on in the evening, and the silver girders of the GWB topped with blinking cherry-light, and the ever-moving West Side cars, and the swarming waters of Muhheakantuck, the river that flows two ways, mixing sea with sweetness, brackish cocktail for the gods’ malign laughter at the death of D.H. in a hell gate of smoke, at the mourning of the father and of the daughter and of the poor widow who wants to paint the pitiable spirit of afternoon light. The brushes are fingertips on the skin of canvas. I press just hard enough to bend the bristles, as though I am touching his chest, pressing the muscles in his chest as he looms over me, threatening with love, his nipples violet with blood. Purple. That will be my sadness and my longing. This landscape of purple and violet is actually my battered heart, too sheltered, confused by twenty centuries of culture, naïve to dark prestidigitations. I am Machiavelli’s ignorant mistress. Alchemy crackles darkly in the air; there is a hint of narrative. And this burlap, uncolored. These hempen strips are his discarded clothes, or perhaps the burlap of the sacks they tie on prisoners’ heads in Iraq and Afghanistan and Egypt and Poland and Pakistan, on the prisoners at Guantánamo. Heavy breathing, hot through jute, labored. The viewer should sense such heaviness, feel the oppression of fear, grow half aroused. I should not call the man I do not want to see but I know that I will call him. My coffee, dregs. Cold. I splash it on one corner of the canvas. That is today, September 12, 2004. But I will not turn on the television, this being one firm precept of my life: I am an iconoclast. Strange how all across America, and all around the globe, people are so easily mesmerized by television’s brazen light, its raucous imagery—-or strange rather that I find it strange, that I have ostracized myself so far from what it seems to mean to be human in this age and day. But I can watch no more bombings, sit through no more sit-coms, bear no more talking heads on the treadmill of base opinions. I must resist certain seductions. So much of my life is a matter of resisting seductions, or rather of deflecting them, for there is no more potent poison than the frustrated urge. I am a creature of detours. I paint a small tv set glimpsed through a window of one of the buildings in the scene. It must be present in the setting, for it is always somewhere. I paint it black and red, the colors of democracy and freedom. I am trying to compose a picture of survival, interrogate myself.

MY DAUGHTER should not worry about me. Sofi, my eye. How we fought! Mother and daughter in their eternal caterwaul. Sofi was twelve when the long divorce began, a divorce it took me too long to see. Her breasts were just beginning to develop, small bumps Sofi hid with extra layers of clothing, slumped shoulders and a stern, impermeable demeanor that verged on violence. Hard as steel could she be. And me too at that time, so self-centered, so strong, carving out space for myself as a mother-wife-artist must. Sofi, then, found herself with a lot of time, with the freedoms of suburbia that a more than average wealth affords, with an uncowed mind and a teenage power and rare beauty I always worried about, for too much beauty in a young woman can have disastrous results, but her acute mind and her sensitivity and her physical strength prevailed and she did not succumb to mall fashions or abusive text messaging or slightly older boys who stashed flasks of vodka and disintegrating condoms in the glove compartments of their Camaros. Still, we fought. It was worse when J.M. was around, J.M. who spoiled her silly (he believed it was the father’s job to pamper the daughter), J.M. who seemed to be either always at home lifting pot covers and looking for shirts and pens or else never at home, off on some vague errand or research project or sitting in the library till the lights dimmed or off on week-long trips to Seville and Istanbul and Paris, and when he was away Sofi was sweet and helpful, perhaps a bit too dutiful even, but when J.M. returned she would turn again to iron, scowling in her bedroom, and even J.M. was shocked at the fierce, intransigent tantrums, the mad sorcery of hormones or disgruntled gods beyond the human pale. And all the while the brother observing from the sidelines, simply curious at human behavior, glancing up from his plastic soldiers and
the detailed diagrams in his battle books to witness the strange, fascinating outbursts of the older sibling. Happy D.H., poor blesséd boy.

But I am almost late. I slop my brushes in turpentine, rinse my hands, retie my sandals. My skirt breezes behind my brisk stride, though when I catch the bus, traffic labors fitfully down Broadway. I spend the minutes rubbing spots of paint from the back of my hands like Lady Macbeth, then descend at 68th and stride hard to Trojka’s on Central Park South, where Rafael awaits me at a table for three. Black-and-white clad waitresses hover on the periphery. The decor is mock decadent: burgundy walls with ornate Spanish-silver light fixtures, walnut banisters, absurd damask ribbons. The plates are Prussian and saxe, the menu (chartreuse) vaguely French. Rafael has chosen the wine, a Sangiovese with a hint of fragola and bubble, perfect for lunch. He is in high spirits. Robert Polidoro, formerly of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the man who has been chosen to curate the 2008 Venice Biennial, has expressed interest in exhibiting my work. He was intrigued, Rafael tells me, with my evocative mixture of the mundane and the mystical, with my broad range of subjects, and with my incredible palette, colors the curator claims he has never before seen. Ever the enthusiast, Rafael played me up, of course, extolling my “fascinating” new series of paintings, large works in which I capture the spirit of light in urban scenes that combine the narrative force of the neo-classical, unflinching portraiture, and Klimt-inspired designs on a roughed canvas. --My dear Rafael, I say sipping the Sangiovese, what have you done? --You told me yourself, EP. In fact, I’ve seen them. --You saw an early version of one, I remind him. --And it was fascinating. Nothing like it in the history of art. --Please, Rafael. “Unflinching portraiture”? The “narrative force” of the Sabine women? --I never mentioned the Sabines, Rafael says, pouting and smiling. --And just what is a “rough” canvas, Rafael? --I was speaking of the texture of your painted surface, of the small objects you glue to the canvas, the fabrics you layer on. Not everyone can pull that off. Look at the disgusting messes Schnabel makes with his pitiful broken plates. It’s one facet of your genius, EP, though of course it’s your colors and your subject matter that raise you above the artistic rank and file. And such compositions! You know I am moved by your work. --I think, Rafael, that you are moved by your exorbitant commissions. --Such a tease, EP. Please, you might embarrass me. --I don’t know what I’d do without you, Rafael, I say.

There is movement on the periphery. Mr. Alfred Stein joins us for lunch. He’s a fit fifty-five, medium height and slender enough, skin very white but not pallid. Good shirt, casual jacket, silver-rimmed glasses behind which dart his powder-blue eyes, sharp eyes, eyes that know art. He has purchased paintings of mine in the past and is interested in viewing my more recent efforts. Rafael immediately brags, announcing as fact that Polidoro has chosen my work for the Venice international. (He kicks my shin under the table to stop me from correcting him.) Alfred Stein offers me congratulations. --Well, it is not quite certain yet, I admit, ignoring Rafael’s grimace. Mr. Stein touches my hand. --I’m sure it will be. His fingers are cool, but a glimmer lights his irises. Love’s tentative arrows. I wait three seconds, then remove my hand to adjust my napkin. We order and eat. Tricolor salad with walnuts and goat cheese. Roasted baby lamb chops. Crème caramel. After the espresso, when Rafael excuses himself to wash his hands, Mr. Stein places a hand lightly on my shoulder. --I am sorry, he says. I wait. --I attended a ceremony yesterday, he explains. Though there was a fair crowd, fewer and fewer people show up each year. How are you getting along? --I try to work, I say. --That is admirable, he says. One can see that your paintings are the result not only of superior craftsmanship but of a deep and sensitive being. --Thank you, I say. I am touched not by his flattery (Rafael has inured me to sycophancy) but by his thoughtful remembrance, the implied condolence. There is not one moment of life
when D.H. is forgotten to me, September 11th or 12th or May, January, February, August, April, midnight, morning. Not one minute, not one day is he forgotten. But I must forget him, just as I must forget the man to whom I no longer care to speak yet who I desperately want to speak with.

--Might we, Alfred Stein proposes, have dinner one evening? --I am currently seeing someone, I say immediately, almost automatically. --He is a lucky man. Call me when you're tired of him. --I do not think that will be anytime soon. --I am patient, Alfred Stein says. After all, I have already waited ten years, and, though admittedly growing older, I can wait a few more. I might blush but one couldn't notice in the restaurant's dim light. Rafael returns and reaches for the check.

--No, no, let me get that, Mr. Alfred Stein insists. As we leave, bunching for a moment in the entranceway, I feel his palm on my waist grow warm and am surprised at my own body, at its sudden wantonness, its unannounced pull to abandon.

--Goodbye, we say, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.

IN THE TAXI heading uptown the driver is playing an Indian music I have never heard before. Actually, I am told, it is Urdu poetry, recited as song. Beautiful and alien. Were I to visit a certain Indian deli on 2nd and C and proceed to the basement, the driver tells me, I would find a trove of difficult-to-find Indian musical gems, will I not come and make a visit? He hands me a card with a number and address. Rajis Delicatessen & Delicacies. --I will see, I say, I will see. The driver turns up the music and drives, and I listen in a hypnotic daze while I watch the gliding streets, the men and women walking, the linden trees, the shops and apartment buildings whose windows reflect the light greyly. It is a woman's voice, high but not shrieking, a cappella, ecstatic. 79th and Broadway. Very discreetly, in such a way that I know the driver cannot see, I shift aside the hem of my skirt and let my fingers fall to the space between my legs. The cotton on my panties is soft and thin. The city is my lover, lightly caressing the skin on my inner thighs. I am wet, a touch. The driver’s eyes are large and green in the rear-view. 84th Street. --This is fine, I say, let me out here. I straighten my skirt as I stand and walk, but--maybe it’s the wine--feel ponderous on the sidewalk. I have the heaviness of pregnancy without its buoyancy, a watermelon on tendrils, as Plath wrote. I do not stop to pick anything up. I do not look into the faces of the passers-by. I return home by sense of smell, the vague acrid whiff of dog poop, the hot dog vendor’s moist meaty steam, the M8 bus fuming on 96th, the brass cleaner Askar is using to shine the banisters. My keys reek of coins passed from hand to hand; the cleaning woman has sprayed the couch fabric with Scotch; my fingertips smell of me. I lie down, drag a knitted blanket over me like an old woman, think How we fought! and dream. Of spiders. I am Steatoda nobilis spinning her web, brimming with eggs, and immediately on the threads disperse hundreds of tiny spiders, they have come out of me and I am spent. They build their own webs and I mine. I catch a fruit fly and a feather, a cloud and two drops of water, two marbles that are someone’s glass eyes, the Jewish eyes of Mr. Alfred Stein, Urdu eyes in a rear-view mirror, Peruvian eyes, and I wonder how the men can see without their eyes, and what do they see, and why the eyes are thrones of desire. I want men to pass their looks across me and up and down, I am a painting they admire, I am my own paintings, holding always in a far small corner, as a dark smudge on the periphery of every canvas, a building coming down. And people do not have wings. People do not have eyes. A vast smoke and a great cloud of dust mushrooms downtown before flooding up the canyons of Madison and Fifth, of Columbus, Amsterdam and Broadway. The blood-dimmed tide. Mud people. Human figures slagged in grayblack ash, their faces blank, only their eyes lit in this immense city that has fallen silent, the hush pierced only by faraway sirens. Up and down Broadway and across the Brooklyn Bridge, people pluck out their eyes and hold them in their hands. The tears pool in upturned palms. We can no longer see, we are blind with agony.
and anger, we release honed warriors in all directions, the borders are uncontrolled, we abruptly 
have too many freedoms, we indulge superfluous liberties, we plan brand new euphemisms to 
replace the downed towers and burn our old canvases, all our art, which has been suddenly and 
utterly baffled by the ugly birthing of the century. And in the background, insistently, beautiful 
Cassandra cackles, her laughter bitter and sharp and mocking, my cell phone waking me up, 
calling me back to the merciless afternoon, an aging woman stretched on a couch under a 
knitted blanket, sweating.

I rise and splash my face, pen a desultory doodle on a notepad at the kitchen counter, 
looking out the window at the brown river, at the broiling waters of the Hudson, while the coffee 
brews. I study my phone, with its neat, glowing Modigliani screensaver, but do not call anyone. I 
walk to my studio. Oh, Jeanne Hébuterne! I would call you, I would lunch with you, caress your 
sad pregnant belly. I mourn your fall, the vertiginous plunge you share with D.H., I would adopt 
your son, for I am not old, I am not bereft of love, I am not dead. Forty-something. Widowed. 
That’s what I call myself, though I have lost a son. I am sonless. There are no men in my life. I 
do not want men in my life. I want a man. I want another September 10th. I will paint one, I tell 
myself mounting the studio stairs, beginning to visualize it, beginning to sense the colors, the 
composition, starting to flirt with my muse. But on the second floor landing the phone rings again. I 

open the door to my studio, step in, turn the lock. The phone is still ringing. I look at the display. It 
is not him. I am safe among my paintings and I answer. –Mom, it’s Sofi. --Hello, Sofi. –Mom, are 
you okay? --I am fine, Sofi. --Are you painting? --Do you remember the day after, Sofi? --Huh? 
--Do you remember the day after it happened? --You mean September 12th? --Yes, September 
12th, 2001. Do you remember it? --Yes. --Do you remember how it rained? --Yes, I do. --Do you 
remember the lightning and the thunder, those great, awesome, frightening blasts of thunder in 
the night? --Yes, Mom, I remember. --Do you remember how they sounded like explosions? Do
you remember how bombs entered our dreams that awful night? --Yes, I remember. We were at your place, together. We burned candles because you insisted that electric light was too bright. --It was. --Yes, I agree. And Dad was there. Even Dad. --Yes, but it's the night I remember, I mean the storms, those bolts of lightning over the bridge's steel girders, those great crashes of thunder. That's what I'm thinking of, that's what I'm painting today. I started with a twist of wire and now I'm painting a twist of lightning, the turn of history, the loss of a son. --Mom. --I love you, Sofi. Don't worry, I'm fine. Give a hug to Leonardo. Are you okay? --I'm okay Mom. --Give a hug to Leo, he's a fine boy, a fine man, Sofi. I have to go now, goodbye, goodbye. And so did the twist of wire become lightning, the cork a broken star, the ticket stub the symbol of lost love, of lost, lost love, as love always is, your finest portrait painted over with mud.

I TRY TO PAINT, describe a city I can live in, fashion a bearable room. But J.M. calls me. He texts me, emails me. Calls me again.
--What is it, J.M.?
--EP. I have to show you something.
I don't say anything.
--You must come over, he says.
--I can't, J.M. I'm working.
--This is important, EP. I haven't slept for three nights.
--I haven't slept for three years, J.M.
--I'm thinking of doing it, EP. I'm going to do it. You know, the grating, the cold water.
--J.M.
--I've seen him, EP.
--Who?
--You must come over.
I don't answer.
--I've seen D.H. I've seen him. I'm sure it's him.
--Is?
--Was, is. You have to see it.
--It?
--A video, EP. Of the towers.
I hang up the phone.

YOU CAME from Argentina with your chemistry books and your mustache, with your sexy accent and gaucho tales of the plains, with your silver bombilla hot on my lips and the yerba mate that kept me up all night talking and listening. The campus swirled around us like a storm, all those bright minds hugging their notebooks, trying on ideas, reading, reading and reading, hunting down professors, cramming in the early mornings for late morning exams, all that science and literature buoying us up, making us idealistic, giving us hope in the future. You helped me with chemistry, with the number of molecules in a mole, with the esoteric kabala of the periodic chart and then suddenly it was night and I was in your arms, under your kisses, beneath your irresistible pressures. You had Indian blood in you, you said, Inca blood. Your chest: smooth with muscle, hairless, tan as bread, insistent. Your kisses were rain forest. I imagined myself inhabiting the paintings of Rousseau, those surreal jungles in which I could see the details of each leaf and petal, every vein in every leaf, each shade of the infinite greens. I breathed the scent of each painted flower, trembled at the panther eyes peering from the foliage at our lovemaking. You gave me that. And when you looked at my drawings--I was doing miniatures at the
time, my first artistic love--your eyes widened with enthusiasm. You encouraged me, you were my first audience. That, too, I owe you. What joy, what greater joy than for an artist to find her audience, to love her audience and to discover that her audience loves her, understands her work and appreciates her efforts? What joy, what greater joy? There was an art to chemistry, too, you showed me, a decidedly logical and rigorous creativity to science. Those equations, Einstein’s blackboards, Fermi’s unstoppable numbers. A male art, as I thought of it, the scientific innovation that promises to save the world, that dissects, then reassembles, then makes quantum leaps toward destruction. For we were eventually destroyed, were we not? It took fifteen years, but we were destroyed, destroyed as surely as the towers. Only, we have been lucky enough to resurrect ourselves from the ashes. A divorce! People get divorced all the time, you assured me. But that was later. At first you were abject, turmoiled. You cried at my ankles, a man in his late thirties reliving the separation of his own parents, only this time it was you leaving your wife. Did this make me your mother figure, I wonder? After the initial shock, I tried to comfort you. I never told anyone this: the forsaken wife tried to comfort the very man who was forsaking her. But I did. I did because I recognized your suffering, I believed in it, knew it was as real as your trembling hands.

Do it, J.M. Walk the grating to the edge and jump for us both. I will not feel sorry for you. I will envy you. I will mourn you. Do it, since I don’t have the courage. Do it for us both.

I TAKE UP my palette; I paint the bridge in the backdrop, the elegant inverted ellipses. From the gray girders a gray smudge drops. Only I know who it is, for “as the Masters knew,” the world was too busy to notice the death of the boy. The ships sailed calmly on, and J.M.’s splash was too insignificant to deserve more than a passing thought. Thus do the men in my life disappear as they appeared, one by one, with great intensity, suddenly here and ever so suddenly gone. I sit on the couch, recline. A video? I shiver, pull the knitted blanket over my bones. A video, a video. My god. My eyes are heavy, they seek the oblivion of blackness, the sweet darkness before men came into my life, before D.H., before J.M., before the man I want but cannot see, before these twists of wire tangled up inside of me, these feelings that rouse themselves in the deep of night, that twist themselves in forms grotesque and beautiful, they are drowsy in the daytime, drugged, surreal, and sometimes I dare to look at them as they slumber, careful not to wake them with the daylight. I am like a mother checking in on her feverish child in the thick of night. I have twists of hair and of sentence, I have twists of history leading back to ancient deserts where now not even the ruins remain, only swirls of sand and dust and a great emptiness that yet swells with latency, where traces of what was can be intimated, intimated only. And so I paint, and the colors take shape and the shapes make signs and the signs twist into the eye of the beholder, pinprick the emotions of those closest to me and of strangers and of loves lost, lost sons, husbands lost, daughters and mothers and fathers, colleagues lost. Today’s newspaper—I glance at its headlines, its heavy date, but leave it unread. Two years, they say, and thus should my mourning be past this third year and a day. And so I mock-celebrate the passing of my mourning, which has not passed, which will never pass, which will twist inside me like a mobile hanging in the dark breezes of my heart’s chambers. I paint, I live. I will pursue the new series, paint huge canvases of longing and of inquiry, I will ask much of the new century and I will answer to it as I must. I will fly to Italy, to Venice. Then I will go East, or North, or South. I will not return. I have decided. I open my phone to make the arrangements, drop a pebble down a well so profound the bottom is impossible to see.
John Parras received a B.A. in Creative Writing from Carnegie Mellon University and a Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University. A National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellow in Prose, John Parras is the author of *Fire on Mount Maggiore* (University of Tennessee Press, 2005), which won the Peter Taylor Prize for the novel. His creative work has appeared in *Conjunctions*, *Salmagundi*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Xconnect*, *Oasis* and other literary journals, and his chapbook *Dangerous Limbs: Prose Poems and Flash Fictions* (2013) is published by Kattywompus Press. He is a Professor at William Paterson University and Editor of *Map Literary: A Journal of Contemporary Writing and Art*. His newer work is forthcoming in *Hermeneutic Chaos* and *Flash Frontier*.
Helen Hall is a composer and filmmaker based in Montreal, Canada whose music is inspired by natural acoustic phenomena such as the rhythm of breathing (Circuits), the harmonics and interference patterns of multiple saxophones (Fluvial) and the natural frequencies of the earth’s magnetic field (Infinity Maps). Her independent research into the physical basis of sound and its relationship to energy has led her to extend her music into film. Powerlines, her first firm, is a documentary about the mystery of electromagnetic fields that began as music based on the sound waves of artificial electromagnetic radiation. Pictures of Infinity, her second film, is a feature documentary about Nikola Teslas’s unique understanding of nature and its inherent connection to acoustic principles of energy. For more information, please visit http://helenhall.net.

Music: Circuits – for solo and prerecorded voices
Performer: Joan La Barbara
Different Rooms, Different Spaces
by Hermann Mensing
transposed by Priscilla Layne

Prelude:

While searching for definitions I might have found a mathematical and a physical definition for space, but not one for room. For example, I could not find out whether a space has windows. Nor could I find out whether a room has to have windows in order to be considered a room. So I decided I would call a physical space a room only if it had windows. If it has windows, then it naturally needs a door as well. Yet what if a space doesn’t have windows, but does have a door? What would it be then?

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room (n.) From the Old English rum “space” (extent or time); “scope, opportunity,” from Proto-Germanic *ruman (cf. Old Norse, Old Saxon, Old High German, Gothic rum, German Raum “space,” Dutch ruim “hold of a ship, nave”), nouns formed from Germanic adjective *ruma-“roomy, spacious,” from PIE root *reue- “to open; space” (cf. Avestan ravah- “space,” Latin rus “open country,” Old Irish roi, roe “plain field,” Old Church Slavonic ravinu “level,” Russian raviina “a plain,” Polish rum “space”). Old English also had a frequent adjective rum “roomy, wide, long, spacious.”

Room/Space 1:

This is a space that once had windows and doors, but it was never a room, at least not in the sense that we usually mean when we say “room”. It was a space in the basement of a two-story office building. The building had been reduced to rubble during the earthquake. The space, which hadn’t been a room despite its doors and windows, had collapsed underneath the rubble. A few hollow spaces had formed between the debris. Auntie A- is lying in one of these hollow spaces (no doors, no windows). She had sought shelter in the basement during the tremors. And although she can hardly move around, she hasn’t been injured. It’s dark. And it’s eerily quiet.
She knows what happened and she’s hoping she’ll be rescued. She calls out. Someone will answer her at some point. But it’ll be hours before someone can free her from these confines.

Room/Space 2:

I was fifteen when I moved in here. It didn’t have more than a bed, a dresser, a small table and a chair. From the window I could see the district court and jail cell bars. At the age of eighteen, I moved into a room in the attic. That’s when Auntie A- moved in with us. At the time she had been working for her sister’s business in the rebuilt building that had nearly buried her alive. She moved into my former room. A cast-iron stove stood in the left-hand corner across from the door. The door connecting my room with my parent’s was blocked by an olive-green dresser. There was a bed to the right of the door. In front of the bed stood a small table, two cocktail chairs, and a sofa with two pillows sitting regally like miniature kings. The way I remember it, everything in this room ranged from green to olive-green. And although Auntie A- lived there until three years ago, she never really used it. She sometimes went upstairs to take a nap. But in the evenings she sat in the livingroom with my mother and father while I listened to loud music in the attic.

Room/Space 2.1:

This was also the room where K- slit her wrists; a sign that she could no longer take the oppression and violence. The family doctor came and downplayed everything. He said something like “the course of true love never did run smooth.” What was he supposed to say? Rub salt in the wound of a family catastrophe? – No. He taped together K-’s wounds and said goodbye. All that remains is an image of K- in bed. Large bloodstains on her sheets. Shamefully looking away. No understanding. Silence.

Room/Space 2.2:

Last year someone died in this room. It was the grandmother of a Cambodian family who moved into the building after my mother and aunt entered a nursing home. My grandparents and parents had lived there since the turn of the century.

Room/Space 2.3:

Did anyone have sex in this room? Not to my knowledge. But considering that people generally enjoy procreating, you would have to assume it happened. Who and with whom? – I don’t know. I only know that after the earthquake and until the 1950s a displaced baker and his family lived on the second-floor. The room was part of their apartment. I also know someone masturbated in this room. Because it was me. And I know that someone threw up in a bucket next to the bed for 24 hours in regular intervals. That was the result of my first time getting drunk, and I never got that drunk again. I don’t know what’s going on in this room right now. But my knowledge of human nature tells me that everything people do is now taking place in this room.

Room/Space 3:

It’s night in this room. Two lamps burn dimly and Trainspotting is on TV. Someone’s sitting at the computer. He just got back from LA. He played a gig there. They told him he did a good job. I assume that’s the only reason why he left his room, got on his motorcycle, rode into a cold north wind and walked into a tapROOM.
Room/Space 3.1:

An entire lifetime played out in this room. It’s a stage. Father and mother moved in after their first child. Soon they had a second. Different animals walk back and forth: mostly cats, but also a guinea pig, a hedgehog, a bunny and birds. During this time, the prop designers have their hands full. They carry sofas in and then drag them out again when they’re threadbare. They put together bookcases and take them apart. They arrange chairs around a table. They discuss what would be the best spot for the tiger chair. That’s what happens year in, year out. In fact, there is only one spot in this room that has remained unchanged over the years. That’s the spot on the left, underneath the large window. It has an amplifier, a tape recorder, a radio, a CD player and a record player. These devices stood there even before anyone knew how the life in this room would be decorated. The speakers were placed by the opposite wall. Then the prop designers chose what music to play during the move and they got to work. We can assume that they’re still busy. For the past few years they’ve been occupied with paintings and sculptures. They hang them up and move them around as if they had a plan. But there isn’t one. They decide everything spontaneously. Everything could be over all at once. The room’s occupants find that important to know.

Room/Space 4:

This is a space where everyone has spent some time. It has neither doors nor windows. Still, everyone finds their way in and – despite some difficulty – back out again. There’s no talking, eating or even drinking in this room. There’s only complete darkness. You can float. You can change your appearance. All in all, this is a space where something magical can happen. Something uncanny. A holy space. It’s the first place people stop and the first place people leave again. Many try to return to this space years later. Unfortunately no one has ever succeeded.

Room/Space 5:

Who’d have thought we would rush from space to space so quickly. After all, an entire life lies between the last space and this one. A life lasts only so long. No one has any guarantees, but if it ends, it always ends here. This space also has neither windows nor doors. And you cannot enter this space on your own. And you cannot leave it. From its appearance you can easily tell whether it’s inhabited by rich or poor people. And there’s something else that differentiates it from other spaces. It can be carried. It has brass handles on its left and right side. It can be carried from here to there, and there is either a hole in the ground or a hole in an oven. One way or the other, after a long or short period of time, the space and all of its contents disappear in the hole. Who would have thought that spaces could dissolve? You learn something new every day.

Room/Space 6:

I’m small, my heart is pure, and only Jesus shall find room in it.

Room/Space 7:

Another room with a window facing the district court. But you have to stretch to see the barred jail cell windows. If you don’t stretch to see them, all that’s visible is a tall, red, brick wall. What do you think is behind it: criminals who go outside once or twice a day. There’s a door in the wall; a tall, gray, iron double-door. No one has ever seen it open. In the 50s this room had an oven with enameled doors and a stove you could use to heat up a pot. A handrail ran along the edges of the oven. A gas stove would later take its place. Both cupboards were ancient. They had two
sections. The pots were on the bottom and the plates up top. There was a table in the center of
the room where everyone had a spot. At the head of the table with a view of the window: father.
To the left of him: mother. Across from her: son. Across from the father: the daughter. There was
a sink in the right-hand corner next to the window. Eventually there was a washing machine in
that spot. For a while, this was the only room in the house that was always heated. A lot of fights
went on in this room. People would scream and yell in this room. But this is also the room where
I flew across the Pacific to Australia while my father lay on the chaise lounge and balanced me
on his stretched out feet. In this room I heard things I will never tell another soul. This room was
the center of my world. Until the day I hurled a cup of coffee at my mother.

Room/Space 8:

This room had a number. It had three beds and the walls were chalk white. Two of the beds were
empty. W- lay in the third. He was a feeble-minded man in his 50s. He worked in the hospital
kitchen, swept the courtyard, did a little of this and that. You might say he liked the charity he
received for his work. Then came the day when he ran in front of a car. I was told to console him,
because he didn’t have anyone else. I don’t think he was conscious. There was a monitor at the
foot of his bed that showed his heart rate: a curve that rose and fell. The room was partially lit.
I found the quiet that filled the room uncanny. W- breathed peacefully. I looked back and forth
between him and the monitor. His heart rate flat-lined. I ran to find the attending nurse. She
said I shouldn’t worry. He was dying and nothing more could be done. I should just remain at
his bedside. So that’s what I did. The quiet in the room felt surreal, though nothing is more real
than death. But this was my first encounter with death. After a while I got used to it. And when
W- died, I realized there was nothing scary about it. I just left the room and said “W- is dead.”

Room/Space 9:

Why is it so quiet? Does danger lurk around the corner?

Room/Space 9.1:

No entry.

Room/Space 9.2:

We’ve reconsidered. We’ll allow you to enter at your own risk. The people here might remind you
of your own life. So you should be careful. Enter the room(s) as if wild animals roamed inside.
Act as if demons were sitting on shelves and storms could blow everyone away.

Room/Space 10:

Two people are lying in bed. They just did it. First of all, because they love each other. Second,
because this is the city of love. The bed rocked and squeaked. It’s amazing that it didn’t break.
The room is shabby. They couldn’t afford a better one. It smells like cat pee. Through an open
window you can hear screaming, a hand smacking bare flesh, blows, wood splitting and glass
breaking. The sounds are coming from a movie theater where they only show Kung Fu flicks.

Room/Space 11:
Powder room.

Room/Space 12:

Study.

Room/Space 13:

There isn’t any room with this number. So it’s either 12a or 14.

Room/Space 14:

My room is small. It’s more like a hole. I built an alter in a small nook. It’s got a photo of C, a candle, incense and my diary. The door leads to a courtyard with reddish-brown walls with white roses climbing up it. I bathe in the courtyard fountain. The water is ice-cold. The people are the color of bronze. Some of them giggle when they see me.

Room/Space 15:

You’d have to fly in order to get here. But you could also take a ship across the ocean. Either way you have to travel far, far away.

Room/Space 16:

When Greg and I went to school together, his room was decorated with ties. He claimed to have stolen them all. Not that anyone believed him, but still it was worth seeing. The ties were brightly colored. Some of them had frills. There must have been 10 to 15 of them. He had pinned condoms in between them. He had different kinds of condoms, even though there wasn’t much of a selection back then. The rest of his wall was covered in posters of Cream, Led Zeppelin, Cuby’s Blues Band and…

Room/Space 17:

A room for premieres. Narrow. There’s a sink to your immediate left. There’s also a children’s bed, shelves, books by Twain, Dickens, London…school books. They are mostly in brown and beige. It’s a room in a bungalow. The smell: breathtaking, because there are two women and three men with stinky feet living here. One of them, the mother, is depressed. I’m nineteen and a frequent guest. But nothing will come of the premiere. The sink, which is supposed to play a supporting role, refuses to play along and quits. So we have other things to do.

Room/Space 18:

The stage has been set. A room for illusions with partitions, props and lighting. The play being staged is A Street Car Named Desire. Williams. It’s about New Orleans slums and their fluid social milieu. In scene two, the aristocratic lady is sitting naked in the bath. She’s very attractive. The lighting technicians (including me) and stage hands usually sit in the breakroom playing cards and drinking beer. Instead, we’re standing in the gangway and trying to give the impression
that we’re about to change sets. But there’s no set change coming. The countess is about to step out of the bath. After that the gangways are empty.

Room/Space 19:

A window, a door, a hole in the floor with a porcelain bowl above it. The window in a quarter of a semicircular tower that clings to the house like an awkward hug. The window is small and high above the ground. But you can still reach it. You just lean a bike against the wall, climb onto the seat and grip the window frame with your right hand, stick your leg through the window, pull your lower body up so that you’re hanging out of the window sideways. Then you try and reach the pipe attached to the tank with your free hand, pull in your head and slowly work the rest of your body into the room. During this acrobatic feat, one foot hangs out the window, while the other hovers high above the porcelain bowl trying to reach the seat. You tear the crotch of your pants, but then you’ve made it. You pull in the other leg and stand with both feet on the seat and hope the door isn’t locked from the outside.

Room/Space 20:

I walk through a warehouse, down a dark hallway and stop in front of a door. I open the door and go inside. It’s a large square room. To my immediate left, two sets of four desks face each other and divide the room. My enemy’s desk is in the back row on the left-hand side. To the right of the door is a large oven that I have to keep heated. Behind my enemy there’s a teleprinter. And there are sansevieria plants on the windowsills. Underneath – two desks for women. The rest of the office is male. Every day from morning till night, men of all ages work here. I’m the youngest. I make it possible for everyone else to leave. But my enemy has to stay. I chain him to the teleprinter. Then I douse files and desks with gasoline and set them on fire. And I leave the room. I watch the fire engulf the space and burn down the building, leaving nothing but its foundation. I’m happy. He’s finally dead.

Room/Space 21:

There’s only a bed. And SHE’s in it. Bedridden since her fall seven years ago. Blind. Nearly deaf. Never complaining. It’s a hydraulic bed. You can set it to eight different positions. There’s a night stand next to her bed. A talking clock, two bottles of peach juice, cough drops and lotion on it. A radio and a telephone on the windowsill. Pictures of her father, mother, in-laws, children and grandchildren on the wall at the head of the bed. The walls are white. Even though I visit once a week, I don’t know what the floor looks like. (My inattentiveness sometimes frightens me.) There’s no escaping this room. SHE will die in this room. And I hope I’m here when she does.

Room/Space 22:

You haven’t said anything yet. Maybe you haven’t even started thinking. But you have to accept such things. It’s unavoidable and happens every day. You face each other, eye to eye, and ask critical questions, which go unanswered every time. Then you brush your teeth. You wash your face and under your arms. You tremble early in the morning. And when you think you’ve made some progress with your observations, you risk taking another look. Yeah, that might be you. You’ve seen this face before. After a long period of reflection, incoherent thoughts consolidate into memories. You’ve been in this body a while now. You can even remember its name. But you
have no clue how you got in there. You leave this room to go drink coffee someplace else and
distract yourself with news from around the world. You’ll make another attempt tomorrow. But
you still won’t get much farther.

Room/Space 23:

Finally a room for contemplating. A “holy site for the removal of all evil” where we often find that
conflicts of the soul evaporate – even if they leave behind a smell that takes some getting used
to. So what happened? How did we reach this catharsis? We can’t really explain it, but every
morning we humbly make a pilgrimage back here. We mutter our mantra surrounded by pictures
of holy cows and flying pigs, watched over by John Z., a drawing done by our youngest son M.
and some stick-figures drawn by our eldest son J. While elsewhere there are other explosive
mantras scaring away the morning.

Room/Space 24:

The floor is made of stamped clay and the walls are made of clay and hay. The roof is thatched.
A small window with a burlap bag hanging from it. A low door. Always half-lit inside. An open
fire pit there. It’s my magical house. When I go outside, I can see sky-high mountains in the
northwest. China’s out there. I cast spells. I go down to the ocean. I cast spells. I sit on the bus
and return to where I came from. I cast spells. But my house remains empty and the rabbit
doesn’t like carrots.

Room/Space 25:

All the rooms until now have been three-dimensional. That’s why I’ve been hesitating to describe
this room; it only has two dimensions. And they only come alive when electricity flows through
the room and a video recorder is on. We see an Italian family on the beach in Tijuana in 1990.
Bored kids between the ages of five and ten. A woman whose gaze longingly wanders over the
horizon. And a morose, chain-smoking man. If they say anything at all, they sound tired. Then
there’s a sudden change. He sets up a video camera. When everything is ready, he gives the
camera to his wife and starts playing with the children. At first they are confused, but they soon
cheer up and embrace it as nice for a change. She films. He makes witty remarks to the camera.
The next few minutes turn into a display of happy roughhousing on the beach. Close-ups are
followed by panning shots. The woman films like mad. But once the filming is done, the family
falls back into the motionless, joyless rigidity of the three-dimensional space.

Room/Space 26:

If I remember correctly, this place is called Dhurbar Square. It separates the new part of
Kathmandu from the old city. And the jail is on one side. I often looked up at the barred windows.
One day I saw someone wave. I knew him. I had seen him in Sri Lanka. He asked whether I
could get him some paper and cigarettes. I nodded. I bought what he wanted and headed for
the building. As soon as I passed the first guard a nightmare began. Everything smelled like
urine and filth, the walls were stained, the lighting was dull and I wouldn’t have been surprised
to hear screams. I told a watch officer why I was there. He directed me towards a specific office.
I went over and knocked on the door. Someone asked me to come in. Cigarette smoke. Bars
on the windows. A metal desk. A chair. A metal file cabinet. Everything was dingy, with piles
of files everywhere. A man sitting behind a desk. Small, with a dangerously shifty look in his
eyes. Why had I actually come to this hellhole? “Sit down,” he said, not “Please have a seat.”
Suddenly I realized that I was at his mercy and he wouldn’t hesitate to treat me as he saw fit.
He interrogated me. And the worst thing was that I had some hashish on me. I thought, “I’m
never getting out of here again!”

Room/Space 27:

Another space that doesn’t quite fit the definition we have in mind. The space taken up by
language. The space in which I grew up. A space which during my childhood was still divided
by the insignia of two different countries, even if it was permeable and can be entered or exited
with less scrutiny since NAFTA. On my side we spoke standard English and Californian English.
On the other side they spoke Spanish and Spanglish. Californian English and Spanglish use
a lot of the same words. Despite those similarities, Americans and Mexicans have a hard
time understanding each other’s cultures, which might have to do with the fact that Mexico
was settled by the Spaniards and the US by the Brits. I grew up between all of these words
and at an early age I began to imitate them. At the age of 15 or 16, I crossed the border and
succeeded in shedding my American skin in exchange for a Mexican one. I liked that. There
were a lot of reasons to change. One of them was, I could finally escape my American past.
I still love this change even today. And if there was such a thing as reincarnation, I’d insist on
being born near a border.

Room/Space 28:

The floorplan is square. A simple toilet in the left corner. A cot in the right corner. A small table
next to that. No windows, but a dim light hangs about 13 feet in the air. The walls are painted
an unnerving turquoise you can wash. A steel door can be opened with a large key. And there’s
a flap in the door. You can throw sentences through this flap. Sentences like: We meant a play
and not a series. We meant a radio play and not a reading disguised as one. If you respond, I
don’t have time to waste on three sentences, then you hear the answer Whether or not you get
to work is up to you. So you sit in this room. You’re fed regularly. You could leave if you wanted
to. You chose this. You sit in this room and voice your desires to the people who always win
out.

Room/Space 29:

Another boxy floorplan. No windows once again. The color of the walls: a washed-out,
translucent blue. Two fiberglass rods that intersect under the dome hold up the construction.
The space is mobile. After a little practice, you only need 15 minutes to set it up and get it
move-in ready. The woven walls are all that separate the inside from the outside. One wall
has a zipper which allows you to exit or enter the space. So, a commonly heard sound is the
zipping up and down of these kinds of walls in similar spaces throughout the neighborhood.
I’ve often enjoyed spending the night in these rooms. I especially enjoyed the proximity to the
outside world. Though I have to admit that on stormy nights by the ocean there was something
uncanny about it. I’m thinking about a night in San Francisco. As I stood on a pebbly beach
by the bay, with a view of Treasure Island, again and again the wind pressed the dome more
than halfway down into the room, allowing it the chance to return to its original form with an
explosive pop. It’s nearly impossible to sleep during nights like that. On nights like that, you
wish you were back in a room with sturdy walls. But nights like that are an exception. They pass, and with any luck, a clear sky will appear around the world the following morning and reconcile us. Our backs hurt, the camping pot boils water for coffee, you squat there like an Indian and just live. That’s nice.

Hermann Mensing writes radio-plays, drama, poems, short stories, and novels for children and adults. Besides that he has always had and still has a strong focus on the internet. Long before people started blogging Mensing had a literary column online he called “Der Alltag”, which sums up his work in all its aspects, probably more than his printed work. He also is a musician, having played the drums in different jazz and rock groups longer than he can even think of.

Priscilla Layne is an assistant professor in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures at UNC Chapel Hill. She works on a variety of texts from the 20th century, primarily focusing on issues of race and gender. Her research interests include film, popular music, rebellion, social movements, and (post)subculture studies. After receiving her B.A. in Comparative Literature from the University of Chicago in 2003, Priscilla served as a Fulbright Teaching Assistant in Berlin and researched the left-wing skinhead scene with a grant from the Study Foundation of the Berlin House of Representatives. Priscilla received her PhD from the University of California at Berkeley in 2011. In 2008, she and two co-translators, Kristin Dickinson and Robin Ellis, won the Susan Sontag Prize for Translation for their translation of Feridun Zaimoglu’s Koppstoff. Since then, she has translated plays for the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse Theater in Berlin and is currently working on a book manuscript called White Rebels in Black.
A classically trained composer and Artificial Intelligence scientist with an early involvement in electroacoustic and avant-garde pop music, Eduardo R. Miranda’s distinctive music is informed by his unique background. He is emerging as an influential composer for his work at the crossroads of music and science. His music, which includes pieces for symphonic orchestras, chamber groups and solo instruments, with and without live electronics, has been played by renowned ensembles such as Bergersen String Quartet, Leo String Quartet (from the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra), Sond’Ar-te Electric Ensemble, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, BBC Concert Orchestra and Ten Tors Orchestra, to cite but a few. In addition to concert music, he has composed for theatre and contemporary dance.

The inside story of his acclaimed choral symphony, Sound to Sea, is revealed in the book Thinking Music, published by University of Plymouth Press (ISBN 978-1-84102-3-601). The publication includes the full score and a CD with the recording of the premiere by Ten Tors Orchestra. “This book, by a pioneer of contemporary experimental music, is a story of how an striking composition was born: an unusually generous prelude to a rich aural experience.” (Philip Ball, author of The Music Instinct). A review of his solo CD Mother Tongue (Released by Sargasso, London), in The Wire magazine, reads “…These are immensely sophisticated pieces that constitute an electronic global music of convincingly organic simplicity.” (Brian Morton).

http://neuromusic.soc.plymouth.ac.uk/
Crichton had been smoking that cigarette for hours, or so it seemed. Trying not to move too much, he reached into his pocket and fumbled for his lighter again. Everything was happening in a kind of muted slow motion. In and out of focus, the flame inside his hands was an intermittent addition to a myriad of orange lights struggling with the softening dark. He must have been asleep. It seemed like the only available explanation. In the uncertain period of time he had been sitting there, more or less conscious, nothing else had presented itself. The sky loomed large and dim through his scratched lenses, full of an absurd squealing recognisable as the effect of wind among the shapes of machinery. Crichton nervously pulled out his phone. It was, predictably, dead. When he tried to turn it on a second time a familiar sad face flashed up on the screen. He sighed, pulling bruised knuckles over his brow, where a film of sweat was encamped. While he contemplated his next move, a puckering sound from his lips announced that the cigarette had gone out again. This manifested itself as some kind of last straw.

Clambering awkwardly onto all fours, Crichton peered over the edge. The gathered forms of the Clyde waterfront stared back with mocking, squat permanence: the Rotunda, the Armadillo, the Squinty Bridge. He snapped back, having proven an unattractive hypothesis. ‘For crying out loud,’ he muttered alongside the yellowed cigarette: he was stuck on the top of the Finnieston Crane, apparently. He began to work through a hazy mess of images, trying to put together some explanation. The process was slow and a touch reluctant. After all, there was a chance he did not really want to know. He slouched and pulled up his fly, closed his eyes and fiddled once again with his lighter, which now had a jammed flint. There were a couple of seagulls floating up there, enjoying the morning breeze. Crichton watched them suspiciously, readying himself. As he remembered it, they’d been walking the few hundred metres from the subway to the first stop of the night, when Guy Wilson had begun to make a distracting noise. It was a kind of dehydrated, inverted smoker’s cough. Each hacking version started somewhere in the nose,
reverberating through the looser parts of Guy’s face: his nostrils, his outer cheeks, his lips …

‘That really is charming, mate. I hope you won’t be stopping it any time soon?’ Crichton asked, brought out of an interesting train of thought.

‘Purely, ah, functional and … will cease as soon as is appropriate I assure you,’ replied Guy in his tipsy university impression.

‘Good, good, good.’

‘Grumpy I see. You’ve been sleeping too much again,’ Guy pointing for some reason at Crichton’s shoes, like they were a dead giveaway.

‘Come on, it’s disgusting, there are people around,’ was all Crichton said. Guy looked back with a placid, obstinate gaze and continued making the sound. There were, indeed, a few other people on the pavement, but they were all too far away to be bothered by some snivelling. Mercifully, moments later the offending article was dislodged and swallowed.

‘Well thank Christ for that.’

‘So what’re your thoughts on tonight?’ asked Guy.

Crichton paused for a few moments, thinking about Helen, noticing the rhythm of their walking, noticing the splashes of brown sauce on his shoes. A square sausage roll for breakfast. Clumsy. This Guy is right, I have been sleeping too much. ‘I imagine it will be the usual Saturday night,’ he replied, reaching into his pockets and fishing around for cigarette materials. ‘Got any skins?’

‘Is anyone else around?’ probed Guy, handing over some rolling papers.

‘Meh.’

‘Is Helen around?’

Crichton had obviously not done a very good job of keeping cool. The last few weeks he had barely thought about anything else.

‘Might be, later on.’

‘Is that a good thing?’

‘Time will tell.’

They had reached the door of the pub, a faux-Tudor affair with flaking paint and good beer. They hung around for a while making cigarettes, Guy remarking on the evening weather.

‘Got any baccy?’ Crichton asked after a while.

‘What? Eh, yeah, sure. Don’t you have any? What’ve you been doing for the last five minutes?’

Crichton said nothing and focussed on his now-sweaty roll-up. He was a bit like that. Dreamy. A sensitive you could say, a mystic, also kind of a schlemihl.

‘Ok then, tell me about her again. I can tell you’re desperate to.’

‘I am not.’

A moment passed.

‘Right fine then … Helen’s … well … I don’t know really. I’ve only met her once. She’s amazing I suppose. She’s everything. Mysterious. Sexy. Intelligent.’

‘You can’t just list words Crichton.’

‘Ach you wouldn’t understand even if I could explain her properly. Have you got a lighter?’

Guy’s face was catching the passing twilight, his worn shirt-cuffs scrupulously clean. Crichton had come to believe that his friend was an extremely normal guy. So much so that his personality flickered between eerie familiarity and invisibility. Guy nestled in the centrepiece of some conceptual map, from where he could easily disappear. There was a sinkhole of mediocrity right in the middle of things, a weird place to be.

‘What do you think you know about women anyway?’ asked Crichton, now fighting with the lighter. It was a familiar state of affairs.

‘I don’t think that I know anything at all,’ replied Guy bluntly. ‘I see women as people. Your
hoodoo’s a handicap, in the real world.’
‘How uninspiring of you.’
‘Convince me otherwise Crichton; I’d love you too. You’ve got all night.’
And so a challenge was set.
‘Anyway, I’m Greek Orthodox way back you know, so I could hardly expect us to share an understanding,’ said Guy. ‘You with your Latin dogma.’
Greek? Greek Orthodox? Crichton was taken-aback. But such was the nature of the normal, tending always to reveal itself as odder than expected sooner or later. ‘I haven’t been to church since I was a teenager, Guy,’ he said after a moment’s processing, ‘and … I probably never paid much attention anyway.’
‘Aha,’ said Guy, having always seen through Crichton’s bullshit.
‘Well, ok, maybe I owe something to Catholicism, but on this particular issue, women that is, I’ve trodden my own path.’
‘Aha,’ said Guy.
Crichton just grumbled and went on trying to light his cigarette.

Suzanne came stumbling out of the bathroom to the shimmers of some or other trance classic being played quietly so as not to scare off early-evening guests. Her gait was currently a kind of drunken stagger, close to a permanent fall, the subject never quite in control as they catapult from one foot to another. This sashaying brought her to a halt somewhere near the fruit machine. ‘Barman, a pint of lager,’ she announced from behind a crowd of people. Bold tone notwithstanding, this was ineffective and Suzanne began to muscle her way through. Among those flung aside were two men standing in close conversation, each with a beer in one hand and a whisky in the other.

‘Whoa there!’ they objected, almost in tandem. The one with brown splashes on his shoes rose up to his full height. His friend looked less annoyed and may even have rolled his eyes in preparation of the following outburst:
‘I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but it’s hardly becoming,’ said Crichton, enunciating, something he’d picked up in the years of hash-pipe scholarship.
‘Don’t mind him, sweetheart,’ stepped in the other, Guy, ‘he’s got a flawed view of women that is at best binary and at worst prejudiced.’
‘Don’t mind him!’ Crichton started to bleat. Guy moved back into the crowd and made a hacking noise something like an inverted smoker’s cough.
‘Get in there and buy us a drink will you, in the name of Christ,’ said Suzanne, holding out a fiver, ‘and shut your fucking noise.’
This had the desired effect and the two disappeared, returning what felt like only seconds later with a pint and a whisky for Suzanne. ‘Cheers,’ the three of them agreed, having now bonded.

‘What’s yer names?!’ asked Suzanne, miscalculating volume. She threw out a conciliatory hand gesture. ‘Guy? Crichton? Good lads I don’t doubt, I don’t doubt,’ now growing into her role as the resident big personality.

Above the sound of general pub chatter and restrained dance music, there was breathing space for an awkward silence to ensue. Crichton in particular felt the silence as a reproach and finally just said the first thing that came into his head:
‘Shall we go somewhere else?’ this happened to be.
‘Why the hell not?’ said Guy.
‘Dead on, fellas,’ chimed Suzanne.
‘Can I borrow another cigarette for the road?’ asked Crichton, who was like that.

A few steps and sashays up the street and Crichton started to get an eerie feeling around the back of his neck. Now bound to travel at the pace of the slowest member in the group, Suzanne’s controlled falling provided ample space to soak in the evening’s vibe. Something wasn’t quite right, it appeared. The hairs on Crichton’s arms were now joining in with his bodily alarm. He darted some eyes around the streets opening up ahead, finding nothing out of place. The city had its usual rollicking Saturday-night glow: provisionally chic, boisterous, a faint sense of danger; nothing suspect there. It was only when he glanced back the way they had come that a figure in a polo shirt and dark trousers drew his attention. To make matters worse, the man paused and pretended to fiddle with his phone on being spotted.

‘Guy,’ Crichton power-whispered. ‘Guy,’ he tried again.
‘What mate?’ Guy perked up, having been helping Suzanne administer her gait.
‘Guy … behind us,’ continued Crichton with wide eyes.

Guy took a look behind. ‘What about him?’
‘Just … look at him. I think he was in the pub.’
‘Yeah he was at the bar,’ said Guy.
‘Look at the way he’s dressed,’ insisted Crichton.
‘Badly, you mean?’
‘Yep.’
‘Wait, like … undercover badly?’
‘Exactly, Guy.’
‘Shit.’

The three of them darted down an alleyway, Guy tugging Suzanne along by the arm to produce a kind of hyper-limping. They ranged themselves beside a large wheelie bin and started pretending to look at phones and fiddle with cigarette materials, Suzanne reading graffiti out loud and sniggering.

‘Got any papers?’ asked Crichton.
‘Just pretend,’ snapped Guy.

The off-duty policeman sauntered past the entrance to the alleyway without so much as a casual glance.

‘Phew,’ they said, abandoning the construction of imaginary cigarettes. Now, while the state of Suzanne’s conscience was currently obscured behind a thick wall of early-evening tequilas, neither Crichton nor Guy had any particular reason to fear the police. Yet given Crichton’s relationship with the cosmos, authority was best to be distrusted and ideally avoided. He had a history of minor mishaps: petty crimes, unintentional vandalism and cases of mistaken identity.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ said Guy, sensing his concern, ‘there’ll be no nonsense tonight.’

Crichton’s muttered something, his eyes gleaming with mystery and apprehension. A moment later, the two men looked around the alleyway to find that Suzanne had disappeared amongst the excitement.

‘Shall we then?’ asked Guy.

‘After you, my good man,’ responded Crichton, seeming to take heart. ‘To the next hostelry.’

They were in a Gothic quarter of the city now, all arching gates and hidden gargoyles. The icebreaking half-bottles from late afternoon were adding to a sense of dramatic foreboding, but it was there nonetheless. Bakery steam rose from a grating in the pavement, the city spreading its tendrils into the night, overpowering and volatile. Neither being natives, both Guy and Crichton
had strange ideas about Glasgow, ideas that blurred whenever they were examined too closely.

‘What time of year do you think it is?’ asked Crichton, staring upwards at the orange light reflected on patchy cloud.

‘Eh …’ began Guy.

‘You’re not sure, are you?’ he interrupted.

‘What are you talking about? It’s the first …’

‘Ana. Stop right there. What I’m asking is do you know what time it is?’

‘Oh,’ said Guy.

There was a pause.

‘I suppose we’re in some kind of special moment?’ Guy continued, suppressing a grin.

‘You needn’t bother trying to patronise me,’ said Crichton. It was difficult to tell when he was being ironic and if so, how much. ‘I know that you’ve no grasp on the big questions.’

‘If I make you a smoke will you shut up for a while?’

Crichton’s phone beeped with that strange attention to timing reserved for certain objects.

The pair had now reached the second pub of the night and were beginning to feel a proper thirst, the kind of thirst that is only condoned by the night-time air and a solid start, a moment without season in the liquid dark.

‘Who’s texting?’ asked Guy, putting his tobacco away. Crichton did not reply, but the rapid eye movement and acute tapping of his fingertips on the touchscreen could only mean one thing: Helen. ‘What’s she saying?’

‘She’s not far away. I don’t know if we should wait here, or maybe go somewhere a bit nicer, or meet her up the road …’

“We’ll have a beer or two and wait for her,” announced Guy. ‘Man, the way you get flustered … Think of her as an equal, a sister.’

“What?” asked Crichton, who hadn’t been listening.

‘Nothing really. Shall we go inside?’

#

William didn’t feel comfortable at the bar. The stools were made of a black faux-leather material that was slippery against his trousers and he was getting funny looks from an old guy a few places along. In between gulps at a pint of stout the man was glancing over to make tutting sounds.

‘Well then Bill, how the hell are ya!’ came a voice from behind William’s head.

He turned around. ‘James!’ he returned, putting more enthusiasm into it than he really felt. There was something embarrassing at being found in a pub, off-duty and alone. James looked to be returning from the toilet so this might be only brief small talk.

‘You have to come over and meet my new woman,’ James insisted, dropping the preliminaries. There was an intense glow in his eyes.

‘Oh, do you know, I’m really just getting finished up here before heading on,’ said William. ‘A new lady did you say?’

James could hardly contain himself. ‘That’s right! That is right!’ he squealed. ‘You absolutely have to come and meet Helen.’

‘Oh, I really should be getting home. Work …’

‘Come and have a drink, Bill. It can all wait.’

William left his seat and dissolved into the bowels of the pub, Crichton and Guy watching in a kind of brace posture against a back wall. All in all, his departure was felt as something of an
anti-climax.

‘About time for a drink then?’ asked Crichton.

‘It certainly is.’

‘What’ll you be having?’

‘Same as you, I don’t doubt,’ Guy acknowledging Crichton’s strange insistence on matching drinks. This, he had reflected, must have been down to a warped sense of ritual.

‘Grand,’ affirmed Crichton. He marched up to the bar and began scouring the shelves for options. This being a large, one-size-fits-all type of place, nothing was very expensive. With the various bits of hiding they had done over the evening, Crichton felt that some serious drinking was now in order as a means of catching up to an imaginary, meridian level of intoxication. ‘Two pints of that stuff,’ he said, pointing at a hoppy summer ale in the beer font. Then, ‘two of those,’ the other arm launching at the malt of the month, ‘and a couple of those, the coffee one,’ right arm switching to indicate a high-up shelf. Enjoying the clock- or air-traffic-control-effect produced by waving his arms around, Crichton began to wonder if the foreboding of before could have been only a passing humour. It can be difficult for the booze mystic to retain clarity of perspective. Crichton had, after all, had a number of false dawns in his existential, weekend ponderings. These were of a fairly uniform character. Reliably, the toxic charge of the night brought a deep underlying solipsism to a head, the iceberg-tip to a clusterfuck of paranoid yearnings. He was, he increasingly suspected, personally the nerve-centre of the neo-imperial impasse, key to the crisis of late-capitalism, but he couldn’t be entirely sure. It was a difficult one.

Fully loaded with drinks, Guy and Crichton loitered at the bar exchanging pretentious banalities and buying further rounds for a good forty-five minutes or so before a ruckus in another room started to become evident. The commotion seemed to be growing closer. Moments later someone – Suzanne? – was visible through a pine archway in a state of what looked like righteous indignation. A disagreement about manners could be discerned among a number of raised voices.

‘Apron-wearing wanker!’ Suzanne screamed, suddenly launching a left-hook banjo towards a barman’s nose. She tore away from the spectators and appeared to consider mounting the bar, before fall-sashaying to the spot where Guy and Crichton were planted.

‘Suzanne?’ asked Guy, coming towards his senses.

‘Lads. For crying out loud,’ she slurred. A wave of self-awareness seemed to descend and she glanced at hands covered in viscous alcohol, muttering something like, ‘not again.’

A hasty exit now seemed advisable from a custodial point of view. Guy took the initiative and made a break for the door, Crichton and a befuddled Suzanne ricocheting off innocent bystanders and out onto the street. Things were going fairly well until the dreaded ‘Stop, Police!’ rang out to accompany their guilty exit, delivered in William’s best crowd-control boom. Parting the crowd, he launched himself at the door and was out on the street in time to see Suzanne’s vacillating gallop disappear around a street corner in the semi-distance.

#

Meanwhile, back on the Finnieston Crane, Crichton’s recollections were disturbed by the seagulls floating in a new pattern above him. It might have been a random shift or an avian cultural nuance, but the presence of distantly audible voices helped to suggest something more. Life was a bit like that for Crichton, an endless process of wondering whether things really signified in the ways he could imagine. He scratched his back and found a couple of bruises. Was it all just pattern recognition or was the world a subtle, unified network of meaning? And
assuming that this network existed, did it have a focus or a centre? Was he himself really only one amongst countless uniform nodes? Being a uniform node might be fine for all Crichton knew, but it had historically made him uncomfortable.

This was mystic hoodoo of a kind, wasn’t it … and not just market forces, with Crichton an end-user hero *extraordinaire*. The birds now circled above his head like a child’s mobile minus only the strings. Birds were pretty freaky if you thought about them too much. Having said that, everything was pretty freaky if you thought about it too much. The morning was warming by incremental steps and Crichton’s body felt less passive. From down below, where dog walkers or whoever might be circulating, he supposed that he must be a tiny dot in the sky. He needed more answers. He allowed the birds to fly on without interpretation and returned to the night before.

‘We’ll lose him in here!’ shouted Guy, pointing out a basement jazz bar coming up on the right. ‘Quickly, before he turns the corner!’ The trio floated down the steps, announcing themselves into the quiet ambience of smooth alto saxophone runs with an almighty slam of the door.

The patrons of the bar turned, heads snapping around like pinball flippers. ‘What the fuck …’ they chanted in harmony, the soloing woodwind of a 1940s standard soaring above with staccato alarm.

‘Somebody get rid of these idiots,’ announced an elderly man in a grey suit as Suzanne tried to pick herself up from an upturned table, a couple of straws and a slice of lime in her hair. Three bouncers moved in, the band playing on unperturbed. Guy, Crichton and Suzanne zigzagged in and around the neat circular tables, smokeless red light catching the faces of outraged jazz aficionados, drunken wheeling flummoxing the security. Customers were trying to get involved — throwing angry limbs at the soft parts of the outlaws — but a kind of wonky Zen dexterity had descended, the threesome’s flopping and jitterbugging evading all but the most determined aggressors.

‘To me! To me!’ Suzanne was shouting in the direction of her comrades as she wrestled against a stucco wall. A snide trip brought Guy almost to his knees and Crichton was forced into the back of him by an oncoming mojito. Vaulting onto his shoulders, mid-leapfrog, Crichton rode Guy up and over the maître d’s podium. Around the third chorus the saloon door swung open again, its slam lost among yells and drum fills. At this point one of the band lost his patience with the situation and, dropping a modified cello, scoured the front of the room for projectiles. A lonely pool cue seemed somehow too medieval so he grabbed up a handful of darts and began hurling these in the general direction of the fracas, narrowly avoiding two ducking thespians sitting over long drinks. One of the arrows hit home, winging Crichton in the left arm just above the elbow.

‘Jesus Christ!’ he shouted, throwing his arms out to the side in an accusatory crucifix.

The three escapees now saw their way blocked by William, who was standing with a smug grin, tapping his watch. Just then, however, a rogue dart from the hysterical cellist struck William a little above the thigh, his hands scrabbling around behind his back to find and remove it. This offered a brief window of opportunity in which Crichton, Suzanne and Guy were able to zigzag back to the front of the bar and make it out onto the pavement once again.

‘That didn’t work,’ said Crichton, feeling it necessary to make conversation.

Onwards past a row of curry shops and closed hairdressers, the sound of shoes and annoyed pedestrians filtered up and around the launching heights of city-centre superstructures. Weaving in and out of bus stops, using alleyways for cover and pausing to check on their pursuer —
occasionally visible at a remove – light-headedness began to descend.

Guy and Crichton held onto each other’s shoulders for a minute, panting. The darkness and street-lit sepia of the night being now complete, they seemed to have lost track of Suzanne, who had surely been with them only a few moments earlier.

‘Where is she?’ asked Guy in between hamstring stretches.

‘She’s not … Guy?’ said Crichton, suddenly pointing in the direction of the road.

‘Keep up fuckers!’ shouted Suzanne from out of a taxi window, pulling up her skirt to moon at strangers and disappearing into the black with a reverberating guffaw.

This felt like something of a reprieve.

‘I think we lost him,’ Guy observed, ‘and anyway, it was her he was after wasn’t it?’

‘I’m not sure that matters anymore,’ said Crichton, judiciously.

They pulled into the nearest bar. It was a classy affair with a gleaming anthracite and chrome interior, low lighting and a cocktail list in leather. The brown sauce stains on Crichton’s shoes suddenly felt embarrassing and he tried to rub them off with a shirtsleeve.

‘Two pints of that and two of your grassiest Islay,’ said Guy, orienting himself against an inviting stool. ‘Well, what an evening so far.’

Crichton stared back ambiguously, looking like he wanted to be sarcastic but couldn’t quite.

‘Let’s just have a drink.’

A few minutes passed while they settled in. There was cold music coming from somewhere in the ceiling, hidden speakers voicing the muted sounds of contemporary soft pop.

More time passed and Guy and Crichton found themselves staring through a garden of empty glasses, noticing the sheen on the bar changing. Things started to feel a bit tasteless now that they’d recovered their composure. Having said that, they had drunk rather a lot.

Before this loosening of certainties could fully percolate, Crichton turned to his right and paused, bewitched. There, at the top of the stairs that led to an expansive mezzanine level, was Helen, backlit with a soft pearlescent glow. She was radiant, as per, and Crichton felt self-conscious in putting together a smile, suddenly overthinking the tiniest movement of tendons. Everything was forced and unnatural now, a performance. It was a bit like being really high, in both senses of the term.

Helen stood, one hip cocked, beckoning him upstairs. He followed, steps echoing against soft pop that suddenly wanted to mean something, abandoning any attempt to be at ease. It was in moments like this that he felt vindicated in his mystical outlook.

‘Hello,’ said Helen.

‘Good,’ said Crichton, leaning in for a kiss on the cheek, ‘eh, I mean …’

Helen turned away and left him hanging in the air. She swished a few steps ahead to a small booth where there was, miraculously, a pint waiting for him opposite her untouched Cosmopolitan.

‘Please, sit down,’ she encouraged him.

‘Sure,’ said Crichton, sure of very little.

‘And how have you been?’

Crichton tried to shift himself into a more comfortable posture. ‘I’m lovely,’ he said. Under the table his foot struck against something which did not retreat. It felt like a … surely a high heel or an elegant female boot. He rested against it, feeling a rush of endorphins. ‘I’ve missed you,’ he said, looking directly at her face now. Growing bolder, he stroked the boot a little, smiling with lips pursed down to his pint. It was still cold. How wonderful.

‘Have you been exercising?’ asked Helen.

‘Ah, cheers,’ said Crichton. Then, ‘Oh … no, not really.’ He squirmed, trying to smell himself.
'Just …'
'Just gallivanting,' she interposed.
'Yes, that's it.'
'I expect nothing less,' Helen laughed.
There was a silence, soft pop aside.
'Aren't you going to talk to me?' asked Helen.
Crichton looked up from the table, enjoying the feel of her shoe and disappointed the silence was over. 'Yes. How are things?'
'Oh really,' she scoffed, performing an extravagant hand gesture. 'Leave the nonsense please. What's happened to the philosopher in you?' There was a sneer there, threatening to infect the mood.
'Ok,' said Crichton, sitting slightly more upright. 'To be honest, there is some stuff I'd like to talk about.'
'11 bet.'
'Well, this evening has been … geared, somehow. There've been mysterious forces at work. You don't know how unusual it's all been, finding you.'
'Don't I?' queried Helen. The light in the room kept changing and catching her from different angles. Alternating, gaudy colours overlaid her skin and hair.
'It's all pretty confusing for me, a bit overwhelming. Somehow the whole city, this whole night, has been working to bring me to this point. I am almost sure of it now.'
Crichton was not sure of it at all and was talking as a way of ordering his thoughts, rather than the other way around. It was one of his worst qualities.
'I see,' said Helen. Her accent was there, and yet not quite there. It was tangible from a certain position but also a smooth part of the fabric.
'I wish I could explain myself,' Crichton continued, aware of beads of sweat popping out onto his forehead. 'You're more than just a beautiful woman and … and I feel that you're my chance of being more than just a drunk man.' A drunk man with brown sauce on his shoe, he could have added, but didn't. 'You are … the city, I think.'
'Oh,' said Helen. 'Oh …'
'Is that not … Oh,' said Crichton.
'I am not the city,' said Helen firmly. 'That's not how it works. I'm just … alive.'
This was disappointing to say the least. More sweat started to peep out of Crichton's face, his hands also growing marshy. 'I’m such a nobody,' he moaned almost to himself.
'Jesus,' said Helen, who had clearly overheard. 'No you’re not. Get a grip.'
'A special nothing is nothing special,' muttered Crichton, as if it was some kind of weird little mantra.
More or less ignoring him, Helen continued to correct: 'You’re just a person like us all. Loved, if you’re lucky. If not, then at least surrounded.' Come to think, this stuff sounded a bit like it was her weird little mantra.
Things were not going exactly to plan. The conversation was pretty forced. Helen was not quite right, not quite playing along … no, it wasn’t a case of playing along … she just didn’t quite understand. Yes, that was it.
Then again, maybe Crichton was being unreasonable. Of course, Guy was right, up to a point. He did struggle with his place in the world. But … but when you looked at it, everyone was more or less clueless, weren’t they? Sure, an existential metronome, passing from self to other, ticked at the back of his mind, one element in a larger puzzlement. And well … course he did occasionally suspect that mysticism might be cowardice under another name. But it was
a difficult balancing act and broadly speaking, this viewing the world as alive, as a story, was a clean kind of crazy. At least he wasn’t fucking normal.

‘I can see where you’re coming from, but doesn’t it lack a little bit of … romance?’ Crichton asked her. ‘Maybe if you’d been there tonight …’

‘Naturally,’ she quipped. At this point Crichton remembered that Helen was a journalist of some description. He had suppressed the information, mainly because it interfered with her allegorical status.

A mask was beginning to slip, held up now by only the subtlest threads. Helen guzzled on her straw and peered at Crichton over the top of her glasses. She looked to be sizing him up. His mind was a mess of confusion and lust. This woman, this whole city, seemed to be looking through him. He got a strange feeling in his stomach and decided to check. Shifting backwards he took a quick glance under the table. His fears were realised. It was inert. He’d been stroking a table leg.

‘It’s hard not to love this bar,’ said Helen, who somehow seemed to know.

This whole thing was getting weird. A moment passed in uneasy contemplation.

‘I’m still here you know,’ interrupted Helen gruffly. ‘Fuck it, I’m off for a piss.’ She traipsed off into the multi-coloured scenery.

‘Well then, how’s it going?’ asked Guy, who had been waiting for a chance to swoop in. ‘Are you wowing her?’

‘I … things are more complicated than I might have hoped,’ said Crichton. He sighed. ‘Nice … Guy. You’ve not come to cheer me up I see.’

Guy passed this over. ‘Look at yourself. You’re shaking, you look sunburnt.’

A note of deeper concern flashed in Crichton’s face.

‘Hardly surprising, given it’s your whole worldview at stake. But don’t worry,’ said Guy, patting him on the shoulder, ‘I at least think it’s sort of cute. Here, take these,’ he said, passing Crichton his tobacco and bits, ‘you look like you could use one.’ Guy made a familiar sound from his nose and strolled back to the bar looking pleased with himself.

Crichton’s breathing was getting heavier and faster and he didn’t know what to do with his hands anymore. Man, they were some sweaty. They were just kind of hanging in mid-air. His eyes were starting to snake, rattling from side to side in their sockets. He tried to focus. His feet were tapping on the floor in a wonky double rhythm. Helen had been gone a while. His beer was almost finished. It wasn’t even cold now. He thought about leaving, maybe that would do it, would send the appropriate signal to … to whoever. Fuck. His jaw was clenching and he was uttering some kind of ridiculous glottal stop over and over.

Helen appeared, walking in from a far wall. She stepped lightly and directly, Crichton holding his head still with a considerable effort and waiting for whatever would now happen between them, the climactic moment.

‘I’m sure we can settle this …’ he started to say. Helen walked right past him and took up a position at the head of the stairs. Crichton watched as she cocked out a hip, timing it perfectly so that the lights shone out a warm glow, framing her from behind. Down on the ground level someone was caught mesmerised. They followed her up and through to an unseen booth.

Crichton was not sure what or how they saw when they looked at her. He started rubbing the table leg again, trying to recapture a feeling, or maybe just taunting himself.

Something popped in Crichton’s chest. He stood up, eyes racing around the room, all his movements feeling mistimed and reckless. He was muttering to himself, single words and phrases like ‘flawless’ and ‘for fuck sake’. Taking the stairs in one awkward bound, he spent a moment trying to get his balance on the ground floor, moving from foot to foot. Guy noticed
him treading water in the middle of the pub, greasy hands patting the air around chest-height. ‘Crichton, what the …’ he asked, more unsure than ever if Crichton was taking the piss.

‘You just keep perched on that … stool,’ said Crichton, shaking, somewhere in the sweet spot between incoherent and infantile. The panic dance shifted into a panic scuttle and he was off before Guy had a chance to say anything further. Just beside the door, everything now slightly blurry, a face caught his eye for a moment. It looked like the policeman from earlier, though Crichton couldn’t be sure. An ambiguous look passed over the face, a look that might have been recognition or just pity. Crichton was out galloping down the pavement before the situation could develop.

Not being an especially fit man, Crichton’s desperate sprint involved a lot of gasping and half-trotting. In relative terms, however, he was now barrelling south through the city, smacking against street furniture and pedestrians as he went. He was craving a cigarette but the speed and the swampy palms made this impracticable. In between small absences of consciousness that launched him forward, strangely fragmented, Crichton’s features were stern in shop windows, his limbs machining in an automatic direction. This flickering self-awareness had an interesting quality like poetic lacunae or stop-motion film that was not entirely lost on him. The heights of the city were claustrophobic and glass, the river veering into view at the back of his mind. His breathing was increasingly pressured and someone was shouting, ‘Run, Forrest, run!’ from a street corner. He was already running.

A split second of volatile lucidity around about Jamaica Street forced Crichton to reflect that this was heroic only by a pretty strained effort of the imagination, a niche brand of heroism. Mercifully, the next moment he experienced another chest spasm, taking him beyond self-reflection and back into the precipitate moment. And then there were only his pounding feet, his unmoving face, the image of lights and faces, yellow and red and a kind of searing non-thought. Finally it all gave way to a sensation of floating, stepping in the air, wings carrying him higher. Feeling buffeted by a Saturday-night wind, emerging, he trod above the night and left it all below.

Crichton gave up and threw the cigarette away. He felt that he had earned a bit of littering. It had been a night of the portentous and the ridiculous and he wasn’t entirely sure which to feel now. He grabbed onto a nearby pole and pulled himself up, imagining that the rising breeze was cleaning his face. He smiled knowingly at the brown sauce splashes on his shoe, somehow at peace with them. The night, his panic, had been to do with a series of questions. Or at least he hoped it had, because otherwise … he shivered at the thought. Of course, he could latch onto some easy bullshit like embracing process. Acknowledge that there were no certainties, only a chain of contingent half-truths. But he wasn’t ready to let go. He could tone things down, that certainly wouldn’t hurt, but there was more to life than finding the comfortable route. In fact, maybe straining against the natural progress of things was all he had. ‘Fuckem,’ Crichton whispered. There simply was no other choice.

There were blue and red lights flashing in the morning haze, now ambiguously fading to clarity. Beneath, the city spread its viral arms, a mass network of people and things. There were suddenly tears in Crichton’s eyes though he wasn’t sure why. Some sort of epiphany? Was this it? He felt the wind thrill around his arms, a rushing sense of movement. There was no emergency. Not any longer. There was only himself, a hangover and the skyline. It was a shabby kind of tableau, but it would do.

Crichton stepped from the top of the crane and felt the rungs meet his feet, strangely
unwelcome.

Somewhere near the bottom, Guy was waiting with a glass bottle of fizzy juice. ‘Finished?’ asked Guy.

There was an image of Crichton’s face on the bottle, though it could just as easily have been someone else. ‘I suppose,’ he said, hoping that in coming back to earth he had not missed his chance at revelation.
Gerard McKeever is an author and academic based in Glasgow, Scotland.

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