“Prowling The Meanings: Anne Carson’s Doubtful Forms”

and

“The Traitor’s Symphony”

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LIST OF CONTENTS

"Prowling The Meanings: Anne Carson's Doubtful Forms"

ABSTRACT ____________________________________________________________4

DECLARATION & COPYRIGHT STATEMENT ________________________________5

INTRODUCTION. Carson And The Edge ________________________________6

CHAPTER 1. After Elegy: Destabilising Form In Nox

Introduction ______________________________________________________26

Section 1: The Forms Of Death _________________________________27

Section 2: Language And Elegiac Forming __________________________42

Section 3: Translating The Elegist ________________________________55

CHAPTER 2. The Edge That Breaks Off: Form And The Limits Of Language

In Just For The Thrill, 'Cycladics' and Glass Essay

Section 1: Do Words Hold Good?____________________________________65

Section 2: Scepticism And The Productivity Of Language__________73

Section 3: Silence And Demented Language _______________________83

Section 4: Formal Monstrosity And The Saving Of Language______90

CONCLUSION ____________________________________________________103

BIBLIOGRAPHY_________________________________________________105

"The Traitor’s Symphony"

SYNOPSIS ______________________________________________________115

BOOK 1

Preface: David _________________________________________________116
Section 1: Wife And Husband  

Section 2: The Composer  

Section 3: All Voices  

BOOK 2  

BOOK 3  

CODA  

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ABSTRACT

This thesis uses four works by the contemporary Canadian poet Anne Carson (born 1950) to argue that it is in the embracing of failure and difficulty that modern poetics may negotiate formal erosion and the limits of language.

The introduction addresses Carson’s divisive reputation, and uses two separate criticisms of her poetic skill to delineate her liminal position in the modern poetic landscape, and therefore demonstrate her potential as a valuable framework for discussing innovative form. Via an examination of the criticisms of Robert Potts and David Solway, I argue that Carson is neither high priestess of postmodernism nor a collagist of poorly produced forms. This illuminates two points: one, that she occupies a space outside several modern ideologies of poetic authenticity, expression and form, and two, that this position can be effectively used to interrogate those ideologies and investigate new possibilities for poetic creativity.

In Chapter 1, Nox, Carson’s elegy for her brother Michael, is argued to experiment with traditional elegy form – but not in a mode that wholly follows Jahan Rama- zani’s famous framing of 20th century elegy form as defiantly, traumatically fractured. Nox is shown not to be merely subversive, but also interrogative of its own formal tradition, embracing the inherent contradiction within elegy: that absence could be rendered as presence, that a living, flawed language could make the dead speak. From this contradiction, I argue, Nox creates a productive solution: it occupies a position of formal non-forming, a return to the state of poesis, refusing to emerge as a completed poem or retreat into fragmentation but instead occupying a liminal space of continual creation.

In the second chapter, this preoccupation with elegy’s paradox is shown to be part of a greater theme within Carson’s work. The failures of language in Carson are elucidated with reference to the sceptical 19th-century theorist Fritz Mauthner. Mauthner is argued to be the best theorist for the thesis’s framework because of his belief in the possibilities of language’s resurrection as a valid communicative medium. Through three texts, “By Chance The Cycladic People”, The Glass Essay and Just For The Thrill, Carson’s interrogation of this hope is shown to produce creativity from difficulty, creating monstrous form-combinations to render the silence beyond language’s limits as poetically productive.

Thus Carson’s texts, in their struggle with failure and their obsessive doubt, can be used to construct several means of negotiating the limits of form and the inherent fallibility of language. The conflict between the drive for authentic expression and the perceived failure of expressive mediums is one of the defining features of both Carson’s work and modern poetry in general. However, it is by inhabiting and challenging the unstable, fraught areas at the edge of meaning that poetry of the 21st century can, in the words of Carson’s great influence Samuel Beckett, try again, fail again, fail better.
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INTRODUCTION
Carson And The Edge

Anne Carson is one of a small group of modern poets whose name produces both public recognition and fervent critical argument. She emerged as a figure on the literary scene with a rich stretch of productivity in the 1990s-2000s, garnering awards and praise with *Autobiography Of Red, The Beauty Of The Husband* and other, shorter works. Her place in the poetic canon is, however, contentious. Her fame and prizes, among them a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur Genius Grant, have accrued in parallel with accusations that she violates the potential of her classicist roots, and utilises deliberate obscurantism and reliance on famous names to bolster her own credentials. Her catalogue attracts both admiration – Michael Ondaatje has labelled her ‘the most exciting poet writing in English today’1 – and ‘charges of excess and of misplaced erudition’2, which have been developing since her first successes. I will use the latter to establish Carson as my central structure for an examination of the state and future of contemporary poetics: the debate surrounding her value, stripped of its extremes, is an effective tool for plumbing those schools of thought surrounding the ‘survival’ of poetry and Carson’s peculiar placement within/outside them.

It is possibly the volatile presence of this debate that has restricted the production of critical perspectives on Carson’s work. Another influence may be the fact that contemplating her oeuvre as a coherent whole is, as shall be discussed in this introduction, often difficult. A survey of the literature reveals that studies of Carson

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largely focus on one text, as if each exists in a vacuum, isolated from the backlash that began in the 1990s and still affects her position and potential in the poetic landscape.\(^3\) As a poet of the moment, producing work with great frequency and in an expanding field of genres and forms (in June 2014, for instance, she published *The Albertine Workout*, a pairing of new poetry with the art of Kim Anno, and *Nay Rather*, a republication of a 2008 essay with accompanying Greek translations and illustrations), criticism on Carson must also necessarily be nimble on its feet. This thesis aims to utilise Carson as the framing device for examining the limits of contemporary poetics, arguing that it is at the fraying edges of form that interesting solutions are being posed to some of modern poetry’s most pressing difficulties. Against a context of postmodern distrust of narrative, language and sign, modernist dissolution of self, and experimental poetry’s interrogation of its own viability,\(^4\) Carson’s form and genre transformations provide an effective basis for examining poetic modes of survival. Carson’s work, in this thesis, will be utilised as a means of demonstrating the possibilities of doubt and failure as tools for poetry’s continued vitality. However, the use of such a controversial poet requires explanation, and it is in the issues targeted by her detrac-


\(^4\) This interrogation is not, obviously, solely confined to those poets defined as ‘experimental’ – that definition being malleable, for one. However, as will be discussed at a later point, it is the interrogative impulse that can be seen to characterise some modern experimental poetics, as specifically defined by Joan Retallack.
tors – and their reflection on her place in 20th and 21st century poetics – that I identify her value as the crux of a theory of innovative form.5

This introduction, then, will first propose as a foundation a definition of Carson’s characteristics as a poet, and then identify the elements of her work that have created such contention. These elements will provide the access point to a discussion of Carson’s relationship with the poetic modes and trends of the modernist and post-modern, and find in her polyvalent and ambiguous stance the essence of her value as a bellwether for contemporary poetics. Carson’s poetry of experiment, as expressed through probing work that ceaselessly interrogates its own worth, will be established as an effective means through which I may investigate limits as a productive space.

To respond to the critical arguments against Carson’s value as poet, then, it is necessary to summarise the dominant features of her output, particularly the early works that attracted such high-profile criticism. Carson’s works, while varied in subject matter, generally incorporate reflections on the limited nature of genre, existing in liminal spaces between categories and adopting different forms. Her early pieces are often personal and narrative-based, and heavily woven with various cultural referents, on which she riffs in complex, often obscure patterns. Classical influences are dominant – Carson’s artistic reputation grew organically from her poetic Greek scholarship as Professor of Classics, and much of her work uses classical ideas and dramas as navigational tools. Her preferred mode of syntax is counter-intuitively flattened, an unadorned mode of phrasing that is pared and solid. Carson’s primary structure is the sentence: ‘in Carson a single sentence can transcend the whole operation,’ in the

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5 It is not the aim of this thesis to posit a ‘crisis’ in poetry that requires solutions to avoid extinction. Rather, I hope to argue that in some of Carson’s work with form and the limits of language, models emerge that provide interesting negotiations with specific challenges.
phrase of Blake Butler. What could be read as a formal maze of cultural anecdotes, oblique pronouncements and emotional distress is, in the coolness of a Carson sentence, distilled into more controlled, fragile work.

However, this work is met with resistance and deprecation by several camps of critics. One, vocally led by David Solway, focuses on her utilisation of academic and mythic reference and detached syntax as demonstrations of a cynical refusal of actual intellectual and poetic engagement in favour of mere showmanship. Another, promulgated by Robert Potts in his argument against her T.S. Eliot Prize win for *The Beauty Of The Husband* in 2001, decries her experiments with form and ambivalent attitude to poetic tradition as actually concealing a ‘crashing inability’ to produce more conventional poetry. These two criticisms, while both focussed on proving that the emperor has no clothes, emerge from different traditions and ideas about the ‘ideal’ poetry, and utilise Carson as part of their own discourses on how to preserve or defend those ideals. In examining and assessing them, Carson’s position in the modern poetic landscape, and her usefulness as a focal point for discussions of form and language, will become more evident.8

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For Solway, Carson is a figure of allusive superficiality, ‘dabbling... in poetry and scholarship without having to know much about either’\(^9\). Carson’s ‘charlatanism’,\(^{10}\) in this context, is supposedly founded on a deceptive veneer of academic intimidation and genre sleight-of-hand that conceals a fatal lack of depth. Carson, for Solway, becomes a cultish figure adored by readers and critics bewitched by her cynical performance of profundity. *The Critical Survey Of Poetry*’s summary of this side of the argument in Carson’s biography, stripped of invective, is that ‘she hides behind myth and allusion or uses them to isolate herself’\(^{11}\). Solway’s charges make more sense when expanded beyond Carson herself to the wider debate, in which he is participating, about the place and state of poetry in the 20\(^{th}\) and 21\(^{st}\) century, as first modernism and then postmodernism rewrote and deconstructed ideas of poetic worth, value and purpose. Solway’s position is as self-defined defender of a code of ‘genuine’ value in poetry, and specifically the lyric, of poetry that cultivates the purity of connection between person, language and the real. In explicit opposition to this, in Solway’s conception, is Carson, whose ‘conversations’ (to use the term loosely) with cultural figures, paratactic statements and exploratory assemblies of form are representative of the threatening force of postmodernism and the allusive, bizarre and apparently depthless poetic ‘play’ that has developed from Lyotard’s ‘incredulity towards meta-narratives’\(^{12}\) to question and subvert existing poetic conventions and structures.

There are many difficulties with Solway’s approach, not least because of postmodernism itself, which by its nature strongly resists having one avatar or symbolic exemplar of its approaches. Carson is similarly difficult to locate solely within

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10 Solway, “The Trouble With Annie”.


one tradition or counter-tradition. That protea quality provides great potential for the use of her work as theoretical basis, as this thesis will establish, but to use her as a figurehead for poetry’s postmodern state, as Solway does – he facetiously labels her ‘the higher Oprah’ for summarising ‘the condition of poetry at the present cultural juncture... the drive to produce (and eulogise) poems that contain scarcely a pellet of genuine or discernible content, the slightest hint of cohesive form or the merest geode of a memorable phrase’\textsuperscript{13} – is to approach both her and postmodernism itself from the wrong direction. Labels are viscerally resisted in Carson, even those so structurally anti-label as postmodernist, an intent which should be incorporated into analysis. It is an explicit part of her approach, as demonstrated by her scornful response to an interviewer’s enquiry about whether the unclassifiable nature of her work in bookstores (in this case, \textit{Plainwater}) was ‘a problem’ for her: ‘Not a problem but a question – what do ‘shelves’ accomplish, in stores or in the mind?’\textsuperscript{14} This is not mere grandstanding but a kind of \textit{modus operandi}. Her attitude to ‘shelves’, it will be explained, is more one of simultaneous recognition and rejection than of wholesale belonging. It is, at its heart, deeply restless work.

Potts, meanwhile, appears superficially to target the same parts of Carson as Solway – he refers to her ‘fashionable philosophising’ and ‘almost artless grafting-on of academic materials’\textsuperscript{15} – but his criticism emerges from a defence of a different area of poetic discourse. Carson, in Potts’s view, in failing to fully commit to the strictures of the forms with which she has lined her text – her elegiac couplets are ‘doggerel’, her boundary between realism and allegory apparently unclear – declares herself as ‘de-

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{13} Solway, “The Trouble With Annie”.
\textsuperscript{14} Ian Rae, \textit{From Cohen to Carson: The Poet’s Novel In Canada} (Toronto: McGill University Press, 2008), 221.
\textsuperscript{15} Potts, ”Neither Rhyme Nor Reason”. 
liberately anti-poetic’, with an ‘unbecoming contempt for the medium’\(^{16}\). How, though, does Potts define the poetic medium, and how does this affect the shape of Carson’s apparent contempt? The rest of the T.S. Eliot Prize review is telling: he favours Geoffrey Hill as the more deserving victor, a poet whom it is easy to place in opposition to Carson as old guard to new, the nationalist, elegiac ‘language of the past largely invented by Victorians’\(^{17}\) versus the depth-averse, abstract modern interloper. However, Hill and Carson are more closely connected than this dichotomy would suggest, united by their explicit love of the challenging or ‘difficult’ in poetry and their use of strong academic foundations for creativity, so this is not Potts’s placing of traditionalist above the new. His argument instead centres on the role of form in poetry, and its primacy alongside language: in his defence of the famously obscure JH Prynne, Potts quotes approvingly Prynne’s own belief that ‘pretentiousness, sentimentalism and expressive disordering (i.e. muddle dignified as experiment)’\(^{18}\) are not the tools of a skilled poet. His promotion of Prynne proves that he is no opponent to the non-lyric and experimental, but his dismissal of Carson can be seen as linking poetry’s aesthetic value to commitment to form: her sliding between ‘confessional-style realism’, lyricism, philosophy and theoretical detachment is, for Potts, a sign of failure.

These critics, then, target Carson as the representative of a debate on poetic form and its fragmenting, and whether this endangers a core value in poetry or opens new possibilities for its vitality. Thus the two criticisms emerge from linked but distinct areas of contention in modern poetic practice, and both show how Carson’s interesting position in that landscape, her confronting and occasionally confusing work, makes her deeply suited for a discussion of the ‘limits’ of poetry. Where does Carson

\(^{16}\) Potts, “Neither Rhyme Nor Reason”.
stand in the landscape of 20th and 21st century poetics, and how does this provide her with a perspective that can be used for this discussion?

Her alignment with postmodernism is not an entirely comfortable one, partially because of postmodern poetry itself (if such a collective term is possible) and partially because of her own distinctive and conscious separation from certain elements. If there are dominant techniques in postmodern verse, they are ‘displacement of the subject and of narrative, expression de-emphasised in favour of fragmentation and constructivism’\(^\text{19}\), as summarised by Michael Robbins – yet Robbins uses this description as part of an angry argument against postmodern anthologies, noting that the propensity to gather such poems together under one heading actually creates a sense of collective identity, a non-mainstream postmodern canon, that was not previously extant and is indeed against much postmodern thinking.\(^\text{20}\) The ‘condition of poetry at the present juncture’ is therefore not as simple or straightforwardly united as Solway portrays it, and Carson’s position as its representative is correspondingly unbalanced. Yet the main part of Solway’s criticism lies in the value of certain poetic techniques in Carson that he sources in postmodernism, and it is to these that I will now turn.

Carson clearly has strong links to many elements of postmodernism. Her scepticism of the powers of language and the lasting possibilities of art, her emphasis on parataxis and her conscious invocation of the reader are reminiscent of the works of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and those associated with them, for example Susan Howe’s *Chanting At The Crystal Sea*.\(^\text{21}\) Hank Lazer’s summary of the elements that characterise that loosely affiliated group runs close to many of the characteristics of


\(^{20}\) Robbins, “Ripostes”.

Carson’s own work: ‘Rather than taking the traditional view of poetry as a staging ground for the creation and expression of an ‘authentic’ voice and personality, Language writing arose from a fragmented sense of the self, affirmed the modernist emphasis on radical experimentation with literary form, blurred gender boundaries… and sought actively collaborative relationships between reader and writer’. In this sense, Carson is seen as following the linear ‘development’ of poetic form from modernism to postmodernism in her own work. Indeed, one can see distinct ties to Carson in Language poet Lyn Hejinian’s introduction to The Language Of Inquiry where she says, ‘Language is nothing but meanings, and meanings are nothing but a flow of contexts. Such contexts rarely coalesce into images, rarely come to terms. They are transitions, transmutations, the endless radiating of denotation into relation.’

This attitude, as I will examine in Chapter 2, manifests in Carson as a deep Wittgensteinian scepticism with classical roots.

So far, so clear: but the idea of Carson as figurehead for any postmodern school is deeply flawed for a variety of reasons. For one, many elements in her arsenal of techniques are more firmly situated in traditional modernism than postmodernism: impressionism, the interior perspective, and rejecting the structure of ‘realist’ narrative, for instance. For another, while Solway explicitly positions Carson as part of a binary, representative of a poetic assemblage of depthlessness that breaks off entirely from poetry’s ‘authentic’ lyric past – he asserts that ‘what Carson does... has been done before, done better and done authentically’ – Carson’s work justifies a more nuanced position. The texts’ interrogation of what authenticity means in poetry

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24 Solway, “The Trouble With Annie”, emphasis mine.
probe the boundaries of expression and the processes of art. As an example, the overt allusiveness that Solway targets as a manifestation of her manipulation of modern sensibilities, substituting name-dropping for what he believes to be ‘real’ academic commentary, is a problematic element of Carson’s poetics that points to considered criticism rather than straightforward poststructuralist aping. The Short Talks, Carson’s most famously explicit inter-authorial works, are deeply isolated in their brevity and spacing. They unweave the concept of an inescapable Kristevan ‘mosaic of quotations’, and instead contain an impinging authorial presence in conversation with the famous and influential. “On Ovid”, for example, begins with authorial assertion: ‘I see him there on a night like this but cool, the/moon blowing through black streets’ (32). “On The Mona Lisa” has the second sentence ‘Don’t tell me he was painting his mother, lust, et cetera’ (37), while “On Sylvia Plath” begins with ‘Did you see her mother on television?’ (38). The idea of the plural text, of writing-as-rewriting, that Solway saw as an ‘IKEA-type’ assemblage of quotations violating poetry’s inherent requirement to be ‘original’, is a problematised part of her work, containing overt authorial control. While Solway believes implicitly in the cardinal virtues of originality and authenticity, Carson’s texts use a poststructural technique to complicate it and to contemplate how originality and authenticity might work in modern poetry.

This ambivalence is a central feature of Carson’s placement in the postmodern and poststructural. Possibly the best term for Carson’s position is ‘self-conscious’ – and while that self-consciousness could be argued to emerge potently from postmodernism, she deploys it in decidedly ambivalent ways. While her works embrace the fragmentary and incoherent, using shattering, form experimentation and disar-

27 Solway, “The Trouble With Annie”. 
rangement, they also contain a narrative propulsion, a pull towards coherence, that separates them from the boundaries laid out by Robbins’ postmodern anthologies and aligns the, more closely with the concerns of modernist writers, who were ‘deeply attached to what seemed to have evaporated or been discarded’ by the conditions of modernity, and indeed with pre-modernist lyricism. Rather than manifesting a straightforward suspicion of narrative, Carson’s work is involved with life stories and trajectories, particularly biographical and autobiographical modes. While, in Chapter 2 of this thesis, I will establish that these modes are rendered equally as suspicious as any other genre that claims to establish a stable relationship between language and truth – she targets history, anthropology and film – Carson is undeniably drawn to, and focussed on, the traditionally linear, and moves within that limitation. Fragments of the lives of the famous in ‘Short Talks’, the central love stories of Beauty of the Husband, Autobiography of Red and Red Doc>, the pilgrimage narratives of Plainwater, the biography of Emily Brontë that underpins Glass Essay: all demonstrate a return to the underlying rhythm of the lived life as poetic structure and foundation. One could argue that all these examples are meant to expose any attempt at modern narrative as facile. However, it seems more viable to think that Carson is actually producing what Robin Blaser termed a ‘carmen perpetuum, a continuous song in which the fragment-ed subject matter is only apparently disconnected.’

Thus an interrogation of ‘authenticity’ and its possibilities, the value that Solway places her so firmly against, is at the heart of Carson’s work, and at the core of her value to my examination of contemporary poetics. It is impossible, for instance, to regard as fully postmodern a poet who so frequently returns to the potentiality of art

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29 Robin Blaser in Rae, From Cohen To Carson, 21.
as representational of experience and emotion, even if these excursions are often investigations of failure: if this is Fischer and Marcus’s famous ‘crisis of representation’\textsuperscript{30}, it is a crisis Carson appears to repeatedly try and solve. From The Glass Essay through The Beauty Of The Husband, Autobiography Of Red and Nox, there is a core of misunderstood, mistranslated if you will, expressions of love – for lovers, husbands, brothers, between Hercules and the monster Geryon – interacting with the frolic of famous personages and protean forms that so infuriated Solway and his compatriots. It is, in other words, not devoted to irony and ‘waning of affect’, but still in pursuit of modernist and pre-modernist expression of the self and emotional connection through art.

This repetition of the personal positions Carson as one of the poets probing Solway’s binary: is lyric realism the only way to produce authentic expression? Indeed, her poem-essay “Flatman (1\textsuperscript{st} Draft)” in Men In The Off Hours can be read as an ironic comment on postmodernism and her critical placement within it, as she adopts the guise of a circus ‘flatman’, a 2-dimensional creation rendering all of existence onto a single parodic plane:

I was born in the circus. I play the flat man.

My voice is flat, my walk is flat, my ironies
move flatly out to sock you in the eye. [....]

My flat world cost only $2 to view
at first, later this price like others went up.

This can be interpreted as Carson’s self-comment on the ‘affectless’ postmodern landscape, all pastiche and irony and no depth, and her self-conscious, deeply sceptical presence within it. She is impersonating, stepping within the flat skin of, Solway’s ‘flat’ postmodern head-priestess, to whom both ‘brute natures and angels in transparent draperies all alike’, both high and low culture, come to observe and be transformed alike. Ultimately, however, it is both sarcastic and distancing, finishing with an evocation of a piece of art invulnerable to ‘her’ flattening power:

Not Beethoven – Beethoven I cannot flatten.

Thus the poem ends on a rounding-out, on a lyric three-dimensionality that aligns directly with the art Solway argues she is destabilising and devaluing. This situates her at a kind of crossroads of postmodern and more traditional techniques, within a realm that explains her significance to contemporary poetics: that of the experimenter, the protean artist who creates in liminal space and is perpetually probing what ‘genuine’ art actually means. It is this aspect that will prove so valuable to my discussion of formal experimentation at the limits of poetry.

If Carson is more complex and more sceptical than Solway’s interpretation allows, she is also a direct challenge to Potts’ beliefs about the value of poetic form. For both critics, Carson represents a poet whose experiments conceal an inability to undergo the more supposedly difficult or rigorous demands of the traditional. Yet Potts’ stance has more in common with than may be immediately obvious. Carson’s formal experimentations are often not complete fragmentations or releases into incoherence, but cycles, splices and blurrings: Anthropology Of Water, for example, streams together quoted haiku, the essay form, the epic, pilgrimage narrative and love poetry, interspersing and interrelating. It is, of course, easy to view Carson’s multiplicity of forms
as evidence of her position as a jack of all trades and master of none. However, this thesis will assert that Carson’s form-arrangements are more productively viewed as a kind of solution to a Wittgensteinian scepticism of language. This point will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2, but Carson’s ambivalence towards form should be interpreted not as what Potts characterised as ‘contempt’, but the opposite: a revising and reconstituting of forms and their combinations in pursuit of a vitalisation of poetic expression.

This account of the critical terrain gives the unfair impression of Carson’s work as two-streamed, with a veneer of on-trend hybridity and name-dropping covering a more directly traditional poetic exploration of the personal and preservation of form. However, this conception is flawed, and plays into Solway and Potts’ concept of ‘real’ poetry as heavier, more profound, deeper. In fact, all aspects of Carson’s work are heavily interrelated, part of the same poetic, experimental mission. The postmodern aspects and formal fragmentations of the texts are more effectively pictured as part of a panoply of techniques and approaches, utilised to interrogate poetry’s continued value in the face of ambiguous, failing language. She is not opaque or fraudulent, in this sense, but can be used as a free agent in examining solutions to some of modern poetry’s challenges, from linguistic limits to the role of form. Her texts are a good example of what Ian Davidson calls alternative poetry’s ‘space’: the experimental poet’s self-created playground for the exploration of new understandings.

It is more coherent to view Carson’s work as interacting with, and critiquing, various poetic traditions rather than settling within a single trend or movement, and this is the basis for my selection of her work as bellwether of form in this thesis: not as traditional lyric poet masquerading in contemporary clothing or as the freakish

'Flatman', but as creator of the Flatman, ringmaster in the centre of (and above, and outside) every circus ring. She is a mover between forms and thicknesses, and also suffers a continual shifting of her own direction and productions. These shifts are a crucial element to consider, as they mark the importance of self-conscious repositioning in her creative process. A repeated feature of Carson’s work is the command in the second person, superficially directed at the reader but also doubling as directives to herself, and concerned with the process of writing and creation (and decreation). It is one of the more consistent elements of her works – consider these two examples, from texts eighteen years apart, both drawing on the metaphor of Japanese calligraphy:

Try laying your rice paper directly on the campground to paint. The bumpy lines are like not knowing. (*Just For The Thrill*)

Use a distant brush
to paint these things. Do not
redip. ("Short Talk On The Withness Of The Body")32

Reiterated themes throughout the body of her work are an element of Carson’s poetics that this introduction will address in more detail later, but this is a good demonstration of her career-long self-consciousness of her own praxis, and its incorporation into the core of her work. How does one place one’s brush? What is the best, most authentic way to create? These statements of ‘advice’ around such questions are both inside and outside, commanding the poet while simultaneously being acts of cre-

ation – a complex liminal space that positions Carson as perpetually self-evaluative, never wholly residing ‘within’ a text as creator or part of any distinct tradition. This uneasiness enables her to play with different elements of poetic schools, uniting the personal with the lyric, the abstract with the intense close-up. It is also the essence of her use for this thesis: as evaluative tool in a consciously exterior space. This, then, is the response to Solway and Potts, and their allegations of superficiality, formal failure and callous, depthless piecemeal knowledge-play: what appears as unproductive posing in Carson is actually part of a performance of evaluation, ceaselessly probing the future of poetics from every direction.

Contemporary scholarship on Carson also demonstrates her potential for discussions of language and form in poetry, mostly in its interesting conservatism. Its current direction tends to focus on thematics and contextual elements, a dangerous position for a volatile artist whose own concepts of ‘value’ and ‘worthwhile artistic production’ are under such continual and pressing interrogation. In this sense, Solway and Potts are a welcome part of her world: if poetry, as Lee Upton argued after Harold Bloom, is ‘the language of defence’33, perpetually examined for its value and purpose, then detractors are an essential part of the landscape of its survival. Doubt, for Carson, is an essential ingredient, whether produced inside or outside the text. Scholarship around Carson also has a tendency to focus not only on specific works but also on specific interpretations of those works in context. Indeed, it shares a common vice with Solway and Potts in that it often uses Carson as a figurehead for movements that are, in the words of Meghan O’Rourke, ‘trendy’34 – and Carson’s work, as I have demonstrated, is sufficiently elusive/allusive that it can be made to fit many purposes.

33 Upton, Defensive Measures, 15.
and discourses. Her adoption by queer scholars and critics of women’s work in experimental contemporary poetry are both sophisticated interpretations – she does, after all, negotiate at length with figures of feminist and queer identity (Gertrude Stein, Sappho) and stray very far from the ‘realist origins’ of pre-modernist narrative—though neither approach fully grapples with the heart of Carson’s work, its subversive over-written structural development, its self-destructive interrogation of poetry’s form and function. This repeated act of embracing Carson as emblematic or suggestive of a wider trend points to the inherent protean quality of her texts, their ability to slip in and out of many schools.

Translation is one of the more intriguing elements of Carson’s work that render it fit for purpose as a means of examining poetics. Her distrust of shared meaning, embracing of uncertainty and fraught relationship with originality find their roots in and are reflected by her classical scholarship and translation, and those roots are the heart of her value to a reevaluation of poetry’s future. Her inbuilt reflections on the porous nature of language, the difficulty of transmitting meaning and the futility of text creation can be seen as drawn not from postmodernism’s distrust of the ‘transparent transmission of knowledge’ but from translation’s perpetual challenges, whether in Nox or If Not Winter. It is this preoccupation with the viability of the written word, filtered through a prism of silence and the untranslatable, that pushes her work to the limits, and it is at those limits, I will argue (particularly in Chapter 2), that

35 Rae, From Cohen To Carson, 31.
37 Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue, editors, We Who Love To Be Astonished: Experimental Women’s Writing and Performance Poetics (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 1.
we need to locate our contemplation of poetry’s possibilities, and to embrace doubt as a productive force.

The last aspect of Carson that makes her useful is her embrace of the incomplete. She is not just propelled by new and transformative artistic ideas with every work, but also by continual rewriting, being what Susan Sontag called ‘repetitive, obsessive and impolite’38. Echoes do not just become interesting parts of Carson’s work to be noted by critics – the figure of the wolf with the seed in his ear, for example, or the repeated line ‘I am an unlocated window of myself’ spread across several texts – but the core of her praxis. Any idea must be perpetually rewritten, re-understood, re-transformed: ‘it’s a convenient form we have in culture, the book in which you can make stuff,’ she told Stephen Burt in a 2000 interview, ‘but it’s becoming less and less satisfying. And I’ve never felt that it exhausts any idea I’ve had.'39 That word ‘exhausts’ is telling: it denotes concerted work. To progress chronologically through Carson’s works and assess their ‘development’ is to avoid the fact that they are not only developing in the conventional sense and obeying linear concepts of artistic time, but also circling, gnawing at reiterations of doubt and inexpressibility, around a core of unstable and flawed language.

This idea of ‘rewriting’ contains a strong link to Andre Lefevere’s popular interpretation of translation itself as rewriting rather than as seamless transmutation40, but it also reflects on the concept of ‘original’ artistic creation itself and the notion of solid, inviolate poetic works. Carson’s work can be seen as interplay between the notion of individual, self-enclosed work and of manifestations of ideas approached and

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38 Sontag quoted by O’Rourke, “Hermetic Hotties”.
interrogated from different angles. I suggest that we view this through the prism of Lyn Hejinian’s influential ideas in “The Rejection Of Closure” about the collusion of closure and openness in modern experimental poetics. Hejinian’s description of the ‘conflict between a desire to satisfy a demand for boundedness, for containment and coherence, and a simultaneous desire for free unhampered access to the world’ is a good articulation of Carson’s polyvalent attitude to bounded texts. What Hejinian offers as a combination of rigorous, bounded form and open, raw material – a ‘flowering focus on a distinct infinity’ – is manifested in Carson’s texts as a kind of repeating perpetual motion within original work that opens them beyond traditional concepts of textual boundaries. Some commentators, including Lee Upton, believe that Carson’s ‘chains of effect are to be re-interrogated without ultimate closure, as her re-draftings and even obsessive repetitions of narrative suggest’, but it is my contention that in Carson closure does retain its vital appeal. The endings of her works often satisfy an internal rhythm that would be out of place in writing that rejected solidity: the finality of ‘It was not my body, not a woman’s body, it was the body of us all./It walked out of the light.’ in The Glass Essay (47), of ‘E ulti e sus eja Deus adiuva nos!’ in The Anthropology of Water, bring both projects to a close musically and thematically. Instead, rewriting should be regarded as the crux of her poetry: not only her essays should be regarded in the original sense of the word, as ‘attempts or trials’, but her entire output should be seen as essaying, as exploring and reacting to the concept of a bounded, singular text. As she says in Eros the Bittersweet, her reflection on clas-

43 Upton, Defensive Measures, 28.
44 Upton, Defensive Measures, 225.
sical desire: ‘To be running breathlessly, but not yet arrived, is in itself delightful, a suspended moment of living hope.’

The works chosen for investigation in this thesis may seem surprising, given that none of them counts among Carson’s most famous output: that honour goes to Autobiography of Red and The Beauty Of The Husband, for which she is best known and around which the dominant part of relevant scholarship circles. However, Nox, Just For The Thrill, Glass Essay and “By Chance The Cycladic People” are major works in their own right, and are both deeply individual texts and exemplars of the relationships, themes and motifs that shape Carson’s output. As this is a thesis that focuses on establishing Carson’s pushing of the boundaries of form, genre and language as part of an analysis of boundary-pushing as the future of poetry, the works selected are highly formally innovative. Chapter 1 will be a one-text discussion presenting Nox, the elegy to her brother, as an example of Carson’s transformation of the modern conception of elegiac texts and their value and purpose, and as representative of her characteristic cycle of creation and destruction in poetic form. The influence of the idea of poesis will be traced through her transformation of Catullus’s elegy 101 into a leviathan transcript of photocopied, fragmented grief, and mistranslation. This discussion will open out in Chapter 2 into a wider interpretation of Carson as innovator, engaging with philosopher Fritz Mauthner and the works of Samuel Beckett to frame her as a force for transforming modern poetic form. It will be argued that Carson’s poetic praxis centres on doubt and the failures of human language, and that this provides a kind of solution for poetry in the face of these difficulties.

CHAPTER ONE

After Elegy: Destabilising Form In Nox

Introduction

Anne Carson’s Nox, published in 2010 by New Directions, garnered critical attention for its innovative presentation as much as for its elegiac contents. Critics praised its weighty concertina of pages, in their own made-to-fit box, in the language of assessing an art object: Ben Ratliff at the New York Times called it ‘precious in the word’s best sense’, while Andrew Motion at The Guardian called its ‘raw materials of elegy... a brilliantly curated collection.’46 This intersection of experimental object and experimental text is, as will be explored in the following chapter, a sad pun: even the heavy presence of Nox as object in the world cannot solve the inherent difficulty of elegy, which tries to make a real object out of an absent subject. Yet it serves as an excellent way to introduce the most intriguing element of Nox: that it negotiates the form of elegy through destabilising it, not in the mould of traumatic 20th-century elegy, but in a cycle of poetic struggle that renders that inherent structural difficulty as productive. This cycle, I will argue, provides an interesting model for the relationship between form and the inexpressible in contemporary poetry, with implications not only for the future of elegy but for contemplations of poetic form itself.

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Section 1: The Forms Of Death

The act of writing elegy is the performance of a negotiation between absence and presence. The question of whether it is in fact possible to represent or honour a vanished loved one has been played out in elegy since its beginnings in Greek tragedy and funeral rite, and Carson’s Nox is a modern interpretation of that struggle. Nox, an elegy in the form of collaged poetry, art and translation for Carson’s elder brother Michael, is both an exceptional grief-object and a self-denying one: Carson simultaneously constructs and destroys her approach to the elegy form, at once establishing a unique position and degrading or eroding it. The thesis of this chapter is that Carson’s particular form of elegy exists in the state of poesis, the emergence from chaos that categorises the Greek theory of imaginative creation. Nox does not emerge from this state, but remains within it, challenging both the ‘form’ of elegy and the notion of a complete grief-text. Carson’s lament for her brother, according to this idea, is not one of traditional consolation, but is closer to what elegy specialist Jahan Ramazani calls the ‘violent and ambivalent’ attitude of modern elegists.47 However, it is also a piece of ‘grief-work’48 that performs the absence-presence paradox through a process of destruction of form, a performative aspect in which Carson is clearly invested, given Nox’s staging as a dance piece in 2012.49 Carson, then, is being subversive to the end of questioning the viability of elegy, and its denial of death through text – but her subversion self-complicates, both resurrecting and condemning elegy’s form, in a doubtful cycle. It is therefore possible that Nox is an elegy for elegy itself: an evaluation of the possibilities of the form, and an attempt at renewing its vitality in text.

49 Nox was performed as a dance piece in March 2012 in New York’s Danspace Project.
The choice to classify the form of *Nox* as elegy rather than eulogy is based on a distinction in poetic purpose. Though Carson herself does not reference either term, the elegy form is distinguished from the eulogy by both artistic intent and position in time: Jean Bethke Elshtain characterises eulogy as ‘a lament for that which is truly lost’, as opposed to elegy’s ‘rhapsody for something fading but with the power to touch us still’.\(^5^0\) Elegy as a textual form is traditionally poetic and forges a connection with the dead, while eulogy is plain speech and performs an acceptance of their complete separation from the living. Yet it is the rhapsodic element in time that takes *Nox* beyond a eulogy delivered for a specific occasion to the more universal elegy, which was designed for preservation and repetition beyond the occasion of death. Classically, the difference in definition centres on the divide between verse and plain prose, as experts on ancient Greek elegy distinguish the elegy form by two characteristics: its distinctive couplet structure (in either elegiac hexameter or pentameter), and its performative songlike aspect, accompanied by an instrument called an *aulos*.\(^5^1\)

Carson’s decision to include the somewhat halting, brittle, reductive eulogy at Michael’s own funeral – her dismissive mention of ‘a long speech... about dew and Christ and shooting stars and the merciful palm of God’ (10.2), and her reproduction of the shouting sparseness of Michael’s partner’s speech (‘I DO NOT WANT TO SAY THAT MUCH ABOUT MICHAEL/YOU ALL KNOW HIM IN DIFFERENT WAYS’, 10.2) as the end of *Nox* is an indication of the text’s views on eulogy’s limitations. The eulogy in *Nox* is deliberately meagre, distant and suffused with inappropriate religious paradigms and a sense of displacement from death.

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The history of elegy itself is strong throughout Carson’s text, and must be established as a reference point. Specifically, elegy and lamentation, from the Greek *elegia*, carry certain components with which Carson is directly involved: the idea of elegy as subversive to accepted public forms, and the concept of the female as the accepted vocal griever or ‘mouth’ of grief. Modern studies of elegy as both an historical form and a poetic tradition frequently highlight its position as external, as ‘a challenge’ to accepted methods of thinking and action. Elegy is utilised in the Homeric epics as ‘anti-heroic’, as an opposing and harrowing voice to the pursuit of wartime glory, and is a discourse of subversion lasting thousands of years. The modern, post-World-War elegy’s framing as fraught – Ramazani characterises it as ‘vexed, self-aware, riddled with tensions’ – is thus not a total transformation but a development in kind. Carson’s own oeuvre of elegy-centric texts, particularly her grief for an ended relationship in *The Glass Essay* and her work on retelling the Greek play *Antigone*, all enter a context of dispute and disruption of conventional mourning forms. Elegy in Carson’s oeuvre is not contained in death but in contemplating representation after endings: *The Glass Essay* is an exploration of personal griefs and absences on multiple levels, from the eroding consciousness of her father to the ‘visions’ of pain and death in grieving a lost love. She herself refers to the elegy form as historically ‘polyvalent’, a genre with a poetic openness beyond its most obvious associations. This question – how does one truly know or represent another person, after they cease to be pre-

53 Abbie Findlay-Potts in Uppal, *We Are What We Mourn*, 13.
sent? – is the central paradox of elegy, and it appears throughout Carson’s work. *Antigonick*, her reworking of *Antigone* post-*Nox*, is particularly interesting for its parallels in topic: a sister mourning for a brother before being walled into her own silence, for daring to vocalise for the disgraced or absent dead.

Carson’s approach to elegy is broad and complex, tracing concerns with the mortality of text, the fragility of identity and the flexibility of mourning in form. It has parallels in Susan Howe, Amy Clampitt and Anne Sexton, all of whom have produced elegies at once passionate and probing of what this lamenting form bequeaths them and what it means. It is not alone on the landscape of poetic elegy by women, but it is singular. Her translations of Sappho explore the possibility of meaning after destruction, an element this discussion will identify in detail in *Nox*. The continual poetic motif of her dementia-wrecked father in *The Glass Essay* and *Plainwater*, who is and yet is not – he exists in a liminal space of mourning, where speech and identity have deserted him – is an elegiac presence. Interestingly, her father – and thus Michael’s – does not appear in *Nox*; possibly one personal representational snarl of difficulty would confuse the lines of the other. Elegy must, its historical origins dictate, be questioning and self-questioning to survive, and Carson’s *Nox* is her latest exploration of the boundaries of the form. If one can envisage it in the same terms as *Antigonick*’s denouement, *Nox* is her own walled-in room, her own small classical world of grief: it is her ‘room I can never leave’ (7.1), in which she accepts the burden of mourning and vocalising a disgraced, abandoning brother. The distinction, of course, is that the audience never hears from Antigone inside her tomb, while in *Nox* the reader enters the claustrophobic place of punishment alongside the poet, to watch her plumb its possibilities.

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The position of elegy as a defiant or counter-traditional form, positioned against the grain of dominant attitudes, attains more shape when the ‘feminisation’ of grief, both in classic and in modern conceptions of mourning, is taken into account. Carson’s elegy – importantly, for her brother – can be read as a contemplation of the history of lamentation as a ‘female’ property, an innately gendered voice. Elegy’s lamenting aspect has even been characterised by historians as ‘woman’s song’, so profound is this identification. However, while the alignment of a subversive genre with the ‘oppressed and marginalised’ sex is an obvious one, the history of elegy is more complex with regard to gender subversion than it immediately appears. From its origins as a female lamentation in Greek tragedy, elegy evolved, according to several critics, into a masculine-dominated arena, entirely obscured to the feminine except as ‘muse... or attendant nymph’; the elegy’s traditional role as mechanism for transferring economic power from deceased to elegist was an almost uniquely masculine performance. Elegy became a male instrument of power with a female vocal history, a strangely double-gendered form. Thus elegy can be seen as a site both vocally female and politically male, in which Carson is both the feminine songstress and the masculine inheritor of property. The feminine landscape of elegy bears the historical weight of male performance, a balance Melissa Zeiger characterises as Orphean: the male poetic figure ‘being imprisoned without release in a sphere of ‘female’ grieving and mortality’.

Within Nox this dual gender-form is questioned and displaced, replacing feminine lamentation and masculine poetic force with neutrality, cleanliness, absence: ‘It

59 Due, The Captive Woman, 32.
60 Uppal, We Are What We Mourn, 32.
is white and clean as an eggshell inside. I like cleanliness.’ (5.4). The only gendered elements are Michael's lovers, ‘naked except for some jewellery’ (3.2), their fleshiness and femininity in plain contrast to Carson’s own silence on the matter of her own mourning body, and Michael's mother, whose maternal ‘point of view’ (4.3) is hopeless, definition-less without Michael’s presence, characterised by an eternal listening: ‘When I pray for him nothing comes back’ (4.2). For Carson herself the ideal model, the ‘neutral’ – a word which recurs several times in the work – is plain, white against her brother’s ‘black, dense’ existence (5.2). Her small Antigone-esque grief-room, the one she ‘prowls’, ‘groping for the light switch’ (7.1), is one where light is the prime goal: she prioritises this over both female lamentation and male adoption of voice. Though mourning appears to bequeath her genders and forms, she aims for purity, the sheer matter of the un-gendered body, childlike and indeterminately sexed as Michael’s picture on the cover, and for reactions common to grief across genders: blushes, tears, falling. Thus the text allows the coexistence of both modes, expanding its exploration of grief-languages, and performing a new beginning of elegy-form from a more neutral place.

Nox is an artefact of grief that utilises poetic form in its most traditional, rhetorical sense: to apply logic and sense to chaos, logos to lexis. That Carson ultimately appears to find Michael’s death, and the process of elegising it, devoid of both sense and logic, if not beauty, is the central destructive tendency of the text. It is her characterisation of herself as the establisher of logos, of the boundaries of physical form, that drives and determines the poetry, and it is a role with complex ties to the historical origins of elegy. Carson may be seen as identifying with the traditional emergence of the elegist-as-poet: as inheritor of the deceased's lands through the process of delivering the lament. Classically, it is death that gives an heir both their legal presence in
the world and their ‘poetic voice’\textsuperscript{63}, a process of voice-validation that Carson both celebrates and rejects. While the first non-translated word of \textit{Nox} is ‘I’ – heavily symbolic of the production of her poetic self via death – it is couched in an immediate argument against itself: ‘But death makes us stingy’. Self immediately pluralises, diffuses, and the just-formed poetic self is abruptly rigidified and negated:

Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it. No matter how I try to evoke
the starry lad he was’ (1.0)

The poetic self, Carson’s ‘I’, is here arguing against its own existence – that she cannot ‘evoke’, that ‘words cannot add to it’ – and her own ability to complete any project of effective memorialising. This is not merely starting with a question she aims to answer, but a question that recurs throughout the entire elegy, weighing it down, rending her authorial self. Even the phrase ‘Death makes us stingy’ casts a shadow, implying with its punning echo of other famous pronouncements (‘Death, where is thy sting?’, 1 Corinthians 15:55) that the author’s prime duty, original expression, is impossible. Thus Carson’s relationship with her legacy, with her right to voice as a gift of the dead, is immediately parsed as complex – as denying. She forms the world of her elegy but quickly infuses it with muteness, images of the universe (‘starry’), violently negative and blank sentence form, and – after only six lines – a break from text entirely into the refuge of photography. The birth of Carson’s inherited poetic grief-voice is intentionally strained and challenging, eroding the form of lament. She inherits ambiguously, not wholly; Michael’s death ‘came wandering slowly

\textsuperscript{63} Peter Sacks in Uppal, \textit{We Are What We Mourn}, 7.
to me across the sea’ (6.1), an agent of its own poetic action, and she is reluctant to approach it.

The *logos-lexis* relationship in *Nox* can be drawn as an extension or performance of the relationship between Carson and her brother: Carson frames herself as the form to his content, the structural element to his flood and formlessness. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, when *Nox* was still a private text being passed among Carson’s friends, she referred tellingly to the process as ‘mak[ing] it into something containable’

\[64\] – a rhetoric of structure, of boxing and enclosing, that runs closely through her poetic power in *Nox*. That this is a difficult pairing from the beginning – form and content can never be separated so cleanly – is one of the tensions in *Nox* as a poetic piece, as Carson performs enclosure while simultaneously observing its limitations and watching the boundaries between herself and her voiceless, formless brother blur. The balance between sister-restraining and brother-overflowing is performed at the level of the sentence, his presence overwhelming her carefully stringent syntax with flushes of punctuation and action:

> When my brother died his dog got angry, stayed angry, barking, growling, lashing, glaring, by day and night. He went to the door, he went to the window, he would not lie down. (1.2)

Bangalore, Amsterdam, Kathmandu, Paris, Deinze, of the girl who died, usually naked except for some jewellery, a blonde delighted girl’ (3.2) exists in its own distinct pattern of litany, possessing an alien and startling rhythm. Its disruption is felt even in the line-breaks: ‘My brother dies in Copenhagen in the year 2000/a surprise to me’ (3.1) seems superficially casual, unbroken, yet the break, which in most theories of poetry denotes a place for breath,\(^65\) sunder the sentence, providing both divide and disturbance. In that breath is Michael’s geological disturbance of her terrain, his ‘dropping through every conversation like a smell of burning hair’ (4.3) – sensual, immediate. In this sense Carson’s prosopopoeia, her giving of voice to the death alongside her own voice, is not an act in which the two voices raise in chorus or complement one another. Instead, it splits the text, doubling its vocal character into contrasting forms\(^66\): her own un-sensory projection of self, and Michael’s sensuality. Yet Carson herself seeks anchorages, contemplating Herodotus (3.3) as well-rooted firmness against which to hold the suppleness of Michael’s voice.

Perhaps the best figuring of this form-content sister-brother binding in the text is the symbol, repeated wonderingly by Carson, of the egg: ‘yellow circle within a white oval’ (5.5). As I have said previously, the ‘white eggshell’ (5.4) for Carson denotes cleanliness, boundaries, a finality. This is not mere extrapolation – the colour spectrum of the work is white with ochre, and violent splashes of yolk-yellow paint appear on brother-text and brother-photograph, unbinding the blank-page encirclement of Carson’s ‘white oval’, her attempt to bring order and balance. Encirclement is at the centre of Carson’s elegy:

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\(^{66}\) Karen Elizabeth Smythe of Paul de Man’s ideas, *Figuring Grief*, 7.
enacts in wretched parenthesis an enclosure or cradling of her brother’s identity, and therefore his death. The feminine aspect of the egg metaphor is perhaps tongue-in-cheek, obviously recalling both birth and being trapped in the feminine space of grief, yet the puncturing of this sentence’s rhythm (‘oh poor brother taken from me’) with encircling lamentation is definitely redolent of hapless protection – of an encirclement that is too late. Recall here Seamus Heaney’s directive to ‘pine for ceremony/Customary rhythms’ in the aftermath of death; Carson’s ceremony is organic, down to the first principles of the natural world. It also contains an element of irony, of deliberate distancing: the utilisation of the metaphor of birth for a death-text is an inherently contradictory one, introducing an element of poetic ambiguity to the text’s grief process. Carson’s attempt to conflate the organic, birth-centric nature of the egg’s materiality with the experience of death – her parents’ egg sweaters, the interior of the church – is both an emphasis on cleanliness and form, and a peculiar paradox at the heart of elegy, with its emphasis on textual life beyond death.

Yet beyond this metaphor stretches a series of attempts to control or ‘form’ Michael’s voice and narrative and to actively question Carson’s own role as elegist. The physical lack of numberings on the text can be read as an assertion of privacy, as a removal of Nox from conventional public ‘readability’. Carson is also enacting a tension between making her brother’s memory communal and jealously preserving its familial nature. However, the lack also denotes an aspect of form-shaping: that Nox cannot be read except linearly, that there is no navigation beyond that provided by Carson herself. Control is the ultimate power of the historian-elegist: the collage-text

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67 Sacks in Uppal, We Are What We Mourn, 300.
68 Uppal, We Are What We Mourn, 11.
is Carson’s creation of artefacts, and her arrangements and selections, in their non-traditional and almost haphazard forms, emphasise that element distinctly. It is, however, necessarily a total power, and therefore a denial of agency to the dead, a silence Carson both embeds and battles within the text’s physicality. Michael cannot speak for himself, cannot order or project the shape of his own elegy – the sheer absence of text and evidence from him, beyond shards of telegrams, a handful of remembered telephone conversations and childhood photographs, renders him a distant spectator, invisible even to the less poetic and more rigorous memorialising of his eulogy (10.2). Yet Carson is uncomfortable with her total poetic grip over her brother: his photographs are copied, shadowed, traced, his letters repeated over multiple pages – to perform both the physical attempt to allow him mutual control, and its failure. She even gives space to his own elegising, his message to his mother about the death of a girl neither of them ever saw – and yet his text is so shattered, so far from her own ‘transactional order’ of academia and form, that she is forced to place a transcription beside reproductions of his letter, in huge dense blocks. Anna’s death, her own known self, is translated, communicated through Michael, his mother, the letter and finally Nox itself, until despite the heaviness of Michael’s text, its immediacy, its formlessness – ‘SHE LOST HER FEAR STARTED TO LIVE SHE MISSED A LOT AS A KID FELT SO DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS ANNA WAS TRULY A GIFT SHE DIED MARCH 24TH (3.3) – the reader simply senses a distance from the fact, a Chinese whisper of broken and eroded communication from the reality of Anna to her elegy. Michael’s own performance as elegist runs inside Carson’s as a grief-mirror, restricted hopelessly by language and meaning, and becomes another instance in which, despite efforts otherwise, her power over the text’s territory is absolute.

It is impossible to read Nox without encountering its status as a created text.
book of Carson’s, and she herself told an interviewer that she had gone to the top of a stairwell and let Nox unfurl down the central matrix, in apparent homage to the last words of the book: ‘He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears’. Its materiality – even in photocopied form, a liminal space that will feature later in this chapter – is undeniable and highly emphasised, with deliberately rough-edged collages, irregular placements and severed photographs transporting it from totem to art-object. Yet Carson’s emphasis on the visual becomes another dismantling of the elegy form, not through pure subversion or ‘difference’ from typical elegy, but through the continual erasure of visual codes of grief. The core of elegy is its attempt to make the dead ‘visible’, interpretable, and hence Carson’s difficulty with elegy as a form-in-the-world can be depicted as its inability to perform such a capture. This is an incapacity that Nox performs on an artistic as well as a lyrical level.

The language of invisibility permeates the text: ‘He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears’, Nox’s last lines, echo with other elements of nothingness. ‘When I pray for him nothing comes back’ (4.2) and Michael’s voice as ‘black, dense’ (5.2) create his death as an opposing force to his light-infused, warm-yolk life: a space, a gap, a parenthesis. It is invisibility and incompleteness that ravage the photographs, which would otherwise function as perfect lenses. Nox progresses from neat, almost quaint memories (see the father-son before 1.1, the shadow on the snow before 1.2, or the soap-box lakeside shot before 2.2) to fragments, sections, irregularly cut and splintered. This is not merely derangement in grief or the figuring of increasing distance in time, though it functions well as both. It is, at its most basic level, a denial of the possibility at the heart of elegy, and of photography: effective representation. Indeed, the notion of the book’s ’album’ form itself, from the Latin for ‘white’, as a blank area on

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which to inscribe memories – a blankness in form that permeates and swallows – infuses the physicality of the text with a context of muteness, of open space.

The interaction between text and the visual in Nox is complex, floating at levels of meaning beyond the easy or metaphorically distinct. Yet certain image-types and arrangements prevail: bars, burns, serrated edges, blanked-out or covered words. There is often a hovering, barely-touching relationship between text and image, broken by violence – see for instance Michael’s conversation after 8.1, covered in fine plastic shards, or the text of 5.6 covered in punctured ribs. This creates a presence of inherent distance, of thwarted attempts to establish closeness, both in physical text and in syntax. This distance is a denial of elegy form itself: elegy is classically produced by the closest relative or ‘voice’, yet Carson’s elegy is produced from distance, the fact of her relationship to her brother almost rendered as coincidence. Yet at other points the visual and the text mirror one another, in what is nearly a parody of an illustrated children’s book: the reference to her brother as Lazarus is headed by a black paper smeared with a face made of handprints, as if pulling his pale silhouette out of darkness, and the tree-house picture of 8.2 precedes its explanation by a page, dictating the foregrounding of the visual. The falsity of memory can only be touched accurately by perfect reproduction; description comes only a poor second.

However, the visual elements also draw strong references to the defacement of visual traditions of grief: preservation, monuments of remembrance, worship of the departed body. Nox enacts a kind of anti-embalming, of letting in Carson’s ‘many kinds of light’ (1.1) to the closeness and stasis of death. Indeed, Carson told an interviewer that she herself viewed her task in Nox as that of a pursuer of light: ‘Carl Sagan described the universe saying, ‘Well, it’s a million miles of dark empty space with

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70 Ramazani, *The Poetics Of Mourning*, 222.
nothing in it and no meaning, but there are a few places with light. We want to focus on the light places.’ I think that’s a good rubric.’ What Jeffrey Hammond calls the elegiac impulse to ‘embalm the name’ as a method of preserving essence is in Carson directly subverted: the name is instead scattered, derived from itself (re-typed over a letter in 4.1, given rich bold blurred lettering in 5.2), and surrounded by the incomplete, the severed or the ripped. The text eschews stillness for what is almost ritual scarring, in a way reminiscent of Ramazani’s theory of modern elegy: that it exists less to recuperate the dead than to dissect and devolve them. Ramazani’s 20th century war poets in particular are preoccupied with the reproduction of damage to the dead subject, honouring wounds by wounding their own poetic work: their forms are fragmented, incomplete, bombed with silence, in order to match the dismembered bodies of their subjects. Elegy, in this sense, has evolved beyond ‘preservation’ and consolation to an exploration of the fracturing of essence – by war, absence, trauma and so on. Thus Carson plays into a modern discourse of defacement, of attempting to dissolve excess weight and flesh to uncover meaning – a method made clearest by the relief-works in Nox, where black crayon, heavily applied, reveals white patterns scored underneath.

It is tempting to view Carson’s purpose in Nox as self-destructive: that it is a negotiation of absence through absence, that it mirrors or relates itself to Michael’s destruction (‘pays homage’ is too simplistic and traditional) through a destabilisation. Yet the act of poetic creation and emergence plays too strongly into the rhythms of the work to allow it to be entirely destructive. Instead, Nox may be conceived as a kind of state of flux that simultaneously establishes and destabilises, witnesses and

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71 Parul Sehgal, “Anne Carson”.
73 Ramazani, The Poetics Of Mourning, 220.
blinds, destroys and rebuilds. It is enacting the classic guilty tension of grief-work: that creative inspiration and production come from a loved one’s absence. Further, however, Nox is a doubt-text, one that infuses every completed statement with questioning and views solidity of concept and thought with suspicion: ‘It forms a lock against oblivion. Does it?’ (3.3).

Doubt is an active linguistic presence in Nox, corralling and infiltrating elements of apparent objectivity – time, place, history, even the physically reproduced texts of others. ‘My mother on her death bed (three years ago now)’ (2.1) is a statement separated from its apparently solid time-context by a flexing of parenthesis that reappears like a tic: ‘When I caught up to him in school (he was older by four years)’ (5.1), ‘when she first met him (Amsterdam)’ (5.3), ‘my parents were laid out in their coffins (years apart, incidentally)’ (5.5), ‘when my brother died (unexpectedly)’ (6.1), ‘our conversations were few (he phoned me maybe 5 times in 22 years)’ (8.1), ‘a photograph of him (taken in the bush behind Bald Rock)’ (8.2) and so on throughout. Carson’s confinement of ‘real’ detail within these pens renders it, if not irrelevant, then secondary, a whispered aside to the genuine flesh of the drama; Carson is, after all, also a dramatist. Anything that supposedly ‘forms a lock against oblivion’ must be distinct from the core of her elegy.

Time itself, and the concept of historical record, are also sites for deep suspicion in Nox, which both positions itself as historical document of record (‘My brother ran away in 1978’, ‘My brother dies in Copenhagen in the year 2000’) and destabilises the idea of a lasting ‘mark’, whether in language or image. According to Maurice Blanchot, writing ‘marks or [leaves] marks... writing is remembrance’, the preserv-
tion of the impermanent in permanent form – and yet Carson deliberately places Nox ambivalently, between an emphasis on heavy ‘marks’ and their distrust or destruction. Nox is an examination of the trace in time; it is a physical presence, like the shadow of the photographer traced onto a back in 1.1-2, and linguistic one, preserving Michael’s quotations and remainders of conversations in over-bold stark lettering, trying to anchor them as thoroughly as possible. Yet it is also, in taking Herodotus’s scepticism as a totem, suspicious of such ‘evidence’, subjecting it to endless mirroring, bleaching, X-rays and physical interrogations. Doubt as engine puts Nox through endless re-staging, attempting to make a mark and – as the text is unable to support itself – falling away. The concept of time-as-linear falls away before Carson’s circlings, replacing it with a cyclical landscape of erasure and resurgence.

Section 2: Language And Elegiac Forming

The elegiac form is therefore transformed in Carson’s hands, its historic patterns of subversion and expectation thrown into relief and broken apart – but it is in its denial of the self-confident, self-contained grief text, its hesitation to emerge from a partially-formed state, that Nox carries the strongest implications beyond elegy form itself. Its incorporation of failure and doubt into its formal structure, in order to negotiate the challenges of the inexpressible, is an effective demonstration of the creative potential of formal doubt.

There is a self-denying pattern visible in many layers of the text of Nox. It contains ‘the smell of nothing’ (1.2), both in form and in content, though whether one erodes or destroys the other is a question to be teased out in great detail. Even the most direct element of her brother in Carson’s possession, the one letter written to her mother ‘that winter the girl died’ (2.2), is turned over, examined from
multiple sides on four different pages, as if to both reveal its meaning and conceal its entirety. Language is, as Carson’s word-by-word examination of Catullus’s translation reveals, another element of objectivity in doubt: the text’s attempts to secure the meanings of Catullus’s elegiac Latin in full view of the reader point to an underlying insecurity, particularly considering that the dictionary definitions are wrinkled, pasted and seemingly transitory objects. The reduction of ‘fraterno’, for instance, to

[FRATER+NUS] of or belonging to a brother; proper to a brother,
brotherly, fraternal; honorific term applied to allies (8.5)

seems deliberately reductive and ambiguous, a very small word for the expanse of brotherhood Nox devotes so much space to examining. The monoliths of Michael’s own typed-out correspondence are laid on the page in bold black unpunctuated slashes, so overtly clear as to virtually make them unintelligible, a parody of the concept of producing clarity in meaning. Michael’s hand-written, mother-preserved ‘Love you. Love you.’ (10.1) is photocopied on the flip-side of a quotation by Herodotus, torn and glued – ‘I have to say what is said. I don’t have to believe it myself.’ (7.15.3). Behind meaning is doubt, and thus the core eroding force of the poetry shines out: what is a declaration of love, post-death or otherwise, in which one can believe?

Thus far I have neglected to discuss Carson’s segments of floating italicised text, because they will feature in a later segment on liminal space, and yet in this context they become of interest. Her italicised sections – brief sentences, small, in open space – are an act of destabilisation in and of themselves; they are cracks in the façade of the dominant linear narrative. Fragmentation is not a new element in modern textual discourse, but the fragmentation of elegy is innovative because of its violation of
traditional elegiac ‘wholeness’: the concept of a single piece of work for a single mourned essence. As the asides of the real ‘objective’ world are contained in parenthesis, so too is another layer of consciousness present in these collected fragments, which resurface without context as if drawn from another, vaster work, an echo or reflection of the one being constructed. Thus Nox cannot exist as an independent creation, but instead possesses a form fraught, as Anne Bradstreet’s elegies were once described, with ‘stress-marks’, parallel and perhaps more complete texts that are dismantled or partially visible.

The brief segments also, in their collaged physicality, draw the reader’s attention to the text’s standing as a made object, and here is one of Carson’s most parodic approaches to the elegy form. Form is physicality as much as space and arrangement of text, and Nox’s heaviness, its immense and unavoidable presence, forms a symbol of the work’s inadequacy to capture impermanence. In rendering her text almost exaggeratedly monolithic, far beyond the weight and height given to novels twice its textual length – and certainly not approaching the slenderness of traditional poetry volumes – Carson is highlighting what William Watkin identified as the paradox at the heart of elegy: ‘making physical, material works of art out of the very event that destroys our own physicality’. The exaggeration of the material aspect thus plays into an extant discourse on the material archiving of death, and while it works as a physical reminder of the burden of grief and the vastness of human experience, Nox is also self-defeating in its weight. It is, for all its bulky form, temporal in aspect – the pages are ripped, stapled, virtually on the edge of flying away – and the introduction of ‘many kinds of light’ into such a bundle of research becomes an impossible job. Nox

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76 Ramazani, The Poetics Of Mourning, 222.
also inhabits a hybrid space in textual genre, between the original notebook of its genesis and the scrolls of Catullus: a monster, like Carson’s own Geryon, marooned in a space without context. Nox resembles a tombstone: it is in its own mass asserting a negation of representation.

That the text is also a photocopy of an original notebook leads naturally to examining repetition and mirroring as an element of Carson’s text in flux. Liturgy, in its earliest forms, was a repetitive action; the first recorded dirges were, according to historical texts, the deceased’s name repeated over and over in a plea. Thus repetition infuses the elegy tradition, and yet Carson’s text, in filling its form with boundless mirrors and copies, invokes the concept of inviolable separation from truth and representation. The characterisation of the text’s form as an ‘enclosing’ or protective structure, of sisterly form to brotherly content, resounds again here: there is in Carson’s many acts of repetition both an attempt to frame or clarify, and an implied inability to do so. Photographs, translations, photocopied letters, quotations: the text is an arrangement of copies within copies, repeating some sentences (for example ‘My brother ran away’, 2.2) five times in a mockery of clarity through repetition. Nox is not an invocation through the repetition of name, but a formal experiment in the folly of replication of the dead as an endless resurrection-process. Ultimately the other side of the mirror is clouded or inaccessible, an image which recurs throughout the text:

Eventually she began to say he was
dead. How do you know? I said and she said When I
pray for him nothing comes back. (4.2)

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79 Watkin, On Mourning, 4.
This presents Michael as the other half of a failed connection, an echo in an abyss, who has ‘nothing to say’ (5.1) and blocks off his accessibility via language or markers (‘as I say he had changed his name’, 5.6). The gap between representation and object, in Nox, is a direct reference to the gap between presence and absence: inviolable and yet continually broached by painful attempts at meaning. Though Carson resists the image of herself and her brother as a halved pair, the idea of copies filters itself into the metaphor. ‘Repent means the pain again’ (5.5) is a summary of this impulse to create – even in the classical elegy form itself, which in modernity only produces ‘fainter and fainter copies of an unobtainable original’, a context of distanced repetition. Grief is in essence repetition, but it is always mangled in the attempt.

This cycle of perpetual, flawed grief-work is in itself a challenge to the concept of consolation and understanding, the inherent time-scape of traditional elegies. As I previously outlined, linear time is curtailed in Nox as a suspect element; an additional motive for this corraling may be the text’s resistance to the concept of an ‘end’ to grief, of elegy’s traditional function as developing catharsis. The elegy as language-journey towards the telos of cure or relief for both elegist and audience is a strongly traditional element – as well as inheriting voice, the elegist must attain closure. Yet this narrative cannot exist in a text removed from linear time, since it implies a ceasing of ‘the pain again’ and the removal of the text’s necessity. Instead, the text is resistant. It ends not with emergence from the cycle but with the bodily, the ritualistic, the earth-bound and fatalistic:

And then there’s the funeral feast or saekken afterwards. (10.3)

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The deliberate bathos of this moment, plunging the reader from expectations of succour into contemplating the human appetite, is a comment on the falseness of closure. Still more so is the final text:

*He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears.* (After 10.3)

This sentence, italics Carson’s own, is sing-song and repetitive; Michael is a static force beyond the movement of time or text, and ultimately, despite every attempt, beyond elegy’s reach. *Nox* is outside time due to time’s insistence on development; *Nox* itself is a refusal to fulfil Northrop Frye’s precondition for the existence of catharsis and ‘detach’ from the spectator and author, instead attempting a perpetual cocoon that must eventually disintegrate.

The elegy form of *Nox*, then, contains potent reflections on expressing the unsayable and the validity of the linear. Its incorporation of those elements into its formal structure produces a text with an unstable core of doubt, and provides a model for creativity under such conditions. *Nox* establishes, occasionally traumatically, its own liminal space of perpetual forming. The classical definition of *poiesis* is the emergence of form and light from darkness, and *Nox* – night – embodies both that darkness-space and the struggle to emerge in brightness from it. In this sense Carson echoes Rilke’s idea of death as the transmutation of form:

Death does not involve a sombre passage to a mysterious

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81 Smythe, *Figuring Grief*, 3.
Beyond; it is merely a transformation of one form of being into another.82

Nox is pure form-in-being, yet it is not entirely emergent; the destruction-and-resurrection mechanism of the text means that Nox is never fully formed but always in the cycle of destruction and creation. This is an alignment with Michael’s own essence, his chaotic, unformed life which cannot be ‘cooked’ by Carson’s attempts at enclosure in text; a more unstable, more uncertain work is, paradoxically, a more effective tribute or capturing. Ramazani’s idea that modern elegy is, instead of consolatory, embedded with ‘protracted strife’83 is re-imagined here at its furthest limit, replacing resolution and fully-formed text with endless creation, a process that elegises the static traditional elegy form. Thus the traditional light-darkness symbolic play in the text becomes an establishment of position on the border, and Nox emerges as a liminal text, actively establishing elegy-form as poesis itself. This eminently modern poetry can be seen to enact a return to first origins, as a means of negotiating and questioning the failures of form.

It is now necessary to briefly open the lens of my examination a little, to note the wider implications of this liminality. It is valuable to see Carson here as functioning within a vivid and well-populated 21st century context of poetic interrogation, as expressed by Joan Retallack in her seminal “What Is Experimental Poetry And Why Do We Need It?”, a section of which I will here quote in full:

The launching question of every formal experiment catapults one towards the unknown (often improbable) possible... During the second half of the twenti-

83 Ramazani, The Poetics Of Mourning, 226.
eth century many of us came to the idea of uses of language that are not only in conversation with the surprises, unintelligibilities and most intriguing messes of the contemporary moment but enact interrogation into its most problematic structures. A poetics that can operate in the interrogative, with epistemological curiosity and ethical concern, is not so much language as instrument to peer through as instrument of investigative engagement.84

The fundamental interest of Nox's embrace of/return to poiesis, then, is based not on arguments for its originality or subversion, but on its transformation of this poetics of interrogation. This is Retallack's encounter with the ‘unknown possible' transformed: a model of interrogation of the elegy form that fully, and repeatedly, engages with its ‘problematic structures'. Retallack refers to experimental poetry ‘re-composing' form, but (pun intended) Nox can be argued to be ‘de-composing', or constantly taking apart the elegy without ever fully putting it together again. In that sense, poesis shifts the focus of interrogation, refusing to defeat elegy's difficulties, and instead incorporating its ‘investigative engagement' into the production of form itself. Doubt, as will be fully explored in Chapter 2, here becomes formally fertile.

Close examination of the text reveals the unique conditions of its space of creation. Kristeva's theory, in Black Sun, that human language can only emerge from a first gigantic loss85 places Nox at the locus of the first language-noise, where Michael's death figures as the trauma that first allows expression to occur. It is a breaking of silence, a hardscrabble piecing together of language, and the presence of muteness as a safe space, a ‘fundamental opacity' (1.3) that Carson is reluctantly leaving, is a strong

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presence. This concept of loss as the space from which words emerge is a thread through Carson's other elegiac works: Just For The Thrill, mourning her father, begins with the question 'Who is that woman?', asked by him as she descends the stairs at night (188). The figuring of Michael's death in Nox as the culminating absence triggering expression is best imagined as astronomical, for the 'starry lad': as a black hole so powerful it can only be approached sideways, through history, elegy, academia, analogies of dogs. Nox builds gradually to the revelation of Michael's death through a network of distraction – as if attempting to take it, its traumatic heaviness, by surprise. The text is built around this absence, this founding 'muteness of my brother' which refuses to be 'cooked in my transactional order' (1.3) – Michael's muteness figures as the point of collapse from which Carson must enact her own expression, her own 'order', although his inexpressibility, his changing of names and histories (5.6, 2.2), will thwart her perpetually. Michael is the point at which all 'thinking about history' (1.0) begins, in which human time for Carson begins and thus reflection can be unleashed. The notion of elegy as the founding point of reflective thought, due to its necessary inhabiting of a vacuum, is often quoted as original to Coleridge, whose elegies existed in a space of 'lost and gone' and so were 'natural to the reflective mind'86. Elegy, the mourning-noise, is the beginning of the word, the poetic reflective thought, and thus the poet.

Nox is a work of reluctance, but alongside the probing of representation's failures is a pull from an abyss of muteness. 'Words cannot add to it' (1.0), at the text's beginning, is an establishment of the allure of silence; Lazarus's presence as a mute arbiter of resurrection, 'loading this space with muteness' (8.4), is a founding symbol. Muteness floods the work, tingeing pronouncements with a hopeless, des-

86 Kennedy, Elegy, 4.
perate feel: some of Carson’s more dramatic elements, such as ‘WHO WERE YOU’ scratched into the page in primal soot (2.1), have the feel of arbitrary moves against an opposing force. Against this concept of muteness as safe is the text’s development of the idea of words as heavy, as possessing weight in the world. They are, in Carson’s own phrase, ‘the immensity of the mechanism’ (1.1), a weight in a formerly weightless place that cannot, perhaps, handle the new burden placed upon it. Readers witness the building of ‘a room I can never leave’ (7.1), an architecture of close-knit weights that ‘drop’ (4.1) onto the page. This imagery of weight recurs throughout, as positioned against muteness, blankness, the safety of the unsaid: ‘hopelessness built a wall in her’ (4.3) and ‘his voice like something else crusted on it, black, dense’ (5.2) are expressions of language as density, as created material positioned against blackness. Carson’s own characterisation of language is exaggerated in its listing of weighted qualities, overloaded with adjectives that jumble in a decidedly non-Carson scrum:

The luminous, big, discandied, unrepentant web of them that hangs in your mind (7.1)

Here the essence of Carson’s expression is of language as living, unexpectedly uncontrolled, beyond her grasp. In this context, Carson’s syntax is both careful (like an animal testing its new feet) and solid: no breaks are allowed in it, no tests to its rigidity, though Michael’s voluminous content overwhelms this brittle attempt at forming. Though Nox gives the appearance of a text in fragments, Carson’s expressions are separated into squares, blocks, visible foundations that do not prioritise but merely accumulate, ‘asking, searching, collecting, doubting, striving, testing, blaming’ (1.3). Surrounded by fragments and chaos, her paragraphs do not extend over pages but are self-contained, rectangular, without space to penetrate or destabilise them. They are
boarded-up pieces of text, physically under siege. The stillness in Carson’s voice is here a contrasting element, of caution in a swallowing landscape.

*Nox*’s place as a border-ground text between forming and formlessness is inherent in its visual presence. Distanced from the ‘real’ of its original, its composite, collaged physicality imbues it with the sense of having freshly emerged, unpolished and erratic. This creation via fragmentation also echoes the work of Camelia Elias’s influential theory on fragments as an emergent literary genre – that fragments themselves exist in a liminal space, between form and formlessness. She notes that the fragment in literature has the power to ‘mediate between its state of *being* and its state of *becoming*’:87 as both whole, formed piece and incomplete segment, the fragment occupies a complex area that highlights the process of textual creation.

The text’s embrace of liminality is emphasised by its own creation of interior liminal space: the separate, between-chapters pronouncements that appear to be left over from another text entirely, or to be echoes of a commentary one must strain to hear. The first of these, between 1.3 and 2.1, acts as a severing, a relocation of attention; after Carson’s impersonal musings on Herodotus, forming language and history from the ‘first absence’ of Michael, comes the startling italicising of a single image:

*In small white sleep mits your hands protrude.* (1.3-2.1)88

This italicised segment is not only an immediate location of the personal, it doubles as an effective metaphor for the text’s own enclosing elegiac mechanism, en-

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88 A note about referencing: these liminal segments are distinguished in the text both by their italics and by the fact that they are unnumbered. The numbers I use to locate them are the paragraphs in the ‘main’ text that occur before and after them. For example, ‘sleep mits’ appears after paragraph 1.3 and before paragraph 2.1.
closing the real ‘protruding hands’ of childlike, vulnerable Michael within the small whiteness, the blank comfort, of elegy. It is a border-text, existing concomitantly with the ‘main’ while simultaneously questioning the idea of a ‘main’ text at all. It introduces intimacy, radically closing the distance between reader and text: the image of the hands encased echoes through the remainder of the text, so occupied as it is with the idea of encasing and protection in language. Its direct address of the dead as ‘you’ is also the first plunge into immediacy; Carson’s hesitancy against the muteness, the great overbearing absence, is broken here by a sudden violent act, an attempt to talk directly to the dead, with uncertainty and desperation. One of the next asides emphasises her tentativeness, particularly when contrasted with the strident formality of the Herodotus examinations: *I make a guess, I make a guess* (2.1-2.2).

In this sense the asides, if they can be called that, are distinct spaces, placed alone in the purity of the page, where Carson attempts more immediate communion with the dead. They are the only aspects of the text, beyond quoted conversations, where ‘you’ is addressed, either Michael or Carson, as if it can only be attempted in areas of complete separation, of non-text. They are, in this sense, functioning as windows, as the closest places to silence through which Carson can touch Michael. This is, however, only an aspect of their purpose: while elements of them are conversational (*I am curious about the season of coldness you have there*, 7.2-8.1, for instance, or *Places in the world where you and I saw things*, 3.2-3.3), elsewhere they are virtually Delphic, separated from any context or surrounding, seeming to reference only themselves or another, absent text. They are the dark reflections in water of the edifice of Carson’s elegy, fragmenting its illusions of solidity in the world, placing it in the *time which knows no time* (5.3-5.4):

*Single motion which departed, leading itself by the hand* (4.1-4.2)
And drips (the ancient poet says) in sleep before the heart (8.5-9.1)

are placeless, reference-less – a rendering of the text as private, unknowable. The idea of the elegy as a single element, a real and solid text, is here challenged; instead Carson produces a public elegy flexed through with context-less opaque parts that deny unravelling, deliberately phrased to appear drawn from another location (a collection of exterior texts, or Carson's memory) that is linguistically inaccessible.

Elegy form is an attempt to produce a creative product out of an absence, and so these elegiac eruptions of text may present a different manipulation of the form. It is possible to argue that the italicised sections are a break in the text’s wholeness, and in that sense they recall the inexpressible core of Carson’s elegy-form, and its destabilised position on the border of being and not-being. However, they are not merely annotations to the true text of Nox, but a revealing of its location on the borders of elegiac form: it has spaces within spaces, containing an interior punctured with the liminal. The intensely poetic italicised portions seem just-formed, just-emergent, incredibly intimate with muteness, silence, the abyss of poesis: not so much remnants of another text as the very beginnings of language, the most intimate first adventures into form. They are what elegy represents: a trespassing of word and meaning onto an entirely empty territory, and its open tentativeness.

Thus they are personal, and filled with images of open space, beginnings and emptiness: the nets rest, full of shadow (5.6-6.1), Something inbetween, something so deeply swaying (6.1-6.2), If you are writing an elegy begin with the blush (7.2-8.1), As in some cave may lie a lightless pool (8.4-8.5), Places in our bones, strange brother (3.3.-4.1). Structurally these do not produce a linear narrative of emergence and forming, as the text is cyclical; Carson begins her negotiation of language-forming in Michael’s
absence with strength, a show of formality within the rigid discussion of history (the first chapter, 1.0-1.3, is entirely occupied with contemplating Herodotus), before relenting to show the *small white sleep mits*, the foundation of intimate form on which she is building. They are exploratory, unsure, tentative about structure and language: *I fall, you fall, I have fallen, fell, a neutral verb, whence casual and casually* (4.2-4.3) and *For lack of a better term a windswept spirit* (8.1-8.2) are experiments in language, attempting to find clarity. It is telling that the core of the text, *Repent means ‘the pain again’* (5.5-5.6), is in the italicised section, liminal and just-formed, and operating as the engine on which the rest of the structure will operate. The text ends on italics – *He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears* (after 10.3) – in a falling-back into the liminal space; from the formal structure, the reader re-enters the current, where forming first begins. Elegy thus, in Carson’s hands, becomes a process of examining language, of Retallack’s poetic interrogation taken to extremes; her elegy is not merely a grave AVE for her brother, but a questioning reflection on the meaning of elegiac expression, and whether language has any weight against the presence of life and death.

**Section 3: Translating The Elegist**

It’s not about grief. It’s about understanding other people and their histories as if we are all separate languages. That’s what I was trying to explore.\(^8^9\)

Anne Carson, 2011

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\(^{89}\) Parul Sehgal, “Anne Carson”. 

The theme of destruction or inadequacy of form – as protector, as controller, as method of elucidation – runs through *Nox*, as the text creates a negative, eroding space in the centre of elegy form. The presence of translation as a figuring motif works as an extension of this; the translated texts in *Nox* act as mirrors in mirrors, mimicking both Carson’s sibling relationship and the impossibility of expression in death. The parallels are made bald by Carson herself – ‘I study his sentences the ones I remember as if I’d been asked to translate them’ (8.1) – yet Carson-as-translator and Carson-as-elegist, in overlapping, cast light on the mechanics of distrust in *Nox*, its gradual shedding of faith in text. Their interaction makes clearer the shapes and possibilities of *Nox*’s destruction-construction cycle of form.

Carson’s one-word-at-a-time translation of Catullus’s brother-elegy, the famous Elegy 101, uses dictionary definitions, scrupulous arrangements and multiple permutations, and is therefore a parody: its dismantling of ancient text into painful word-by-word analysis deprives the text of poetry, context and light. Its striving for accuracy leaves Catullus’s work, which is presented in water-blurred ink as *Nox*’s preface, ironically more ambiguous. Readers are shown the materials of translation and pulled into the difficulty of the process by startlingly dry definitions like

**alloquerer**

*alloquor alloqui allocutus*

[AD+loquor] to speak to (usually in a friendly manner), address, to make a speech; *nunc ego deserts alloquor alcyonas* now I harangue desolate halcyons; to appeal to, to invoke, call on (gods); to comfort, console. (5.1)
This return to the first principles of *alloquerer* distances rather than evokes. Carson’s translation work outside of *Nox* leans explicitly away from such scrupulousness, preferring to chase the tone and feel of a translated text – see, for instance, *If Not, Winter* – and therefore her choice to dissect Catullus bit by inching bit is telling. It is no accident that Carson’s eventual full translation (7.2) bears little resemblance to her built layers of Latin. The idea of the untranslatable hovers heavily in *Nox*; Carson’s decision to pair this word-by-word translation with the main text, left page to right, is an enactment of impossibility, of untouchable essence. The core of the text is in the expression *for lack of a better term*, from one of *Nox*’s liminal segments (8.1-8.2) – elegy and language falling away from memory and self. The untranslatable is, of course, Michael himself – a presence Carson characterises as light, as she characterises translation itself (‘translating as a room... where one gropes for the light switch’ 7.1), and which offers the false partnership or relationship of the one-word definitions to the poetic text. Two sides eliding and not comprehending: Carson attempts to bond her brother to language, and ultimately cannot.

However, this metaphorical interpretation of translation’s role is not the full picture of its function in *Nox*. The translation of Catullus that inflects and threads through the text is an exploration of meaning, reflective of Carson’s own intellectual context as a translator. Further, translation’s rhetoric as the ‘afterlife’ of a text, to quote Walter Benjamin, plays a crucial part in locating *Nox* on the boundaries of form, between entirety and chaos. It is tempting to view the mirrored pages of Latin word-translation as an ‘anchoring’ of *Nox*, a pairing of ambiguous explorations of elegy with something more tangible, more resonant of Carson’s own reality as a trained classicist, but this view disregards the complexity of Carson’s own attitude to translation it-

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self. As a translator, Carson has inhabited the borderlands in the classic debate in translation, the binary between ‘faithful’ and ‘beautiful’, and destabilised this dichotomy as false. Briefly, the transmission of meaning ‘from one code to another’, to use the traditional definition of translation, was theorised to take one of two forms: preserving the word-for-word meaning of the text, with disregard for its musicality or ‘mood’ (a so-called faithful or close interpretation), or choosing to transmit the overall ‘sense’ of the text without scrupulous accuracy in form (la belle infidèle, to use Gilles Menage’s phrase). 91 Modern versions of the debate have eroded this dichotomy as unrealistic, and as placing unconsidered constraints on the relation between form and content in meaning. In If Not, Winter and other writings, Carson has declared her translating self as a voice of choice and fidelity, existing in the intermediate ground in her pursuit of a new ‘version’ of the classical subject, with implications for her interrogation of the elegy form.

In Nox, the dichotomy is present in both forms: in the word-by-word, laboured, ‘faithful’ analysis of Catullus’s brother-elegy, in Carson’s own ‘free’ version of the verse (7.2), and in echoes and permutations throughout the text. References to Catullus underlie several of Carson’s phrases – ‘the starry lad’ that is her brother (1.0) is in fact a direct reference to another Catullus poem, immediately setting up a parallel text, a ‘translation’ of her grief into another form. 92 The appearance of these various translation techniques is not simply indecision or a movement towards a particular favourite, but an expression of Carson’s own ambiguity as a translator-self. Her role

as the form-creator, as the ‘intermediate’ between work and translation, becomes at once highlighted and less defined; the text undermines her editorial and textual control, her own ‘transactional order’ (1.2) of meanings between texts. Carson’s own Catullus 101 is clearly marked by her characteristic tone, devoid of punctuation, prone to cries within parentheses, and yet exists in the midst of her Latin dictionary-parsing, not at its end. The two appear simultaneously, inflecting her ability to ‘create’ an ultimate text, with ambiguity. Her ‘final’ version is also filled with mirroring phrases; it begins ‘Many the peoples many the oceans I crossed’, and continues with:

Now that Fortune tore you from me, you

oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me [...]

and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell.

These repetitive aspects - ‘wrongly’ and ‘farewell’ - are both recognisable ululating cries of distress and strangely undermining, as if doubling is necessary to guarantee any expressive power. In If Not, Winter Carson declares her attempts at ‘transparency of self’ (‘the more I stand out of the way, the more Sappho shines through’) an ‘amiable fantasy’, her power of choice in language, even while attempting an absence, is present, and in Nox its judgement is decried. Here the language of the elegy form, the textual production of presence from absence, becomes fraught: the creator, like the translator, is always present, corrupting the form from the inside. As I have demonstrated, Nox, in openly negotiating with this corruption, provides a valid model for interpreting its difficulties.

The presence of the multiple translations of Catullus is also a challenge to the notion of the inviolate individual self, an expression of which the elegy aims towards. Michael becomes not simply an absence but an absence among many absences, a brother among brothers, repeating and imperfectly collated. The preservation of his ‘trace’ in the world becomes more fragmented and ironic when faced with this gallery of brothers, this multitude of version and possibilities. Translation's attitude towards the ‘original’ here becomes a parallel with the idea of all deaths being ‘new’: Nox cannot ultimately be definitive, and so the core of its elegiac purpose – to recreate a single vanished life – actively dissolves.

Nox’s complex, continually forming and destabilising relationship with the elegist-translator is also visible through the frame of gender. Elegy and translation share discourses of fretful gender and repressed femininity: elegy is both vocal transmission of masculine territory (though Michael has no territory to leave, beyond an inheritance of emptiness) and hidden female lament, and translation is burdened with metaphors of derivative, feminine inferiority to the male, ‘original’ text.95 Carson’s malleability, her apparent resistance to the restriction of a gendered authorial self, inflects both genres, and the inclusion of translation here appears to function as an additional ‘freeing’ mechanism – a space in which the text strives for gender-neutrality, cleanliness, non-ambiguity. Nox’s erasure of gender in its approach to the modes of elegy is an exercise of power over the form, rendering the elegist capable of both lamentation and inheritance of voice simultaneously. Indeed, Nox could be divided by a cursory observer into masculine vocal ‘power transmissions’ of the typed text, and female screams and scrawls of anguish in the annotations and art, though of course their interplay and relationship are far more complex. This multiplicity of

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voice, this destabilisation of the gendered roles of the form, reflects on Carson’s translation-role, in which she dissects the so-called ‘feminine’, inferior translation as an inherently powerful creative act. *Nox* is, as previously discussed, a text of translation-in-action, a disruption of the continuum that allows Carson to show the translation’s emergence, its original text, its beginnings in authoritative definitions, its many lives and versions. Gender thus becomes a frame through which *Nox* examines creative process, and also exploits it to shed greater light on the mechanisms of elegy form.

The approach of Carson’s Sappho text to the problem of a fragmented or absent base text has relevance to *Nox*’s elegy-interaction with her brother, whose subject-self is unformed and barely visible. The ‘blizzard of marks’\(^{96}\) that characterise her approach to Sappho, her embrace of the absent within brackets, are also present in *Nox*. Yet Michael presents an at once less challenging and more puzzling proposition: he presents physical evidence, comprising texts, phone calls, postcards and photographs (more, doubtless, than the famously and alluringly fragmented Sappho), yet in a sense he is less definite than the Greek poet. He ‘disappears’ (10.3) having never fully emerged from the translator’s space: while Sappho’s incompleteness is rendered a key part of her poems’ beauty, the paucity of artefacts for Michael obscure his voice (‘something crusted on it, black, dense’, 5.2) and mar his distance. This translation, unlike *If Not, Winter*, emphasises the distance from the source rather than its closeness, recalling Michael’s reproduced elegies for Anna. Carson’s own ideas of translation involve, as in her poetic conception of Michael, an unbridled light hidden from the author: ‘if light appears [...] we undo a bit of the cloth’.\(^{97}\) Michael’s own light is inaccessible; her cloth continues over her eyes, and he is obscured by the mass of his own evidence, the heaviness of the text. The reliance of both the elegiac form and the aca-

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\(^{96}\) Carson, *If Not, Winter*, xi.
\(^{97}\) Carson, *If Not, Winter*, x.
ademic tradition on materiality and evidence are here subverted: elegy becomes less, not more, possible through the provision of her brother's artefacts. It is an element of the text's instability that the evidence, the fragments that would seem to shore it up, instead make the elegy more obscure.

Translation in Nox is also deeply entwined with images of death and living, of the 'life' of the text beyond its first-language iteration. Ezra Pound's classic framing of translation as 'blood brought to ghosts' usefully expresses the discourse, which emphasises the translator's role as an attempt, even if consciously incomplete, at resurrection.98 This expression of translation as the 'elegy' of a first work paints the inclusion of Catullus in Nox as a destabilising meditation on the impermanence of text itself; yet the discourse of the 'afterlife' of text in translation has more complex ramifications. The 'afterlife' of Catullus's text, in its various iterations in Nox, can be seen as an expression of a particular school of thought in translation: that an original text can only remain revitalised, relevant and 'alive' through the process of repeated translation.99 It is the process of each new poesis, rather than the product, which gives the translation new life, new being in the world – a search for 'the reverberation of the work in the alien one', as Carson notes in If Not, Winter with reference to Benjamin's aforementioned essay.100 Thus translation becomes another expression of Maurice Blanchot's idea that 'form lives only through its alterations'101 – a prioritising of the breaking down/reforming movement of creation. The various permutations of Catullus, in their confusion, therefore emphasise the liminal space of Nox's elegiac forming: they place it on the boundary of forming and formlessness, embracing poesis. The Catullus translations are not a metaphor or a mirror, but a structural contribution to

98 Gentzler, Contemporary Translation Theories, 20.
100 Carson, If Not, Winter, xxi.
Nox’s position in the liminal space of poiesis. Translation, Octavio Paz’s ‘art of shadows and echoes’,\textsuperscript{102} renders the ‘mute ash’ of Catullus (7.2) as on the verge of speech: as perpetually being renewed, recreated.

It is in this act of elegiac speaking itself, in what Roland Schliefer calls ‘the recovery of voice in the face of death’,\textsuperscript{103} that Nox finds the essence of its approach to the form. Elegy was originally an utterance of grief: the word ‘alas’ is, according to the hypothesis of Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, a figure of the origin of elegy, evolving from an exhalation, an involuntary grief-noise.\textsuperscript{104} Nox is a celebration of that immediacy, that noise: its brutal, raw, undiluted status can be parsed as a return to the beginnings of grief speaking, the beginnings of forming language from chaos. Thus it denies the ‘forming’ of elegy, its evolution beyond the lamentation of song, by keeping close to both historical and linguistic origins. Its positioning in liminal space is not only in the borders of poiesis but in time – between the first human lamentation and the development of the elegy as a formal, whole and inviolate object. Nox is not so much a denial of elegy’s progress as a re-examination of its instinctive purpose – and Carson’s text rejects a complete, inviolate form for a process of continual decay and resurgence, taking the 20th century fragmentation of elegy traced by Ramazani to its most extreme conclusion.

To observe that Carson is a transformer of forms is too glib. In Nox the form of elegy is not simply altered or subverted but entirely destabilised – the concept of a full, whole text of grief becomes anathema, the only close representation of a necessarily unrepresented experience being instead a text living and dying on the edge of chaos. It is not so much a fragmented collection of memory as an examination of the ‘truth’ of

\textsuperscript{102} Edward Honig, \textit{The Poet’s Other Voice: Conversations On Literary Translation} (Amherst: University Of Massachusetts, 1985), 155.
\textsuperscript{103} Honig, \textit{The Poet’s Other Voice}, 7.
\textsuperscript{104} Anna Teresa Tymieniecka, “Creative Mimesis Of Emotion,” 1.
grief and its representation and vox, in the process casting light on the possibilities of

*poiesis* for modern elegy.
CHAPTER 2
The Edge That Breaks Off: Form And The Limits Of Language In Just For The Thrill, “Cycladics” and Glass Essay

Sometimes you come to an edge that just breaks off.

Anne Carson, Just For The Thrill

There is no communication because there are no vehicles for communication.

Samuel Beckett, 1901

Section 1: Do Words Hold Good?

In the epilogue to her pairing of Simonides with Paul Celan in 2002’s Economy Of The Unlost, Anne Carson presents a question:

Every time a poet writes a poem he is asking the question, Do words hold good? And the answer has to be yes: it is in the contrafactual condition on which a poet’s life depends.¹⁰⁵

Do words hold good? This is, I will argue in this segment, the core interrogation at the heart of the poetic process in three of Carson’s texts: Just For The Thrill, a personal essay on the transformation of a love affair on an American road trip, “By Chance The Cycladic People”, a later poem about a lost tribe, and Glass Essay, one of her earliest major works, a narrative poem on heartbreak, Emily Brontë and family

tragedy. Though characteristically diverse in genre, subject and forms, the three will be demonstrated to unite in probing the 'holding good' capacities of language, its facility for genuine representation. It will emerge that Carson's own artistic process in all three works is driven by, indeed formed via, her intensely powerful scepticism about the ability of language as a vehicle of communication. I will argue that the texts' confrontation of these limits of language, and what lies beyond them, is the key to reading Carson's work. All three works also solidify their deliberately failing language with monstrous form-combinations, an approach that has great potential for dealing with the limits of the medium. This resolution, engaging with language's limits while also making poetic creation sustainable, is a blueprint. Rather than bowing to the failures of the medium, the monstrous model in these three texts renders the limits of language as both productive and transformative, an innovation that I shall explore as a new, fruitful approach to scepticism.

This trio of works is in many aspects representative of wider trends within Carson's oeuvre, and so functions as a microcosm of her poetic universe: her probing of the experimental personal essay as modern form, her obsession with corrupted pairs and failed communications, her focus on the powers of myth and anthropology. Thus they are the foundations of a larger argument about Carson's poetic process and its history of strategic, varied engagement with the limitations of language. They are, however, not mere synecdoche or seamless stand-ins for other texts. Each highlights vividly different elements of negotiation of language's failures, and as such they are il-

lustrations of different structural confrontations with the limits, and expressive examples of a viable model for productive poetic doubt.

Carson’s poetic usage of the limits of language – not as impotence but as performative centres of artistic power – becomes more lucid with an examination of the discourse of the limit in poetics and her location within it. The impinging of doubt into theories of language, transforming its conception from a ‘faithful, transparent medium of representation’ to a ‘net of activities’ that fluctuates depending on outside factors, was a characteristic of the modernist movement, and held (indeed, holds) strong sway among theorists of the late 20th century. However, Frederic Jameson’s definition of modernism as an examination of ‘the gap between the signifier and the signified’ is in fact a summary of a far older debate on language’s empirical relationship to the real, a theme in linguistic studies that enjoyed a new vogue with Wittgenstein but has roots in debates by far earlier thinkers. Carson herself theorised the beginnings of language’s difficulties as ancient. In her ‘biography’ of the Greek poet Stesichoros in the Introduction to *Autobiography Of Red*, she pinpoints the beginning of doubt in language in his radical movement away from traditional rigid descriptive forms. “What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?”, she asks, and the answer is the introduction of authorial decision to the ‘latches of being’, as she describes adjectives (*Autobiography Of Red*, xix). Stesichoros, in rejecting the Homeric epic paired rituals of ‘neat-ankled’ women and ‘wine-dark’ seas for his own adjectival revolution, broke what Carson called the ‘still surface of code’, a language which did not pretend to identify with the real but simply with its own rigid patterns. As he ‘released being’, he also introduced the possibility of language’s failure: a medium that attempts to ap-

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109 Interestingly, Carson’s own structural preoccupation with pairs, and their inability to communicate, could be theorised to come from this adjective-subject revolution by Stesichoros.
approach the genuine or lucid, and inevitably cannot. In this sense, “What Difference Did Stesichoros Make” can be placed alongside ‘Do words hold good’ as the core question that drives Carson’s poetic work.

Thus the resolution that the texts will be shown to provide, though incomplete and highly risky, addresses a recurrent and deeply fascinating problem in poetic praxis. They do not aim to return to the ‘still surface’, but move poetry to the very edge of its capabilities, where its impotence is most obvious. Therefore Nox’s explorations of the boundaries of form and the perhaps-inevitable failures of expression can be placed in a context of wider investigations of language’s limitations in Carson’s general oeuvre. The driving engine of Nox, enacting a perpetual poesis as a reflection/treatment of expressionless grief, may have seemed a remarkable departure from Carson’s earlier work, uniting a more intimate focus on the personal with an aggressive and unfamiliar fragmentary structure, but is in fact part of her continued negotiation with linguistic impotence over many areas. The ‘muteness’ that impinged on and warped Nox’s language was effectively the silent soundscape of death, but it will be found in this trio of texts as a broader silence, representative of the boundary point where language reaches its limit and fails. Intriguingly, Carson in the latter part of her career may seem to be shifting away from text as a viable vehicle. Her very latest work – Nox rendered as a dance by the Institute Of Contemporary Art in Boston, the “Cycladics” as a poem structured by random integer generator, the abstraction of Red Doc> and The Albertine Workout – appears to be a movement beyond works that inhabit and engulf the limits of language, into explorations of other mediums of meaning altogether. However, rather than a defeat on the battleground of ‘holding good’, this can be more effectively seen as a staging of different kinds of meaning, different
ways of shaping language into signifying forms, and so will be shown to be simply an extension of a ‘monstrous’ approach to the gap between signifier and signified.\textsuperscript{110}

Before delving into the texts’ poetic negotiations of the limits of language, it is necessary to locate and articulate their theoretical concepts of the limits themselves. The most lucid way to achieve this is through the lens of Samuel Beckett, who has been an explicit inspiration for Carson across the breadth of her career. Calling on Beckettian analysis, and particularly on other theorists who influenced his famous ideas about the incapacities of language, seems to be an unwieldy way to negotiate Carson. However, the link between Carson and Beckett is sufficiently strong to have a budding area of scholarship devoted to it,\textsuperscript{111} and in Carson’s ream of extra-textual references Beckett looms particularly large as a direct influence, to whom she often ties her poetry.\textsuperscript{112} He and his structures of thought are a productive way in which to begin probing the doubt in Carson’s language.

The best articulator of the Beckettian model of scepticism that filters through Carson is its originator, the 19th century Austro-Hungarian theorist Fritz Mauthner, a brutal sceptic concerning language’s uses and potential, who declared the following: ‘In the beginning was the Word. With the word, men stand at the beginning of their insight into the world, and if they stay with the word they’ll stop there.’\textsuperscript{113} Mauthner’s writings obsessed Beckett, and the line between this scepticism and Carson’s worry over words ‘holding good’ is a clear one. However, while Beckett interpreted this as

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{110} Discussing the beginnings of Carson’s inherent doubts could be focussed on her work as a translator, where the instabilities of language are thrown into stark relief in the attempt to transmute meaning from one ‘code’ to another.
  \item \textsuperscript{112} Carson’s work references Beckett frequently. Selected references are Decreation (New York: Knopf, 2006) and the poem “Peril,” The Threepenny Review (Fall 2009), accessed December 2011, http://www.threepennyreview.com/samples/carson_f09.html
\end{itemize}
pessimism and the peculiar dilemmas of the creative endeavour, the texts Carson produces are more positive.

Mauthner may seem like a strange and specific choice from the field of language sceptics in philosophy, particularly when Wittgenstein looms so large, but the motivations behind it are several. For one, I am not attempting to trace some illusory influence or definite contextual connection between Mauthner’s thought and Carson’s work, but using him as a framing device for elucidating Carson’s linguistic doubt. For another, Mauthner’s particular brand of scepticism includes a positive slant rarely found elsewhere, an expression of hope for the future of language, and as Carson’s work can be shown to incorporate that hope, it seems an effective device through which to process her work.

Mauthner was one of the earliest articulators of linguistic empiricism, believing language to be thought and vice versa, and he prefigured Wittgenstein in his framing of language as entirely, deplorably metaphorical, ‘nothing more than its own use’\(^\text{114}\), and therefore inherently flawed. More than any other aspect of Mauthner, it is this Wortaberglauben, or word-suspicion, that we can see refracting through Carson. Language, in this interpretation, was given a false remit when Stesichoros released it from rigid codes and engaged it to actually represent the world: according to Mauthner and other followers of empirical positivism, our own language and array of signifiers comes only from our sense-experiences. It is innately personal, inextricably mired in our own thought, and therefore completely incapable of connecting to any signifying ‘real’ – or, crucially, to anybody else’s hyper-personal language. Thus all angles of the poetic project are at risk: any actual engagement with meaning, and any possibility of sharing it effectively. This visceral Wortaberglauben is, as with many of

\(^{114}\) Fritz Mauthner, *Die Sprache* (Frankfurt am Main: Rutten & Leonig, 1906), 24.
Carson’s approaches to theoretical difficulties, explicitly present in her texts: ‘My point of view is admittedly faulty’, she says in 4.2 of “Cycladics”, self-consciously weakening her own work’s communicative power.

The Beckettian influence of this concept of language as obscuring instrument is also explicit in Carson, occasionally in direct quotation. Carson references Beckett’s idea of language as a physical impediment to reaching the real – though while he refers to his personal language as ‘like a veil that must be torn apart to get at the things (or Nothingness) behind it’\(^{115}\), she makes the image less violent, transforming it into ‘if light appears…. we undo a bit of the cloth’ (in her translation of Sappho, *If Not Winter*, x). This veil is Mauthnerian, the obstacle of the personal metaphorics of language that impedes any signifying connection to the real, the ‘things behind it’. While Carson’s ‘light’ seems more benign than Beckett’s ‘Nothingness’, I will show in Section 3 that this is a particular figuring of the terrible/warping silence beyond language.

Beckett’s reaction to first reading Mauthner, expressed in his correspondence some fifty years later, is perhaps the most lucid summary of his attitude:

For me it came down to:

Thought words
Words inane
Thought inane\(^{116}\)

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\(^{115}\) Kathryn White, *Beckett and Decay* (London: Continuum Publishing, 2009), 109 – Carson’s light is not greatly distinct from Beckett’s ‘Nothingness’, as light in her work is often a signification of truth, brutality or violent essence.

However, Beckett’s helpless inanity, his pursuit of the ‘unword’117, does not fit the three texts under examination in this chapter, which contain, as in Carson’s work in general, a more considered probing, a reiteration of the question in different forms and contexts. It appears, for instance, in her celebrated early work *Beauty Of The Husband* as the central question ‘What really connects words and things?’118. And it is here that an aspect of Mauthner, rather than Beckett’s pessimistic interpretation of it, becomes the more lucid partner to the three texts. According to Beckett scholar Linda Ben-Zvi, Mauthner also articulated a key part of Carson’s work theory – that of obsessive focus on ‘redemption’, of probing the limits of language ceaselessly despite the knowledge of the impossibility of any true expression.119 He called the inescapability of critiquing language using language itself a ‘quietly despairing suicide’120, but viewed it as necessary nonetheless. Here is the texts’ *Wortaberglauben* departure from Beckett, for whom the only remaining possibility was to strip away the uselessness of language to see what remained. Instead, our texts cleave to Mauthner’s practise of the continuing critique, the sustaining of language through repeated investigations of Jameson’s ‘gap’. Just For The Thrill beings, ‘Surely the world is full of simply truths that can be obtained by asking clear questions and noting the answers’ (188) – and while the ‘surely’ foreshadows the text’s difficulty with this, it is this hope, Mauthner’s focus on redeeming language, that I will demonstrate pushes the texts’ artistic creation forwards.

119 Ben-Zvi, “Samuel Beckett And The Limits Of Language,” 187. This is a contested part of Ben-Zvi’s work: other scholars posit that Mauthner was unable to escape the tyranny of language and viewed silence as the only other option.
120 Mauthner, *Die Sprache*, 120.
Section 2: Scepticism And The Productivity Of Language

In this section the pervasive influence of empirical scepticism will be shown to be at the forefront of Carson’s poetic practice, explicitly placing her texts as interrogations of language’s role as vehicle of meaning. I will argue that all three poems are linguistically destabilised, engaging with the difficulties of their medium on structural levels. The two aspects of language that Mauthnerian scepticism questions – the relationship of signified to signifier, and the capability of any two speakers to communicate – appear repeatedly in the three texts, positioning them at the very limits of language.

The first aspect of Mauthnerian scepticism, Jameson’s ‘gap’ between signified and signifier – which prevents language from having any real relation with the experiential world outside itself – is most strongly present in the texts in the form of parody of authoritative languages. Any model of communication that claims to be ‘objective’, to have absolute and untroubled relationships with the real, is thoroughly ridiculed or at least made unstable. The adoption of history, academia, religion, law, psychotherapy and biography are exposed to the weakening effects of sarcasm, and a deep suspicion of what Mauthner called ‘rigid language’; any mode with pretences to universal communication. The ridiculed forms share a conception of language as an untroubled vehicle for truth, a ‘still code’ that has complete control over meaning. It is, of course, both Mauthnerian and ironic to discuss destabilisations of rigid language using one of the rigid languages themselves, but this is another reflection of the ‘redemption’ principle that the texts will be shown to follow: that interrogation of the

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flawed vehicle within the flawed vehicle itself is the only way for any expression to survive.

All models of authoritative expression in the three texts represent and es-pouse concrete linguistic truths that are shown to be both alluring and inherently flawed. One particular manifestation of ridicule in Carson’s work is excess of detail, which in her work is always highly suspicious, generally acting as an indicator of dis-comfort or sarcasm. Sections drawn or quoted from authoritative language-forms de-liberately invoke rhetorical hyperbole, where excess and extravagance are a method of casting doubt on statements. ‘Details are in bad taste,’ Carson notes in Just For The Thrill, ‘they expose our infection.’ (223) Lavish authoritative details crowd the texts with what are clearly meant to be irrelevant statements – ‘We can trace [camping] back at least to the summer of 1553’, Carson notes primly in Just For The Thrill (195), apropos of nothing – but most often the target is not relevance but narrow-mindedness. The scholars who belittled Emily Brontë are reproduced in excruciating detail in her Glass Essay: ‘Uninteresting, unremarkable, wracked by disappointment/and despair’, one says of her, while others ‘understand her prison as the limita-tions placed on a clergymans daughter/by nineteenth century life in a remote parish on a cold moor.’ (Glass Essay 8, 24) Here the ‘limitations’ of Brontë’s life as rendered by academic biographers are mimicked in a way that, through manipulation of their authoritative language, reflects its own limitations, its own ‘prison’ of interpretation. Elsewhere in Glass Essay, the coolness of Alzheimer’s diagnosis, which Carson repro-duces in full (‘Second, neurofibrillary snarlings//in the cerebral cortex and in the hip-pocampus’, 30), becomes violently inadequate beside the realities of the condition it describes. The academic fussiness of this ‘rigid’ language, this array of fact, becomes a condemnation of its problems.
It is a position examined from a similar perspective in "By Chance The Cycladic People" (known from this point as “Cycladics”), a poem that treats the hushed conclusions of history and anthropology in a blasé, flatly amused fashion. 1.0, which forms if not the actual beginning of the poem then the starting point of its interior logic,\textsuperscript{122} returns to the inherent suspicion of any use of detail with the phrase ‘The Cycladic was a Neolithic culture based on emmer wheat, wild barley, sheep, pigs and tuna speared from small boats.’ This is anthropological history as morbidly ridiculous, its irrelevance exposed by the depth of intimate detail – ‘To the Cycladic people is ascribed the invention of the handbag./The handbag, that artefact which freed human beings from having to eat food wherever they found it.’ (6.0-1) Detail in these texts is a ruthless act, the ridiculous a judgement on pretence.

Self-consciously authoritative language is also disconnected from its self-perceived monopoly on meaning in our texts through juxtapositions with decidedly non-authoritative language: emotive artistic sentences and the innately personal. Just For The Thrill contains many phrases from 'classical Chinese wisdom', in virtually every case paired almost immediately with a contrasting and, by implication, equally valid interpretation – often radio tunes (‘Another thing is you know one thing is, Carmen Macrae is singing on the radio, I don’t want to be free’, 199). Similarly, crisp discussion of Aristotle’s ‘three kinds of arguments’ is followed by the abrupt statement ‘Well I guess you’ll just have to watch me jack off a lot’ (208) – a rhythm of bathos that abruptly disrupts the dignity and rigidity of any language that hopes to fit truth with uncomplicated ease. It is also worth noting that the lover who rejected the writer-figure in Glass Essay, against whom the poem unleashes brutal emotional visions, is named

\textsuperscript{122}Rearranging the text, which was composed into numbered sentences that were then ordered according to a random integer generator, may seem a violation of the key chaos at the heart of the composition, but in a sense there are two poems to discuss: the “Cycladics” as ordered and the “Cycladics” as disordered. Contemplating it in both senses is perhaps the most effective way of marrying the point of its chaos to the essence of its narrative.
'Law' (3) – a genre of unproblematic meaning, a ‘rigid language’ of justice and power. The authoritative ‘still code’ has been personified, and so becomes just another personal language, another set of individual signifier relations with which Carson in her own isolated language struggles to communicate.

Lest it seem that Carson here is privileging Ray Charles and the radio over Aristotle and classical Chinese wisdom, in a low-high inversion, the crooners of Just For The Thrill are similarly evoked as distant or eroded: the songs ‘exist in twenty-two different versions’ (218), and eventually elide into what is simply ‘a calm female voice’ (237). No position that aims to stabilise language, whether through emotional connection or authoritative command, is safe in the trio of texts – the two halves collide against one another and collapse.

Finally, authoritative languages physically degenerate in the three texts under the pressure of constant scrutiny and disbelief. Classical Chinese wisdom in Just For The Thrill becomes chaotic, in its collisions with other concepts of truth – ‘A waterfront pavilion gets the moonlight first. Sure as eggs. Climb the wall.’ (219) – while geography is revealed as a falsehood laid on a landscape. The Arkansas river is inexplicably not in Arkansas (211), and maps are the consequence of ‘laying your rice paper directly on the campground to paint’ (207), warped and inevitably intimately personal. In Glass Essay the violent visions of Nudes elucidate the gap between personal experience and the structures of psychotherapy, which cannot contemplate or elucidate psychological pain (‘[The psychotherapist] said,/When you see these horrible images why do you stay with them?/Why keep watching? Why not/go away? I was amazed./Go away where? I said’, 23) Similarly, “Cycladics” degenerates into a space beyond the possible: ‘When their faces wore smooth they painted them back on with azurite and iron ore./Did I mention the marble pillows, I think I did./They painted wonderful widow’s peaks on themselves or extra breasts.’ (9.0-2) Note here Carson’s
self-conscious introduction of herself as the interlocutor between the culture and the reader. Strangeness is here a method of destabilising the mode under examination. This is an establishment of language’s limitations from the ground upward, not just a communication failure but a revision of all modes that hope to codify it.

The second manifestation of Mauthnerian scepticism in our texts, the impossibility of communication between separate speakers, occurs when they push language to its limits to explore poetic possibilities. This is, after all, not merely the tracing of an influential idea but a demonstration of its usage as powerful mechanism for transforming experimental poetics. The poems’ renderings of personal languages as incommunicative function as some of the most basic engines of Carson’s work – particularly as one of the major failures of communication must be between reader and author. It is here, therefore, that Mauthnerian scepticism pushes the texts to fresh possibilities.

It is telling that Carson’s main guise in “Cycladics”, Glass Essay and Just For The Thrill is as an anthropologist. This stance is not specific to the selected texts but represented widely across her oeuvre, and her preoccupation with deciphering the signs of the ‘foreign’ speaks to the difficulties of communication at the heart of scepticism. The foreign in Carson is in every aspect outside herself, the ‘central lobe of the brain which neurologists call insula – that means island’ (239): in other characters, lovers, mothers; in landscapes; in other texts; and in the entirely other culture of the Cycladics. This is the main incapability of communication drawn from empirical scepticism, the ‘personal languages’ that make any language unable to be shared. In this sense anthropology is a structural method of attempting to transcribe the differences and so surmount them. She is the ‘whacher’ of Glass Essay, watching ‘God and humans and moor wind and open night’ (7); she is ‘transcribing my notes by flashlight’ in Just For The Thrill (217); and “Cycladics” is an explicit anthropological text parsing a long-
dead tribe, now unable to give voice in any way except through her. This statement of her anthropological stance, ‘travelling into it like a foreign country, noted its behaviours, transcribed its idioms’ (Just For The Thrill, 190) – where ‘it’ is any other person, language or relationship – is an attempt to render, in her own words, a movement from being etic to emic, outside to inside the perspective of the foreign. That this is always doomed to failure shows up strongly in her pursuit of collating foreign data: in “Cycladics” proverbs are left without obvious referents (‘Well, they said, these are the pies we have’, 2.2), dangling in midair devoid of any real connection to our language. In Just For The Thrill this attempt to communicate through the isolation of the ‘whaching’ becomes heartbreakingly dramatic:

I am sure I can explain this if I get back in time... ‘Tables’, I say. ‘Each shadow,’ I say. ‘The bell,’ I say. He is looking around him on the ground. ‘Could you get the coffee out of the truck?’ (Just For The Thrill, 210)

As self-conscious ‘whacher’, taking notes of the foreign but unable to render them coherent, Carson inhabits a confused and often contradictory landscape: in Just For The Thrill, no label on the map corresponds to its true nature in life. As Carson says of the Needle Mountains, ‘They don’t look like needles, do they look like needles to you?’ (Just For The Thrill, 214). Yet it is this conscious project of note-taking, of pursuing the unknowable Emily Brontë’s ‘little raw soul [...] caught by no-one’ (Glass Essay, 8), of parsing her lover’s unfamiliar ideas of pleasure (‘Make me your fuck boy’, Just For The Thrill, 212), of recreating an entirely vanished civilisation in poetic disorder, that these three works use as their drive. Despite the texts’ failure to penetrate these separate language-cultures, it is a deliberate part of their make-up to continue regardless. What Wittgenstein in his Lecture On Ethics called ‘this running against the
walls of our cage"123, the doomed attempt to escape personal language and render language profitable, is for this trio a modus operandi.

The figure of the pair who cannot access each other's language is a strong motif in the three texts, carrying Carson's personal anthropological obsession with parsing the foreign into new, varied iterations. The establishment of a common code, a 'fragment of unexhausted time' as Carson puts it in Economy Of The Unlost, finds its expression in repeated performances of failed communication between pairs: the partnering of mother-daughter, lover-lover, writer-subject, person-mirror, is a continual reiteration of the failure of bonds across linguistic barriers. The reader finds themselves in the role of observer of these failed pairs, another anthropological watcher who notes miscommunication but can do nothing to fix it. The motif of the box that frets its way through Carson's texts – the 'Stop the box' bewilderment of Just For The Thrill (204), the 'hot pain box slamming me each way I move' in Glass Essay (35) – is a symbol of the personal imprisonment of language that blocks pairs from connecting. Glass Essay also depicts it as a physical blockage, 'mortal boundaries/visible around them like lines on a map... I saw the lines harden' (16). Thus the presence of the limits is physically visible between the pairs, a reiterated symbolic blockage that reappears despite attempts to forge across it. This continued presence is important, as it makes obvious the inevitable failure of the pair-experiments, the unknowable nature of another speaker's language, and so renders the efforts of the poems a pattern of failure and attempt, of the push to express and the falling away into lack of mutual comprehension. The reader's silent collusion in this performance simultaneously empower us - we are the only participants who understand all sides - and disempowers us, as we can have no influence on the outcome.

Pair-failure is therefore productive: it is in these gaps and misunderstandings that the texts push at the limits of language and see it disintegrate, leaving the reader actively attempting to piece it back together. They are filled with mistranslations and mis-hearings, formulating entire relationships and discourses on unstable ground. The emperor-partner says he wants to 'kiss on you' (*Just For The Thrill*, 194), Carson as child fails to understand her mother's voice 'with ropes all over it' during fights with her father (*Glass Essay*, 40), frying pans are depicted as mirrors ("Cycladics", 3.3): each text draws structurally on complete misinterpretation as an explicit participant in pair relationships. The illusion of communication is subverted continually, whether through painful attempts as in *Just For The Thrill*'s drama with the table and bell, or through the constriction of pair-interactions so rigid and performed that they clearly long ago ceased to communicate meaning. The dialogue in *Glass Essay* 'trailing through the glass' between mother and daughter (4) is so over-used that it can be written without demonstration of who says what, that being irrelevant: 'Not a good melon, // too early for melons. / Hairdresser in town found God, closes shop every Tuesday. / Mice in the teatowel drawer again.' (4-5) The 'atmosphere of glass' (4) that encloses them is embodied in these banalities, a weapon of communication that causes complete dissociation from speakers. The banality and crudity of the emperor's repeated request, 'Please fuck me', in *Just For The Thrill* becomes so devoid of meaning that eventually the text can no longer delineate who says it – 'Make me your fuck boy, one of us whispers' (212). The proverb of the lost Cycladics tribe – 'Well, they said, *these are the pies we have*. It was a proverb' (2.2) – is an attempt at communal language that has sheared into complete strangeness. The texts are populated with empty cliche and repeated idioms that dodge the reader's attempt to cohere them into meaning.
The most notable rupturing of code in the three texts, the one that creates the most possibilities for Mauthnerian ‘redemption’, is that of the pairing between the author and the reader. Her trademark use of parataxis, the breaking of relation between separate sentences beside one another in text, is not actually what Jameson feared of the popularity of modern paratactic works, namely ‘schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers’\(^\text{124}\). Instead it is taking another direction entirely: placing the burden of interpretation heavily on the reader, making them feel their distance from the writer’s own language, the ‘lines hardening’. Parataxis features in all three texts; it acts most strongly in *Just For The Thrill* and “Cycladics”, while *Glass Essay* appears to cohere to a more generally structurally sound narrative, but it ruptures the surface even of that text, particularly in the sections on the Nudes, subconscious inexpressible pain-demons. As Bob Perelman argued, the disconnecting rhythm of parataxis acts to provoke awareness of the art of writing itself,\(^\text{125}\) and the parataxis in our three texts is an active, wakeful rupturing of the pair-communication between author and reader. In postmodern literature, paratactic texts were theorised to disrupt overarching narratives of meaning and any idea of collective cohesion, ‘in uneasy juxtaposition... the conflicts and contradictions between them unresolved.’\(^\text{126}\) Paratactic sentences lay beside one another challenging and defeating any attempt to make them cohere, or the pursuit of the very idea of cohesion. However, the parataxis in our texts is more complex: rather than aiming to disintegrate or devalue the idea of an overall narrative, it serves as another performance of the unknowable nature of personal language, this time the author’s itself. We as readers become the anthropol-


ogists of the text's country, striving to make its paratactic sentences ('That moment when everyone sees exactly what is on the end of their fork, as William S. Burroughs said of celebrity./To the Cycladic people is ascribed the invention of the handbag', 5.3, is an example from "Cycladics", without the added disjunctive power of the random integer generator) into a narrative we can read – not because there is no narrative, but because it is rendered inaccessible through the texts' awareness of the Mauthnerian vulnerabilities of language. 'My point of view is faulty', Carson admits in "Cycladics" (4.2), and that point of view, that authorial influence, renders the pair of author and reader (herself reading Emily Brontë in Glass Essay, and ourselves reading her) both inherently doomed to misunderstanding and perpetually striving for a shared language. Authorial intrusion is not, in these texts, merely a demonstration of control (worthless in any case), but an admittance of culpability for wielding a personal language herself: 'I could say, Yes I know that I have two hands./Then one day I awakened on a planet of people whose hands occasionally/disappear.' (Glass Essay, 38) As such I will interpret it as part of a wider use of hybridity, of monstrosity of forms, to prevent the limits of language from causing ultimate disintegration. 'It is a two-way traffic,/the language of the unsaid', says Glass Essay (27), and it is the 'unsaid' that drives the poetic praxis of Carson forwards.

Thus language-scepticism filters through the trio of texts, creating out of the performance of communication failure a set of new possibilities. The doubt that could effectively have destroyed or hobbled them is instead parlayed into a series of interrogations that form a creative core. In obsessing over the limits of language, via failed pairs, undermined 'rigid' language and self-conscious anthropology, the texts instead create openings for creative expression. However, as the next section will make clear, the texts' explicit negotiations with scepticism in its various forms are only one part of their destructive-productive relationship with the limits of language. The more con-
fronting, and ultimately more rewarding, element of that relationship is the texts’ willingness not only to discuss or perform the limits of language, but actually to allow those limits to infiltrate and wreak havoc upon their structures. It is this that makes the texts so supremely vulnerable, and sets the stage for the monstrosity of form that will be posited to ‘redeem’ them.

Section 3: Silence And Demented Language

Poetic activity is born out of despair before the impotence of the word and culminates in the recognition of the omnipotence of silence.

Octavio Paz

What lies beyond the limits of language, the boundaries of expression? The answer, typically, is silence and formlessness, Beckett’s ‘Nothingness’, the absorbing of communication into failure and the void. It also, William Franke argues, has a strong history of interpretation as divine or ‘transcendent’, a glorious space in which poetics can dissolve into the unsayable.127 Yet in the three texts under discussion, the area beyond the limits of language, the space they have pushed towards in their relationship with scepticism, has an active influence over their structures and syntaxes. This section will demonstrate that the limits of language are, in these texts, not passive symbols or delicate dissolutions, but active incursions with which they deliberately engage and struggle. The unsayable becomes a violent force ‘burning the word

to ash';\textsuperscript{128} however, it is not, as in Octavio Paz’s conception in this section’s epigraph, ultimately ‘omnipotent’.\textsuperscript{129} In the critical tradition of silence in modern poetics, this physical grappling is a slightly disruptive act: silence is frequently parsed as the Beckettian mute and all-enfolding, all-immersive enemy against which any words are a futile attempt to fill time. However, Carson’s three texts subvert this discourse by rendering it powerful, symbolically strong, and capable of laying clear stress on poetic structures. The silence beyond the limits forces the texts to near-destruction, a move that I will demonstrate to be part of a wider project to render them as poetically germinating.

The limit of language takes two clear and divergent shapes in Carson’s texts: that of formless silence, and that of her dementia-ridden father. Discussing these two motifs as clear-cut symbols of anything may seem contradictory, given how vigorously the works have been shown to interrogate the linguistic foundations of symbols, signifiers and easy reading. Yet this symbolism is part of the texts’ self-reflective examination of the limits and their value for poetics. Figuring language’s limits in texts that distrust figures adds another dimension of instability and terror to the presence of the limits themselves.

Demented language as a symbol of the disintegration of meaning becomes, in the texts, a very confronting and personal articulation of the limits’ terror. The figure of Carson’s father inhabits ‘that crude coast where everything breaks down and turns simple again as a protein structure’ (\textit{Just For The Thrill}, 208), where language literally and entirely fails in its hold on the real – a manifestation of the threat of scepticism. Language in the possession of her father becomes an impenetrable object, uncon-

\textsuperscript{128} George Steiner (speaking of Dante), \textit{Language & Silence: Essays On Language, Literature, and the Inhuman} (Yale: Yale University Press, 1966), 60.
trolled and uncontrollable: he vocalises in ‘snarls and syllables and sudden wild appeals’ (*Glass Essay*, 32), ‘a sound like a growl’ (*Anthropology Of Water*, 120), a return to the animal origins of sound before/beyond the introductions of meaning. This is the glass language between family members taken to its furthest extreme: the other speaker becomes horrifyingly incomprehensible not only to listeners, but to himself. Against this ‘stream’, a descriptor she uses across several texts, Carson’s own language becomes restricted, a rictus, contracted into simplistic brutal segments out of a very visible fear: ‘Forward and back. All of a sudden he stops moving and turns toward me. I feel my body stiffen. He is staring hard. I draw back a little in the chair.’ (*Anthropology Of Water*, 120). The signifier used for her father’s language-wrecked body is his hands – the forming element, the controller, the creating part. They are destroyed, useless, ‘stunned’ (*Just For The Thrill*, 209): they cannot hold grapes or affection or sustained meaning, and are simply distorted, ‘keep growing/Each now as big as a boot in Van Gogh’ (*Glass Essay*, 33). Dementia, in its personalised invasion of the texts, is a visceral symbol of the disintegration of language, and the fearful restriction of Carson’s portrayal of self-as-daughter demonstrates the sheer power and helplessness of this incursion.

It is telling that at one point elsewhere in her oeuvre Carson discusses her father’s ‘sentence [...] clawing into me like a lost tribe’ (*Anthropology Of Water*, 120). This is the visualised endpoint of her anthropological investigations of communication between speakers: a complete breakdown into isolation, to be ‘lost tribes’ like the Cycladics themselves. It is the ultimate repudiation of any concept of her practise of anthropology itself as a privileged, ‘stable’ method of communication – it is transformed, like her authorial, paratactic voice, into the personal, and therefore the completely, vulnerably subjective. In the spectrum of Carson’s texts, there is a movement from the symbol of her father as the ultimate degradation or violence of formlessness
personified, which showed its strongest presence in Just For The Thrill and Glass Essay, to a more abstracted model of disorder. The Cycladics are a less personal discussion – an entire distant tribe, whose broadest perspectives are foreign and laughably unavailable for interpretation, dying out ‘except for one, a ferryboat captain’ (“Cycladics”, 10.0). The whittling of an already-blatantly inaccessible language (‘They put stones in the sockets. Upper-class people put precious stones’, 9.4) to a single Charon, a deliberately ambiguous figure who is utterly isolated in a dead code, is effectively Carson’s revising of her father as symbol to a more universal poetic point. Rather than language’s limits as disordered and therefore powerfully distorting, the limits’ personification becomes the captain, still subject like the father to ‘snowfalls’ (13.0), but marooned in the ‘shallow holes’ of her own language (14.1) not from internal disorder but from the ‘die-off’ (15.0) of all understanding ears. It is these two figures that patrol the edges of Carson’s language over time, their isolation in animal/deceased languages pressing upon and warping the texts and figuring the true threats of the limit.

Silence, the other iteration of the physical limit of language, is tremendously present and warping in Carson’s structure and syntax. She is in many ways a poet of the blank, of the silence that does not transcend but invades. It manifests in several different forms: as damaging light, smothering snow and silence that smothers. All of these symbols form part of an erosion of language’s power by the presence of its negation. In this sense, language in the texts is a city on a bleak, snowy landscape (a metaphor Carson uses elsewhere in her work); its civilising faux-protection can only go so far, and beyond lies a deeply threatening wilderness that perpetually shapes and redefines boundaries and power.

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Imagery of brutality and violence infuses the use of light as symbol in all three texts, breaking through language and connection in a very physical sense. Light, in Carson’s pattern of signs, signals a confrontation with the limit, the ‘splash and glare’ ("Cycladics", 11.1): ‘all the lights are on’, glaring at Carson’s intimate first meeting with her lover in *Just For The Thrill* (193), ‘carving into me with knives of light’ in *Glass Essay* (10). The transformation of this traditional poetic symbol of freedom and clarity into a physical rip through language, ‘sharp enough to slaughter goats’ ("Cycladics", 10.2), renders it both weird and terrible, *unheimlich* as well as unsettling. Light is an agent of fearfulness – ‘movements inside the light’ in *Glass Essay* herald the breaking-off of an entire section (16), while light in the moor’s Brontëan landscape signifies reaching the very edge of the physical limit: ‘thousands of hair-thin cracks catching the white of the light/like a jailed face,/catching grins through the bars’ (24) – but it can also be poetic, fruitful. The limit-obsessed poetry of Emily Brontë in *Glass Essay* (‘vaults, cages, bars, curbs, bits, bolts fetters/long windows, narrow frames, ach-ing walls’, 9) is described by sister Charlotte as ‘breathing lightning’ (13), physically grappling with and channelling the terror of the light to create new challenges.

Physical interpretations of silence generally characterise later works: “Cycladics”, for instance, uses the body ‘to silence mental conversation’ (11.6). And yet “Cycladics” still ripples with light that is abruptly real, ‘moonlight more silver than the sea’ (16.1). Although Susan Stewart asserts that the ‘work of poetry is to counter the oblivion of darkness’¹³¹, it is better seen as countering oblivion from both sides – the demented severing of language from any meaning, and the invasion of silence from the snowy plains outside language’s fragile city.

These may seem like poetic figuring of the *terminus*, the delicate and porous boundary of language and limit at which Mauthnerian scepticism places the texts, but it is crucial to note that their influence is deeply, powerfully structural. Both elements of the limit in this trio of texts are visceral presences that shape their overall poetic development. Through corrosion, cracking, twisting and other reactions to the twin motifs of the limits, the texts deliberately engage with their own possible destruction.

The degradation of the texts in the face of language's limits is powerful. The first angle, the demented language, manifests by infecting the texts' own language with fretful repeating of words, flushes of description (as when the wind 'keeps belling, boasting, wrestling, rinsing, dishevelling, bonfiring, boistering,' *Just For The Thrill, 206*), forming direct parallels or imitations of the 'word salad' of her father. The best example is *Just For The Thrill's* puzzled, almost childlike handling of the phrase 'lover':

'Lover? Good lover. Better lover. Love being your lover. One of the best lovers I ever. Better than aubergine. Had. Had. Had. Stop the box.' (204) This goes beyond paratactic acknowledgment of the flaws of personal language in the hands of the author, and also beyond a circling of a pair with anthropological bewilderment, though it contains elements of both. It is pushed further into confusion, parallel with the first deranged 'decoupling' of her father's language from meaning: 'What happened to you to I who to? There was a deer. That's not what I. How many were? No. How?' (190) In one tragic sense this is as close to communication or shared language as the pair of father-daughter can ever come, in sharing the 'black neon noon' of completely disordered words (240). All that remains is the language of limit, reiterated haplessly until it, too, loses all meaning: 'It is forbidden to camp anywhere but on the gravel pad. It is forbidden to make fire except in the pit provided. It is unlawful to walk or move except on the trails marked.' (*Just For The Thrill, 219*).
Elsewhere the disorder of language infiltrates the texts in the form of increasingly deranged sense-experiences, a textual world where even the personal empirical experience on which (according to scepticism) language itself is based has become fearful and strange. This particular form of ‘demented’ disconnection, in infiltrating and distorting the experiential landscape, destabilises the foundations of all expression. In Just For The Thrill, such disconnection renders Americana as suddenly bewildering: 'Neon smells like shock treatment and makes that same ice-pick nick in your mind' (235), ‘Along the roadside lie gigantic sleeping badgers covered in snow’ (236), and the ‘funnies’ meld together into incomprehensible erotic dreams (229), while in Glass Essay they form The Nudes, responses to emotional pain that are both bodily and decidedly, horribly unreal (22). These are not uses of surrealism for shock, but disorders wreaked upon the texts to demonstrate the cruelty and horror of demented language. It is no longer possible to obtain meaning 'like some stained wall where all of a sudden you see a face' (240): only the stained wall remains.

In "Cycladics", the appearance of disordered language is sharper and more heightened because of the comparative brevity of the text. To the superficial view it is a supremely controlled, ‘flat’ work, using Carson’s trademark uninflected, paratactic syntax without incursion from the more organic and anxious elements of Just For The Thrill or Glass Essay – but demented disorder manifests itself nevertheless. The repetition of 16.0 (‘As far as the experience of stirring is concerned, small stillness creates small stirring and great stillness great stirring’) is a sign of a disruption of the ‘stillness’ itself, a destruction of poised language by the disorienting power of ‘word salad’. For all the poem’s veneer of control, dementia pushes further into it than in either of the other works: it corrupts/infects the authorial voice itself, taking the sceptic’s inherent distrust of personal language to a new level. The ‘faultiness’ of the author’s point of view is based in a now-familiar inability to keep track of utterance: ‘Did I
mention the marble pillows, I think I did’ (9.1). It is the authorial self and its inability to broadcast clearly, like ‘playing a stringless harp’ (7.0), that becomes the locus of the limit in “Cycladics”.

And yet the trio of works never entirely surrender to the disorder or silence. The texts remain, attempting their ‘try again, fail again, fail better’ Beckettian trials. What propels them forward is their embrace of the monstrous, and it is to that idea that our attention will now turn.

Section 4: Formal Monstrosity And The Saving Of Language

Hybridity of form is one of Carson’s most distinguished characteristics as a modern poet, the aspect for which she tends to be most publicly lauded. It is a blurring of lines that extends not solely across the three selected works but through her entire oeuvre, from the melding of tango and autobiography in The Beauty Of The Husband to the fractured myth-song of Red Doc>. It can be twinned with her obsession with failing language as the defining aspect of her poetic output, but I contend in this final section that the two have a more complex relationship than simply partnered preoccupations in the poet’s mind. Form, in our three texts, is not subjected to fracturing and hybridisation solely for playfulness, but as part of what poet Ron Silliman, in his analysis of the emergence of formal play in modern American poetry, called ‘the larger question of what... it means to be human’:132 the desperate desire for communication of human experience. Carson’s forms become monstrous, deliberately, violently estranged from the normal and firmly situated in a shifting space of hy-

bridency, as a method of negotiating the failures of the medium itself. Hybridity in this context is not merely a reflection on poetic praxis and tired ideas of expression but an attempt to form a new idea altogether, one that can sustain itself at the limits of language’s impotence. Monstrosity is a crucial part of this promise: a utilisation of the limit’s terrors with terrors of its own.

To make any allegations about an artist’s use of ‘form’ is to instantly enter difficult definitional territory. As a deeply ‘protean monosyllable’, form as a term is widely diffuse in use and if deployed lazily can wreak havoc, particularly when discussing an artist like Carson, for whom form is itself a slippery and contested area. It is necessary to define its particular usage here, and to separate it from the idea of genre or of vague senses of ‘shape’. While in the discussion of Nox form was closely linked to both tradition and forming itself, the process of creation/poesis, here it is more usefully seen in its literary guise, as denoting various coherent structures used for expression. In this sense, it contains all aspects from rigid, deeply structural forms (sonnets, for instance) to the more flexible love story, philosophical meditation, diary and so on. That Carson’s works rejoice in, and negotiate the limitations of language through, a kind of monstrous multiplicity of forms is a crucial aspect of her approach to doubt. Form is, therefore, a structural contemplation of the boundaries of language in Carson – but their resultant monstrosity, their emphasis on pairings and divisions and half-weird marriages of juxtaposed ideas, must be viewed as equally a reaction to the forces beyond the limits as they are a playfulness within them.

Monstrosity is also a peculiar theoretical concept. It is multivalent and definition-resistant by necessity: in the articulation of Foucault, who introduced it to the theoretical arsenal, monstrosity is the leftover, the anarchic, the outside of conven-

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133 David Pole, Aesthetics, Form And Emotion (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1983), 81.
tional language or expression.\textsuperscript{134} However, the deeper sense of the term, beyond superficial senses of ‘non-ordinary’ and ‘horrifying to the conventional’, is of subversive challenges to existing orders, of the monstrosity as interrogation of the traditional.\textsuperscript{135} The monstrous is therefore tied inextricably to the idea of the limit, as it is defined as limit’s surpassing, its disturbing exterior space; ‘monsters,’ in the words of Allen Weiss, ‘exist in margins’\textsuperscript{136}. Thus the three works are already, in their pushing against the limits of expression and codified signifiers, negotiating the domain of monstrosity – their ripped and deranged language can even be depicted as an experience of the monstrous, as a result of the interrogation of the margins.

Yet it is in forms that the use of monstrosity in our three texts finds both supreme expression and a method of moving beyond chaotic silence, towards an ongoing exploration of the margins. Form is on the surface a counter-intuitive partner to monstrosity, the ‘conventional language’ that monstrosity ‘stretches to an extreme’, as Andrew Hock-soon Ng has it\textsuperscript{137} – and yet the monstrous also encompasses the hybrid, the transformed, the synthesised, the confused.\textsuperscript{138} Indeed, Nerys Williams theorises that in all poetic praxis, the long poem – the epic, the saga – must involve an element of monstrosity, of different elements combining in one, in order to attempt a sustained poetic vision: to try to ‘make it cohere’, in the despairing lament of Pound in his Canto CXV.\textsuperscript{139} Thus the texts’ manipulation of pure forms into conflated hybrids, bulg-

\textsuperscript{134} Foucault in Andrew Hock-Soon Ng, \textit{Dimensions of Monstrosity in Contemporary Narratives: Theory, Psychoanalysis, Postmodernism} (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 175.
\textsuperscript{137} Hock-soon, \textit{Dimensions Of Monstrosity,} 178.
ing and jostling in fragmentated combinations that permanently shift, is monstrosity of a long poetic tradition, one that neutralises the limit’s devouring, transforming it into potentiality. The hybrid combinations of form that run through the breadth of Carson’s texts are therefore not so much boundary-pushers in and of themselves as a monstrous answer to the shredding force of silence.

It is the argument of this chapter that in using forms in ‘monstrous’ ways – placing them at the very edge of their conventional usage, aborting or collaging them, creating hybrids of several with full expression for none – the three texts are uniting both ideas in a manner that renders their limit-interrogating poetry actually sustainable. While I have observed that repetition of the same issues in differing arenas, particularly the idea of pairs and the manifestations of limits, constitute the backbone of Carson’s continued output, a more interesting mechanics is at the heart of her failing/not-failing language experiments. To place her works in the domain of the monstrous, the ‘space of experience in which thought interrogates its own limits,’¹⁴⁰ is to render them redemptive in the true Mauthnerian sense, capable of balancing the fragilities of language with the continued production of language-based art. This argument will be made through separate examination of the three texts, each of which uses formal monstrosity in a different manner to negotiate and negate the final terrors of the limits.

*Glass Essay* is, at first glance, not so much monstrous as it is simply multiple: its many voice-modes and forms appear to run in concurrence, without difficulty or excessive emphasis on their hybrid nature. Indeed, the nature of the combination of autobiographical essay, notation of psychological experiences, examination of Emily Brontë’s art and borrowed segments from other works is modelled in the text itself:

¹⁴⁰ Nuzzo, “Foucault and the Enigma,” 60.
the ‘old videotape’ of last year (11) running concurrently to this, overlapping and in-
terrupting, which so haunts the speaker –

Perhaps the hardest thing about losing a lover is
to watch the year repeat its days […]
I can feel that other day running underneath this one
like an old videotape – here we go fast around the last corner
up to hill to his house (10-11)

However, this is not a settled or an entirely fulfilled space for the forms
themselves. As Carson herself does with the painful memory-videotape of the previ-
ous year with its ‘lozenges of April heat’ (11), the text ‘pushes downward’ through
each form’s manifestation, forcing focus onto another area and refusing any one form
a space to itself. ‘No, I say aloud. I force my arms down/through air that is suddenly
cold and heavy as water//and the videotape jerks to a halt/like a glass slide under a
drop of blood’ (11). This form-jerking is not skittishness, though it could be parsed as
fear (which will be explored in further detail in examinations of Just For The Thrill). It
is a good metaphor for the endless swinging between incomplete forms.

A key part of this switching between forms – not paratactic but united under
a wholly common narrative, though drawing attention to Carson’s own authorial
power and fallibility can again be portrayed as part of this monstrous performance –
is that they are allowed, over the course of the long poem, to at least partially manifest
on their own, splicing and eliding as if to avoid detection. This forms the internal
structural logic of Glass Essay as an always-moving mass, never still or easily located,
tangentially swerving from form to form. There is always a quiet bulkhead of un-
steadiness under this seemingly controlled text: it veers without being radically jux-

94
taped, sets up polite segment headings to render it complete in a narrative sense, and yet always runs the risk of the unexpected, breaking through like the Nudes through careful meditating on pain. The shifts in form take the appearance of associative flickers, rather than more brutal moves:

It pains me to record this,
I am not a melodramatic person.
But soul is ‘hewn in a wild workshop’
As Charlotte Brontë says of Wuthering Heights.

Charlotte's preface to Wuthering Heights is a publicist's masterpiece (12)

This is the non-paratactic yet definitively non-uniform mode of form-shift in Glass Essay at work: levels of current moving alongside one another, each surfacing briefly, ‘cutting across’ one another as the mother’s voice ‘cuts across me/from the next room where she is lying on the sofa’ (20). This hybridity of forms, which elide so gently here and so much more brutally in other Carson works, is a direct attempt to cope with language’s limits via monstrosity: by not allowing any mode of expression, authoritative or not, to form completely or dominate, the text appears to be practising misdirection, dancing tantalisingly on the edge of silence. The many forms of Glass Essay are explicitly present to attempt a dissection of the pain of lost love, a ‘deeper explanation’ (37) than mere personal experience or academic contemplation; a solitary form is insufficient to express the ‘moment like no other/when one’s lover comes in and says I do not love you anymore’ (38). One form on its own would fail through the inadequacies in language I have previously explored, while a combination that uses monstrosity, a twisted space where ‘conventional language is stretched to an ex-
treme',¹⁴¹ can at least attempt to express the emotion partially using half-forms in concert. It could be coherently argued that this multiplicity of forms creates a kind of bulwark against Carson’s Mauthner-esque doubt in language, and its infusion of silence and disorder into her texts. This is tempting, but incomplete: it is the rhythm of their arrangement rather than their sheer mass that forms the most interesting part of Carson’s form-hybrids.

However, Glass Essay differs most significantly from the other two texts under the spotlight in that it contains unto itself a model of monstrosity as productive: Emily Brontë as author and celebrator of the ‘scorpion’ scuttling down the armchair, the ‘breathing lightning’ that broke open her limit-obsessed poetry (13). The parts of Emily Brontë on which the segments of Glass Essay devoted to her are focussed are largely concerned with her negotiation of language’s limits, which drove her as much as Carson: in Carson’s argument, Wuthering Heights is built upon a single failure of language, Heathcliff’s mishearing of the half-sentence of Catherine (‘It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff’, 18). In near-fragmented and partial segments, Carson’s exploration of Brontë as a monster of misunderstanding, excluded from the academic discipline and entirely mysterious to both biographers and her own family, is an internal model for monstrosity as an escape from limitation. Brontë becomes a creature of monstrous violations of form and ideal: her ‘foul language’ (26), the Iron Man who controls her poetry (20), the ‘pain devil’ Heathcliff’s internal wilderness (18), her cauterising of a wound with ‘red-hot tongs’ (18), combine to render her as an artist who understood the power of monstrous disturbance to interrupt difficulties. To return to the idea of form in the three texts, the uncertainty, the weirdness and unsettling of Glass Essay’s collation of forms is perhaps its Heathcliff, the shifting monstrosity that

¹⁴¹ Hock-Soon, Dimensions Of Monstrosity, 178.
keeps it alive and suspended like a ‘hot pore blown into rock’ (14) rather than subsiding entirely into silence and disordered language.

Just For The Thrill, in contrast, performs such radical shifts in form that it becomes less a gentle series of currents surfacing and descending than a rapid collage, cycling swiftly through registers in deliberately jarring combinations that relinquish any reference to an overall narrative flow. In a typical example:

But women are numb or liars or never stop thinking, you cannot make me stop thinking.

Does a Flower Love To Have Its Ovary Sucked by a Bee? is the title given by the Hades emperor of China to a treatise (213)

If, as I have established, it is the rhythm of these hybrid forms that is their most pertinent feature in their negotiation of the limits of language, this shift in pace is indicative of a new stage. Rapidity, here, so frenetic as to appear completely paratactic and devoid of connection, distinguishes this project from Glass Essay, which used monstrosity of partial forms to attempt to give expression to a complex human experience (lost love). Just For The Thrill, however, appears through its monstrous, frenetic form-cycles to be approaching a different idea: to use the sheer speed of monstrous ‘transformation’\(^\text{142}\) as a structural basis for a new kind of poetic form, one based entirely around the endless ‘pulling pulling pulling’ (193) that drives us to continue trying to communicate in a failing medium. Desire is a crucial poetic force in all three texts, combining lust for human connections with the frantic want to express

meaning, and Just For The Thrill (and, as will be seen, ‘Cycladics’) creates a poetics of form that attempts to satisfy that desire, even if it is inevitably only partial.143

We must look at the poetics of this new structural monstrosity as much for what it denies as what it creates. Just For The Thrill deliberately distances itself from any intimacy of emotional expression, from the ‘I fell to my knees and sobbed too’ autobiographical revelations of Glass Essay (6). Instead it veers away, preferring vague references and sleights of hand – ‘As the Chinese proverb says, there was blood in the water trough one morning’ (189), for example, to refer to a first period. As has been noted, Carson’s authorial distance from the situation results in confusion as to which speaker is saying what in the tent at night. This indirect approach fits with the anthropological mode that Carson self-consciously adopts in the text, but it also serves a strong structural purpose linked to frenetic, monstrous combinations of form. In perpetually swerving away – from full-blown emotional immediacy, from any extended manifestation of form – the text is aping the kind of dementia that lies at the limits of language, of words unable to move past their own ‘nakedness’ (191) into coherence. However, this ‘dementia’ is productive. It eschews the directness and gentle ‘glass slides’ of form conducted by Glass Essay (11) for a communicative vehicle that utilises the threatening confusion of the demented limit, forming a monstrous ‘human language’ collage (210) that moves rapidly, self-corrodes and creates the very opposite of a ‘still code’:

Smiles and says quietly, Fuck me. Bad at pelting the rat for fear of

smashing jade bowl

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143 Carson on desire in Eros the Bittersweet (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1998), 30: “But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realise I never can.”
beside it, says classical Chinese. Lady Cheng’s special interest was mapmaking. (195)

This is not chaos, though it has the lineaments of a demented language, but a collation of phrases, half-heard dialogue, snatches of reproduced ideas – all flawed through their filtering via Carson’s own heavily unreliable prism of consciousness – that combine to create a wave of forms, solid in its strangeness, approaching representation through its own instability. The ‘whir, click, true’ that punctuates Just For The Thrill (202, 220), imitating the noise of a camera heard offstage in the futile pursuit of truthful portrayal of reality, is the best analysis of this structural idea: the whir of onward movement, the click as a form partially manifests, the continual new feeding of film and then the clicking once again.

This monstrosity of form-collation is taken to its limit, perhaps self-critically, in “Cycladics”, where the forms on display (faux-historical narrative, surrealist divergences, personal interjections and random pieces drawn from other authors and texts) are filtered not only through the ‘admittedly faulty’ point of view of Carson (4.2) but through the scrambling influence of a random integer generator. The destruction of overall cohesive narrative through randomness is a ploy from postmodernism and various schools of poetry of the early twentieth century, a reference that should be kept in mind, but Carson’s use of it in “Cycladics” can be more fruitfully portrayed as part of an experiment with formal monstrosities and impotent language. It is another layer of formal disarrangement in a poem explicitly concerned with the endpoints of languages and codes, and the remnants that survive for post-destruction analysis. While Just For The Thrill and Glass Essay dwell on the ‘pulling pulling pulling’ desire to

144 L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, for instance.
communicate and represent in individual human contexts, “Cycladics” more directly addresses language itself, and the frightening ease of its demise into misheard ‘proverbs’ (2.3) and misunderstandings of symbols like the ‘frying pan/mirror’ (3.3). While this superficially gives the appearance of a spectrum, with the formal monstrosities growing more potent and distant from single-form cohesion over the course of Carson’s career, it is more realistically depicted as a set of varied iterations on the same motif, developed obsessively from different angles. This direct negotiation with the end of language, as the speakers ‘all died out except one’ (10.0), allows for the text’s random monstrosity, its bewildering and startling hybridity, to be extended to the point of near-nonsense – at least on the part of Carson herself. To ‘sort’ the text into even vaguely cohesive or linear arrangements of forms is left entirely to the reader, a relinquishing of power by Carson that extends beyond mere playfulness to a direct accusation of complicity. To render “Cycladics”, printed originally in the London Review Of Books as a ‘word salad’ directly reminiscent of dementia, as coherent involves reader interference with the poetic vision, however random and non-personal its origins. Thus the text becomes an ‘unsettling subversion’\(^{145}\), a monstrous variant, not only of formal arrangements and the permanence of language but of the idea of sacred poetic choice, the selective power of the artist. Rescuing meaning from the disorder and terror of disarrayed, long-dead language becomes an act shared between the poet and the reader, and only collusion can allow the text to move into productive hybridisation. While the other two texts work towards a rapid and viable monstrosity, “Cycladics” pushes past it into the impossible, beyond a mere monstrous

\[^{145}\text{Nuzzo, “Foucault and the Enigma,” 70.}\]
'conflation of genres'\textsuperscript{146} to a howling landscape of random chance only rendered coherent by interference.

It is an overstatement to allege that the texts’ monstrous forms, in their negotiation of the limits of language, solve or completely mitigate their flaws. However, their approach to what Carson calls the ‘imperfect, perhaps transitory code’ of human language\textsuperscript{147} is a fascinating blueprint for the revitalising of poetics in the face of such doubt. In manifesting \textit{Wortaberglauben} so directly, placing themselves in explicit danger of failure and then enacting a complex ‘rescue’ by utilising warped shards of different forms in jarring arrangements, these texts create their own version of what Beckett described as ‘the literature of the unword’\textsuperscript{148}: a head-on confrontation of (again, borrowing Beckett’s term) the weak ‘materiality’ of language. However, while Beckett’s entire oeuvre has been depicted as the pursuit of ‘radical reduction, of working to find a means to literature’s end’,\textsuperscript{149} our texts – despite the shattering randomness of “Cycladics” – are more effectively pictured as pursuing Mauthnerian ‘redemption’, a form-model that will somehow sustain the ‘pulling pulling pulling’ of communicative desire through language. The key question that must emerge from their array of attempts, which willingly adopt the monstrous as a weapon against the failures of language, is whether they appear worth the brutal effort: whether, by so transforming her poetics into such extraordinary hybrids and just-snatched-from-the-brink encounters with language’s demise, Carson may be implicitly reflecting on the diminishing returns of such pursuits, and the future of poetics in a landscape where seeking one’s own language is so volatile an effort. Perhaps the ‘omnipotence’ of Octavio Paz’s silence and the fractures and flaws in language as a medium are inevitably impossible.

\textsuperscript{146} Weiss, “Ten Theses,” 124.

\textsuperscript{147} Steiner, \textit{Language And Silence}, 69.

\textsuperscript{148} Beckett’s letters, reproduced by Kathryn White, \textit{Beckett and Decay}, 119.

to negotiate, and the trio of works are merely a play with the inevitable, a brief spurt of activity in a permanent state of silence: 'Prior to the movement and following the movement, stillness.' ("Cycladics" 16.2).
CONCLUSION

I recommend to your private enquiry Roland Barthes’ [...] dreamy commitment to a third language in which we would all be exempt from meaning.

The Albertine Workout, appendix 15(b)

Criticism of a still-living, still-producing artist is a different, and in many cases trickier, proposition than criticism devoted to an artist whose oeuvre has been completed by death or retirement. Delineating the centres of thought and purpose, creation and doubt within Carson’s work is particularly difficult because of the motion of her career: not the development of sole themes in different environments, but an ongoing transformation of form, language, genre and angle. Forming steadfast theories around Carson’s polyvalence and applying them to contemporary poetics is possibly a futile proposition, since future work may backtrack, explode or undermine previous ideas; so this thesis is very much of its moment in time. However, possibly theorising on Carson’s polyvalent creativity while in its midst, rather than as an annotation on an extant, complete solid, fits the style of the work: a strong part of criticism in the midst of an artist’s production, as Anna Byrd says in ‘How And Why Do We Write About Living Artists?’, is the ‘possibility of conflict’, not necessarily with the artist themselves but with past, future and the concept of completion. Carson, as I have shown, is both attracted to and shies deliberately away from the illusion of completeness, the idea of an original text produced and released whole into the world. So the instability inherent in contemporaneous criticism may be the best fit to grapple with the successes and goals of her work.

This thesis has identified, at the core of Carson's creative productions, a centre of doubt, whether in undoing and subverting the traditions of the elegy form or in creating monstrosities to navigate the difficulties of language. The central question that explicitly drives Carson's writing, in this argument, is how language, a human-made construction with deep inherent failings, can sustain representation and communication. In *Nox*, that question is given a specific focus in the contemplation of the elegiac, which by its nature attempts to express the vanished and immutable; in 'Cycladics', *Just For The Thrill* and *Glass Essay*, it becomes a more wheeling confrontation with the limits of the medium, and how to negotitate them. The struggle between the urge to communicate and the conviction, which as I have demonstrated can be expressed clearly in the theories of language-sceptic Mauthner, that language can ultimately never reach other people has been argued to be the key struggle in Carson's current work, and the heart of productive reflection on the state of contemporary poetics and modern creativity. While these obsessive forays into poetry's limits, the *limes* beyond which civilised language ends and the unknown begins, are not always completely successful or convincing, they are at least productively restless, shaping a useful discussion on how failure can be poetically creative.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


The Traitor’s Symphony is an experimental novel in three voices, set in an unspecified totalitarian state known only as the Regime at some point in the twentieth century. It follows the career of David, a young composer who rises from tortured outcast to celebrated Regime talent through scheming, moral ambiguity, and a deal with the Professor, a translator and populist radio pundit. David trades the sexual attentions of Dion, a beautiful but brain-damaged boy, for the Professor’s help in rising through the ranks of the Regime’s musical system. The voices of the Professor and his doctor wife Anne, who have just lost their newborn son, alternate with David’s as the bargain binds them together in disaster.

The narrative is inspired by the lives of collaborationist composers in various 20th century states, including Dmitri Shostakovich and Carl Orff, but is not focussed on any one figure. Instead, it takes various elements of their experience - the state apparatus of approval, the minute observation of ‘doctrine’ in musical content, and the humiliation and blacklisting of composers who did not produce acceptable content - as the starting point for a narrative exploring the complex relationship between art, artists and the modern totalitarian state. Research in this area was shaped by Alex Ross’s The Rest Is Noise: listening to the twentieth century (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) and the work of Michael Kater, most notably Composers of the Nazi era: eight portraits (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), and supplemented by archival work in the Stasimuseum and Bundesbeauftragten in Berlin. More broadly, the novel focusses on the difficulties of grief, love and survival in totalitarian environments. Its setting, the Regime, was created by combining elements of daily life under the Stalinist Terror, The Democratic Republic Of North Korea, and Nazi and Stasi Germany, drawing on sources including Anna Akhmatova’s poetry and Chol-Hwan Kang’s The Aquariums Of Pyongyang (New York: Basic Books, 2001). The Regime’s embedded paranoia, hyper-vigilance, rigorous propaganda, regulated femininity, cult-like leader worship and brutal reprisal for non-conforming citizens are constructed from these historical precedents.

Each of the three voices is stylised as a poetic form, as a method of expressing the repression of the individual and the culture of fear in the Regime’s system. This formal dimension draws on modernist literature in its use of language as expression of identity, but also on Wittgensteinian doubt that true communication could ever exist between such personal webs of meaning. Both David and Anne must actively suppress their private pain, he the agony of torture and burden of being labelled a traitor, she the disorienting grief of her son’s death and the loss of her husband’s love. Their inner emotional states are reflected in the forms of their vocals: David’s fractured voice, with its distressed percussive rhythm, is the voice of a musician physically and mentally smashed, while Anne’s blank, frantic segments express the dislocation of her foreignness and the gulf that grief has created in her marriage. The Professor, in contrast, begins the novel in supreme command of language, with brief breaks into sensual chaos as the only manifestation of his hidden mourning. The vocal shifts reflect and form the narrative progression: David rises into controlled prose as he gains power, while the Professor falls into poetic fragmentation in parallel with his loss of control. Only Anne, who forms the novel’s moral centre in her flawed pursuit of understanding and control, is essentially vocally constant.
The Traitor’s Symphony

BOOK 1

Preface

The Composer Is Released

Now they have freed me –
My feet cannot be walked on. Cramp-slab of toes. Under the skin a broken mush of bone.

The prison guard pushes me forward regardless; patting his intolerable hands along my sides as if to say your freedom is temporary, only temporary; his long-flank gun on my neck, marching me out; and the grounds covered with frost, early morning prisoners doing rounds with shaven heads, and the sky; and the gate, where he offers me a cigarette, and my shoes.

It is the indignity. One’s socks only.
The gates – when they shut – are quiet – like muted drums.

It is a skin-white winter morning; and there is only a woman here, crouching on the curb, as I come out of the barracks.

She asks rising if I have news of her Alexei; who has been in there months; and no trial sir nor any word; and her fetid smell presses; and here is his photograph look at his long hair honourable sir look at his innocent face; and my mouth is still soil and ash; and I say No no never.

Resettling she spits onto the ice.

Here is my collar, which I straighten reflexively.

Here are my bruises.

I would not say it. So it was beaten on me. But I would not. But I would not. And they said to me You must. And I said I will not. And so it was beaten.

And of course he is dead.

He is dead; I take the cigarette, and my shoes; though the knuckles are so swollen as to impede fastening; and so they must be slipped on, and worn with the back crushed down, flapping; the ice flecking and licking at my heel; flapping up the street; thinking He is dead, and holding the cigarette which has no flame.
He is dead most definitely. It may be in the papers. He was a prominent citizen. But if he was killed they will erase that. If it is over he is also over.

Examine the bruises on my arms like bites.

Early morning workers pass.

They took me in to give him up; to say that the concerto was decidedly anti-regime and anti-regulation and anti-women pissing in the street and anti-high virtue and anti-moral and pro-degradation; and I said But it’s in D Minor; which they did not understand of course.

Of course they have not listened to it.

It was the conducting notes; so they told me when they were not beating; the notes, in which he wrote To Freedom, and only the conductor saw it; a tiny annotation, his sparrow hand which sank into dough with age, needing my aid to write Allegro above the bars - but the conductor (I think of him sucking his teeth, sulking) snuck it out; left it prominent on a desk, some minion’s desk, cooling with its recent playing; and so.

And so he is dead Maestro Von Sayer.

And the streak-bruise across my chin.

And these seem to be the same thing.

A Concerto In D Minor cannot be immoral any more than a bird, I think; holding my cigarette, which is unlit; a bird with its bright beak, rising into sun; D natural, perhaps.

Here you can’t stand here where’s your permit. Big police-officer. I nod. The sun is real – and watery. And Alexei somewhere is drifting out of the real – into a question at a gate –

The entire world is out of beat –

It is no accident arrhythmia kills a body.

Perhaps if I beat it into myself it will be right; and so I am repeating he is dead he is dead he is dead; and moving, slowly, towards home.
Section 1: Wife and Husband

1. The Wife Alters Her Husband’s Work

It is like this:

Late evening.
The sky a half-glass of dark wine tipping down a shoulder blade.
Me in the cupboard. Breathing quarter-breaths.

Black dress cut half to the clavicle. We’d had rabbit for dinner. Wrapped the bones in paper. Candles stoppered between two fingers.

And he –
Well. He is at his desk smoking contraband cigars.
Me in the cupboard. Pressed against the wood with barely an inch of space.
Between the door and the jamb the single visible frame of his neck tensing.
I am barefoot. Barefoot women are rarely committing good deeds.

Being so still the human body settles into itself. Becomes aware of its own wide lungs the tensile arches of the feet. The swinging bell of pulse in the throat.
The spill of light on my knuckle.

So you’re a doctor. Did you know translators have many hundreds of hearts one for each text it’s a proverb. From the Catalan. What he said to me in our first weeks together. Should I cut you up then and see where they might be hiding.
His insides thick with them. Knots down the side of a liver’s wet purse. Ventricles spawning in floral arrangements around his spine.

He courted me in a café between classes my head still pressed with blood and cell formations. Springtime emerging from winter. Medical textbooks heavy as an animal on my lap. Translation Anne is really an act of hardness. You see the truth of the thing in the white space. And you pry it free with both hands. Making the movement in the air as if pulling apart the two sides of a fruit. It’s like a very gentle sacrifice.

*One day I’ll show it to you* he says. ‘*It’ – like Macchu Picchu or an inland sea. Translators work in pairs you know. *Two leafs to every open page.*

Now – did I move? – a strap slips from my shoulder. The dress drips down my arm in one soft-loud note. A honeymoon gift from Mykonos. I wore it at dinner hoping for a conversation –

*Do you remember Mykonos the oil-drenched deck do you remember the nights angry with stars do you remember the fourteen identity documents necessary to get me past the checkpoint to your home country? Their weight like a fallen body. Mykonos! We flew through our honeymoon like two straight arrows in the same headwind.*

- which did not come. The dress drops from my shoulder. Five feet distant he must hear the slide like wind on corn.

*I am so silent that if I spoke now I would be devastating.*

Has he heard –

He has not.

Will he go upstairs to bed or perhaps fetch tea. Will he finish this page. Will my muscles hold me in grip. Ten minutes it takes before an average muscle spasms.

The telephone. Unexpected though not unusual. He answers.


He growls with tiredness and rises to ring for the car. The cupboard presses close to me – he stretches and all his vertebrae reply– and turning he switches off the light.

The room in this my finger-line of vision swoops to dark.

If it could be any night to relive – if the man rowing me across the Styx asked me *What will it be* in his grey water voice – it would be this night.

The study doors shut as two sides of a wound reach and find one another.
So. Luck – a chance.

Open the cupboard. Come out. Reaching – for a hollow of light to cup in my palm. For the pen dipped in a pocket for the trustful page.

I kneel. Quick as a rat from a hole. The car door in the drive. Crack of gravel. His brief voice - then gone.

There are rules. It is almost a sport when you think about it. Transcripts are bare furrows. The final copy for the publishing a pure veil of lace. Between them there is this: the bristling nest of violent pairings and betrayals. Drafts scratched over and reformed. He works in this way. Tripartite. Bloody.

Bending with the pen I see how far he has gone. How the translation begins to show veins and whole patterns when held up to a light. The match flutters like a throat. And I begin. Multiply – here – an $n$ to $m$. Corrupt a tense. Whole sentences collapsing. What I am doing is massacring his logic. Prising subtly the tender segments. One skilful insertion and the whole piece gapes open – snick. My stomach still aching under the gown though it has been weeks. The clock is in its case. The night curls around my neck and tightens.

******

The key to understanding this act is in this word. *Cupboard.*

What is a wife? I have never fully understood the word. One who waits yes. One who gives out love like a radio wire. One who licks a neck and means it. One who writes herself into a life ardently in the dark.

Somewhere I cleaved from these definitions. Perhaps when I took to leaving my scarves and shoes and dresses and gloves in his everyday places. So he would come to the letterbox stairway table bookshelf of Latin and note my shed scales. My drop of taste in his mouth.
The gloves left hanging on his footstool a week. No remark from him ever.
I am rebuilding my life in the dark as the match fizzes at my nail. Wiping the spare ink across my thumb. Neatly tracing his r's the curl at the buttock of his z's like a watchful monkey.

Apparently in English there is no word – for the woman who loses a child. 
*Mother is mother.* Wives have the shady downward step of widowhood on which they can arrange their veils. Children after the plunge of fire or flood become – magic! – orphans.
*Mother is mother* alive or dead. *Grieving* perhaps. *Crazy* yes. *No longer a female* definitely yes.
Fate via language. If I had my way I would scorch my tongue.
I have not asked my husband who speaks eleven tongues fluently if this is the case in other languages.

*Cupboard.* Woman says a tribe in the Sahara is a cupboard.
Holding all the words and goods and water. Holding all life within her wet womb against the great weight of the heat. A shut space. I read this once.

His radio segments are only distractions. *A translator by nature.* He translates like a seduction: tender monogamous jealous.
See his hunger-work. See its breath in the darkness. See where I have let its blood.

The match goes out.

*******

The morning: tea shower steam rinse smile. The courtyard strict and raw with light.

He emerges fattened with sleep.
*How are you darling.* I am bright like iron. Have spent an hour putting my hair in the old way the way he liked when we married. *You were in so late last night.*
*Oh as good as the throes of old age will permit.* *I didn't sleep.* A peck on my cheek.
That word peck. A chicken at the neck. A pock from my skin. A scatter of harrowing.

*Lick my tongue speak my body out loud* I think to him across the kitchen.
Aloud I say *Coffee is good today.*

Thirty-six and whitened with pain like a saltwater mark on a coastal rock. I rub my palms to bring blood to their surface. To look alive for him. To push time off my skin. Outside our willow-trees are being pollarded. Long pyramid of limbs down on the riverbank. I can hear the shouts of the men hauling.

*My goodness Anne you look like death. You should go back to bed.*
Placed his goaty hand on my forehead to gauge warmth. Tenderly I slip a finger in his cuff. *I waited up to see. If you were all right* –
He is loud. Bluff. As if the servants were listening. Which was his severe whisper to me if I raised my voice. *Well. You must be chilled. That dress last night. Too thin by half – I did say.*

Ten years married.

*How's the work?*
Straight-backed with my secret. Unable to smile.


Whitebeard husband who no longer feels my skin. Whom I have nursed through great illnesses: pneumonia in Italy. Light cholera in Panama. For whom I am now an ill thing. Always.
He’s in the study. Has swung shut the doors.
Hemming your long-skirted translation it was words of our own I chose. Sewing you closer to me always.

A reference to a friend's wedding: *sepulchral* you whispered under the dim blooms.
Your hand a sly mouse under my second best skirt.
A nod to Mykonos: *Kalamatianós Dance* which is what we saw in beautiful white heat I could not find a way to add. *Olive* I could.
A whisper to the first miscarriage: *weaving* what you said you were doing outside the hospital room as I snuck back into human form.

A memory I could not add: *My Japanese-look girl* you whispered on our first night together. *My jade-green willow tree. Where is your hair.* Twenty-two years older and fragrant as tea.

I pare my nails at the sink. Their edges still marked ochre from the iodine.

One vowel to look like another. So that in the glance of the corner of his eye – which is thinned like a calligrapher’s stroke – he may read it otherwise.

Willow trees are deciduous. Must pollard them young so that the limbs strike out better in the next season.

From days of agony issue days flush with green. This promise.

2. The Husband

*Your directives, Commandant.*

I cannot see. This light is stone-light, lying on the black floor like a drowned animal, and we watch the man in the corner: locked into his leather straps, blinking through the blood.

I scratch my paunch, bored. An old man, I must seem to the attendant soldiers: dodderly, drooping with a gut and blowzy beard, dragged in for honour rather than for use. The Regime’s Radio-man. I sense their subtle shifts on foot, their disinterest.

*He was brought in as part of a group of traitors – denounced by a neighbour, says she heard them discussing anti-Regime plots. He understands nothing. Tell him he must give us information.*

*There is no word in the prisoner’s language for ‘must’, Commandant. I cannot force him to say anything.* This is my revenge: my rapier’s prick-poke at him for rousing me from my desk at this hour. I think back to the trembling translation I’d been hemming in, its heat under my hands: a hungry piece I was feeding fragments and figs of ideas. It was coming close, in the dark, to that deep stillness, that full moment when the two languages hang at balance, palm on palm... It was so brief a peace. And broken up for what?
The Commandant snorts. *Can you improvise?*

*I can convey necessity; it is a matter of pronouns. It may be clumsy, understand.* If I use the incorrect address he may take offence... A delicate dialect, this one. Layers full of inference, whole indolent vowel sounds to sound like bells. These soldiers seem to think it’s like a fuck in straw – one in, one out, all done. When it’s so flushed with doubt.

*Well, do it. If he’s silent we’ll fix that.*

I clear my throat. **Good evening. I will be your translator. What is your name?**

*I haven’t done anything.* He has the rich high notes of a good class. His grammar’s good. Check grammar like you would a horse’s teeth.

The Commandant leans in. *What does he say?*

*He will not give me his name.*

*Tell him if he doesn’t give us his name we will beat him.* Not subtle, these boys. No ploys to keep him talking till he tires. Leave him to me.

*This official is not the world’s fastest thinker, but he is sadistic. Note his limbs. I think it might be in your interest to give your name.*

*I do not respond to threats* says the prisoner.

*I am not interested in threatening you. This is not a good language for threats. It is too calm, isn’t it? A great stillness in the vowels. What is the myth? – that it came from the breath of the Goddess as she was sleeping.*

*You know a great deal.* He shifts and stares. I relax into the tones, their swing and up-skip. The soldiers note his interest and nudge each other.

*If you would like to keep talking to me, I must have your name.*

*My name is Villazon.*

*His name is Villazon.*

*That gives us a little, then.* The Commandant signals a secretary – does no writing himself, will scarcely know the alphabet. *Ask him what he was doing in the house of known traitors late at night.*

*My employer asks what you were doing in the house of known traitors late at night.* Were they traitors? Or did one of them have a house, a son, a handsome job – that the denouncing woman wanted, wrapped her arms around? I can see her, hinge-tight to their door, her covetous close face. And then her mouth moving at
the opening of a phone, or a letter: To The Chief Of Police. I’ve seen it done – for duty, for a draft of beer, for fear.

**How long have you spoken my language?** asks the man Villazon. **You have a Northern accent. Are you one of us?**

**Alas, no. I have none of the quietness of mind to speak it properly.** I learnt it at university from the great poet Mortua. A great man, grim, despising my choice to return to my home country, to work there. **You will be the puppet of that government** he said to me, **your gift will be the service of that Leader’s cult.** His slow sleepless voice. Wide awake always – a character preserved in his verse, which vibrates, which is vicious on the page.

**Mortua! Ah, he was famous. He wrote our national anthem.**

**You are a cultured man** I say.

*I will keep out of the politics* I said to Mortua then, and he laughed. **It’s all politics.** When he died I read an elegy of his aloud at the packed funeral; then fixed my stars for home. My month-fresh wife at my side on the boat.

**What does he say?**

That he is not literate, that he doesn’t understand what’s going on.

**Ah? Funny they should pick an idiot. Well, he was in that room with the others.**

*He won’t answer?*  

Wait. **I will see –**

**Mortua, I say, was a poet of great style. Have you read ‘Infinites?’ ‘The land that is singing death, the land that corrodes, its blood rising in bird-flocks’.**

Villazon says **We read him in college. You are a strange translator that discusses poetry.**

**You are a rare man that knows Mortua in his native tongue. Why were you at the traitor’s house?**

*I didn’t know he was a traitor. He is a friend of my father’s from our country. I came for tea, we discussed my work, I am a teacher. There were other men there but I didn’t join the conversation.*

**You have not been here long?** Here: underground, this soundless place.

**Not so very long. A week perhaps in captivity, six days.**

He says he was visiting a friend of his father’s, and only talked with him.

The Commandant snorts. **Typical of the type. I daresay they didn’t trust him.**

*Ah, look at his crusts of snot.* Smears Villazon’s face with the dirt and grease of his
phlegm. Keep on, Professor. We have very little on the men, it would help to know the topic of the discussion.

But surely they won’t be given trials. Evidence can’t be much help.
Of course not. They’re done for. But it’s helpful – to know what our enemies are planning.

The other men, what were they talking about?
Are you telling him everything I say?
Only the parts he might deem relevant I say. He is not a fan of poetry. It is good to have an intellectual discussion.
You are an amusing translator. It is a pity that you are with these men, no matter how you insult them. I do not know what they were talking about. It was in your language. I had aromatic tea, I was thinking of my country.

He says he does not know.
Why does he smile?
He thinks he has the better of me. He is not very bright.
Don’t play games, Professor, we have little time. Insist he tell us.

I will work my way out eventually. As he speaks Villazon’s eyelashes are bound to his cheeks by blood. I will write to my countrymen, the government.
I will be the one translating the letters. What were the men discussing?
They have nobody else who speaks this? You are a poor country to have such little tongue.
Professor?
He says he doesn’t understand what they were saying because they were talking in our language.

Well, I didn’t get out of bed for nothing. Indicate that if he doesn’t incriminate his fellows he will be tortured.
Not killed?
Pain is more fearful than death, Professor, to most men.

I am afraid our conference is almost at an end. If you will offer me nothing the men here are going to hurt you and cause you much pain.
Tell your commandant that I have no use to him and cannot give him any information.

That will probably not result in your freedom, Villazon.
You can make him believe it. You are a clever man.
He reiterates his ignorance like a mule.
Pah. Perhaps he’s right. He doesn’t look particularly intelligent.
The Commandant launches in. A blot of bone-noise – broken? Who breaks bones these days? How gauche. This continues two, three minutes.

Ask him now.

Will you talk? Make up something. These friends of yours, even if they were not friends, are dead now. It cannot hurt them any more. You can save yourself.

Gaaaaah. No. Fiends. Fiends with the tongues of animals.
Be careful, Villazon.
You are no better than the rest, translator. You are a devil-man. You are strapped to the arse of the demon...
I say to the officer Beat him again.

Villazon can barely breathe from his broken mouth. I know what they do in this country. A friend returned to my town with no arms, no tongue.

Come, Villazon, we are more civilised than this, us two! Be logical. If you denounce and make a deal, give them any information, I can make you safe, you can work with me.

You ordered them to beat me.
You were not polite.
Tell them this. I know nothing and will not denounce. I have honour.
What’s that? Why’s he smiling?

He says he has no knowledge and will give none. It seems, Commandant, you called me out in the middle of the night for nothing.

My voice is scraping with scorn. The Commandant colours. Tugs his trousers straight. Embarrassment floods him, bleeds up into his mottled neck.
Pah! He is just a pawn then. What a waste. I should have killed him when he was arrested.

I can do nothing further to save you, Villazon.
I know. You can go guiltless home to your wife, translator.
Goodbye, Villazon. He has nothing further to add.
Good.
Ah, and of course it is the pistol, of course; subtlety escapes the Commandant’s class entirely. His wounded pride wants this boy’s hide.

I hold my head; the noise is always nasty. He takes two steps and fires. A spit of sound, then silence. The soldier’s face still stiff with suffering shame.

Outside one can listen to the night breaking into itself.

It must be three nearly, or past two; my eyes are dry in my skull. I rise as they come to offer their celebratory drinks: wine pale as piss, water so hard it strips the teeth. And the gentleman in the corner, leaking out his little language onto straw.

*Your health, good sirs, and felicity and so on.*

*Thank you for your help tonight Professor.*

*You are welcome.*

Drain the glass – scarcely a half-swallow of wine in it. *Now, pleasure and all good company aside, I must be off. My wife is waiting for me.*

*One’s work comes at all hours in this Regime, Professor. Your own radio broadcasts happen at least every half-day, yes?* Stiffly, stiffly, with his bucket-brush of a face, this Commandant!

*The wonders of repeats, Commandant. Perhaps we should ask traitors to work more civilised days. My briefcase, good sir, and if it suits, my car.*

*We mustn’t disappoint the Professor’s wife, boys. Call the car!*

Oh disappoint the Professor’s wife – oh for as simple a feeling as disappointment for her. No. We are past simplicity. We are in a wilder place.

Now they are dragging Villazon to the corridor and onto sackcloth – looking like a drunk; to be thrown into a ditch doubtless in the morning. I take a deep liquid gulp of air.

The car’s arrived, great head-beams glistening like pears; where’s that from? Some provincial poet. It’s hard to separate the lines in less salubrious circumstances – poetry’s better suited to prettier places, I think. I will read Mortua again in the morning, I’m musty on his lines...

One man comes up to me now, a soldier at my sleeve: straight-long in the limb, a good black burr to his voice – hints of heather and hill in it, a rural lilt.

*Professor it is a very great privilege. I grew up listening to your Radio broadcasts – as did everybody I suppose. Lieutenant Dr--------.*

*And yourself also Lieutenant. Were you part of our little evening cocktail party?*
I am a friend of Captain Roxburgh – to whom you did such a great service – he wishes, sir, to be remembered sir. This casual carefulness! How charming. I grip his hand – hot, he’s nervous, leaves a nail-print in my palm.

I remember him. Charming to see a friend of Roxburgh’s – a brilliant man.

He - he speaks highly of you. Dewfall’s already in the morning air; the gravel pricked with it, the chill. Already the dark of the dripping interrogation room is fading, fleeing my body; the sour straw stripping my skin. It’s a sordid side to the work, but what can one do, when one’s the only multilingual expert in miles? And they’re munificent; and here is this young blonde, his steamed breath breaking the air between us. A tip of sorts.

O flattery. I’d love some fresh news from him – so high in the Ministry now, he’s too busy to write. You must be a very interesting young man, Lieutenant. I grin to put him at his ease – he’s teased himself into a right state. If I touched his arm he’d vibrate. Who did he bribe to meet me here, to have this clear space for a tete-a-tete?

Thank you sir. I do have some news of him from the barracks.

Well I shall have to hear it – over tea? If you have my office address – Friday afternoon perhaps. At four.

Of course sir. I shall see you then sir. Many thanks sir.

Good evening Lieutenant. Much luck to you.

Roxburgh does not come to mind immediately –

Ah – as the car rolls into the drive and out – that youth with barely a skin to his stomach - now fanning himself at the front of the Southern Brigade, fronded with medals! Roxburgh! Who charmed me with French villanelles he’d learnt by rote – one rewards such trifles; one desires the ponds of young minds in which to dip one’s hands.

Friday afternoon then.

Do you wish to take the Boulevard or the cavalry way, sir.

It is unusual for the chauffeur to speak, we do not trade pleasantries or politeness, regarding each other in trustless sparse silence: to whom does he report? Giving out little, so little of ourselves that could be spirited back swiftly in reports to the Bureau. Of course I’m equal in it, would denounce him directly if he lay outside the line.
The Boulevard is the longer way, perhaps extravagant; the cavalry way shorter but more pocked with those god-forsaken checkpoints, four in a mile, endlessly shuffling one’s Pass and smiling up at the guards...

My wife lies awake for me perhaps, in the dark cooling rooms.
I will take the longer way.

I open the window to light a cigarette, and crave music – to touch against my temples, run over the nape of my neck. The radio rationed to a low whisper (to allow better bugging of cars, any idiot knows that) – and my records achingly reduced since the List Of Allowed Composers, thinning out Szeverny, Volokhonsky, other creations of ‘crudeness’, ‘lawless formalism’, ‘unpatriotic intent’. At least the Opera is still operational. Though even there –

We pass the plum-tree of the pavilion, stuffed with blossom.

She lay under it, fresh to the city, barely twenty-two, barely wife, and made me lay with her and teach her all the names for plum: the plush thrust of them on the palate. My Anne Boleyn Anne of Cleves you cleave me, I whispered to her.

A fragment of grief rises – pierces my side. I’m suddenly blind.

And can still feel my son’s single-syllable body in spaces, aching between verbs, absurd, the press of his placid head at my heart: at the start of sentences, in empty rooms. A bloom, a tidal break of ache. All things become his newborn size: the prised opening of a window is the width of his fist, a man’s shoe filled with ten of his tiny feet – still in death wet-warm, red as terracotta...

I push it down, I’ll drown. Raise the music would you I can barely hear it. The cabin fills illegally with filigrees and flaxen waves of chord, taut cords of applause. Oboes like rippled wind through grass. They pass and press upon me, push the dark flows out. Give thanks for this. Have risen from that rotted place – reprehensible, really, my weakness.

We are passing from the Botanical Gardens to the suburb boundaries. I stroke my flanks – still full and solid despite age, despite anguished knees.

I will come into the house where my wife is sleeping, I will lie down all quiet in the dark. I think of the old poet Mortua; of his poems, so rarely performed, part of a lessening world. The spaces are filled with sweet music; there was never anything else.

*****
The house is quiet.

My wife is asleep, not picking at the plate still, waiting. Which is best, better for her health. (Must whisper within myself the reminder: be kind, be tender-tolerant, do not blame her for her beauty’s loss, do not make her feel her failure! Though it is tragic – she was so heavenly once.) She’ll be upstairs, unpeeled like a pear, slotted between the sheets of our separate beds. My choice of arrangement: my head aches when she writhes.

Too early-late to erase oneself into sleep. I shall work. The study is soft with meek morning light. So still, scented with tea and dust. I resettle to the Italian text –

And here suddenly is an arrow-scar in among the annotations – the word olive scurrying up, a scar in my hand upon the spine of text. Lying here, olive, a pit loose on the page.

I do not remember writing it, but that is not unknown, knots un-sewn are often retied absentely afterwards; translation breeds an assault on one’s love of logical time. In Chinese for instance one might take the text three ways; in Russian backward like a bike-chain. Retracing the drift is damnedly difficult.

Where did this olive drop? What crop left it lolling on my page? My mind’s a frantic Wunderkammer, it speaks these things and leaves them – perhaps age...

My wife loves olives – but that is no matter. It must have been Bart – in the atrium’s greenhouse. Seeing him finger an olive, on its sprig. Olives, love – clearly the memory, or thought, wandered up to find me and be noted, passingly. I must have forgotten...

She is awake, treading on the kitchen tile. I rise resignedly to join her.

A great man follows language, can be led.

3. The Wife Walks Into The Garden

Daylight is bald and tender like plucked skin. My face in the basin diminished by weeks of sleeplessness.
Clothe your brittle body. Wrap up your still-wet braids. Carry yourself into the garden.

In the weeks of my confinement the plants have pressed new buds. Flashed up hot green parts. The late cold snap touching their corners with a brutal translucence.

Breathing my coffee I notice one frosted weed stuck sore to the slate. Waving its pale hand.

Agony seems such a small thing now. Frail and distant. Pleasure of the wind on my neck. The frost-swollen crush of the new leaves.

And yet it is a demon in me still. Blackening the tongue. What do they say of plagues it comes in the night and by daybreak all in the house are afflicted.

Also after the difficulty I have found in my mind whole plains of language razed.

Directing the doctor the nurse at my bedside a word would fall through the net. Leaving me groping for an absence. Silence bombed through my sentences.

I touch my hair. These gaps for me to mend. Coating the scar till it thickens into healing.

Here however is the gardener. Good morning madam. His face wavering over thick plantations of cranesbills.

It is a cause of confusion now for the staff: which woman they address.

There is Anne the doctor who lived in my skin. Precise and solid as landscape. Coming in late smelling of iodine lemons surgical light. Sorry I'm late appendectomy!

There is Anne-wife on weekends singing in upper rooms. Foreign-nosed and alert as boiling water. Paying their wages. Tickling the Master under the chin.

There is Anne these past months. Sheets over the piano shhhh. Doctors in the study discussing oxygenation of blood. Wandering this morning garden frail-legged.

Other Annes.

I say Good morning Wulfson.

He says Lovely day for a walk madam.

I say Indeed. The garden looks remarkably well. Most inconsiderate of the frost to come in when you've been so patient with those geraniums.
He says Thank you madam.
He says Madam I am so very sorry.
I say Thank you Wulfson. I will be inside today. Sympathy still unbearable as suffocation.

After it happened I heard the housemaid saying Oh I do feel terrible for her for all she's foreign in the hall.

It was winter I met my husband. The most unsympathetic season. Keening birds on the river-ice. Blood tracks in the snow. What I remember: his new-growth beard just startling the chin line. Osso bucco at midnight shared between two laps. Bare feet and hipbones fresh and emergent from the skin. No pity. Love being a lung's fullness. An afternoon under a leafless plum tree gathering light.

Spilling out into each other's hands like oil. A happiness that grazes so close I could touch it. Still feel its weight on my hair my knees. And yet it slips out of reach. Knows that it's hunted ardently. Feels my hunger on its back and fleeing.

No pity at all - The trees unlocking in the cold are suddenly frightening. I turn and walk back towards the house. Navigating slowly the new and forgotten shapes of things. As the pamphlet dictates: After pregnancy the human female cannot adequately rejoin the workforce due to influxes of hormone in the blood rise in pressure to the brain milkiness of breasts.

This advice with its sincerity and angry gaps. Death will skin all the parts of your life.

*****

The day emerges so hot it leans upon itself and sways in the garden. A blue crackle of sky.
He writes in the mornings. Radio broadcast drafts. The evenings are for translation poetry editing his diaries.

Since I came downstairs I have been allowed these things. To sip warming broths. To be tucked under three blankets and given books nothing too upsetting. To sit in the front room and sew.

The regulations are strict on illness the pamphlets state it: *They must continue Regime work in order to maintain their fundamental State spirit and so motivate recovery.*

Maddening. That I am some crushed animal. That I am coddled as a broken limb even though every morning I snip the sterilised needles and administer the antibiotics myself.

I am not good at sewing fabric even under orders. Nudging edge to violent edge. Unconsciously I remember sutures the linger of bodily swell under stitching.

A soldier we sewed till the scars on his abdomen took the outline of Spain.

Eleven years as a doctor: you mend dream-torsos as you sleep. As they put me under anaesthetic I was digging wound-figments for shrapnel.

In these afternoon spaces without the pull of work to distract me grief comes and lies at my feet doglike. Will not be turned away.

I say to him –

I have never said the right things to him.

Women – where I was raised – spoke only in long strong planks. Things with which to build.

*Raise the barn light the candles where’s the milk the wheat the farrow-men if you’re a bride you must braid fast with a red ribbon if you’re a widow you must be shorn like a potato drink it smother it wilt it smoke it your milk won’t come because you ate bad cabbages.*

This though I tried was not a language I understood.

The language of women here is not much improved. *Care and suck and lift and whiten and breed and breed and gasp with pleasure and darn the socks and darn the socks and breed and breed.*
I say *Are you going out later.*
* Mmm. Yes.
* Shall I make lunch.
* What?
* Lunch.
* No. Not for me. Thank you.

The attending doctor said *But she will not of course return to work.*
* *She has a medical mind:* note by my father when I was fourteen. My nerveless steadiness when resetting bone.

Now I hold the needle and wonder if one bite could break it. Sidle the pieces under the tongue.

The maid enters with the post. Lays them easy within my reach so that I may not strain myself. My knees white under the gown as if plunged in water.

The decrees for the day – no beards past a certain length and restriction on duck consumption – and a packet of manuscripts for him and a small pink envelope for me.

Pink is love letters.

*I have a letter.* My voice runs absurdly fever-hot. Trying to scald him. *Do you think it’s the Captain who came to tea.* *Writing me a sonnet in praise of my cakes.*

Hapless and fury-ridden. Searching for any part that may hook on him. Poets cakes anything.

Marked out for medical training as the eldest I was excused from my mother’s kitchen education. Aprons and soft-smoking fat. Tenderness she gave through flour.

I heard her through a door while reading of blood-clots. *Let it sift* she noted to my sisters *as if it falls from heaven.*

Years from then I would look at X-rays and see cake-bodies. Tumours like berries.

He says *Perhaps.*

*He was a charming man. Have you news of him?*

*Mmm? No. I’m having tea with a friend of his. This afternoon.*
Well. *That will be nice.* This deadly politeness. Caustic as carbolic acid on the inner mouth.

I even considered an affair from my sickbed. Obvious and violent: anonymous bunches of flowers. Pantomime covered-hand phone calls *shhh darling.* Scattered in his path.

Rejected for dignity. However shallow a pool that is.

The pink envelope reveals not a love letter but an official notice.

.... *Your Census appointment is scheduled for _______. Kindly have on hand your identity documents tax records and those of your family and dependents. As this is the third reschedule we regret we cannot offer any further rearrangements except in the case of death or military service. For the State and Glory.*

I say *Oh the Census.*

He says nothing.

I say *Maybe they put it in pink to make it more feminine. That is frankly insulting.*

The Census has been rescheduled twice.

Once because I was in hospital bleached of thought.

Twice because judged *not yet competent.* Two weeks before I combed my hair could look at a line of print without fracturing.

I say *I forgot the date. I thought it was later.*

I say *Berger says I fear it because it secures things. I mean. If the State knows and it’s on the ledgers then it’s irreversible. Not that they don’t know. The doctors’ records of course. We always submit straight to the authorities at the surgery.*

I say *Are the rules so strict on me going back to work. It seems so pointless to be sitting doing so little. My mind is cracking if I have to sew one more hem.*

I say *I will write. To the State. That it is ridiculous.*

I say *Will you pass me the writing paper there. Darling.*

With slow sarcasm he reaches and supplies it.
I say Thank you.
I say Will you be home this evening.
Yes.
Is that a promise or a possibility.
Yes I promise.
Tenderness is pressure on skin. On skull. On internal matter. Pushing and pushing and pushing.
What time do you think. Because I was contemplating venturing into the kitchen –
My dulcet darling. How long have we been married he says.
Ten years I say. Fondness crosses me like water. Our honeymoon was ten years April.
So. When will you learn not to interrupt me when I’m working. Will it be eleven years.
Fifteen. Forty? I merely ask the question.
I slam the door deliberately so it smacks his papers – snick – off the table.

Heaving in the hallway feeling full-body bruised. We had a child and now do not.
Desire is the act of keeping closed spaces open. Just barely.

Interruptions while working. The sole incision I am still permitted to make.

4. The Husband Has A Meeting

    My State office on this startlingly summery afternoon, almost like June, is gloomy – grown over with shadow. A shallow cave of fusty dark.
    But I love the place. Though it’s just library, lounge, leather chairs, the Graces engraved upon marble I found cooling in the sun in Rome and stole.
    The Lieutenant, fond friend of Captain Roxburgh, lies inside, in sheets and shirt, bare-arsed. Like many men of his class he’s given to slumber after pleasure. Fair as flour under that frock-coat – soldiers are; their skin soaks in shade half the time. It’s only fair to let it see the light, be touched, tremble. I stand and watch the soldiery plunder the afternoon silence.
    Elated – the air seems heightened, the atmosphere more subtle.
He drew breath, when buggered, as if presented with a prize; but one can sense it was little surprise, whatever his private perusals of stockings, the corsetry of a comrade’s wife. No need for discussions of pederasty: no need. I did not need to even pull out the illustrations –

Yes, the weakness came – a prick of dark, a spark of pale just-born flesh, death’s smell – but I pushed harder, rode into the sex to make it flee. I’ll be free of it, won’t speak its name. I gripped his mane and came, and wouldn’t cry.

It is a mechanism that works. Find spurts, wash all the nerves in glut, like cattle over fords – and the cord’s broken. Any sense: the nose, the touch, the mouth. Masses of fruit, the palate sucked, a sweetened tune, a room adrift in scent. It’s anti-intellectual, true; but what good’s grief, what purpose does it serve? Evolution should elevate us out of that plain, make us slaves to higher strains.

Some former pleasures don’t expel it. Our bed; the pulse of my wife’s ankle under skin.

Dvorak on the radio. A rerun of my latest will be on later. On The Benefits Of Reporting Suspicious Activity.

Roxburgh – canny, smooth, lucid even while naked as an apple – I met strolling the Avenue, saw him with the General, grinning. Dark-haired - a djinn. Tightly proud, the General told me over gin of his delight in the thin stomach, the stripe of soft pubic hair – then offered to share.

He’s been my great success, my best-dressed former bedfellow: before him there were boys from various parades, but he made it a solid trade. One fuck for a car, an afternoon in bed for every label-star.

And – he understood things. Raising his hands in the dark to find my face, he cried judex, made me glorious judge of all.

Smoke makes my lung a light.

The Lieutenant throat-clears and stirs.

This is just fantastic music, isn’t it?

Roxburgh will have told him to be intellectual, indulgent of my tastes. Hence this.

You’ve been occupying my couch a long time. Do feel free to dress.

His cheeks develop a virginal burn. He blushes, jumps, puts feet – one, two – into trousers, tucks his shirt like a churlish kid. Roxburgh said you could be rude.

I suspect he enjoyed it.
I don’t know if anybody enjoys this. His bright face, ripe with fury.

Don’t be impolite, Lieutenant, or your pleasurable company will go entirely unrewarded.

He becomes quiet, bent over his boots. This game! They grapple in the dark – think they’ve denied their dignity, violated their value, all other manner of mournful fates. When all my sin is a simple trade: eye for eye, bite for bite, morsel to mouth.

Since we’ve dispensed with pleasure, shall we do business? No answer. Well, then. Your application to be – captain, I believe it was. Quite a stretch for a man of your delicate age. I pull the paper from the desk while he watches, warily; believing I’ll say a bluff and dismiss him. Worse acts happen every day; humiliated boys turned into grist for pleasure, and then turned out, used and penniless. It is a rough world.

Would captain in the Ninth suit? I’ll write off this afternoon. You can expect the word tomorrow.

Thank you. The shock is so elegant in his body I could lay him down again, but forbear. In the silence he rises, rinses his hands, pulls on the brocades and burning scarlet; I wave a hand, return to the cigar.

Sir?

Yes, Captain?

Roxburgh said – he said to be remembered to your wife. A supercilious smile.

Tell Roxburgh I will pass it on. Tender-hearted Roxburgh. Cried when I accidentally broke the skin across his spine – a stray scratch.

Ah. All right.

You are surprised, Captain. Why?

I thought – that Roxburgh was being cruel. That he was threatening you. He shifts his feet.

My wife has been very ill; Roxburgh has good manners. He has been a visitor at my house, accepted her hospitality. I am mild as milk.

But he didn’t tell her? There are stories in the barracks, Carr and Brummel and Alexei – who you’ve done things for. And with. And your wife –

What good would it do them to disturb my wife? It would take a cruel man to do it, for no gain. And besides – I do not know why I say this – she has suffered a great deal.
She has never learnt – not to interrupt. Not even when she was in her season of splendour, when I still desired even her dress on the floor, its suggestion of shape.

I hope, he says slowly, I never have a wife. I could be as cruel as you are. I would never live with myself.

I turn. Pick up a large stick – a mulish treasure, ivory-headed, iron-bored.

Dismissed, Captain.

It’s one. At four I’m rendezvousing on a cruise – another Lieutenant. It’s a hustle: older soldiers play for pensions, places by the sea – the General gave an aging plaything a pied-a-terre somewhere! I go for fairer things, twenty-four, not more; and restrict myself to twice, three times in their company. After Bart – I keep it brief.

A thought: Anne wanted me home tonight – for dinner, drinks perhaps. In the open wound of the dining-room, eating our loss like a limp piece of tench. Grotesque.

I hope I never have a wife –

He’ll never know; it does have its joys. The royal spoiling of her – when young; arms arching for bracelets in Barcelona! A pamper-thing, a present-girl. If always so serious when the crown was placed on the curling brow. My brainy Briseis – for whom I bartered so keenly.

Was I mad when I married her? A little. So deeply real she was, so calm, even when hip-high in some smashed riot of ribs, a field’s bloom of blood. Against those solid shores I could roll and storm and see no evidence of erosion, no diminishment of love. I was flying in profusion around Europe, catting the girls and boys with my black tongue, and then I met her coolness in a café, with a daub of blood (not hers) beside her eye...

It was symbolic. Perhaps I should have seen it then. That blood would follow us and fleck our life.

The air pools on my pocket of stomach – for all his post-sex scruples the new Captain was a laudable lover.

I shake myself bodily out of memory into the dark room. One must move swiftly, or one gets stuck solid. I wrote a famous radio broadcast on it: Let Your Memory Be Only For The Glorious Times, To Serve The Regime.

Damn fool, I say aloud – to him? To myself?

And the pale dead child -
But nothing's there. No more.

5. The Wife Waits

What does a woman do in her own house?
It is a profound question for husbands. And for women often.

Perhaps they imagine lilacs. Soft sheets. Passing from room to room with tulle. The deep ploughing of dough with one's hands. Pa of flour gently; feeding the birds. Bare-foot trembling. Much trembling.
I do none of these things. Have always felt myself estranged from the feminine.
At this moment I am lying on the carpet contemplating various types of infectious diseases.

What temperature indicates an inflammation of the liver. What pressure on the ribs. What is the name of that one reaction the veins startled on the surface like swollen wood.
One half of me drifting in memory. My husband brushing my hair down my spine with his fingers early in our courtship called me segreto. The secret.
Unusually the word is masculine.

Doctor Berger says I think it may be an autoimmune disease. The symptoms indicate it.
I say Possibly. Read the case file aloud again.
Unusual I am thinking because the capacity for withholding is female. If you put smoke near me I would hold it slowly in myself like a decanter.

It is important to remember. To hold between your lips this one moment. Move towards it across the space of a room.
Berger is discussing the lesions. Number diameter texture. Marked with black dots on a regulation body silhouette on blue paper.

Blue. My blue dress in which I married – vibrating and sore with hope. Language that passed through my ribs: Italian Russian Corsican.

That photograph: kiss upon his broad ugliness. My chiffon cheekbone. Scar of light across us.

The streaklike coolness of hard sky. *You are not paying attention* says Berger.

*No.* I am frank. Have known him several years in the Local Health surgery. His Roman-mural hands. His search for the simplest solutions: removal amputation one small incision.

Since my confinement ended he has come for consultation on cases. Today I have refused to lie on the sickbed for our conversation as regulation dictates.

He however insists that I at least stay prone on the carpet. *So as not to strain yourself.*

I say *I’m sorry Berger I can’t focus.*

He says *Perfectly fine. You must be tired. Lie still and breathe.*

Compassion that makes me flare with adolescent resentment. *I am not tired.*

He says *We could go over the repetitive mantra again.* Foundation of Regime medicine: mottos in each session. ‘To strengthen body and mind’. Repeating them over the raving the morphine-sack the newly deaf from shelling.

I say *I suppose we must.*

He finds the piece of paper. He says *What is the benefit of dwelling in the past.*

*Nothing.* I want to be pleasing but am still caught in some small place.

*And what does a good citizen do with unrewarding or otherwise unhelpful memories.*

*Erases or forgets them.*

*And why do you continue to hold on to these memories.*

*Personal weakness which I must defeat.* The afternoon light wounding the chaise lounge.

*Well at least I can make a satisfactory report about that bit* he says. Smiles.

I am only half in the room. I am thinking of *segreto.*
When the old Father Leader died there was a grief harvest. Men rent their faces. The photographs show crowds violently crouched. As if their clothes had just come off. Naked with sorrow.
And yet afterwards they returned to their wives and houses. And took up their utensils. And set out for work again.

Berger says *Anne you do seem to be doing quite well I’m proud of you.*
I say *Yes.*
In a shattered body you look for the line. Where is my line.

I say *I am writing to the State for special permission. To come back to work.*
Need the touch of foreign bone. Need life measured in ampoules. Not this ravaged sitting room this uterine cool.
_Anne the State recommendations are quite clear on the point. Though of course we all miss you._
I raise onto my knees. _Only for women with children._
_Asa State physician I must stand against your making this choice._
_I have no child Berger. I have leaking breasts and a most charming scar but no child._
Sopping the sheet in the night. Pads of gauze at the nipples to smother. A body with trauma sutured to its hair its open parts.
_The mental condition is the same. You must focus on healing. On the Census. It’s coming soon isn’t it._

I recognise the script I have said it. It is in the handbooks: _As a State doctor I must stand against your making this choice._

The Census-
If the Census happens our child is dead.
Medicine can operate outside linear time. Healing backwards into death. All outcomes present in the one wound.
I got used to this privilege. To not facing any consequence.

_I understand I say clearly that you are opposed to my choice in this matter. Thank you._
Outside Wulfson breaks into a bizarre version of the anthem. A defiantly minor key.
Life I will reconstruct part by part.

Anne it is safer for now. To stay here. He has a paleness to him. Steeped in bleach.
Is it.
We thought we wouldn’t tell you as you had been through so much. There have been men in the surgery. The Secret Police. A whiplash case – quite cleverly done. Somehow rigged himself you know they can do that. Nurse left the room and then the papers and he were gone.
Ah. I see.
We thought perhaps it would be better –
Yes.
It will be the torture cases –

Men delivered by van or private car. Sometimes so bruised their skin lifted off muscle entirely. Sometimes blind.
It is a plain expectation for us to leave them to die. Write the report casuality of car accident mugging nothing to be done. Their whimpers in the back room.
Yet Berger and I sewed their parts to themselves. At night with only one dim lamp. Reaching for a wound by memory.

Fear in Berger’s body. The slow flush of it over liver stomach mouth.
I say It could be nothing.
He says There are worse things than this Anne. What they can do.
I say There are no worse things than this.

My husband told me that after the Father Leader died children were confused the world did not fall from the sky.
The leanness of light thereafter. The bone-picked ground. So little left.

Will you promise not to come back to the surgery.
Berger is quiet. Anger in me like ink on a slide.
No.
We stand in the livid thickness of the room. My small savage hands. My personal weakness.
He leaves taking his hat. The afternoon quietening. Sheets over the sky.

Beatrice comes in from across the garden. Says *Who's home.*
Beatrice: thickened varicose veins along one calf from inactivity. Miniature dimple of past infection on her upper cheek. Childhood bite on one arm. A life of small injuries.
I rise to meet her. The kitchen stifled.

Arrives kissing. Planting bulbs of herself: *pwuh.*
She is convinced that I am unfortunate possibly because of my husband. Possibly for-eignness. Her faintly wet gloves leaving streaks on the granite.

*You still don't smoke.* Taking out a contraband cigarette. Light on the tile.
*Not the style where I come from.* Stroke my thinning hair. Attempt to look contrite.
No broken needles.

It was never the point –
Hiding in cupboards quite unnecessary. If I am honest.
(For one can come in after he sleeps. He is sounder in his sleep than iron.)
Wanting – lightly – to be discovered. Dropping the wine of darkness from shoulders.
Leaping thirstily to light – *Oh you have discovered me whatever shall I do.*

A young woman's game. Like passing handkerchiefs under plum-trees – like pregnan-cy –
In the time before when I returned from work he would rise and put his head against my head. Talk nonsense as we sloughed the disinfectant off my arms with oil.
For just one cupful of his forgiveness I would crawl in the mire. Beat my body. Any-thing.

Beatrice visits once a week perhaps more often.
I tell her about Berger's cases she laughs. Open mouth like a bitten apple. *Men they can't move without a woman's confirmation.* I find biscuits.
How is he this week your great orator.
She does not like him my husband. But respects.

Well I think.
And how are you.

Better every day.
You know what you look like a ghost. The one who marries the wolf. Or the horse? In the folktale.
My mother told me that story. It came from our part of the world.

Yes I know.
Beatrice knows -

Beatrice is an informer. Packets of information to the State Office every week. Cleanliness of neck and hands. Quiet on the telephone at the market in the bedroom. I move the kettle to the sink.

It’s a tremendous power-help you know. One word from you and. Saved my marriage anyway.

Her cheerfulness in the face of this. Childless also – her husband’s fault not hers she says. Brisk about it as hand on skin.

She came to the house-warming and said cheerfully I’m your neighbourhood spy.
Of course they monitor him –

I was not afraid of the Census until Beatrice.
Saying and it’s cross-indexed by place of birth languages lifestyle location. And when you travel they get a copy too not just passports. Medical details of course letters abroad party guests book purchases. They’re monitoring music more heavily now. Lists and lists. All in huge files in the Record Hold I’ve seen them. Her idle belly. A lunch last autumn. Our plates empty and staring on the terrace table.

How big is the file of one person? I thought: one bed. A life must be the size of a bed.
Depending on the person perhaps a man’s torso. They make them with specialised paper now. Won’t burn they say. Can’t be destroyed.

I said then Surely they’ll run out of space eventually.
Dig deeper. Commandeer more buildings. This is the Eternal State dear the records are necessary.

The thought of the child’s death fixed between cross-indexes. Irrefutable beyond the sweet porousness of love memory doubt. Beyond perhaps. My breath floods with water. Unconsciously I put one hand on my chest to feel my lungs.


We pick up biscuits. I thought perhaps of going away. A holiday together – It’s cool in Italy this time of year. It is light as paper – this answer. Her pity. I rip through it.

You think I’m crazy.

No I think you’re acting through a dark thing. It’s not the same.

It’s not wrong to want. So many things I want. A return to form from formlessness. A coalescence around my bones.

So wear scarlet underwear. Surprise him in the doorway with no clothes. Roast him duck.

I look at my hands. He never notices those things. His work – You’re too old to be jealous of a man’s work you know. Her ugliness that is not plain-tive. But instrumental.

Silence in me lying out gently its long fans.

She turns her face to the garden. Will you be going back to work soon.

Will have overheard my conversation with Berger perhaps. Or simply known. I bow my head.

Berger says I shouldn’t.

It’s against the rules.

I know. But it seems – I was going to say cruel. Illogical.
Cowed by her briskness. Also brittle in me the fear. A bad-luck woman. In my village a woman who lost a child lived alone always.

You saw them moving at night. Washing their burnt hair-

*Perhaps. Most women would welcome the chance for a State-sanctioned retirement.*

She is amused. Rubs her hands with their nubbed nails. *Do you miss the surgery so much then.*

*I don’t know. I think – it was exposure to chemicals. You know they’ve done so little in the testing of those new chloroforms. Perhaps – saying this aloud clouds my throat with black oil – it was my fault for working until I was four months in.*

*Oh Anne.*

*So I can’t leave it – like that. That can’t be the way it ends for me. My work.*

The guilt lies between us like a bank of tide.

Drink my tea slowly. The purity of medicine: that it centres morality. Death versus suffering.

Bea would know about the tortured men. Or perhaps would not.

*Did you do what I told you.*

*What. I am waking from a heaviness.*

*The exercises.*

*Oh. Oh yes. Thank you.* Her exercises imagining the worst questions and saying *Yes I am aware Yes that is correct Yes that is correct Yes.*

Even if it scrapes your inside. Even if holes appear in the nostrils mouth cheek.

Bea can solve the fear. She can lay it out in her and sort it from tendrils into neat lines like cord.

*Now the key Anne is to be perfectly honest. Intimately. You can’t embarrass them. That Honeybone woman tried it – details of her obstetrics lung problems all the details – it simply doesn’t work. You don’t know the training.*

*What do I do if they ask.*

*Yes.*

*If they ask how he died.*

*Well. Do you have an answer.*
No. The final result was some bad spots on the umbilical perhaps a bad lung his heart slowed down. The labour took far too long thirty-eight hours. It was too long they said because I was older. The pelvis tilted. He looked alive but his heart. Slowed. Down.

The light cracks at the edges.
Hyperventilation that bleaches the skin –

Get up. Get up. Walk around. Put your knees out straight that's right. Take three breaths in out. Good girl. My maid at the door. Bea waving gracelessly No just a fall thank you she's all right.

Women and men no different.
Bea sits and watches in the long stretched breaths as I come back towards sense. Says at last I will speak to somebody. About your job. I'm sure we can arrange something.
Tea on the table. Its dark braid.
Thank you. Feel her pity slicing on me. Peeling off the respectful parts of myself. Exposing the weak grateful centre. I would be in your debt.
You would. She raises her head and lowers it. Sleepy smile.

As Bea leaves I say suddenly Did you ever have to do it. The Census.
She pauses picking up her hat.
I did it to my husband. To spare him anybody else. A favour I begged from the Department.
What did he say.
He said thank you.
Outside a water-bird is pulling at the sphagnum moss. Its cruel head bends and bores.
6. The Husband Contemplates Going Home

It’s five-thirty; the second Lieutenant left behind.

A bad lot. He tried to bargain, to bet against – *I can offer a season’s worth of sex for Colonel, or nothing at all.* Then got brutal – *I’ll expose you, you’ll give me this, that, or your life over, your world destroyed.* A pompous boy, cocked in his own cleverness. None of that; I’m brimful with bargaining myself. His pelt’s mine, he’ll have to give twenty times more just to score a Captainscy...

I could denounce him now – leave a leaf for the police. But he’s so young still – and was only stupid, and the camps would take the bloom out of his cheeks. A score of Captains, sliding their shame under a silver epaulette – it is an unfair trade, I will not deny it. Ten minutes’ pleasure for their life’s advancement, carried onwards to medalled death; I should demand more, should collect tributes! But I am scrupulously fair – and what can the officers offer besides one afternoon?

I could go home now. The hour is early; and I promised.

What would await me?

For two weeks after we brought her home from hospital, I rushed home: sleepless but eager to please, pulsing with loss, attentive as any husband. Though we were not wife-husband now but wilderness; Penelope and Odysseus, pulled from each other by darkness, distant wars.

Sat in the drawing room at dusk, fond-sounding through a fog of violence.

*You’re too thin to be wearing just a shift, my wanton wife. Especially in this season.* It was late winter then, the last blizzards still bloating the cloud-line.

*Oh, Buddha wasn’t too good for a wool robe and neither am I.* Laughing, her high chin rising as if broaching water.

*I doubt Buddha wore wool. It would have scratched his belly. Now put that on or you’ll start growing fur on your flanks. Good.*

Outside a twilight bird made one note, vanished. In her new coat she looked tenderly uncooked, unbitten, inedible with salt. We could say nothing that would not make fresh blood run on the floor, could shut no doors on listening ears - the servants camped around the beds and walls, folding the rash of baby-clothes for rubbish. A heap of men moved out the crib in the early morning, burnt its bulk; the smoke suffused the lungs, made all things rank.

*God, I’m stifling. Let’s go for a walk.* Rising I rang for shoes.
Dear, it’ll rain soon. Her accent accentuated her nose, bringing it flaring: for-
eign (as she will be ever, despite a job, a house, a husband), fretful as she was in her
hospital gown. The figure of Suffering cast into life, breathing flesh. I felt a flush of
powerful softness then, for her. No longer beautiful but burdened.

Wind picked pills of leaf along the grass, and I said: You’re a rain-goddess,
woman, casting spells like that. Be decent and stop predicting downpours.

We’d taken not three steps before it poured, pocking my tweed with treach-
erous sodden parts (I remember that above all, the sullen smell of it). We retreated
inside; the weeping-willow wife was shot through and moist, modestly unshod. Her
bare feet, I noticed, were flecked with grass, and the carpet darkened underfoot with
our rashness.

She was laughing – with a single arid note which scorched with blame, de-
sire, demand.

I told you. We should put on the phonograph and dance!

The shutter banged.

I coughed. This coiling mood of hers that stirred since the hospital; ecstasy,
excitement – then a fall, some vicious fights. Grief made her less meek, less elegant in
her efforts to please. Visited my bedroom in the night. Embarrassing. You’re still too
weak for shocks. Bed, a bath, some well-balanced dietary aid. Perhaps some broth, I
think. Steamed roots, I’ll call Alice -

Silently, unlistening, she stepped apart, unwound her wetness. Seal-bare,
wet as wrinkled rock, long mermaid’s hair, stark and staring.

I smiled but was secretly disgusted: looking at how far she was from just-
marrried. How far from twenty-two; how far fallen. The long slash of the Caesarean.
Her hipbones hurried smooth to her high sex; she smelt hot and hard and real.

We used to dance like this Herbert. Do you remember? You would fall to your
knees and kiss my shaven mons through cloth. During the rainy season. You caught a
terrible cold from it – I had to dose you every day with lemon tea.

I did not touch her trembles, did not honour this unwholesome spectacle.
Get to bed, you are getting hysterical. I’ll call Berger for a session in the morning –

You cannot even touch me. It happened; it happened; I am here. And you will
not touch me. She scorned my calming half-caress and removed herself, her weeping
woven skirt, to the studio upstairs. Her back, departing, had the fine spine of any
wolf.
7. The Wife Illuminates

By evening the sky has quickened into something livid. Alone in the house.
I enjoy tracking the sky. At least something in the world continues to move.

He said he would be home. Is not.

The act of annotating text: also called *illumination*.
Noun, from Latin. Literally to throw under light. To probe the cool wet places under fallen trees stones quietnesses.
The definition leaves the actor unclear. Do we raise the text to light or otherwise. Who shudders in the moment listens begins to run.

Tonight long spines of storm are in the valley. The new street-lamps on our avenue winking and shaking on their stalks.
Here are the notes I am keeping for myself transform verb to noun form erase that last page make all the s's into zs which changes genders. Challenge: insert the word 'peach'. Myself at the desk. Hand to my face to move a hair.

He had profound delight in our bodies together once. Before I failed.

Why am I doing this.
*Art’s fundamental condition is its own self-doubt.* His voice lithe at an exhibition of papers in Rome. When he still slept against my body. *It must self-mutilate to stay alive.*
Similarly here. The coarse knives of evening wind.
Also it feels familiar. Surgical imitation of the line of the paragraph. Following the pulse. Feeding that thinned part of myself.

When the child was born it had a broken caul which means luck.
Did not wear red or roast him duck. Knowing that he prefers garlic mushrooms his women with long hair knotted at the back in long shifts. Knowing every push of his desire in my direction.

A contradiction in marriage: one can need and maim at the same time.

Lightning bleaches the space. The lines of the tall cypresses entirely erased against white.

Noted in the dictionary under illumination: *The meaning ‘the action of lightning’ is from the 1560s onwards.*

The ink is on my wrist to be washed later.

One day he may raise his head and say *Do you remember those olives in New York it’s a funny thing it just appeared in my mind.*

I will say *Yes oh yes.* Winter on the river.

I think as my hair touches the paper of the tortured men. Startled by their own attachment to life.

One taking my hand as I bandaged him said to me *You sound like my daughter. She breathes like that.* His eyes swollen into sightless plums.

*I don’t understand this country* I said to my husband in the first years. *It is so – stringent.* Rules about music types of dress. Lists of edicts in swathes for him to recite on the radio.

*Ah you weren’t born here.* Putting down his glasses to look at me over his work. A privilege I am granted so sparingly now. *The Leader is a great man though a bit too fond of fantastic spectacle. He has a noble vision.* *The years of war, when his father came to power – you are too young, it was before your time – were very brutal. After that – we like peace, we like order. We’re a quiet breed.*

*You aren’t.*

*No, minx, I’m not. Hence my exit to the bars and beauty spots of Europe. And then I kidnapped you – to bring home as a bride!*

*I was willing.*

*And now you, my Panacea, must minister to my idiotic countrymen who’ve fallen down holes or chopped off fingers.* Sideways smile in his high-carved skull. *You do the better work you know. I fill up peoples’ heads with nonsense. You sew on limbs and come home*
trailing tales of children you’ve, oh, just casually saved! I’m very jealous. Remembering those particular sentences has the unique pain of twisted glass.

You talk utter rubbish.

I know I get paid for it. Where’s the whisky? Let’s pour one out for reattached fingers and my heroine wife. Of whom I am perpetually and exhaustingly proud.

His heroine wife –
I will return to the surgery.

8. The Husband Returns

I am winding through grass and gravel, wiping my forehead. I’m regretting walking over the private park to home in the rain. Moist pathways flush with gloss, the shake of secret inhabitants in the shrubbery; and I am surreally soaked, so wet as to be part-otter.

It was the rain I missed after years abroad; the downpours, this far north, are scorching, scoring the earth with pits, fits of meteorological madness. Not lush or languid but frantic, Arctic-cool. I was a fool, I said upon return, to leave this weatherscape, this weird and ancient knot of wind and pines.

The officer in charge said I’m glad it drew you back. And with a young wife too. Our girls not good enough for you?

Sometimes I replied you find specimens in other countries that are redolent of home, even if they’ve flourished in other places, other seas.

They laughed – bright boys. And I’d dressed her properly, in the right garb, for the crossing: flosses of Regime tulle, and a hardy hat. She’d sat upon that, possibly in protest, so it was pleated at one side – but it survived.

I stand, breathing heavily, at the foot of the dim house – Georgian, gargantu-an, a general’s before it was repossessed and re-gifted kindly to myself and my wife. Complete with studio for the radio forecast! I regard it and am renewed; it is a lavish symbol of my life, my Res Gestae open for guests, my lowest ambitions grown to whole height.

There is only one light in the muted house. My wife is lit brilliantly in the silhouetted study window. Bent like Beatrice over the forests of Hell.
Marriage is ultimately a disturbance to concentration.
I turn and go again down the garden path towards the river.

Section 2: The Composer

It is early still. Had rested - on benches, in doorways; moving slowly, watching the sun scratch higher in the sky; and pain surfacing randomly, echoes of the hours of beating. Stomach. Pad of the foot. Sudden creak of rib on rib.

Difficult to breathe still. Have to drag it up. Worried that pushing too hard will crush the bruised fold of my lung -

My apartment – brick-built, forty years old; a window broken and replaced by flat board – patched with straw at the gaps like a farmer’s –

Takes minutes to ascend the stairs. Pausing gently on each landing. As if polite - and letting the neighbours pass; a woman with armfuls of washing, grateful - and small children; being generous - and not simply incapable, not shattered comprehensively -

It is important. That they do not know. That this is kept silent.

I fit my key into my lock to smell fat sizzling – and the clap of the pan – and open the door and there is a family; four children in various poses; one sullen mum; the father over the saucepan.

We look at one another. A single gob of fat spits from the pan.

Perhaps I am not real; and this is the wrong city or the wrong street; and the thumping pulse in my wrist is something else, a train-line, or an electrical loop; and I am half-in the other world - for they have always been here in my apartment – this family – you can see from the long lines in their head and arms – they are the same shades of the walls; they have been growing into this place for years – decades – before my arrest.

I say I beg your pardon.
The father says nothing.
I say I thought this was my room. My key fits.
He says We’ve been here since yesterday. All legal.
I say I have been away about four days. Perhaps less I don’t remember.
He says It was all legal. We gave the money for the room.
I say I did too. I live here.

He says Weren’t nobody here when we got in eh. It was all legal.

I say Look there are my composing papers on the desk. And my tie.

For they are there; covered in a suitcase and a bit of rag; and it is real – that somehow we have overlapped – and they are real, and I real – and it is a clash in my head – and I am not entirely sure; there are bruises on my arm; there are the composing papers.

He himself, the father, is egg-eyed. Big as a building. A vast stomach. Expanding into spaces. To hug him would take years, a hundred linked arms.

He says I tell you it was all legal.

I say, for I don’t know what else to say, I’m sorry.

A child scrapes the bedstead with its foot; neat-haired, in its best dress; and the wife is ignoring me – putting potatoes steadily into a bowl – slowly, slowly – like heads.

Here’s my landlady - carrying a bucket in the doorway.

Her ham-hock arms -

I have seen her stripped to petticoats, rinsing; early morning at the courtyard tap; her sagged body-bits; but solid, solid. A hard set of limbs. Drying the thatched hair under her arms. I think of this hair; of its matted breathing.

She looks at the man and says Hello Fred. He says Hello. And they look at me.

She gives an O with her mouth like a pie; and the walls have new portraits on them a black-and-white photograph where my mirror hung; and my bed is rumpled with all the children who are wrestling now; and I say You gave my room away.

And she says Yes sir.

And the father says It was all legal.

And to them I was no longer solid; but had vanished into the soft parts and the dirt (my head is pounding); the matter being grave; and a whisper reached her, in her flats, that I was dead and unlikely to pay rent; and so here is the family.

Though I am not dead.

And breathing.

And likely to pay rent.

It is all legal she says; You give no notice to me sir she says; that you were going away she says; No trouble here I don’t want any trouble she says; and I say But I’ve come back; and she says You have sir.
Which casts the matter newly.

For of course to come back is a new thing. And very odd. And quite indecent perhaps to an inconvenienced old landlady. And bespeaks unsaid things; I can hear it in her head – clear and sour – perhaps I am an informer now (she picks up her glasses which have fallen on the floor); or police myself; and that is strange.

The pale-brown family is fearful. It is open in the room. Their wide eyes like spoons. It is in the reek of fat and the folded skirt of the child sitting still on the bed.

She says Fred it is a mistake. Oh I am too old for all this. And quietly without protest he and the family gather their elements; and she says We will get you your money yes; and they go out together.

Shutting the door behind them.

Taking the chops too. Grizzling in the pan –

Where will they go now? Perhaps to the streets – to scavenge; or perhaps to another apartment borrowed from a dead man; or perhaps nowhere at all.

And I sit down and arrange my bruised limbs. The walls still cold. Where was I when they found me? Sleeping; sleeping.

Kicking in nightmares – of the rhythm gone wrong; of percussion-sticks snapping; of the precious beats giving out all at the beginning, like a child’s spilled basket –

Rhythm is strength and weakness rotating.

The balance of their skulls. In a tight ring.


They hit me on the neck so I kneeled.

And I could not bend to tie my own boots; and so an officer knelt and politely did them up. Later in the cell – before they beat me – he would remove them; his hand emotionless and firm on the ankle; and pair them aside; as if in prayer.

2

What is the rhythm that goes brum-brum-ba-brum like stones into a bowl and how can you capture it accurately with three orchestras and where is the animal that lies in the heart and makes it beat –
I wake itchy and cold.
Hair comes off my scalp.
As if sodden with salt water.

For a sleepy moment I am in yesterday’s life – when I had the rhythm segment of the *Bard’s Song* to write still; and the new Opera premiering this week; and the Maestro demanding sixteen transcriptions of the string-parts; and a cool machinery of day and errand and work –

And then my nose is bloodied on my hands – and the purple meat of my body is under the sheets – and it is gone.

My sleeve stems the blood.
Bones lung pelvis in gentle pools.

The ceiling is shining with light. Reflected from the courtyard below – the puddle of the water-tap. One for all tenants – twenty of us? Children wash in it before school. I must rinse the barrack-filth (the blood-coat, and a loosened pock of scab, and deep seams and caulks of skin); but not yet – when the sun rises slightly – I might wash.

The landlady herself does it. And her broad blonde son. Waist-naked.

And so bare myself to the other tenants, baldly, half-skinned, rabbit-caught, vulnerable; the water on hot bruises; and they will know – and it will all be visible as sunlight –

Bed has soaked streaks. From night bleedings.
I’ll wash in private.

*Are you awake sir. Good: the Leader says a man’s rest is his health.*

I roll my head. The landlady is soaking shirts in the corner. Her arms cracked and wet in the basin. My clothing dark and sopped. The room I see now is clogged with steam.

*Move onto the side of the bed sir. You can do that yes?*

Haul my bruise-soft body-sack to the side of the bed – simple, simple – lift and swing legs over – simple –

But cannot; the limbs petrified; and shivering in this night-shirt – panicking –

I am barely on the edge of consciousness. And can feel its threatening thinness its flexing. And the adrenalin that kept me awake yesterday having leaked away.
And now alone, soldered to my pain, its constant virulent alarm –
The piece does not move David it must always move said the Maestro.

My body feels carved out of nerves. Their silence now in the dark.

The electricity crushed out –

You find it difficult, eh. I saw that yesterday your pain. Be still. Dion.

See dimly his move at the door; her son, whom I’ve seen hauling wheat, bricks, buckets up stairs; a sweated footprint on the landing; long lady-plait of hair vanishing down corridors – quiet, quiet, never-speaking –

Dion turn him for a wash.

Arms gentle on my blind body lifting it.

I think of men moving drums– hands never touching the skin – to prevent moisture on the surface; its taut promise -

Sunken into the soft ground – my face.

Beginning with my soles she washes.

Hair in the basin. There is my loose skin in crusts. My pores when scoured.

Here are her so-solid hands.

One calls a composition clean when its elements resolve unite let the hair scrape down the scalp in one swift line.

The Maestro left his compositions unclean which caused troubles.

She says They left your hands sir.

I say Yes they did.

She says Eh, you can still work.

I say Yes.

Shirt removed; and she lays hands on the broken ribs; and they are poulticed; and the pain seems boundless, arcing out for miles, every spark of movement in me. The small room; Dion’s wing of arm above my back. I pray thanks for him.


Where is it the worst.

Your feet and stomach sir. And head.

Bad.

No. Could be worse.

You could have left me. At a hospital. Her face as she’s oiling bandages – fallen at the cheeks and eyes – like a knocked-in roof; and selling the room immediately; and never having spoken two words – beyond Rent sir –
Doctors. Not trustworthy. Not worth – she waves angrily – this piece of paper! Eh, they know nothing. They said Dion would not live. Would die before five. Doctors!

Antiseptic on her thumbs. My chest like a flag. Its striped flare in the night.
She adds A woman has a duty. I took my oath in the square eh! I was twenty-five. To help all fellow citizens. No good this bandage.

In my home village men were crushed by mines; and came in by stretchers singing; and a heart-wound was fine but a limb-wound fatal for he could not work; and I have heart-wounds and so can live –

Her bandaging has fear in it; lying in her skin like a stain. For I’m free and must have cowed them – must have said something (what?) to get out living, all-limbed, full-toothed. Her bright-haired son wavers in the doorway.

Four days later I am once again walking; and mute Dion strapped leg to leg; and my tender body leans into light; and we cross the courtyard largo; and it is all sunlit, my pale shirt, his sweat, my cracked-open body.

To build a symphony you become brutal.
Splinter old segments at the spine.
Pick through fillings. Find good bone. Begin.

*****

Once I can move – thoroughly, fluidly, without support – I am dressed and moving – gripping my waistcoat to conceal the buttoning which is loose; and I decide – to see Walter.

(The matter of the pass. Confusing. They could have taken it. And so in taking it I would be arrested. Within another ten hours. As a vagrant or foreign spy. And then killed. And would not be a bother. And yet here is my pass.)

Walter will save me; in cheerful, seeding middle age, with the cruff of hair lowering; the best of the Great Four, the musical agents; and he rose to such prominence with Friedrich my master who is dead and executed and dead; and he will be in mourning.

Perhaps a drink together.

David I am so sorry.
Our weeping on the pavement. Black bows on our arms he can lend me money for them.

His offices are down in the Square – I fasten my belt and walk on my newly fused legs. Forty hours with only two men (one for much of it and his hammer) – *Christ he’s a weakling who’s got a tissue for his nose give me the hammer again he’ll learn it that way.* It is too bright.

I expected to dream of it but there have been no dreams. As if they burned them off like hair. As if the division between sleep and wakefulness has been torn from me.

I think of sonata-rondo form. Which I loved, as a boy. The couplets separated by violence, a gulf – as if teeth prised apart – by a lever of sound –

And I walk through the city slowly, feeling the tendons get hot and start to hurt. And the band at the great square plays marches. And young men are rehearsing salutes. And there are the new decrees this Monday. And there is a pregnant woman, quite pregnant, bent over her washing basket; reaching for her sour soap; a young woman whom I love suddenly and wish to touch; but cannot.

It is a high day.

I have thirty-three dollars; from last payday.

My own village is four hundred miles distant; the single lean-to church and the iron-bore; and the grain skullcap of the mountains; none of which I have seen in eight years.

Here is the fire-bombed place of worship from last year. Sagging at its ribs. Here are my own ribs.

Walter’s office is cavernous; a set of private apartments cored out and taken for more efficient regime use (tenants unsatisfactory); for he is a State agent; with his high lapel-star, and very fond of glissandos; he mentioned that at a dinner with Friedrich and myself once; very fond of glissandos.

Here is the make of a symphony.

Four segments.

Like the limbs of men.

Crawling together (muscles in tired syncopation) towards light.

His and Friedrich’s joke; calling me scherzo which is a smaller thing, a light thing, a comical production; and also joke, a joke; and I am standing at his door: *Is he*
busy? Should I call aloud? My voice won’t work. Thinking: perhaps he is dead as well – which had not occurred to me.

He, not being dead, looks up at me and says David.

His face is inordinately heavy, boar-heavy. Steps toward me and then stops.

My father would say a hunting man. Hard-strung muscles thrust deep in fat.

He takes a long breath. As if he has been winded.

He is not mourning – wearing green, not black.

He says Close that door.

He says No no keep it open and speak clearly would you.

He says Don’t want to hide anything. He has a packet of composition-papers; great fat bundle; he puts them down. I recognise the seal -

I say Walter how are you.

He says Quiet. I’m fine.

I say Walter he was killed. They killed him.

He says And what did you come here for, to tell me that? I know. Von Sayer executed! (His own voice ballooning; shouting almost; looking about him. Looking away from the papers as if burning –) This is a tragedy for the State – that such a talent could be a traitor! Though of course he was not that talented – not all that talented, I knew it from the start, one always knows with the untrustworthy citizens – but of course he said nothing to me. Nothing at all.

I say No I know.

I say Walter what can I do now. I have no place. I was his ward.

He says Did they arrest you?

(This is softer; for he is kind, Walter; fearful in his foxy pelt, sweating; but human.)

I say Yes after the concert. They let me go.

He says Why?

I say Because I knew nothing about it.

He says No and neither did I! And now I am down a high earner – and to be banned on State Radio permanently, and never to be mentioned – and all because he (what was it? Whispering now – an annotation on a symphony score? Friedrich, you idiot!) ventured into the trap of so many great artists (louder, lecturing, for the crop of ears) whose vulnerabilities are targeted by anti-government forces!

Outside a hush like gagged mouths.
I say Yes Walter.
I say Walter what do I do.

He says David; oh, David, you understand my position; you are a bright boy; you understand it well; you always were bright. Rising from his desk; he is a solid, a good man; Friedrich is dead and dissolving and yet I am alive and Walter will help me; I was right to come.

He has passed the compositions into his hand; he raises them to his chest; he is perfectly still.

He says They will know if I burn them. It is a damn smell that fireplace. Oh they will know.

I say Perhaps there is another composer who needs an assistant. Hersch was asking for a new amanuensis – My wad of research-notes. My knowledge of movements -

He says Oh David. You understand my position.
I say Yes. Yes.

The new scent is on us; reeking with his anxiousness; to clean, to scour, to render himself escaped; this pollution; this spoil.

Of which I am a part.

(Who was it called me handsome once? Coco – at the dance hall.)
I say A competition or two and I could be good, I could make it – the Maestro said I was nearly ready, that the pieces were fine enough now. And he is dead. They told me. He was your friend.

He is not looking at me. He says But I cannot burn them – pacing now – and I cannot shred them, they'll piece them together, White says they do that –

I say (helpless, loudly) You were so good to him – do you remember the great success at the Opera – and the great reception afterwards, and your State commendation for Services To The Arts? Which is from him. And you took my champagne from my hand, and you turned to him and you said –

His hand on my breast bone.
Vibrating bloodily.
This ruined meat.

He is afraid; his bridge of shoulder heaving; and suddenly I am also afraid. I hear drums in the square.
He says I could have saved you perhaps if you were more notable (pianissimo, muted, pedal on himself) and when the news came through I had hopes that perhaps – but it’s hard, it’s hard, they’re pressing on me, not arrested yet but perhaps soon, and then what? For my family? For the business? No – you must go – you must go – and let it be over; I have no money for you; all the returns were State-seized.

I say Give me something. I will return every day. I will clean the violin cases. You know I am a hard worker a good worker.

I say I am sorry but they beat me and I cannot live long in any case. Protégé to a master like that I will be gone soon anyway.

I say it and it is true -
I say It was just one annotation that killed him I know that.

That cool will live long in my body. I will wake up feeling it on my skin. For Freedom.

I take his hands now crushing them. Warm as paws.

He says Get away from me. I have to clean this up. I have to keep going. Every day I feel older -

I say Give them to me. It will be all that’s left. For it cannot be burned –
He says Yes – yes, you take them. You take them – and this is the last time. I can’t do anything. You know. The cool weight of them. In my arms. Bound with ribbon like meat.

I say Thank you – for being so kind.

I stumble from the building into the hot day street and the door shuts behind.

I wait for two hours – perhaps a secret through the side door; a whisper Here’s a little job for you I’m sorry; a sweet sigh of pity; but no more. My back violent with bruises. And the Maestro’s compositions against my stomach. And it is done; done.

How does a scherzo end? With a coda which is like crosshairs.

*****

After waiting there is a queue of men for jobs; musicians after orchestra-appointments, or provincial lectureships, or favours; and they stare at my deep-gored face; and I move on.
Here is the sugar-balm of sun. The city headed slowly out of winter.
I have the bundle of compositions.
One gash runs the length of my torso like a fish.
I take a burning chestnut from a vendor; for the slick dark taste (one dollar which leaves thirty-two); and this body though beaten is hungry; and I assess the remaining damage of it under the suit. Feet still smashed into glass. Several sour wounds. One knee soft and cramped with blood. Black on the knuckles. Cracked split-face white with healing. They left – a musician's livelihood – they left my hands alone.

The things they spilt into the ground.
I will go to the doctor – the Maestro always advised perfect health for optimal compositional artistry and besides it is pain – smooth and edgeless pain, pain under the fingernails and in the smudges, down the sinking ends of vision – which is unrelenting. I am no good for thinking of pain. When the Maestro is dead. When I hold all his worldly letters. When he is in the barrack heap. His soft hair -

Perhaps – I am headed to the doctors on Victory Street – he is not dead. Perhaps he escaped; smuggled in cases from car to car; music-lovers exchanging cigars with him over the border; opened like a cake-box in safe territory, surprise! moving in his refuge to the piano I will need the text of the next sonata – It is impossible for him to have been dead. I was foolish to believe it –

One hears stories. Men dug from the ground breathing. Held alive until their testicles burst. Scraped out of trees fields broken slate. Their faces liquid light.

Cheered I finger his texts. Perhaps here there is a hiding-clue. He will return undamaged and whole –

The doctor's is devoid of sound; and I am motioned to a seat by the secretary; and she is brittle and made of leaves seemingly. She leans to the recorder and presses Record.

Do you have an appointment.
I do not.
Have you gone to the hospital.
I have not.
Are you suffering from a contagious disease or disability that prevents your attending the hospital.
No. I am ill. I am in pain.
Have you gone to the hospital.
No I have not I have said –
Are you in military service.
No ma’am.
Why not.

Serviced to the Cultural Department. And not from the City; from mining stock, the hardness of land up north; knowing every meaning of stone – but do not mention, do not mention; for it will go on the record.

Have you been in an accident involving cars or pedestrians or public service personnel.

In a manner of speaking.
The doctor will be with you shortly.
I am bleeding. Can I have a towel?
The doctor will be with you shortly.

We sit in the numb silence; and the radio plays; it is the daily Broadcast. Which is beautiful in its regulation – its thud of perpetual message – grogged with harmony; the Professor speaks.

... I am the voice of our glorious country, and I would not lead you astray. I would never feed you lies or bilge, listeners; you are my children, my leader’s children, my dearest friends! We are together in the pursuit of authenticity and truth in a world of claptrap, rubbish, immorality, unclean thought, distrust and State-damaging vipers...

His voice stentorian – baritone, voluble, brisk. Relax into it. He is famous – the Professor. His voice is the nation. He is in every skull.

We are enlightened together, dear friends, and I charge you to hold your heads high and your ears strong, and to ignore the vile propaganda, the smear campaigns and unholy doggerel, of our enemies. I implore it. I demand it!

The secretary coughs. She has not moved. The tape recorder still rolls. The doctor I know is not coming. The room will close. Then men will come. Observe my wrists which roll. Observe my tongue which speaks. Observe my head which when cracked gives off lightning –

It is full of music – it is silent.

The Leader would come to every house and turn the light on in every room in this country himself if it could drive such evil out of the shadows into the harshness of reality; but it is not so simple. It is a matter of vigilance, and of pride, and of purity of
heart and mind! A nation with dissent is a nation without strength. Quash your neighbour’s whispers, your wife’s gossip, your cleaner’s bulging, ferocious tongue...

I rise and leave –

The Maestro would say form is about pulling things out of darkness. And sitting with them. And touching them with your hands.

Outside there is a man selling fox-furs. Dark stinking pelts. Though the spring is come. To wind against the ever-present cold.

*********

It is the evening; and I have no job or progress to show; but a payday’s savings from a scrounged mattress-hole (thirty after the omnibus fare for I cannot walk); and a bucket-meal of scrapings; and a fear, that mutes in me briefly when I bend to eat, but is otherwise livid, constant.

Bloody cold. And the lamps lighted. Frozen bowls of light.

I eat what my landlady brought me – not hearing of payment, *No sir you need your strength*, deep white gloamings of lard. And can see that in her heart she is terrorised. I am a ghost – which has returned from the shallow graves they dig for prisoners out the back of the police-houses – and so has somehow got away, magically, bribed a policeman, taken a deal; and must be courted like this, with sops of fat, with stale bread-bits.

I will not tell her I went to a doctor.

It is no good. There must be planning.

Thirty dollars.

When a mine failed you moved. When a crop gave out you packed up or else died. When a cow keeled from disease you slaughtered and roamed. In my family failure means renewal in deeper places.

But there is nowhere for me to go. Back to them? My father and mother are years dead; and I know what the miner boys do to men who come sloping back from city failure, with better diction, with strange tastes and foreign wives. Their fences mysteriously broken up, their chickens scattered; and meticulous lines of crop destroyed in the night; and broken without being touched once –

That way is rotted. I cannot take it.
I look down at the compositions. They may be the core of good things; and have old friends for help or a bit of food; or perhaps to be sold with the name scored off – and the Maestro in them untouched by death; and I am comforted. See my own scratch of writing above each line, *Legato, Presto*. See his hand-lettered notes – so small; he never made them large, mere pin-pricks for protesting musicians, one told him *I’ll have to wear my magnifying glass as a monocle!*

Lay them on the bed-blanket. All that remains of him – to cover my legs. Extra warmth if naught else.

What is here? Cards to Friedrich. Letter from the Commandant congratulating Friedrich on such a success; royalty checks all, alas, long deposited.

Paper so scarce – I feel its tight knit, its recycled roughness from pulp. Commission for a Saint’s Day Parade in G. The unperformed Sagittarius Symphony in folds. It was not played; it was too good – and the General who had commissioned it a sort-of composer himself. I remember his snort of resignation at the news, wondering how he would tell the musicians. *Rejected for politics* he has noted along the top-line.

It is impossible – for him to be vanished; when there is this, when there is so much of him still in the world!

The candle’s on its last legs; and fix the wick; and cup it close so that they won’t observe; night-time activity being suspect; and the Secret Police thinking all past-curfew light signs of gun-running; and so cup it. In a saucer.

The paper is poor at the edges. Even Ministers suffering the shortages humiliatingly. Ink darkened by dirt; or ground slate; or dog dung. Myself scratching in his courtyard – in eleven degrees – for darkening materials – the ink for the Maestro to write the cello part too light, too light – crumbling frozen clods into the pot – the notes emerging violent brown – *better than nothing* he said –

So fragile all our workings.

So dependent on a piece of crumbled earth.

Next door the Professor’s Nightly Broadcast is on the wireless. *Vigilance is a pursuit worthy of every loyal citizen. You will have your regulation binoculars* – Faithfully the landlady is hemming while listening. His voice in our fabric. I cannot listen. I am blocked in the ears with soil. Must be quiet – so she won’t come in to see this.

Letters on the floor; spilling. So many of them.

Delicate shiver. A tambourine in my heart.

This being my speciality. Rhythmic percussion. I wrote a paper on it –
The bowl has set into lard. Its white cool skin.

Wonder if they gave him food. Before they killed him. Perhaps a good tea. *Now just you eat this and we’ll sort this all out.* Kindly. Him reaching for the biscuits. Always them first. A old man -

Emergent like a face from water.

This terror.

What was on his face when the guns.

Double-check the door locked; and ‘For Freedom.’ The key so swiftly changing.

Can it be seen. Where it came from – that break. This startling Elegy For Soldiers for instance. Six months previous. He rewrote it fourteen times. Angry light between the bars; and sending me to delay it at the publishers – while he lay down yet another scherzo, a new slip of chords – and even this final piece, the printed concert, furred with annotations – unhappy, writhing in itself - And here are the classics. And collector’s editions. And The Fatherland Composition filled with powdered roses. And what Walter kept – precious, precious; notice of the Medal Of State in meaty thickness – and drafts forty years old; a man of artefacts, deeply recorded, and yet somehow they thought they could erase him just by shooting him in the head.

When I will know him all my life. And he lives on in me as if I were double-lunged – breathing his breath.

Shift at the door. *Are you all right sir. Feeling better.*

Pull all the pieces under the blanket. So that I look suddenly plump as a pheasant. *Yes thank you. I am just reading.*

You don’t want to come listen to the Professor then. *Tonight’s is a good episode I do love his voice.* Prickle of the hundreds of papers on my body. As if feathers were coming through; and lumping out of my skin; and short-feathered, thick with fluff-barbs, I would rattle out of the window –

*I am all in my bed now alas. My voice raised; and thin, thin as a sheet – And I can hear him very well through the wall. And will go to sleep listening to him I think.*

*Yes that’s a good idea. Can hear her slow turning on her heels. You sleep well. I’ll turn the radio up so you can hear him properly eh. Goodnight.*

The Professor’s voice presses harder against the wall. Still blurred in the consonants through the brick. I think of the prison-walls so thick that they herded sound, corralled it in, reverbing against only itself –
Is there a piece of mine in the mass. There is no piece of mine.

I research for hours but he is not hiding – has made no preparations for death – wrote to me, I have the letter somewhere, with belief of a future tour of Spain, next May’s Composition Conference – and had no evidence, no presence of death, of suicide – and perhaps the conductor forged it – to avenge some little fault somewhere, a forgotten slight –

When my eyes begin to splinter with moisture I stop.

Hide them breathing quietly under the floor.

Their worthless heft in a hole. Where before I had kept dance hall flowers precious pens a ribbon from a street parade.

When a symphony misses parts it is called a hypothetical or purgatorio. One that remains underground silently.

Here are the limbs of David which can move only with difficulty. Here is his master who is unburied and stripped clean by birds. Here is all the music. Here is the Professor still speaking, his late-night programme, laying its veils across the room.

What is there to do now.

Fall into frenzied sleep. The rinse of sky. Somewhere a woman yells.

In the morning I sell my broken shoes for their leather.

3

Landlady brings me a message. Café at twelve – Bart.

Strain into a jacket. Can see my broken toes begin to fuse. Count out the money again (thirty-four from the leather); some coins; paltry, paltry – and food being sixteen – and the cigarettes for guards besides.

On the way out I pick up the newspapers; ribbed with wet – but pad the coat with them; tucked quiet over the chest for the spring chill; pad the coat; and be inked from the cheap black but still; pad the coat.

Guard on the pavement demands a smoke to pass.

Here’s three for him one being insulting two being insufficient.

Bartholomew is waiting; having ordered his coffee and mine besides; a good four-fifty cup steaming; the corner table – and the waiter Your cigarettes sir; Bartholomew; reaching for my hand. David!
Bart I say.

Come here. Oh I am glad to see you. An embrace – brothering – his long cool smell. Cologne – and a half-undone shirt. Which is the fashion. Bart who swims daily; and wears handkerchiefs doused in scent; and has three sweethearts Tanya Coco and Veronika; and is lithe. His tanned shoulder blades rotating in the water. We would swim together – Wednesdays.

It’s all right. Coffee?

He smiles. I took the liberty – sugar. Have plenty. You look terrible.

I got your message.

Well you’re walking anyway. Pushes the cup towards me. Drink up, young man, drink up! And let’s talk it over. How are things. He remains handsome – a shining-cut profile. My own pale salted-earth body sticks and aches.

Coffee burning-hot. Gullet feels salted and gritty.

How did you hear. About this.

It was on the list of edicts on the radio. Things it was banned to own. Von Sayer records and scores. His careful lips around a cigarette. I thought it must be a mistake but I see from the state of you –

No. It wasn’t.

I see men and women taking their Von Sayer records in the evening. Splitting them under roots. Laying them in mud in road-dirt in gutters in lakes. Filling a hole with embers and cracking the disc into it slice by slice. To see it unmould in the air –

And he is dead then. Or just in prison?

The slice of silence between us. I rally and drink a little.

Bart it’s all right. I mean. I have no income. But a place to stay. My landlady was kind –

Well then that’s half the battle isn’t it. I’ve ordered some lunch. He is bluff – for overhearing. His gentle lean forward. What the hell did he do?

He was a fool. Lunch – you shouldn’t, Bart.

Nonsense. His hair sweet-shining – golden crop – thick fine grass – sweeps it. I owe you for doing all those laps to impress the girls with me, don’t I.

Years and years I’ve known him. And why didn’t I think – to call him, to go to his house when I came out? Because – I sip the coffee, look at his face, his long arms – the logic is more simple – that he would ignore me; and save himself –
So few friends in this city. So cloistered in my work and in Von Sayer. And now cut free-

_They froze his assets then? Nothing in the will._

Sip the coffee. Manage.

I can at least open my mouth to swallow.

_They confiscate. You know that. I have savings._

_They don’t teach you how to lie – you never could. That won’t serve you well at all._ Bart reaches down. An envelope. Tucks into my chest pocket; the paper rustling; a segment detached slipping to my stomach; though he knows – but makes no comment – simple weight, simple.

_Bart I can’t accept this._

_Oh shut up and drink your coffee. We need to get you a comb. After this I’m taking you to my tailor – lovely man, slightly prone to flared collars but that’s beside the point._

_You seem happy Bart. This is never untrue. Have never seen him erode – from his perpetual whole-spiritedness._

_I am happy. Though concerned._

Smiles flicklingly at the waiter – for more cream – and calmly stirs. I take his hand suddenly. Seem always to be reaching – not quite touching –

He is gentle. _It’s all right old fellow. Now David I know. But it’s all right._

_You’re being. So kind. Hold on endlessly. Men together. The weakness of it._

_Met at a party – wasn’t it? Swam on Wednesdays. He’s in the Copyrights Office. My sullen underground-born body. Miner’s limbs. Finished a lap behind – always._

_You’d do the same for me wouldn’t you? Hello here are the sandwiches._

So sweet – the chicken grease against bread; and mop the plate.

_Steady on David you’ll give yourself a stomach-ache._ Bart is not eating but watching me. _Have you eaten at all._

_Not really I say._

_I should have given you more money._

_Bart you shouldn’t. It’s not safe now. Don’t do me favours._

In the cell water dripped down the walls. Though cleaned and warm and gone I still feel. Chilled. Moist on the skin. Twenty hours of bruises.
Oh don’t be silly he says cheerfully. We’re all in it together. That’s a lovely mark on your cheekbone incidentally.

I cannot be ashamed of it. I went to the doctor but left. I was afraid.
Wise move. How bad? Oh don’t tell me. You’ll heal. Young and spry. Good rural stock! And then be back composing in no time. He extricates hands; lights another cigarette.

And swimming. He is silent. Do you think it will pass? The danger?
Bart blows smoke. Change your name. Move into some other body. Some poor creature’s doubtless dead somewhere who could give you up a new identity. Happens all the time.

Does it? I couldn’t.
David you poor creature. And he really is dead.
Yes.
How?
I think they shot him. Is this wise to be discussing.
It cannot get worse, David. One can only be honest about one’s misfortunes.

Besides - I’m going away for a bit.

You have a pass - ? A rare thing – what did he pay?

No, no. To that nice guest-house up in the North. For a bit of a rest and recuperation! I hear they’re quite charming. Breakfasts served and all that. With a bit of physical labour of course – but I’m flabby anyway. Coco has been quite disgusted with me. He shows a violent grin. But is suddenly frail.

Bart. I am distraught. Would touch him but cannot.

Oh it’s all right. His body aloof- as if unreal. It’s much more peaceful you know. A lovely long bit of quiet. Much better than all their beating down my door and following me about and kicking around the landlady.

But those prisons –

David, stop. He extinguishes the cigarette. I’m perfectly happy. Perfectly serene. It’s all arranged apparently. Arrest on Thursday for illegitimate radio broadcasts. Trial on Friday. Sent up for my holiday on Monday. Quite efficient this State machinery.

A bear-grin. As if an animal.

Bart be serious. I don’t understand. What – were the broadcasts?
I don’t know. Never touched a radio. I wouldn’t know what button went where. They really could have picked a better charge, the idiots - but it’s irrelevant. It’s all done. Airy but stuck – somewhere. As if his muscles have given out.

Seized – with a terrible thought.

Are they arresting everybody – who knew me? Or him? Is that it?

He is horrified. Christ no. Oh, David. It isn’t because of you. Don’t go thinking that. I just got myself into trouble. Pushed a little too hard.

His health stained with it. This news. His brittle wide teeth. I say This is not trouble.

And that isn’t a lipstick smear on your cheek either. We took risks – and we paid for them – no longer talking to me, but to himself, to light. I can’t say I regret it, can you? Suits, and a fine job, and some pretty female company on week-ends. A bright, lovely sort of life. I had to pay for it, though. God. I did such things, David. To be safe – and well-off –

What things?

Never mind.

We fall into silence.

The Maestro preferred the allegro form of sonata. Which is tripartite. Part one all unformed matter – then something is half-formed, developed – then what is called the recapitulation; whole and elegant as an egg; a resolution like sunlight, like the sudden discovery of a well for the thirsty, amazing the orchestra. A Bildungsroman in music he said mark it David it grows within us.

I think of this now. That I am between my two men. Bart is unformed – brutal, primal, stunned in the water – an otter. Startled, fizzing with light. Rising from the landscape with an open mouth.

And the Maestro is all forms – is all resolved – the man fully developed; the closing segment with its miraculous themes; astride his own body; final, final as an age.

Both killed I am unmoored.

Undefined against any stronger thing – any structure – I will disappear -

Bart, quietly, is speaking –

I met a man at a party – a famous man, big in the Regime, you’d know his name – and we were having a chat, out on the terrace. Charm and bluster. I was fresh from army training, then, a mere stripling, but I knew my chance and I went for it – and
he said that he’d get me a good job and set me up, if only I went with him and – did what he asked. And I did. He leans for a cigarette but stops. Is slender – in the shade. Cast over with dark. Only I’ve got my girls now, and funds don’t stretch as far as they once did, so – I went to him a little while ago, but I played it all wrong. Took the wrong tack, got angry. Wrote some stupid letters.

He played it all wrong –
The odour of off-key chords is on him.
Bad music lingers over our skins.

I threatened him. He was displeased! I thought it was a bluff – but nothing here is a bluff – or it all is, David.

Swollen David with his hopeful face speaks. Moths in his mouth. You must go to the Secret Police. They could help you – give you protection for the time being – people do it, Bart, I heard about it a few times. They escape it.

David you are a sweetheart. You always have been. A true artist – never quite on the ground. Coco always said you were far too pure to be friends with me –

Don’t be stupid.

It isn’t unfair David. I accept it. Its purity of thought! I took a balanced game and made it ugly – and I forgot just whom the other player was.

Who – was he?

Bart who is light – like a reed, like a piece of weed in the current – drifting, idle in his brightness – I had imagined it was easy. So easy, his curl over the lip of the wave – his shaded, casual eye to the sun-angle.

Our hair comes off us in clumps.

Soil sinks into our bodies.

Bart smiles, sighs. I think we need a drink. Waiter? Vodkas, please. Now, I got you what I could, but obviously it’s not much – with the girls, and keeping bribes on hand for the guards – it’s a bad week in our stars, my boy.

His body in the water.

Suddenly black with blood.

I hold the vodka; its cool throat in the glass.

Thank you. I was desperate.

I know. He will have his long hair shaved. He will have his eyes beaten out. He will be a bare bone in the air. It will be all right.

Maybe. If I get a commission. And you’ll be out in time to see it.
The café is empty –
You are sweet. It’s not for long. A year perhaps. Two.

Oh Bart.

The Maestro was famous first for kicking the formality out of speech; his opera characters speaking in fragments, half-lines, broken corset-bones; this earned him ire but he looked and said People speak like that and We must unbind the voices and so they left him with his stuttering heroes; his bespoke jackets.

One must have one’s convictions, love. One must. Otherwise what’s the point. And a holiday camp it is anyway up there. Though I do look horrible in shorts. No, don’t be grieving.

Without you – it will be nobody.

You’ll survive, David. We all do – well, here’s the bill. If you see Tanya and the girls about would you give them my love.

He pays. Gets up.

I wouldn’t advise writing, David, considering – I may get in touch if I can catch the fancy of a guard. They’ll be bound to befriend me once they see how lethal I am with a poker hand. Now – he leans, scribbles, pauses as if touching a bruise, then lifts – Here’s the name of the tailor. I haven’t time now. Just be careful. He cuts well – for the price.

The envelope itself –
Has fifty dollars – and a name.

It is not a tailor’s name at all.

4

I am left –
I take the money and get into the sunshine.

A woman is singing on the corner. Military anthems. It is brilliant and subtle – her voice.

Bart will not return. They vanish.

A musician called Alexander disappeared once – the night before a performance – and the Maestro furious, but what can you do? We found another flautist.

The camps -
Not ever particularly close to Bart – but shyly. I was frenetic. Caught in the long nets of service. You are essentially his butler he said to me once and I took af-front; but there was the tea; and the hours of annotation; and once a poultice, for the Maestro’s back (seeds, clover; foul ground bone), steaming off the ache – in the mid-night composing room. Listening together to the radio.

One cannot be cruel to the dead.

My arms in the rhythm of swimming –

The name in the envelope.

I am crossing to the park – light in the head – and broken all along the segments of the spine; but otherwise invulnerable; otherwise brutally alive –

I was a servant to greatness; which is better than a lifetime of self-rule in mediocrity. I was in the presence of a mind of the age; and saw his triumphs; and saw the genesis of things; and this was good; this was valuable. I did not go to the mines; it was my gift -

_Sixteen-Year-Old Selected As Composer’s Student._

Eight years alone in music.

_Let me tell you a story, dear Friedrich –_

On the last night (which was for him the last night – for of course he knew) we were sorting the segments for the orchestra – the performance the next evening; thirty-eight parts; oboe by the door to violin on the sofa. The orchestration, after three months, finally, coolly pure. We sat at the table. He nodded. We took glasses of wine. I wrote the movements. _Here is allegro. Yes. But the pianissimo – Rises over the next bar. All right. Put in another segment – Where? There. Yes._ Passing words between us like fruit. The ease of it.

I was surreally happy – and tired; as if athletically; these nights traditionally ended at four.

_The Professor begins soon_ I said looking up from the bar. _Should I turn it on -_

_No. It will destroy the concentration. If the Night Guard wants to know the radio is broken._ He was sixty-seven. Short flat flanks. A quiet breather, indignant with health. Only the aches revealing it, his mortal bone.

_He is a man who makes an art of disliking everything_ said Walter once at a party; laughing; but it is not (I know) dislike – merely intensity. A man floating in wa-ter. His disdain for the real.

I had to leave food for him on the piano. On bad nights.
All right I said.

He got up. The radio was a broad-back service. One of the good ones. Officials only usually. But he was prominent and so gifted with it. He opened the back. What my father would call a wolf’s hands – strong as water. Could tune any instrument. His white ear angry with pitch.

 Took out the wires. Stood with their small veins. Then ripped.

_We are waiting_ he said reseating himself _for a repairman._

Silence is a gift.

This was not humorous –

He was not going to the opera the following evening – _was working at home_ which was not unusual – and I was not to go either; was to write up the next plans, a ballet score of _The Fruit King_ for the Department; and was faithful; and would obey.

In the park the light is almost blue.

I am aching.

In _The Fruit King_ a man dies and is born into a tree –

If he thought he could save me – that was kind; but it is possible – that he simply thought I should be getting on – in his absence; for which he had planned; for which he had laid down long tracks in the soil.

When he finished he said _That is all David;_ and went into his bedroom; and shut the door.

5

There are methods of circumventing the blacklist.

Bribe the officer. Bribe the army. Buy a new outfit an ID a name.

Or else go courting pity. Its fragrance on clothes. The meagre protection of a larger being; and their conditions, and their whims; and thin, thin – and Musser (a year in the labour camp, then released) was made by his benefactor to haul ice – his skin streaking off in ribbons – Even the Maestro’s dictated letters.

Thick with the obedient.

Its one strong note under all his movement.

Bart’s girl Tanya works in the Ministry For Transport. A side boulevard in the morning – fashionable; lined with hedges, furbelows, topiaried faces of the Leader;
the breathed-out serenity; the flap of linen at a window; the cool lawns. Lick of the flag.

When I was ten a man died. Lung-crushed. Mining shafts contract their grip – on the surface a single cup shivers. His wife sat in our kitchen – keening; the open door at the edge of sound; and my mother, my mother unwrapping our last meat to feed her. Lifted the morsel. Took it to the tongue. Said Eat.

All music is play between weakness and strength.

Give them my love –

An officer opens the door; shuts; opens; demands my details; removes.

Tanya who is mezzo-soprano; and Bart's closest-to-wife – though he spun her out across streets cities nights; and prone he said to nightmares where she rent the sheet; her startling white feet sudden in the air – and walking in the blue dress in the Officer's Club she said This heat is horrid and took off her flower which was wilting – soft into its close folds; and left it rotting on the bar –

Will she know – that he is taken?

A countertenor always delivers bad news – then vanishes.

A door opens onto the pale lidded waiting room –

Tanya walks – is small-limbed – and has in this strained light a meagreness; as if all the unnecessary were stripped off – leaving her smooth, frictionless –

Bart called her my rigour. She has flat palms; reaches to shake my hand.

Hello.

Hello Tanya.

Do let me take your coat.

Thank you I'll keep it.

Well. Single word. Strands missing from it. Would you like to see the department.

Bleached gaze of the officer on us.

The strand of her collarbone flexing.

I would thank you.

There are rules for women in opera – to be substantial; and seen vivid even from the rim-seats (bright hair white lines bloodied hands); and solid against the light; and startling - the Maestro saying When she sings every woman in the place should burn; so that after she ceases, after she recedes into blackness, the ladies in the stalls have forgotten to breathe –
Tanya walks rigid. The house old – an aristocrat’s palace; taken by the Regime for space, for its elegant profusion of rooms; and the owners shaven bald in the square – years ago, six, it was in the papers, the Maestro said They all wore wigs anyway – and it is divided, the old stair is guarded by smoking men -

*There is the Minister.* He straps across a room, touches a letter; we’re past. They sleep with him – they all do; Bart told me – and it is acceptable; and perhaps he has a rota.

Bart living in me breathing.

Carrying his love – like a coin under the tongue –

What does she think of me here. Does she anticipate. But she is showing me. An illusion passing from mouth to mouth. And does not touch or look –

*We are very busy with the Regime Games. The new transport plan is past due.*

Light, light, the voice – and golden-haired but not young –

She leads me down towards a corridor brightness.

It is the old conservatory –

Vast shoals of green; and the skylight shutting like a mouth; and the helpless sound of water; and steamed, steamed, into the grey form of marble; and it is frozen, beheld. The ferns glisten. A cupid winks.

*Left for use at State parties. It has great acoustic potential.*

*Remarkable –*

Shuts the door – and her voice drops; it takes a thrumming note – trapped between two hands. *We have perhaps ten minutes. I gave you no invitation to come here. You’ll get me questioned.* Her straining black eyes –

*I’m sorry.* The water floods my lung; I am graceless, muted – *He gave me this. Beforehand.* The envelope in my hand – sodden with sweat and the weight – as submerged; the money heavier, sinking – *I thought perhaps you might need some of it.*

Meat to the mouth. Say *Eat.*

She looks – then grips herself – I *don’t want it. Put it away.* Puts her hands on each other. Then behind her. Face like an emptied glass. *Thank you – for thinking of it.*

*If you require it – just let me know –*

Helpless, helpless –

Her waking in the snarl of sheet.

*Sewing it together* he said to the radio every night – *just to rip it again –*
She says *Don’t*. I think of her at the opera – burning. *You didn’t offer it to the others. The other girls?*

*I only knew how to find you.* This is true – Bart rarely having spoken of the other two; only having met them at dinners, dances, glowing things – like brilliant wind-thrown corn, waving, skittering, touching the sleeve.

*They work long nights. Dance hall girls for the officers. But would use it immediately and not think of him once. Silly things.* She is neat-faced, smooth. See her swimming, capped and whole, along a slur of water – after Bart and I; canoeing her thin self downpool for lengths – and laughing into his wet shoulder, leaving a ringed bite –

I look up at the dripping carcass of iron – which has lights, budded onto the sugar-white girdling; small as teeth. And it is so beautiful; the acoustics swallowed into softness – and swaddled; and it is so beautiful. We are all alone; the house shrinks back from us.

It hurts out of me – *Will you be all right.*

*I am a citizen of discipline and self-reliance as the Father Leader teaches.* Says this starkly – and I hear the gracefulness of it, the lilt, the incant – its elegance worn in through beating – *Men never think you can live without them.* Smiles. *Was there anything else.*

*This came in the envelope too.* It is a puzzle – so show her the name – Bart’s last gift, his clue, his crumb into the palm – not a tailor’s name at all.

She starts. Radiating the swift whiteness of an anger.

*I don’t know anything. Don’t show it to me.* Goes to the fountain. Her long string of back vibrating. Turns back suddenly – *You need to understand – that he had his own way of getting a deal out of life. And he got it! Didn’t he. Swimming with you at the club – and the dinners at the Hotel Ost in town – he said he’d buy me a car, that he knew a man –!* Holds onto the stone.

Outside a car; then silence.

Her small head – smoothed skull like rock.

I have a sudden vision: the Maestro dead. Salt in his eyes. Gored on a dust-heap. Or buried; half his face visible; the cupped mouth open. A glut of blood. Along the low forehead. His hands perhaps shorn of fingers.

Twelve bars of pause. She is calmer now – her face dimmed – retreats into stillness; into the firmness of her body. *Do you know he broke his hand once. His lead-
ing hand – a car accident, six bones. He said he’d always meant to learn to write with the other hand. Could never accept misery except as the half-side of something else. Do you understand.

Silence.

*Forget the name. It’s foolish to focus on it. Realism will save you. I told him that. I said it was senseless.*

*When you last saw him?*

Silence.

*Thank you for the visit. You need – to take care of yourself now.*

She touches one of the invalid ferns.

*I’ll find a commission soon. Perhaps I’ll call on you again then.*

*You’re a musician. You were good Bart said. I remember. Pauses. As if to hand me something. It’s gift baskets here. The only people who get commissions are the ones who send him a particular brand of soap. Goat’s milk. What they crave – Tanya the Minister wants you.*

The greenhouse takes in the voice – lets it dissolve.

*I say It’s a game. And the rules change so rapidly –* 

*Goodbye– She grazes my hand – leaves –* 

*My ribs in a sudden acciaccatura of pain.*

******

Step out into the open note of sky.

The Maestro said *Prevail over your art.*

But what is prevailing –

The streets ahead alight with trumpets drums brass. Skins beat upon. The air sinks. Weight in it.

It is the parade coming. A march goes by the beat of breathing – two to a second. And we passers-by stand to watch – fixed in the light like guilty foxes; holding groceries children water cigarettes – we must be still; and salute when the cry comes. 

*I find a vantage-point. Above the crowd.* 

It is on the ledge of the National Records Building; which is pillared, stepped. Muttering elderly men. Two bend to share a cigarette and watch. Their angular foreheads brushing.
Thinking of Tanya in her nightmare-bed.

Who sews herself together in the morning.

The call to salute comes – a single gesture; held for beat, and beat, and beat – but not undone, not relaxed, until at home, until asleep, when the arm unbends, and falls under the pillow – and even then they find it – and ask why you were negligent –

The Maestro was ultimately less than what he was. Though I wanted belief. His great locus of sound. *Genius does not answer the door* he said sullenly from his bedroom. His long failed body. His cough.

David is still; David is saluting; David is saluting –

They made me salute to them in the darkness. Even with broken elbows. Even with ears bleeding on the floor so that I could barely hear them scream. I try not to think of it but it pushes in and in and in.

When they beat they ask you.

Do you want one or two.

And if you say one you get ten for cowardice. And if you say two you get ten for disrespect.

*You are a musician* they say *tell us what we’re singing* and beat out carols on you with hammers. *The Regime Duet. The Father Leader Says. Honour For All Women.*

Your lungs half-dug holes.

An answer right they wash your face. Track out the cleaner parts for new smash.

An answer wrong it beats double-time.

The marching band song hangs gold wreaths in the air – one that they marked down the body with the hammer (they were bored by then) - two boys beside me are singing the lyrics holding their chests -

And I am crying now, saluting, one hand on my face over my mouth, but saluting still –

A hand on the collar –

Hard hand. Never touched an instrument.

*Hello.*

Landlady’s blessed son. Long blonde. Hair. Six-months tall. Looming in the street-warmth. On his shoulder I am. Breathing one two one two –

*Dion* - *Dion what are you doing here.*

You fell.
Let me go. I can walk! I can walk.

His glory of a head. Shining.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry Dion.

Walks me leg-to-leg down the Record steps - smelling his regulation shirt, its scratch of iron and water – and he watches the soldiers; holding me at my ribs – watches the soldiers –

I have had – a hard time. And am still weak. You know that.

He takes me by the ribs to keep me upright.

Her big child; for he's emptier in the head than eggs; but immolating beautiful. In the dusk light; beautiful. Plough-deep back curving. Waving at the soldiers –

I am caught – in his resemblance to Bart; that heavy golden weightedness.

Which is so easy -

The single heated moment – in a life – of symmetrical perfection – he approaches it and is just now passing, turning away from the sun – descending – it hurts; to see it; I am calming, calming; he is listening to the music.

My landlady in the morning:

He brought you back. He's such a good boy.

Yes.

He keeps out of trouble. Very good.

Not in the army then.


Well it was very kind of you and you can tell him that I said thank you.

Tell him yourself, eh. Eat that – good for hearts.

And tell him yourself – for here's the boy now – waiting at the gate.

Fit for armour, burnished helmets, battle-songs – has long plaited muscles in streams – and yet is just a blazoned empty thing. Staring at nothing.

Hello Dion. It was nice of you to help me yesterday.

Yes.

Who are you waiting for? Be good - I'm going now. I'll see you later.

Moving onward – and Dion (I notice this suddenly) is following alongside.

Six foot perhaps.

Dion what are you doing. You don't need to follow me now too. I'm all right.
Yes.

Keeps along –

His mother – shrill scent picker – she’s put him out (for what? A body-guard?) thinking that since I rose up I’m good for something. And now here’s this boy in my service – following me up the street – always, parental ambition.

Mine sent me here alone at sixteen. I am not surprised.


I have only gone two blocks – before I turn back –

Here I am Dion. I’m done. Will you come along now?

There being enough cruelty in music alone.

To make a new mine you seek the seam.

Feel for its track through chalk and softened ground.

A veil held taut between rivers of rock.

Though I came loose from the mines young I am thinking of this; and my father speaking of fresh seams like women, gorgeous, soft, gives us some cheek; and the first pass of the men under the mine-opening with their picks and chain slung backward, for luck; and these small things -

Rituals are necessary. For the beginnings of the new.

For mine I have cut my hair; and borrowed cosmetic for the bruises.

Tuning up. Pulling the raw notes out.

Having made plans – with the little money left; work, and have a bit laid by – and send some to Tanya; who is not fragile, not needing, a good Regime woman, but still grieving, quietly; and in an unmarked envelope, but she will know – that it is for her care, for Bart’s wish – to wear flowers pinned to her dress at the dance hall, to buy black market stockings, new sheets –

It will be good. And a wholesome thing. And right.

We have found a rhythm of days.
Worked it into our movement. Our wake and sleep.

I wash in the morning courtyard; and am less conscious now of my wounds, of the loose parts of my body – the cracks having webbed, the fragile dents along shin and rib no longer swollen, no longer flooded with dark; and I am silversing, I am slowly coming toward whole, my skin in the early light is thin-shining with new flesh.

Dion does not wash early – but at night; having come home from the Labour Yards; having his shirt peeled back by his mother, who scrappes off the ash, the filings, the stray skin cooling away from burns; and she soaps him along his flanks, his hair-line, plush as an oiled cello, beloved, beloved –

*He works there sometimes when they need another man* his mother says. *Strong boy. Good money. But not so often eh. Plenty of young men for that place.*

*How can he work so close to hot metal* I ask.

*Eh he knows* she says. *Only takes once.*

And in the night room Dion bends for his hair to be wound in a towel – and knotted; like an ancient sultan in a harem.

We do not eat in the mornings but as we walk; small bits from the grocer, a handful of apple, biscuits; and Dion is useful – for this; garners gifts. His head bending under the door frame. His small slow parts of speech. That make women turn and wipe their faces briefly on their arms – before turning back with bread, or cheese –

Generosity of pity.

*What a waste* one says to her friend. *Big strong boy like that.*

While I fold the bread into a napkin.

We are moving overland tapping to find the seam. Looking at the undersides. Seeking the flick and flash of ore.

The music-stores first; Valli’s and Balgakov and Middle Street; any child needing tuition, any instrument broken out of tune into a wilderness. A handful of coins, one day, from fixing a violin peg – that had twisted out; pressed it into its hole with wax, showed the owner (young, bored) how to chase the slippage along the warp of the wood –

*Good craftsmanship outlives its breakage* the Maestro said.

Work within the flaw of the instrument.

Play till the music goes sour or silent.

Then the cinemas – wanting piano players for the silent pictures, serenades for the white faces of women praising the honour of soldier boys; and a special lever
under the piano to pull for bells, when the Anthem plays; and barely a few coins a night, for two-hours, three –

Then, less hopefully, the street of opera houses; which are marble, with carnal gods re-carved into soldiers and good citizens on the balconies, after the Ordinance Of Public Art passed; but some corner ones neglected, a distracted State sculptor – and so a helmet sprouts a floral crown; and a uniform’s drapery folds reveal a stray breast, half-smoothed; and a rifle-barrel in one light remembers it was once a scroll –

Point them out to Dion who laughs.
Though perhaps only at the light.
Or at myself – speaking to him.
I wait in lines. And am patient. And a clean shirt to present oneself – one must be clean – for people like cleanliness. David wash your cuffs this evening for the concert: what the Maestro said. Starch and lemon-juice. Scrubbed-skin.

And a sheaf of good pieces; mostly percussive but some traditional – and a pocket metronome in case they ask Sit down let’s hear some. And a brush; Dion’s hair being ridiculous; and the wind.

A week of this.
And I began defiant with his name on me. Master Von Sayer. You have heard of his works. His influence his Second Symphony I heard your orchestra perform it – last spring. Looking for his friends, his rich loves, his attendants – that clustered at famous parties, jacketed him with flowers, gripping his hand till he said David they have wrung me into a nerve disorder – and having laid steaming towels on his swollen fingers, bruised circles of love at their wrist –

But they have sunk – into the ground.
And are vanished.

And I have started to know it – what fear looks like; how it feels in a room. A note rising beyond the range of an instrument, straining. Can sight-read peoples’ faces before they speak, feel them pulling unconsciously their elements away from me.

I shifted – to I worked with a prominent composer; to I have had eight years of work in the field; to I have all my paperwork I am a loyal Regime citizen here are the pieces. Shrinking – and compact; speaking less, carrying only my pile of songs.

Dion is less useful – here; says nothing to interrupt as I make my case, but is deeply present, his beauty and brutish awkwardness shaping the room to him. He
will wait outside on a step if I ask, faithful, perched happily, and I’ll come out to find his hands full of nuts – or chocolates, from passing students. But it is a chance – that when I emerge he’ll be hidden; and crouched behind a wide thing from a scare; and refusing soothing – from any other person, reaching for my arm –

Once a secretary came in to say I’m sorry sir your brother is causing a disturbance – when I had been there so small a time; and had begun to unwrap my best piece, to point to the interplay of violin and birdlike oboe, the innovative fugue of drums; and the orchestra-leader leaning, prepared for a minute or two to be diverted by an up-and-comer’s ideas –

And the spell broken. And from the lobby howls. And embarrassment – climbing my body; as the orchestra leader closed his hands and said Another time then – uncomfortable, unmooring himself; leaving me adrift –

A car accident outside, a swerve onto the steps. And Dion told to stay clear. And the policeman motioning him on the chest. And Dion eager, wanting to see (what? perhaps the furrowed metal of the hood, he knows metal in his own way, its give under soldering irons in the Labour Yards) – but was pushed hard back; and striking ground; and a startled open-mouth weeping – that is one noise, without modulation, a circular breath –

Outside I found him sitting in dust. And he was quiet then; and smiled - Sometimes it’s comforting – to be his god and king, to extend a hand and see him smooth and settle; but not then, not in that place.

Why did you do that? Couldn’t you keep quiet – just this once?
And I felt the pull of it, the rush of violence; to strike him –
But my own bruises came to my face. And it was not in me.
I was shivering; I wiped my hands on my face as if merely tired.

In the prison when they beat me there was the undergrowth smell. Darkness in it. Finger-skin gone loose from the wet. A sop of hair. They put my head in the bucket. They pulled my head out of the bucket. They put my head in the bucket. Nostrils ears eyes. Small ferns grow out of me I think. Breath like a suck through cloth.

It’s all right. Don’t be upset. Shall we go home now.

Today here is the city. Here is Dion beside me; and the boulevards in their pinwheel from the centre, from the Pavilion of the Father Leader, where his body is interred, where women are laying their wreaths in the morning –
This was an ancient city I tell Dion as the Maestro told me – as we walk down by the fort. There are old graves here, holy sites under the hills, they brought a golden harp out of a grave, I heard the strings were still so taut it could be played.

This being unlikely but not impossible – as the Maestro said; rust and soil oiled off with linen by a still hand; and the string-braid brushed with small brushes, hair-thin, filaments of spun wind; and as a stray finger brushes the metal it splits and reforms the air, its own note –

Press gold in thick dry earth and it holds.

Comes out dark as burned skin.

Music of the oldest strings the texts say sounds like water.

Dion listens but quietly. Is a shallow bowl; things pass through him, emotions, sound. When we walked the courtyard leg to leg he smelt of strange, strong things – mustard, sugar-rolls, meat. Smudge of oil at his hairline.

We stop in the square. Eat: boiled eggs. A ham-piece – from the grocer, for whom Dion hauls boxes. Dion writes in the dust. Or does not. Maybe just symbols. And it is unseasonably hot; and fifteen dollars left – from the hoard.

We should go back to the Theatre of the Noble Sacrifice they’re putting on a new musical. May need a few songs for the sequences. We’ll go early get bread from Mrs Prestel.

I am eating the last of the ham.

And innocent – for they let me free – but nobody believes it; the rumour like a wreath on my head – and I look out of the sunlight squinting. A headache is riding its beat in my head; it is brutal, diffusive; it is refracting through bone; it is blackening with knots of blood. I saw a man once. Past torture. Berries of wet matter. His soft-fruit brain.

Thinking of the name in Bart’s envelope – and Bart a dreamer, leading the world in tall tales; and would have felt no loss of it, what he gave for security. Just a body, just a lick with his golden tongue. So little – and could not see the logic, that a little begot a little, that no more could come of it.

Why did he give me the name? Presumably the man who gave him those gifts, and then sent him away when he over-stepped. For me to get revenge? But he knows me, I cannot hold a gun; and couldn’t poison a damn rat, couldn’t strike a man if he kicked my head in – and am white-blooded. For my use, then, perhaps. For desperate measures – when hope fails. He cuts well for the price.
But there are still places – where I’m unknown, where the music can speak for me.

A crowd is on the side of the square – men from the Press, a phalanx of well-wishers bearing flowers in great biers; some Regime reception, some talk. The flowers are young crop like hair, too early; a man at the mines kept fields of spring alpines, kneeling to sow them knuckle-deep in his precious soil-layer – and then packed them in ice and straw for the city. An extra earner. Can see from here the pale stalks -

The flash-bulbs rise and smash.

Swathe of men moving – as the line breaks, as the door opens –

What’s going on over there? Tell – no, don’t tell me, I’ll go find out.

I go – and come back breathing – heavily. Grip Dion at his shoulders. Both hands.

Dion this is important. Listen to me. That man is the Culture Minister. He is – he is a very important man. Dion is wiping dust from his face; sweet-pawed. We are going to follow him now. And try to catch him – all right?

We set off – and we are following, we are merged with the disciples Dion shouldering forward bull-heavy; and we pass out of the square and down a Boulevard – and he has announced a new policy, a Press man says, on the Regime magazines – a good thing for morale – and I nod -

The cinema reels will be starting – and silent. But they will find another man –

Other petitioners - a man beside me says Could the Minister be persuaded to look – our town needs a Cultural Centre, the walls are falling in, we’re singing off our father’s song-books eh – and another says Slender chance my friend; and so gradually they slough off; and are left standing, rumpled, mopping their eyes – but Dion and I are still pushing ten minutes, twenty, behind his bodyguards, Dion bears up as my bashed legs begin to fail –

What will I say to him.

Mention Von Sayer no. Good way to get shot. A young composer sir. Suffered a tragedy – but great talent a lauded resume. No hard luck story sir only hard work. Read these they are for you – the best pieces – to put in his hand; for him to idly hand to a secretary, who peruses, files it under Percussive or Unpublished Compositions For Attention –
We are coming to the station; he’ll be boarding a train. *Touring the provinces* the Press man says *going to investigate their cultural programs*. *Pink-cheeked mountain maidens at the stops showering him with red ribbons. Lucky man that one.*

But the crush –

There must be hundreds – having waited, come to see him; his dark hair parted down the middle, his blue suit – and the sash of his rank across his chest – and the crowd expands like a lung, shouting delighted slogans, pushes us further from him –

Sound in a wide flat space opens.
Drifts in waves out to the edges.
Thins and whines against listeners’ ears.
And I am winded – and deep-bruised; and cannot call for his attention – over the field of bodies who press; and the train is diplomatic, scores of white on its side, but at the back a few civilian carriages – and he is boarding, raising his hand, unsmiling –

*At the rear a conductor gives me an arm. Are you going up north.*

*We are. Let us on please.* He raises and lowers the door frame.

The Press man leans in at the window - *Here I thought you were one of our lot. Enjoy the red-ribboned maidens.*

*We shall.*

For I am alive with this – to keep the famous man in sight; and on the same page. And follow him across the country. And camp by the stations in spare patches; and wash in lakes, strip to underclothes and wade, bleach dusted clothes in sun; and Dion can haul wood or log, get us enough for food -

Nobody else in the carriage knows about the tour – but are travellers, wrapped in their own lives, one tries to sell me paste jewels – that Dion loves, that he leans across the dusty seat to see; but I am fervent, I have my plan. *We move up, carriage to carriage; Dion at my back, myself straight-spined, official, the appearance of business – that leaves me unquestioned; and up to the diplomatic carriages which are guarded by four soldiers –* Could talk or bribe my way through – and appear suddenly as the Minister drinks water in his private compartment, as he smoothes his moustache in the mirror for the maidens, rifles his notes – and beg, quietly –

*But it is ridiculous; and I will wait – until the next station.*
I want it so badly. And he must feel that need; feel it vibrating through the bottom of the train carriage, through the window-frames, thrumming in the same beat of the tracks; and in his temples – as he daubs them with a handkerchief, as he recites his next speech and fixes the rise at the end of a line; that percussive need –

Rhythm is hunger.
Fixes between want and not-want.
Flies forward into desire.

When the ticket inspector comes and says *Tickets please* I purchase two – profligate; seven for the both of them, slicing away the head of my resources. But it is worthwhile – this chance –

As we draw up I am poised – at the rail; ready to fling myself, to fuss and open doors, a shifting part of his orchestra of followers – and Dion close, Dion imitating my movements, a secondary shadow, a pale twin –

But the diplomatic train must be emptied first – a soldier tells this to Dion, kindly, watching him stand confused at the door – and a car pulls up –

*Where is the Minister speaking.*
*Speaking? No he isn’t speaking. He’s gone.*
*Gone?*
*Yes. Overland.*
*Where?*

*Can’t tell you security risk. No don’t ask me again I don’t know who you are.*

*Do you want to get arrested get off.*

And all of it wasted. Dion has a stick from the platform; plays with it; is silent.

No money for a return ticket. And the cool rapidly coming across the platform. And the stewards grinning; spinning coins for fun on the floor; and I think of snatching one, of sprinting off; of knocking out the woman in the fur sunning herself, grabbing the bag and getting up a pace, cracking it open for the coin-purse, a few notes –

I cannot. For all my hopelessness I cannot.

For Dion – who understands so little – would follow. And cry at the noise. And when we were caught be beaten harder for his silence. And so I turn away – my heart beating savagely – and say, lightly – *We’re going to walk back to town now. It’s good for our health.*
One dollar left. The failed tickets in my pocket sore as my lungs.

As we go back along the track – the evening heavy with moths, with the scratch of light over high grass – I think of the Minister, riding in his car, perhaps with a hand behind his head, smoking; or talking to a lady companion. Every step I feel him receding – Dion leaping down a bank to splash his face in a pool, returning dog-sodden; the dust that ridges my nostrils and eyes – until he vanishes.

We reach the city edge very late, the fields outside the walls. Bright graze of stars. The deep hopeless rhythm of insects. Calling for death in the grass.

There are sounds in the late dirt; there are human voices over the fields.

It is a security post. The hut is open; they, five men working late in the fields, are crowded around a radio. It is the Professor's night broadcast – for insomniacs; people who need the State in bed with them; the neurotic faithful.

I imagine him in his broadcasting room, somewhere (some people know his face, he is seen at parties, introduces the Leader at rallies, his great lucid voice) breaking open a carafe of late wine. Leaning forward. Touching the microphone.

His voice beautiful – the buttery baritone - operatic, a Don Giovanni; though too flexible, too stripped of moral thickness. The Maestro demanding impeccable service records of his tenors, his basses. They must be proper men he said.

The Maestro did not touch his sopranos as did others.

The Professor says I have a letter from young Sven in a southern county. Hello, Sven, it is always lovely to receive epistolary greetings from young citizens. Dear Professor he says I would like to join the army and protect our Glorious Leader but am not yet 13...

This is old – perhaps a week - they repeat them.

The name in Bart’s envelope was The Professor – He cuts well for the price.

Dion and I sit in the long grass. My feet are stippled with ache. His unchanging face. We sit with the men with their scythes and we listen.

Section 3: All Voices

1. The Professor Finishes His Broadcast

For the State and the Leader, my fellow citizens. Goodnight to all.
The routine is fairly rigid. Switch the microphone to Non-Transmitting, let the sleepy boys at HQ wind up the Anthem on the line, do one's post-production breathing. The air in here is singed by electricity – vibrating still.

Then downstairs; Wulfson saying *As usual sir*, and the whisky on the side-board, my black-market bit in the glass.

It gets harder, with the years. I tried to give it pivot, to give it thrust and bust and bluster this time; the higher-ups like the dialling-up, a grip on the emotional hairs. It’s like an affair; one stops spaying attention, stop caring about hiding the lip-sticked collar, dusting off the perfume.

I wipe a rag along my nape.

Such rustic rubbish. Three syllables the limit! When I could limber it out to five, six, through eighteen languages like hoops, looping in space...

The whisky shivers – it’s lovely stuff, from my man down the docks.

One must not object, of course. It’s discipline, to adhere direct to a dialect.

(Even if the dialect is ‘digested drivel’.)

A stray stroke from my hand reveals a sheet – a letter; left under the papers.

From Bart, whose story went, alas, so sour for him.

It would be, what, his last letter? No, the one before – I see its date - with its one arid demand. Which barely bears repeating! He was such a fool.

I find the bottle of ink in the desk and tip it, greatly gentle, from the palm. It spills less sensuously than I’d thought – trickles in specks and streams, licks along the desk-top – then floods. The letter’s livid, blurred, a conquered country; it leaves its plural on the leather when lifted, sopping, a bright wet flag, to the light.

The next morning – Wulfson having attended my accident – the scene is wiped of colour. Traceless.

What one man’s anger will do. If you let it.

2. The Wife Goes To Work

Bea has obtained the permissions. An exemption – dropping through the postbox.

Her note beneath. *And now you are in my debt. As you said.*
Shivering into the surgery coat again. Loss of weight meaning that it drapes badly. Wraps in loose swathes at the stomach.

In my pocket the daily antibiotic dose. Gauze pads for the sterilising gel on my forearm.

All from my own supply. This fragility I will fight to keep separate. This conquered flaw.

Have deliberately avoided telling him hoping for the flare of a fight. To be forced in. Meeting at least the angriest edge of his eye-line. *What do you mean you’re going back to work don’t you know the regulations.*

One of our fights in the early days he threw a glass at the wall. Myself four feet distant. Still he insisted on penitent lovemaking for six days afterward. Now I appear like the flick of a knife at his door. Poised for dramatic scenes. The crack of his hand on the surface of my drum.

*I’m off to work.*

*Work?* He looks and then away. Without grip. *Good. Good.*

*I found the permission. Beatrice got it for me.*

*Mmmm.*

His distracted chin against my cheek. Its animal-hard smell.

A section of my ribs hunkers inwards. Disappointment as a bodily collapse of structure. Sponging the strength out of good bone.

So: he rises. Helps me on with my work-coat thinking elsewhere. These gestures like empty bowls –

*This old coat is disgraceful. A doctor in this ragged grey! Why it’s unholy. One would think you were collecting alms.*

*Bleach does fail. After a while.* Buckling under the rareness of his attention. My glass warping.

*We shall just have to replace it – at the Stores. Lavender is far more suitable. Or grass-green – for the fervent goddess of health. With silver buttons.*

His still-handsome head. Which I have traced with my hands. Which I could make from clay if blind.

I smile. *And a – what is it – wreath for my brow?*
A sceptre he says gravely. Be good dulcet one.

Dulcet one – our old names from before before before.
This brief brim of lightness.
As if I am full of organs still. As if I remain a woman.

He craved myths. Rolled in them hip and thigh.
My golden nymph! he would say back then. You are the only one who understands.
Save me from these slavering beasts!
When he would spill (laugh-sighing) his head onto my lap. My Sibyl-wife I would quite quite die without you.

Perhaps he will take me to the Stores.
Make her a bright delicious thing he said to one shop assistant.
Green scarf under a pillow. Shoes he hid in his shirt. The Stores his spoiling-place: spilling – surprise – beads once onto my bare breasts.

To begin again you dredge up hope. You step backwards into rooms. You light a match and say I vow I vow I vow.

Returning to work is exquisitely familiar. Grey-coat pelt against skin. The Local Health Collective.
My secretary rising. Your room is ready. I put out the records and the stethoscope as you said on the telephone. Her curiosity pressing on her face. Of course they will all have heard.
Disinfect that woman’s path. Cleanse her organs. Wear masks so she cannot touch us with her luck.
No. Stop being stupid. Thank you I say and smile. It’s good to see you.
Yes. You are feeling better?
Yes. What cases do we have today? Are there any epidemics I should know about? I am taking off my gloves steadily.
The new vaccinations have come in. Doctor Berger will be in later.

She is listening to the daily Woman’s Broadcast: Eda’s Hour.
How to raise good state-obedient children.
How to save your coupons for the wash.
How to remain ideologically strong when husbands die.
How to cook how to move how to dress and bend.

The consultation rooms sodden with disorder from my absence as if suddenly breathed upon.
Paper quietly shifting in itself.

Shifting into silence –
I shut the door behind me. Am thinking of his work which lies unbound. Insides pricked with crosses vowels smudges.
Open the windows to my consultation room. Outside the trees gape wide with wind.
I vow I vow I vow. That blood-ink vengefulness. Has no place in a surgery. Seems from this distance thin – a weak gambit for no good end.

In the other room the secretaries whispering.
Dear Eda my partner will go off to serve how can I best prepare him.
Dear Eda my neighbour keeps suspicious hours puts her lights on late eats meat at strange times I smell it under the door.
Dear Eda my children are so brave and strong and right and yet they said cruel things.

After it happened he put away his speech I lay gored in four pieces.
The doctor (whom I knew) said Did you eat correctly Madam? Did you do the exercises as prescribed? Did you have any accidents? It is necessary to know. For the records.
Since logic cannot render a horror it must be elsewhere.
The radio’s whiskers radiate the air. This stunning animal which reaches.

Briefly (the trees move) I am so full of self-loathing that I can barely stand it. Burn hair from my body. Press brand to flesh. Stand in the knife of my immolating light.

Then there is the crumple of the leaves and the waiting room stunned with detergent and Eda saying Yes of course you must which my secretary repeats.
I sit transfixed by inner bruising. My womb full of rushes.
Then a flex of hope in my breath. Its white plunge.
The penitence has begun. I can feel the shape of it. And the renewal – gleaming.

******

Good afternoon Doctor.
Good afternoon.

Three men.

We apologise for the interruption. We understand that you have treated – a Mr W______?
I believe so. Though of course my memory –

A factory worker –
Pain being a verifiable language. Sweetening the body into print. For instance.
The filtration of fracture through the ankle like weed through still water.
Or a lesion’s semaphore. Hooking onto skin.

When was the last treatment?
I would have to get the records. I believe it was a while before my – leave. So nearly a year – now.
Try to remember. For an ailment?
No. No – for a specific injury. I could not treat it and sent him to a neighbouring hospital.
But he came here first.
He did.
Could you fetch the file for us?

My consultation room suffusing briefly. Dipped into dark oil.
Certainly.
Somewhere Eda makes a pronouncement.
A long breath of air like a feather.

*Here is the file. Are you relatives of Mr W_____?*

*No Doctor. We are investigating a case. Here are our papers if it concerns you.*

Police. Their heads bunched into skulls from some vaster more solid material.
Squeezed.

*Do you have legal permission to view the file. Do you have the consent of his relatives to view the file. Then I am afraid you cannot view the file.*

Is the ideal conversation. My own noble self dismissing them. Burning them out of the door.
Somewhere above us cooling on the ceiling it vanishes.

Instead:

*Here are the files. Papers on the table. Open-faced.*

*Can you translate the shorthand? We are not qualified doctors ourselves.*

*I am afraid I did not take the notes on this case. See here. It was dictated – the recording has been destroyed. As is State policy.*

*Do you remember the case Doctor?*

Factory worker corrugated with sheet-burns.
The long weird tails of whip-ends on nape and hand and thigh.
Smuggling the break of himself.

Skin peeling off in slips onto the floor. A night's worth of bandages.

*I remember vaguely. I could not treat him. I sent him to a hospital.*

*Did he show you his wounds?*

*It says he was burned. We do not have the facility to treat burns here.*

Milken baths. It is difficult to preserve scorched skin yet I sewed his flesh back towards a semblance of honesty.
Speaking to Berger of it I said the word *eldritch.*
I never told my husband of the torture men. We both had our cases late at night. Chose not to haul them home into the marriage. Not to let them flex the air between us.

* I see. He was punished for expressing anti-State sentiments and escaped. Perhaps he told you that. 
* I do not remember him speaking save to request help. 
* You should have alerted a guard when such a man came to you. It is suspicious. 
* He explained himself as a work accident. If he concealed it – 
* You remember it then. A proper citizen must always look beyond the proffered explanation. Enemies can pull the wool over our eyes in every direction. However we understand -  

Note: the single knife inserted into meat thus. Enemy-False. Friend-True.  
Swollen in my work-coat. One hand on the files.

* Did you enquire about him in hospital? 
* No. 
* You were in the hospital itself shortly afterwards. You did not go to the burns ward? 
* No. 
* Curiosity is natural – he must have been pretty bad – no? 

As if possible.  
As if I were not bound to the sheet by layers of blood and bitter salt.  
That they knew about the hospital – no longer scares me.

I say I do not remember.  
* Thank you for the material. We will return it to you once it has been of use to us. Please be careful Doctor. We hope you are better. They rise. 
* Yes. Thank you. 
One turns. His long back has I notice a small defect in the spine. *By the way Doctor you are due for a Census soon?* 
* Yes. 
* Ah. A colleague mentioned it. Good morning.*

14. David meets the Professor

The Professor’s waiting room.
Cool dark drapes like hair.
Wondering if the field is still on us. Mud can glut in the hand-seams for years; my uncles and father plated with it from child to coffin; and the bright leaves in Dion’s hair taking hours to comb free. Dust and moss in the eye-sockets the breath the teeth.

But we have scrubbed; and laid out the clothes for beating; and Dion soaped like a schoolboy in ripe suds; and so are clean, smoothed as stone; and will not have the miner-skin the smudge-skin that leaves dark on tablecloths walls sheets.

My father when dead sooted his shroud.
We washed his eyelids nostrils soles.
Looking at him clean my mother said God won’t recognise him.

It took days to arrange a meeting – pass shown fourteen times to eight guard-sets; and a State bureaucrat ambushed out of office; and insisting, softly, to be passed onto those Higher Up, to be satisfied – until here; until this point.

The record lies over my knees.
The guard took it and said Oh and returned it.
The corridor plated in emptiness. Its rigorous suppression of sound.
Thinking of Bart –

Who has been gone two weeks; his bright grip on the world unspooling; and (suddenly remembering) when he cried in pain – a shoulder sheared from its socket in a race – it was in F. In opera men scream in D sharp. Women higher. Half a scale. The rare woman screams in alto shaking the light.

Dion picks at his wet hair.

Its fern swathe on his nape.

I say Leave it.
Loathing sticks in you like paint – which I had not known; thinking it liquid or oil to be scraped off or grown through – but is not; is soft in the mouth; is mute. Of a rival I despise Strekun but his music is genius said the Maestro.

Recognising his worthy parts –
I hold the record close to my knees.
The name in Bart's envelope still in the jacket – seething.

We are in his waiting room. And will see him. And will bow to him the great man. And will petition. And it is necessary – necessary for music which is all things; and surviving; and the debts (landlady grocer two three others) – it is necessary – to rub this enemy on my skin.

What did Bart say. A bright, lovely sort of life –

Not being beautiful I have brought what I can. Used Dion – his vast glittering hair, put an angry smear across his face, to look as if he'd lost a fight – to get a fish; a good bass, from the sympathetic fishmonger who looks at Dion like a weak friend; and joshes him, tells him dirty jokes, ruffles his head – and slipped the package in under his arm –

A man who likes gifts. And in this economy I have so little, a cupful, a piece of glass; but still it may be sufficient.

What would you do for music David. The Maestro fixing a flute part; myself eighteen.

Oh anything sir.
Don’t be stupid nobody would do anything. But enough. Do enough.
The fish sticks to the paper. Flat scales and scores of bone. What does he crave? What can I put into his hands, what tribute can I pay? Goat's milk soap -

My breath in me stark as floodplains.
Dion takes his hair into his mouth.
Go in says the Professor's Secretary.

*******

Good afternoon.
I bow – briefly; my body stretching away from me; and entering his rooms –
The Maestro’s rooms were white. Ascetic purity. Which is the angry condition for creating art. One strips, one moves naked, one sacrifices; *trim your excess and you will have transcendence* David he said; paring it thin –

Comfort as the weakness in pure sound.

Here is plushness; here is soft, soft; and carpet under David’s feet; and dark swollen leather books; and a fine marble globe; and the heaviness of it, the silken weight; and a man’s pleasure –

How can his voice emerge clear from this swaddling.

The Professor rises from the chair -

*Good afternoon. I am afraid I only have the briefest of minutes.*

Pleasant, rolling thickness of stomach – and jowls, deep wattles settled on the bone structure; and the full neck – a Falstaff; succulence-seeking –

A great voice in a fallow place.

*It’s kind of you to see us –*

*Yes. Though I was told to expect only one – your secretary?*

He indicates Dion – by the window staring; the smeared shortness of his suit – for it’s for a younger boy, much younger – but cut clean –

*He is in – in training.*

*Secretarial training? Your taste intrigues me. Come and join the conversation, secretary.*

The great heavy head (a lion’s) turns; absorbs us both transfixed; then turns back to the window – perhaps a bright piece of paper on the ground or an organ-grinder or a boat passing. Disobedient blissfully.

*He is not talkative sir.*

*Well then. What can I do for you both.*

Wildly I think of Bart – of pleading. And of pardon. But no use; no use.

*I am applying with deepest deference sir for help obtaining a commission from the State Musical Department.*

*I see. Smiling – solid light eyes –*

*You have the honour of a prominent position –*

He dismisses – *Let us not waste time on the obvious.* Rises, to take a drink – a decanter.

*I say It is not my first plea. I mean it is in person. I have been taking steps. I wrote letters.*
Which is true; to Department Heads composition leagues the Regional Party Leader; and cribbing the paper from the backs of scores; and always the same litany in it, the same beat:

*I have continually sought opportunities to work for Party interests. I performed loyally as assistant conductor on the Festival Circuit. I have an impeccable record of service. Though I do not have full Party membership I am a member of the Cultural Corps three years and am working to attain full approval stamps Elementary Party Status. I beseech your aid in furthering the cultural interest of the Eternal State through an appointment to your Ministry. I am willing to take a post below my experience pay grade expectation. I am willing –*

He says *Well then. Do begin.*

*Plunge forwards – I am a young composer – with a catalogue of successful performances – an eight-year apprenticeship – existing relations with orchestras. I brought my most prominent piece – The Cry For Victory from 'Winifred' – for you to hear – if that is - ?*

The record light, light in my palm – and he indicates, bored.

*The record player is over there – an ancient beast. I hope it is amenable.*

I put on the record; he offers Dion a drink, is refused.

We settle to listen; ‘Cry For Victory’ begins; watching his face – immutable; he is watching Dion at the window; he is caressing a paper; and the room ridiculous with sound –

I say *The cello is slightly out of tune – and the recording is old – it is my only copy.*

Helpless –

It finishes. He smiles. *Says Most charming. Though I’m more partial to Debussy myself.*

I say *If you know anywhere that requires a composer – or some partial work –* He says *Oh everybody needs composers these days. All the Parade marches – and Cultural Life advertisements.* He offers me an orange; I take it – startled – hold it in my hands.
Have not seen an orange in a year. Citrus scarcer than God. Children scrape teeth along dried peel just for the scent. Their open hands.

My hunger is like fresh hysteria. Would blot its pulp onto my leaking gums – would crush it through hair – and here he gives it, gives it easily – could weep –

*However, somebody with your history cannot of course merely join the application-queues, can he.* Taking his own orange – but not peeling it – merely balancing it – on his tips –

No, sir.

*How tiresome for you. This secretary of yours presumably doubles as a body-guard? He won’t do well against the Police. Or perhaps he is here to bully me?* Behind him a map of ancient Greece – I recognise the scripts. Its long pale back on the wall.

Will he eat the orange – he will not – but holds it absently – and politeness dictates I cannot eat either –

His broad placard-smile.

The taste of threat in it.

No sir. Never.

*Of course not. I apologise to you, young sir. Please accept my hand in friendship.* He tosses him the orange – like some lissom suitor –

Dion has perhaps never seen an orange; is delighted – the colour – but not sure what to do (have seen him bite with sweet-mouth savour on interesting stones) – and so bites whole. Peel and all. Then licks the hollow. Some big animal.

We watch him gnaw in the sun.

His huge clapping jaw.

Looks at us brittle – sensing the quiet, probing it – hides the fruit in his palm –

The Professor says *I really should keep a store of napkins for guests.* No matter. *Do keep eating.* Dion brightens, bends, smothers in his sleeves –

I say (whispering almost) *I want no trouble. I knew nothing of von Sayer. He never said anything.* The police freed me.

*I don’t doubt it.* That loop of voice. Which you take to bed with you in the radio. Soothing your limbs. *Von Sayer’s record was impeccable – but associations matter – matter deeply. It is a nasty little pedigree you have.*

I say *It is not impossible. My reputation could be – rehabilitated –*
He laughs. It is a C. Von Sayer's apprentice turned State-sanctioned composer? My dear boy.

I have never wavered in my loyalty – though I am now in – a delicate position.

Most delicate. Our young secretary is hardly leaping to your defence. Though he is of course enamoured of that orange.

Dion is – shy - he listens to your radio broadcasts. This is a lie but serviceable. I won a national competition by the State to be von Sayer's apprentice – eight years ago – musicians remember these things, respect them –

Ah - it is not the musicians. He rises; goes to touch a book – Musicians are a scintillating breed but quite toothless. It is the Department that matters. You, my friend, are a risk! Enjoyable to think of, no? And smiling; and the light transmuting through leaves; as if the room fills with air –

I have a very good character – the orchestra head can testify – and other men, the heads of music commissions. I have proof of my loyalty.

He asks suddenly Does he have a good character Dion? You seem an observant judge.

Dion turning – now – licking, sensing in the clay of his settled foundations a disturbance, that he is required – placid, smiling even – flat plains of his face in sudden autumnal shift –

I say frustratedly Dion please take the record off the player. Here is the sleeve.

Dion goes – knows records, plays them with his mother; the Morning March from the last war; nursery rhymes.

Has never heard von Sayer. May never.

The Professor looks at me. So he is your secretary after all. How surprising. Touches each paper on his desk in turn – thoughtfully. You strike me as a man of great gifts – perhaps not the gifts this State requires. I will communicate with you if I have any news – you will leave your card?

Certainly – yes.

Pity being so terrible –

I forgot this sir. Lay the awful fish on the desk. Pressed through the paper it has a ghost look. The jaw of the bass a curve of deep bone. I hope you will enjoy it.

That is incredibly kind. He is gracious – though he smells of citrus; and could have rivers, lakes of fish, they could swim up to his house and greet him in his bed as he slept! I’ll have my cook put it on the table tonight and think of you.
Thank you sir.

Goodbye. And to you young Dion. It has been a most unusual pleasure. He grasps my hand. His flat cool grip. May I give you some advice?

Yes. Of course.

Do not take a young hungry man to meetings – unless he is a part of the point.

Outside Dion is smeared by juice-shine; and follows me to the omnibus; and reaches for my arm – though taller by a head – and sticky, hopeless lads we return home.

15. The Professor Afterwards

I watch them go.

Place a lime to my lips – loving its succulence. From the Arabic, the long syllable lime. Though there’s the Roman limes, too, the boundary-mark for barbarians – between Empire and emptiness.

These men – wanting and wishing and wailing! Flailing that fish, too: frankly it was more alluring than he was. Amber-eyed, good solid flesh. Put fins on him and he’d fly straight to a net, be fried within a day.

Although this was innovative – that slim-hipped specimen not a prize, not dangled for me. How new. How innocent! Really von Sayer’s man looked horrified when I bothered to honour his bounty. And got silence – a sweet creature; a shy one, yes; young in that startling unflushed fashion – barely coloured, barely cropped from the seed-pod, and pure. Yes.

It was noble – not to bring him as a bribe. Though really the von Sayer protégé’s plight is pitiful, long beyond the limes now – cast like Ovid into ominous territory. I cannot be his Augustus; cannot produce a pardon for a man marooned so far out in the wastes. Would require strings pulled until they severed. No; he will rot, recede into the bogs and barbarian mists. Survive, perhaps.

A sad shame – for he’s talented; truly. I spit pips, the pit of pith, the truth is harsh and lingers on the tongue.

The boy, however. Unbruised by use. I cannot envision much effort required – and the windfall so winsome, so beautiful –
As I write the four-line note, the window catches in a brief breeze, wavers like unravelled hair.

16. The Wife Does Penance

My mother when dressing me for the ‘marriage breakfast’ (she had not been present for the wedding but meeting my husband three years later meant a marriage breakfast) attempted to give advice.

*He seems very opaque.*

*Don’t let him get his way always.*

*Remember to put your face right in the evenings. Evenings are important.*

Her cool solid hands on my hair. The long plait seeding my spine.

This opaqueness.

Standing under lindens in windpicked Paris he said *Must you always have these scenes.*

*That violet georgette I bought you yesterday. Is it not gorgeous do you not like it.*

*Yes yes it’s beautiful.*

*So why be unhappy. You look like a Gorgon go tidy your hair.*

Me: in drenched silk from an earlier rainstorm. Dress tangled over thighs.

Still he would continue imparting languages to me in small bites – a word for a mouthful. Verb for liquor. Touch for noun.

Sex being a good mechanics of learning if we can be honest.

In the consultation room I plait myself into quiet knots. Waiting for the patient.

Thinking of the ink.

A special Italian one he likes *like the blood of a saint.*

Where is it the marital tradition of mixing blood. Mexico perhaps.

*Always make sure of your materials* noted my surgeon professor. *Assess the tray before surgery.* And here my materials have disappeared beneath me.

The long rattle of the bottle this morning. Startling as a bared throat.

An urgent screed perhaps. Some long frenzied translation to be sent off before nightfall. Dipping his pen in till it scraped the bottom like a dry tongue.
So I have a respite – until he fills it. Out the window the sun is caught in trees like long veils.
I touch the edges of my fingers. This is dangerous. This whole procedure. An addiction.

Briefly I entertain the thought of sourcing it for him.
It would take barely half an hour. Knowing the black market street by the groups of women and baskets hovering. Casually smoking in doorways together. My dogself strapped to their scent.
Men travel in trucks leaning out and whispering. Lady hey lady we got candles got three lightbulbs got some kindling left some nice irons some silk stockings over here.
I would reach in a truck window and emerge with an indigo bottle. Shocked heaviness straining my pocket skin. And then You brought some for me Anne how generous –

But fear opens and shuts in the thought. Once. Twice.
Black market men could talk to anybody. Women in the market could talk to anybody.
My husband. Beatrice.
And the Census – seeing everything.

My secretary says Your appointment Doctor. Opens the door.
The woman who comes in is solid and milken with pregnancy. Hair pale as skinned rabbit. Doubtless her organs gauzy stones.
I watch her deep-blown heaviness as she settles. Her snug loops of hair. She’s carrying low that means a boy.

It is necessary. I am not cruel to myself. But this is a working practise I am a doctor I must be rigid and agonising.
In truth I requested it. A pregnant girl give that one to me I have free time this morning. Tracing a finger down the appointments list. Seeking to scorch this agony out.
Now observing her I feel the plates of my back grind slowly.

Yes what do you need is it. I mean what is the difficulty.
I curse myself. Still after years my voice unstable in this adopted language.
Panic attacks in stores not unheard of. A word – *pork* for instance or *sunflower oil* – evaporated into the ground. And this part of me particularly parched.
She says *No difficulty eh. I am a little too fat this time perhaps. This is my third.* Hand across the broad arch of her stomach. Pressing.
*Yes. But that will happen. You have no symptoms nothing to concern you.*

We proceed together. I lean to hear the miniature pulse beating under her own. A faint clap after an encore. Occasionally I drop a word and she supplies.
*It is imperative to be out in the world again after a grief* the textbook says. *The psychological shock cannot be mitigated by long seclusion like monks or nuns.*

Though I had wished for nunnerys previously. For vespers silence cool hidden robes pure water deprivation the long twitching nerve at night.
It would not be a lasting solution – and so I am undergoing this.

When the next tortured man comes I feel I will have something to say to him about pain.

The textbook continues *It is normal for the female to wish for self-annihilation. This may be expressed by starvation, denials of small pleasures, deprivations, etc. It is normal for the male to express grief by suppression or acts of violence.*

I have memorised this section. As I did with university texts. Passing them into my mouth.
I am feeling for the small ridge of the baby’s back when she says *Do you have any. What. Any children.*
None. *You are carrying beautifully.* Pressing my palm down to measure its wire of spine. *Gorgeous.*
*Yes this is how I always carry.* I am perhaps too lyrical. Her look has dipped into blankness.

Takes black effort to remove my hand from the curvature of the small spine. Through the pale mesh of her stretch-marks its tender rind.
When I found this arc late in pregnancy he would bend and say *Here is your curve little moon. Are you waxing. Are you waxing gibbous little moon. Shall we call you Hyperion like the tiny orbiter of Saturn. Then perhaps I might have to eat you. Would you be tasty little moon.*

Turn to the paperwork hiding the vibration of my skull. What has lain down across my body.

*For the birth you have the midwife. Yes very good. Well this all seems in order.*

Plunging through suffering. Tightness of my lungs as if held struggling underwater. When she leaves there is sudden drenching in light down to the scalp the pores the eyeholes. Emergence from a calm into stark high breath. This frank and righteous pain.

When Berger comes in late and says quietly *A man is here. Dark car. He's nearly out.* I am prepared.

He has been crushed at all the frontal points. Ribs pelvis collarbone. Pressed from a height.

Turns to look at me out of the one working eye. Says *Fucking leave me to die you fucking bitch.*

Still I raise and buttress the smashed apses of his body. Clot the pulmonary haemorrhaging. Splint both knees though they’ve dissolved to wetness.

After he dies in the fourth hour I remain sponging dried blood from his ear canal. Five minutes - six. Multiple dips for the antiseptic. When Berger finally forces the sponge from my hand the ear glows a perfect silver.

17. David And The Professor Negotiate

**Dear Dion,**

It was charming to make your acquaintance this week. Would you do me the kindness of accepting an invitation to join me at the Opera performance of *An Honour For The Great Leader* at the Great Opera House, from 8 o’clock onwards? I take an interest in your future prospects.
Yours in fraternity,

Professor __________

The Maestro said *If lost return to the point of breath.*

*The human organism was the origin of all music.*

*Stamp your feet. Whistle. Begin.*

The note on the table. Its cool drift. Marked – the engraved monogram – golden, a pushed raised gramophone – and succinct; and asking for Dion; and not for myself who crawled and bound my feet and begged; for Dion –

The room slick and spring-cold.

And violently I imagine him dead, Dion, dead; and his hair gorgeous, crashed with blood; and delivering it to the astonished Professor laced with ornaments; *This is what you wanted sir*; and his body armorial noble stupid – this vision – it passes – is gone.

Hands on each side of the chair-spine.

Move forward towards the bed. Stand in open space.

Dion! – who is now upstairs shaking the rugs; he and his mother on the roof cracking the long flanks – in clouds of dust and wood-rot; have seen it – his submerged face – delighted by the movement, the high air, the sudden riot of sound –

Perhaps it is a message – an idiot has a better chance than you.

Hide the letter in the coat-pocket.

Steam a shirt-front, a premiere bow-tie.

**********

The central Opera House is clicking with guests, their whispered ears, their necks.

*Never trust anything* said the Maestro only your ear –

Entrance *through invitation only* but I carry a violin case – and so through the musician’s entrance *Beg your pardon thank you* – passing down the greenroom –

Not well-known. My face obscure. In photographs. Labelled ‘And Friend’ in the Press. Hanging behind in the back row of official portraits, Friedrich and the stacked admirers and there in the corner my single face – and thus allowed subterfuge –
There is no fame said the Maestro.

Himself plastered, floured with it.

Even on the execution-heap his body thick with medals.

The Professor is by the Box Office – heavy, heavy; ringed with followers, in
white tie, wax in his beard; his insistent mass, fleshy, cooling –

I say Good evening –

Surprise on him; as an eroding rock face suddenly shows a streak of metal.

He says shaking my hand The wandering composer! What a surprise. I was unaware
that serious musicians were drawn to this type of fare.

I say No – rarely –

Was not allowed to attend State performances; the Maestro saying It will
muddle your faculties; for it’s sedated pulp – the musicians all knowing that; regurgi-
tated folk-songs painted bright and simple; and pleasing, sapped with softness, with
dross. The regulations saying Cannot distress and must emphasise the morals of the
audience; and so trotting chords, and heaving waves of patriot-crescendo like weeds,
and so bleak, so poorly done – but popular –

He waves a hand, says Ah, you blessed ones – able to amuse the Muses and not
suffer the obligations of the State Office to don a tuxedo. His flicker of rawness con-
cealed; the crowd swilling, drifting in furs and murmurs – he adds: Your secretary is
not with you.

He is at home.

He arches a pantomime eyebrow – Late on his dictation training?

No, sir.

Well, that is unkind of you.

Perhaps.

And why do you deny him a treat? Has he misbehaved – stolen your ration
cards? Dropped your record in the mud?

I say He is my - my ward. He is – unable to attend public events – much as the
invitation was appreciated. Mouth of meal – of dust –

Your ward? I thought he was your secretary. I must have misheard.

He helps me find commissions. It is a hard job – good to have company –

He says I see. And you attend in his place. Wondrous! – yes, thank you – that
seems rather rude to me - but then I am hopelessly antediluvian – champagne? Sneer-
ing –
No – thank you. I merely wished to deliver the message – rather than let his absence worry you.

The electronic bells – he says Then I am much obliged to you, dear friend. Worrying unnecessarily ages one terribly. There is the curtain. Considering you have prevented my guest, you shall join me.

We find our seats – a private box; and he greets two Generals in the next, colloquial, smoothing the banister; their gloves pearlescent in the light; and below the arc of patrons shuffling their boots; it is full; it is always full. (They conscript soldiers to fill empty seats; and there is a swathe, their shaved-pate heads; and the theatre swells - )

The lights go down.

What had I imagined.

Not beyond the opening bar.

It is a series of folk-songs re-imagined in scenes; a composer I have never heard – but a careful one, careful – the strings have laces of long-loved classics, Grazze, Tsvetroika – to scent it, just touching it, with nostalgia – as if grazing the lips –

In the darkness he is leaning to the balcony – as if amused.

He says I do hope you find this little politician’s perch amenable – I did want Dion to see all the dancers from this angle.

It is a good position.

Unfortunately we’re a little too far away – to see the conductor's notes.

The Maestro once asked me to listen to a movement. Just one time. Then transcribe it. All perfect its three parts and eliding flutes. One error means the ruler.

Hiss over the shoulder-blade. Scoring deep into fear. Took an hour.

The finished score impeccable.

My hard terrified grasp on the dark.

The overture stirs; reaches towards something brilliant, sharper; returns cowed to numbed rote chords, as if whipped –

To Freedom.

Is what it was.

I have tried not to be angry. At his folly.

We are silent; and the opera begins. A soprano, too young, emerges – sings of forsaking herself to duty – the line is lustful, passionate, but she is light, light; and
not yet trained enough; and silken like a wet garment; trembling, arcing off-pitch into the stage-light; and must break – her voice brittle – slips –

The Professor says Poor girl.

I am quiet in my seat.

The single bruise of my throat.

The Professor turns; says suddenly Why did you come to me, composer? To warn you from your secluded ward? If you so wish I will never trouble him again.

The orchestra is an eighty-piece. And twenty the rhythm section. And swollen iron Alpine bells; and crotales, their bronzes points alight; and costing thousands from the Stores; and fragrant their sound, the shake, ancient – what I could do with them; what is possible –

I would never stand in the way of a – burgeoning friendship – but thought it polite to inform you. He cannot be without a guardian – and not in crowds – Thinking of the sound of crotales –

Shy?

Young – he panics –

Nervous then.

Yes. Yes. He is not ordinary – was deprived of oxygen at birth – one must treat him carefully. Sir.

Percussion you can swallow.

Take it onto your tongue.

Let its fan across your neural lines.

You are most considerate. Ah! – this one is a folktale I haven’t heard since I was a boy. You know it? He leans on the balcony, gestures at the players – The foreign, shabby seer seeks an audience with the lovely Queen, is dismissed fearfully, returns with one of her most gracious ministers as a personal friend and is celebrated, feted... Intriguing, is it not, what counts as a stranger and what as a – a respected friend? I wonder what Dion thinks of that.

From here you see the false back of the Queen’s gown. And her long shoulder reaching. The cheap seams. The kind seer fringed with twigs; rural, mythic. The audience jeers; and the minister enters to a stark burst of violin; their vow of friendship renewed forte, forte – cheap sentiment, flecking the stage –

Florid petal-rain.

The minister leading him in holds his arm.
I am thin as ribbon if you touch me.

The gracious minister is a lucky man I say – slowly – He has time to introduce the seer. Perhaps if he were younger – searching the country for work – he would – find it harder. The Queen would remain – inaccessible –

Gripped suddenly with fear; the game laid open, gaping – and brutally clear – and waiting, for his movement, breathing –

He says Ah. See the Queen embrace the slovenly soothsayer! Quite brutal, this instrumentation.

Yes.

And so they exeunt, happy all three. He leans back – sighs. A tremendous tale – and very lucky that the minister was, as you say, so well-placed – but, of course, the seer has powers. He blesses all that helped him. He would, perhaps, dislike being thwarted. I often feel that way personally.

Yes, Sir.

His expression unreadable – It is so very elegant to talk in allegories, is it not? Then turns, casually, as if the thought had just alighted – Do you know, composer, I was thinking of writing to you – a little commission has come up at the Winter Palace. They are seeking quietly, very quietly – a symphony part. A section has proved inappropriate and needs replacing.

I play the part to his key. Thank you for the information.

If you know anybody who would be interested? The head of the board, of course, is a personal friend – Maximillian, exceptionally kind – and in that luxuriant location! Very near, you know, to the Parks Of Victory. Glorious places – I never get a chance to perambulate them, alas...

The cue is taken – If you would enjoy a companion to walk the Parks, sir, Dion and myself would be glad to accompany you –

What a delightful idea. And all the crowds – Dion will not be distressed?

Not at all. With my presence – he would be comfortable.

Perhaps next Friday. We rise; the National Anthem is sung. He shakes my hand. Good evening. It will be glorious, my dear composer, to be properly introduced to your Queen...

18. The Wife Is Interrupted
Past midnight. By his desk breathing. Scouring myself for some kind of breath direction light.
Finding nothing.

There are shoals of thought for translation.
One: pick word by word as if hairs. Skin the paper absolutely.
Another: immerse yourself in sense. Communicate the scent of it. The tone sniffed on the wind.

Similarly there are opinions on medical treatment.
One: work from symptoms upwards. Swimming towards air.
Another: aim for the disease itself as described. Its hidden ripples in still aspects. The general permutations on one vast general body.

The ear spotless. No blood even in the auricle even at the punctured edge of the drum. Resplendent with my fulfilled duty.
I loosen my coat. The day’s blissful promises never again rubbed off me like dirt off the ankle of a swimmer in deep water.
Instead there is this: ring of dark ash. Open. Pain.

It is not so much a pairing – these two ideas.
More an echo. In the gut. In the ear that prickles to the next piece of news.

When I was a child I promised myself not to eat unripe apples. And then ate. And then promised not to eat.
A process of denial and weakness. Looping in and out of the body.
If I could be a bare hard no-feel thing that smoked into light I would. Even if left loveless. Even if never touched by him again.

He comes in just then –
Looks at me standing by the table.
Says What are you doing.
I say Looking for a piece of paper.
He says *On my table*.
I say *Yes I was going to write you a note. And go to bed.*

He says *Ah*.
I say *Yes*.
He says *With what ink exactly would you write it. I knocked it all over yesterday.*
I say *Good thing I didn’t try to write anything then.*

When I said never be touched by him again I was lying.

I say *How was the evening.*
He says *Splendid actually.*
I say *The music can’t have been that well-done.*
He says *No abysmal. The Muses hid their faces. A barbaric brutalising of taste!*
I say *I don’t know how you can stand these things.*
He says *Oh it’s work. You know that. Networking; like a Senate visit. I made a good arrangement tonight – quite worth the ear-assault.*
I say *That’s good.*
I say *Work today went well.*
He says *Yes! Your work! The high priestess returns to the temple of Apollo. And how many lives did you save? Half the city or just a few?*
I say *Just a few today. But I’ll let you know when I cure a plague.*
He says *Tremendous. An occasion! Bring out the wine the winsome dancing girls! Or perhaps just some gin. You’ll take some? Come on dulcet one.*
I say *God yes. Thanks Herbert.*
He says *Good. Here’s to Anne the physician of – no let me get it – phenomenal feeling. Splendid.*
I say *You’re giggling. You are actually giggling.*
He says *I thought that was quite good.*
I say *It could be worse. You could be making rhymes to the dog at the window again.*
He says *Yes. Ha what is that ten years ago now? Nearly fifteen. In Paris. That dog had a definite poetic presence. A sibilant soul.*
I say *Only because you crowed sonnets to confuse it. And the pension landlady.*
He says *A veritable canine Chatterton.*
I say I thought I’d have to have you committed.

He says Yes Anne; and wouldn’t that be delightful? Lunching with a lunatic! Afternoons at the asylum! I’d pick posies for the poor. Is that what they do? Or basket-weaving. And you’d come visit your berserk beau. And coo. And it would be stupendous.

I am laughing. My lungs feel half-dense with the weight.

He says I really must take you away. Nice perhaps. Grapple with grappa.

I say And cover me in gold and spices?

He says And cover you with gold and spices.

I say I think I may be too old for that.

He says Nonsense. You will never grow old. And neither will I.

In this instant I am caught in his shallow nets. My hapless loving-husband. Who disbelieves in failure lack starving. Who pursues succour always.

He says Let me take you to the Stores next week. We will roll in russet silks. I’ll feed you figs from a platter. Precious fig-eater; that is an Equatorial bird the fig-eater.

I say Am I a bird?

He says My sweet-spoiled girl! Give me a boon to grant. Wish for something ribald and ridiculous. A mink?

I say It’s too hot for minks. You are so happy tonight.

He says It feels as if a wave has crested and breasted and broken. The salad days are coming again. Our fields are full of lilies and rushes.

I say I have a small boon.

He says Name it dulcet one.

I say Stay with me for the Census.

He says Ah.

I say Yes.

The light having failed across the room.

He says That’s very against protocol Anne.

I say I knew you wouldn’t.
He says *Now don't stomp. Everything is lovely so lovely don't spoil it!*
I say *It is ruined. It has been ruined. I want no figs. I can't eat them.*
He says *Quiet my dear you'll wake the neighbours.*
I say *Don't sneer.*
He says *You're upsetting yourself. You're not calm – or used to strains –*
I say *I am perfectly rational.*
He says *Of course you are.*
I say *It isn't the same. The salad days are not coming. The child died and I am not twenty-two any longer.*
He says *Well perhaps we were fooling ourselves on that score in any case. To try so late –*
I say *It would have happened regardless. Whether we had it now or five years ago. If I am to stay sane I must believe that – that we could have done nothing to prevent it.*
He says *Anne you can't disclaim responsibility –*
I say *It isn't declaiming – disclaiming I mean. I reject nothing. I take all the failure onto myself. You haven't any part in it.*
He says *How very gracious of you.*
I say *You are most welcome.*

I say *I'm scared Herbert. I wish I weren't.*
He says *There's nothing to be scared of. My little Anne. Come here. I can't be there – but we'll go dancing afterwards – I'll riot you in scent and succulence – it will be delicious again. You'll forget.*
I say *Yes Herbert.*
He says *Good girl. Now bed. Bed and calm yourself. And breathe, and solve more shattered bones tomorrow.*
I say *Goodnight Herbert.*

19. The Composer Is Interviewed

Near twelve.
Gather the sheaves of it; the composition.
In the waiting room of the Winter Palace holding my own hands. Rain on the window – a thick hot shower, ardent, splashing the sill. Still not quite believing – in this. In its reality. It will turn out to be a trick; I will be thrown out for being presumptuous –

The commission a small one. Just small – barely five minutes – a rejected aria in an opera – the content 'unsuitable'. Don't ask. Mine has trumpets they like trumpets. Drums a timpani. Attempted to root out any paganism. Three chords repeated. Revised eight times.

Rhythm in light throes.

Overture of The Ring Cycle. Which is accepted.

Dion confined in his flat. Being de-loused. Mentioned to his mother – the golden husk infested – one doesn't like to speak of these things but for his health – and her smoothed face conspiratorial; and so placid Dion is being bathed in chemical whiteness – powdered ground bone. What do they use. Ammonia. Burn on the tongue. Men blinded with it. Nasty.

Remembering eight years ago –

Himself the great man.

The train station rattling.

The competition winner! Did you have a pleasant journey he said and grasped at my hand. So much smaller than the pictures. Whiter. And twitched. Whenever moving. Thinking it was an artistic tic I imitated it for years.

De-loused immediately; the city regulations don't be afraid of it I'll be back after. Stripped to the waist and lowered over a bucket; and the skein of water for drowning them; and bitterly, bitterly cold; and the scalp-powder alight; and tight vision searing down, humiliated, to nipples on a concave chest (pneumonia holding it folded like two mountainsides colluding); and pain -

Colossal pain.

My skin – forever then white.

Hope Dion keeps his mouth closed. Otherwise it gets in.

Go in, they are expecting you. Half-glance from the secretary. Flirtatious eye-bend. Same as given to all others. Doubtless. Pale-forehead good-breeding face; lashes from the films; correct, correct, A female citizen must be modest and well-attired; still the fresh gaze – flecking – neat crossed-at-ankles. Wonder what she would look like tortured; face sunk in with boot-smash; whispering for Mum.
Ah, Mr – yes, of course. Do come in. Be seated. Have you had a good journey to us?

Oh yes.

I am the head of the Institute – Maximilian Struwwel – how do you do – and these are my associates -

Introductions made – and my heart punted into speed – shamed; still faintly purple at the browbone – but his smile blithe, blithe – dashing with his bowing – I settle. The room is wide and blank.

I brought my submission –

Laid before the three panel members, their blue folders. Smiling serene. They do not open it.

Perhaps I explain first?

I say Possibly it is a little long for the purpose, first of all – but I did take careful note of the overall themes of the piece – that gorgeous rising crescendo of clarinets in Act I – they’re here, elongated slightly, to preserve integrity of course – since it’s an introduced element... I took the, the conflict theme – of Yolanda and the priest – and translated that, the libretto, into a kind of percussive build-up, thrashing drums, the rolls of temple-gongs, that sort of thing – to rise and fall alongside their argument – as if a heartbeat? You understand... but less expected, for instance when Yolanda cries there is a sudden strident chord, vaguely discordant but nothing, nothing untoward, you understand, I’m not a modernist.... And – it falls away at the end into a muted theme, The Priest’s Theme, almost Arabic in influence, haunting you know – evidence of wickedness – on a pan-pipe and violin, as the lantern procession occurs.... Of course all of this is open to change -?

Their smiles unbending – like stunned flowers –

Yes well that sounds exactly what we want. Just exactly. I congratulate you. The Director leans forwards in a grasp; takes the piece. Still unexamined –

Oh well that’s. Delightful news Director. Do you not want to –

Oh I don’t think that’s necessary, not necessary – do you? Shakes of head from the venerable three. Sudden sweetness with embarrassment. The composition in his palms – No. It all sounds quite splendid. I think the competition is over – most satisfactory, most. Of course you came with a high recommendation – the Professor is a good friend of yours... Aha. Well, then. Berta will show you out, we will – contact you if there
are arrangement issues... My highest congratulations, sir, on your valuable contribution to this opera...

Shaking of hands – briefly – then out –
Berta straight-legged in her chair. Hands a cheque. Filled out – the date – yesterday; and so unnecessary; to explain – the decision already made –
Wheeling, wheeling into the new sunlight.
Collar soaked with sweat. Indecent.
It was so short. And had prepared for an assault; for a morning defending, arguing, supplicating; had lined up justifications for all parts, the themes, the unusual pipes – but of no use; they just took it – and now I am wandering the park, half-stunned –
The Maestro would have given it hours. Picked its filaments apart. Laid it all on the vast table like a bride's veil.
But I must not be thankless -
The Winter Palace after the rain is silver, cooling. Gilded gables rising against the alarmed light. They say before the Father Leader there were lions here, leopards, a menagerie; peacocks on the balconies; monkeys in the courtyard, reaching for the flowers on women's hats. Decadence that was swept away.
Their stricken, polite faces. As if I had come into the room heading my own army of beasts. As if lions stood behind the chair – and nuzzled my spine; and the rise and fall of their thick breathing –
The wind turns back. I feel suddenly fragile, translucent. Turn to reach the gate before the rain begins.

20. The Wife Prepares For Her Own Interview

The house expansive around my shoulders. Drawing in air.
Dawn. My hair wet. My bed lying stunned like a pyre in its nakedness.
Lying with palms upward upon my stomach as if carrying plums.

The half-awareness of this: the brittle light of the open window wandering the room while downstairs the maids are shaking out the rugs –
Single sentences to make up a marriage. Their slender twigs.

*I never said that to you now stop it.*

*Do stop being so childish.*

*How very gracious of you.*

The long soft sounds of morning. Settling – turning – laying down.

And time has escaped so. I was twenty-two and married and now am –

The Interviewer is coming; next week.

I have already rinsed the hair and laid out the clothing. Long coarse layers to disguise the thinness. What meat do I buy. What do I sacrifice for stillness.

*How can I continue to exist in this plate of calmness.*

Rising I bind myself into the dressing gown. Planks of rib under poor quality silk: a black-market thing he bought after a fight. Our roads made of silence.

I wore it over my dress then three – no four days.

The corridor between our rooms struck with motes of light.

His door as usual half-open. *I don’t enjoy the concept of being snuck up upon by enemies in the night dear wife.* When I once lying bright on his pillow asked it to be closed.

*Wetness stains the silk. It is my body that moves.*

*Its frankness in the dark.*

He is in the bed –

*Arch of the shoulder and belly softening. Beard rolled into itself.*

*My anger-bitten man who once woke in the night talking. We cannot escape language anywhere the caves are all empty how can we move.*

*Will I keep the gown on. I shall.*

*We know the rooms of lovers like their presence in water. What is displaced.*

*Beside him in the bed curling. The deep cloth of his breathing. In which I may wrap myself.*
Herbert I say. Quiet as a moth-movement. I'm sorry about fighting. The Census interviewer is coming. I worry I am not brave enough. I wonder what you're dreaming about. Is he there? Are you together? He was so beautiful. He looked just like you. Do you remember.

My hands upon his spine. Its fervent line of life.

I love you always and always. As you said to me. Always twice. To bind it. I am sorry I failed you so badly. Always and always.

When he wakes later I am downstairs in the garden rinsing the terracotta tile.

21. The Professor Waits For Dion At The Parks

I am strolling in the Parks courtyard, waiting.

The weather, the day, is pleasing – the sun sweeps down women's legs in their thin skirts (my broadcasts suggest walks, for one's health), as they hug each other, adjust their hats. Bellissima as a word was originally anchored in the buoyant, distributed specifically to the women of the sea; combing out pearls from their pulpen matted wefts, in the pictures. It's good for this day, for its sea-thick clarity.

An angry halted Spring this year. Spoiled by rain– but what a summer! The ground's all breaking over with blue and purple petals. And berry-cherries in the trees this week, in full foaming-petticoat surrender! Delectable. It takes a brick-hard man to be unconscious to their urges, in this weather.

Will he bring the boy after all? Now there's a stunning being – formed out of hot heather and May clay. With Apollo's weave of wheat for hair.

An acquaintance appears. Mark, Ministry of Defence! Hello Herbert. Morning Mark. An alliteration thrills me. I am a simple soul. How are you?

Oh, fine. How's the wife?

Quite excellent. Recovered marvellously. And how are you?
He resents, as they all resent, my own eminently extended season. An old radio hack's orchard still in fruit, long after all their channels dried! And in *fragrant* fruit no less.

Note his query. Mark thinks, as do they mostly think, that a weeping-willow wife means tragedy. And they embrace it! – entertain images of me broken over graves, grief-glutted, finally finished.

What slender little they understand. The gods favour effort; and they, too, are beauty-seekers, they always protect their own.

*Always and always. To bind it.*

Where have I heard that? – auditory boats crack and sink in my streams, I hear whispers – and can never place them. No –

Mark drifts on and I am alone, immaculately happy, and planning. A taxi – a tricky proposition, with his keeper on the watch, but I've managed to fix fiddlier things. And then!

I purchase an ice cream, and in a flourish purchase four more for neighbouring children in their charming pastel-paleness, their silly shoes. Then I take another turn: float like a hunting-boat, white-sailed, Greek, with the eyes painted upon the prow.

Silliness! Giddy in this glorious light. Is he coming? I hope, I hope - !

Perhaps he has *splendid* thighs. Leg, limb, loam; honey-lick of light stomach-hairs. Now that's naughty and a priest would unchristen me for it.

22. David Brings Dion To The Parks

Dion fidgeting. His best things. Patched half-cottons. Still he looks well in them – can be regal – with help; a starch and shave and a harsh brush – and gentle, gentle my soothing – explaining *We're going to meet a friend a nice friend*; his gigantic hands on knees; close together on the omnibus.

To his mother I've found a good opportunity. *A job interview* she says I say *Yes something like.*

The Parks bathed in dust. High green domes. And the professor emergent; waiting it seems – with an ice cream and cane – all white-suited. Big stomach in vest. Venal, his health; large-jowled; a blaze like a bad dream. Smiling, smiling –
He says *Ah, you made it! How are you, Dion?*


I say *Dion this is Professor Herbert. Do you remember him. He’s a nice man.*

He says *Yes.*

The translator smiles. *I thought a bit of culture would do us all good! The world can be so colourless, can’t it, Dion? Without a soupcon of art to make it bearable! Now – linking arms – placid Dion leaning, thick-shouldered – Did you know, Dion, that your friend is one of our finest composers? I bet you didn’t. He’s very modest. He just got a very prestigious job at the Winter Palace. You’re lucky to have him as a friend, you know.*

Professor and Dion bent together. Dion lolls – stares upwards. His meagre attention. Listening to unheard birds. Sympathetic! – the professor’s frustration; *Now Dion come look at this flower do you think –*  

Chrysanthemums in particular; long rows.

Shoulder a gentleman. *Beg pardon.* Man ignores.

David which is myself walks along the swept path and eyes the trees the passing women. Leans to fix his shoe. Sees reflections.

How much is enough space. Three steps four. Tactful but still in hearing. Though the Professor’s voice is low. Can take the power out of his projection and leave it leaf-thin, barely audible. It washes in and out.

And Dion is silent. Attuned to the decibel if not the tone of conversations. Trained by his mother perhaps. Her saying *Now when folk are speaking quietly eh you must be quiet too.* These cues of *pianissimo.*

I am thinking now of the Winter Palace. And the piece they took. Now they have open air concerts – in the Parks. Perhaps here – under these trees? The acoustics would work – if they placed a screen perhaps in those two hollows; and raised a platform – and the orchestra slightly lower, in this dip here, we could trample that grass – perhaps in the late summer afternoon, and the audience under parasols, fanning themselves –


*Dion.* And. O.

Gone; and the entire path – pace it – devoid; and unseen by guards questioned; calmly, *I’ve lost my friends ha ha,* slow flex of organs with fear; and the sunlight
caustic – the burnt edict Do Not Attract Attention; and so resisting to cry out – in the front courtyard – the dust hazing in vast swathes – and gone –

The path dusted and empty. All the way to the road. No signs. Can’t call –
Twenty feet away a taxi stops –

The door open Dion emerges. Unhurried. Sweet movement like a dog. Assured in the world – coming through the traffic, the pale clouds – having seen me – approaches; stands smiling –
He says Hello.

I say Dion where were you you can’t do that. Dion never go away without me telling you. Do you understand me. Never do that again.

His shirt slightly open. Top buttons unplucked. One hanging half-done.

He says Yes. Straining on the surface – his great flesh moving hard. You didn’t come too. So I left. I left.

The taxi’s other window open. Visible – through the moving cars. Eminent head protrudes. Sweat-streaked. White hat gone; and his young lad gone; and watches without expression visible – Dion’s retreat – and the door slammed – and exits.

23. The Wife Prepares For The Census

To prepare you sluice all the rugs of dust. Hands and knees.
You arrange chrysanthemums salads portraits of The Father Leader.
You make each room into a lit nerve probing the dark.
Kneeling you crease the folds out of your body.

Frequently today I discover myself holding my breath. Its savage cool in my throat.

Bea says Wear Party colours it may seem petty they appreciate the effort.
Says When she comes offer tea first then.
Says It will only be a brief pain then she’ll go and the records won’t need to be done again for two years perhaps.

It will be in eight hours she arrives.
I feel myself full and swollen. Not like pregnancy which is moist and dreamlike. A parched beaten-dry sense. As men who lose blood in tonnes turn paper and salt. I hold my arced stomach. I wait.

24. David Prepares Dion For The Dinner Party

Lay scent on a handkerchief.
Smudge around the brow neckline collarbone.

*To be smelt when you lean over to whisper,* said Bart to me laughingly.

Dion moves in his chair; likes the scent – tries to touch it as it dries on his skin – but is quiet, quiet; unsettled by the unfamiliar, which clings –

Have thrown the windows open to air.
This coiling heat.
My own shirt slick to the skin –

But tend to Dion; and strap his humid lug of hair into neatness; and stiff, stiff the collar – which is white, which was dragged on the rocks this morning, while the women sang old army songs – and the bow-tie; and mop the cheeks.
Shaved him earlier – with the long agile blade – his white cheekbones rising – and the stun of the light – the courtyard flushed with it; spillage of the suds. Open eyelids, his. But expressionless. *Do you like being shaved Dion? I'm good at shaving I shaved my boss every morning for years and years – he wasn’t like you though – he had grey bristles. Grey right here!* Tickle the chin. Dion’s cracked smile. Like bruised fruit. My split-knuckle grip.

Filing his nails I paused to make a face – he grinned.
His face unscratched by the Labour Corps - which is lucky; for they come back spitting metal-filings from the tank-mending; and palms ten-gored with splinters; and shoulders smashed from lifting barrack-stands; and brutal, brutal – what he does -

But must be delicate. And arrange his hair in long seething rows.
There was a day without word.
Once Dion walked to me from the taxi.
A day without word –
And I did warn him (powdering now my long red neck); but he altered the rules – and was thwarted – and so we waited. For dismissal and denunciation and the long fine bones of the camps.

Ultimately though it was he who sent the letter:

*The seer presents his compliments to the Queen and her minister, and invites them to supper next Wednesday, the better to retell the tale from the beginning.*

David - I acknowledge attempting to circumvent your authority and therefore cheat the narrative; but folk-tales are ultimately undeniable. Ministers in stories must be respected – especially when they are newly encumbered with valuable public work! Though bureaucracy can, of course, be so brutally fickle to its servants if it is displeased.

*Wear black tie.*

My response was brief.

Giving away little except my only asset which is access to Dion.

*The minister presents his compliments to the seer, and confirms that he will accompany the Queen to dinner.*

And now tonight I twist Dion’s black tie.

Dion I say you understand that you must be nice to this gentleman. *He is a nice man. I will be there with you. You won’t need to run away.*

He says Yes.

I say *No running away.* Buttoning his cuffs. *I’ll be there. And if you become scared or sad we will go home. Just go home! Like a – like a pair of birds. We’ll fly home.*

He laughs.

I say *Dion this is very important. That you be good to him. And do what he says. He is my friend. And this is our last chance – to be good and nice to him – or he’ll be sad and won’t see us again.*

I say *Do you understand?*

He reaches out – for my compositions; their intimate soft skin. Like an animal’s.
Have seen him stripping a goat-body of pelt. Sudden focus with a knife. The winter courtyard. His body intellectual; a deep-learnt rhythm – beneath thought, in the catch of muscles and breath. I leant from the window – a pack of snow fell – and he broke from the music of it; became his lesser self, sunk-shouldered, chewing; smiled up at me; smeared the blood.

He strokes them now.

His huge bunched hands.

Movement so slow the timing’s pressed out –

I say Don’t.


Having told her it is the job secured; a man who likes Dion’s strength for his State buildings – and well-paid; and tonight we will sign the deal over dinner –

I say Yes I hope so. I think Dion will have a good time.

She says He’s a good boy. Yes my Dion. You do me proud. Here take this.

Pins a war medal on his lapel –

Is good luck – they’re impressed by that the employers. He’s not nobody. His family fought in the wars. Proud citizens! You tell them. You tell them we did well.

The medal forty years old perhaps- and illicit; possibly from junk – but before the Regime; a relic from before history began properly – swinging, swinging – and I arrange it and I say Thank you.

25. The Husband Prepares For The Dinner Party

I’m fixing a lapel, intent on its lie on the throat – would a collar be too coy? Should I have stressed the starch for the laundress? It seems too martial, too mask-like, making my head in the mirror appear teetering like Goliath’s on a linen plate – when Anne emerges. Engineers a twirl – she’s girlish still, frilled with regulation blue tulle. I recognise it - it’s the gown I got her into for her first flight here!

Her face is fearless, sheer– she’s like a print from a page of the Regulation Dress Book. She looks straight at me.

How do I look?
Like a handsome animal was held hostage in a haberdashery. I hate the women's clothes they cant in this country, all fluff and fragrance. Charming as ever.

Who are you seducing today?

The Census is happening this evening. She's still, looking over her shoulder, poised: a coil of unspent energy. I don't meet her eye.

Ah. Yes.

Are you going out?

I must. I'm blustering, try to keep myself in check. A dinner. Boring thing.

You'll delight them better with me out of your way.

Yes.

Her disappointment is always deep as this: an undisturbed pool, a porous gaze that grazes my body and waits. She's motionless at the mirror while I shave.

What if it's unbearable.

Don't talk nonsense.

All right.

If you continue to get in the way of the mirror I will shave my beard accidently into a Van Dyke point.

She leaves.

When they took my Census it was brief; I sensed their relief, their slackening faces just out of shot, as they shut the door. My flaws had shocked them: Voice of the Nation with a foreign wife! Still – they were polite.

After all, the stuff of my life is no stifled thing, I've let it ring out in the broadcasts – the years abroad, recording till I've cried. It was before the child – but I swore we were trying, belying their talk of age, of sage-leaves looped around the bed-post, for virility. But it took little, nothing; barely touched me. Like a light swim in shallow waters.

Unbearable. Which as a word is the antonym of to bear meaning produce, sustain, bring forth, all the worthy positives of a woman's life. That she chooses to say it is weak, just wilful. Lets death overpower her duty.

What does she fear? She's like a skinned thing, flinching from the briefest touch, the clutch of any hand. A man can cope better, perhaps. Prepare himself, be politic, play the game. Oh, she has my name, she will be fine.

The thoughts sink from my mind and are replaced by fuss: which truss of tie, suspenders sighing on my stomach, too tight? What if he fights? I want his longing, if
it can exist. Seeing him step out into dust I felt a wave of lust and anger, and cool misery that lived in me for days: a dark space, dim as grief. I want relief.

Desire is three points long: longing, achievement, and then moving on. Spin out the first and thirst will make you grind your teeth to plates. But it’s all worth the wait – the lift, the serene high, that burns off guilt and anger and despair, repairs your broken bones. My mouth’s a stone. I’m waiting to place it in his river, see it rise.

26. The Wife Has The Census

When they come there are two of them.
Necessary perhaps.
A difficult operation. Requiring many hands. Requiring several eyes on my swiveling.

I lead them into my husband’s broadcast room.
This being a careful choice. Remind them of your husband’s position says Beatrice.
Stand them in a place they cannot control.
Its cool walls of radio organisms fretting in their rows.

As a young student my routine for years:
Rise. Rinse off the gouges of sleep. Then into the family paddocks sweetening with light.
Medicine needs entrance. One walks into the body over land.
Thus reciting lessons aloud in wind: flex the muscle to the bone note the lens of the eye what are the characteristics of pneumonia. Birds striping the furrows.
The morning fields hazy and fresh as a hand suddenly ungloved. Storms of green.

Even now I must move into the medical mind.
Here is the vascular anomaly whispering underfoot here is the inflammation of the article.
A memory-path into things.
Some bodies still smell to me like corn against green sky.
(Once I saw a seed-biscuit cracked open spilling.
Thought there’s my marriage.)

The memory-path into my child I want to tell them is not clear.
Is forked angered flooded in several parts. My bare feet sloughed.

The older says Good afternoon. The younger says Good afternoon.
I say Good afternoon. All honour to you and to the Leader.
They say nothing.

This is your husband’s room. Where he broadcasts his work?
Yes. I like it in here. It’s perfectly soundproof. The servants won’t disturb us – you see.
The younger one moves fishlike in low slow circles. Look at this Victoria. Such apparatus. It is uncanny. And he broadcasts nightly. Oh I listen to him and Eda regularly. I do like it so. It is so calming and righteous.

Victoria’s blue suit cools the room. The Census is a simple process. Questions and answers. Usually it is one Census-taker but in this case there are two. I trust this is fine with you.
Yes of course.
Good. Let us begin.

You were born in which region: One through Eighteen.
None. I was born outside the Regime.
You are a foreigner.
Yes.
You are married to Professor Herbert S –
For ten years.
I have the date on the marriage license. Don’t answer questions I haven’t asked.
I apologise.
The younger one checks the date.
You are married to the Professor. And you are a foreigner.
That is correct.
A foreigner with a foreign passport. Not born in any of the eighteen regions. Just to confirm.

That is correct.

Show me the passport.

The younger notes Easy to forge. The paper’s very thin. Her sweet-fat face.

I have a Regime passport too.

That your husband got for you.

Yes.

Generous man. And you had settled in the Regime before you married your husband.

You were a refugee.

No. I met him in Paris. I was studying. He brought me here after we were married.

You married him outside the Regime?

That is correct.

And you were allowed in.

I was.

And you had never tried to enter the Regime before in any other capacity.

I had not.

Were you willing to live here?

I was. I did not know much about it.

You did not know much about it. She leans back into the sentence. Lights a cigarette. Her cool grip closing on itself. You were perhaps filled with our enemies’ ideas – that it is shoddy here, that people are depraved –

I came from a very small and isolated part of the world. My husband told me wonderful things.

But you would of course have preferred to stay where you were born.

No, I came with my husband. We settled. Our life here has been very happy.

The young woman pauses from taking notes. Her head cresting. I always somehow thought the Professor was married to Eda. Because they’re both on the radio. Isn’t that funny? I think it’s funny.

Girls in my village desired thin-hipped men. Faces like a single stroke of paint. Myself I wanted to sleep in flesh. Married a man gifted with hair belly voice. A lust perhaps for solidity of material. Orbiting its gravitation its indolent fruit fall. Possibly this was contrarian.
Besides that one hard hot month in the malnutrition clinic. Seeing collarbones rise like the huge struts of a ship as the body lowered.

In Paris curling up against his great sail of a shoulder blade I said half-asleep *It would only take one good tragedy. To divorce us.*

*What's a good tragedy?* he asked. He was smoking. Plaiting my hair over his shoulder. *Don’t know. Don’t knot the hair it can’t undo.*

Holding his stomach in the dark. Its inner planetary warmth. Its invulnerable line.

*Your household consists of yourself, your husband, eight servants, no children.* *That is correct.*

*It is.*

*Yet on your medical form it states here that you have had one child.*

*That is also correct.*

*Pray tell me which one is lying.*

*Neither are wrong. The child died. Is that on the form.*

*It died. Before birth?*

*No just after. Eight months into the pregnancy.*

*I see. What cause.*

They were not exactly sure. *A dead part in the cord.* *The gynaecologist is Dr Surzberg if you wish to talk to her.*

*Could it have been caused by accident. Or misadventure.*

*No.*

*You seem not to be curious about the cause.*

*I know all the facts. The facts do not alter the result.*

One expects the dead to be rigid and cool. I thought being born he would be fruitlike.
Pale and waxed and immaculately coloured.
Instead a bloodwarm soft child born close-eyed. One hand in a yellow fist.
In the photograph his head is turned to rest slightly on one shoulder as if weeping.

*A child would be a burden – would place pressure on your marriage perhaps.*

*No.*
Or perhaps where you come from wives don’t bear children. Perhaps concubines do it?
That would be a radical change of culture. Mine specialises in raising sheep.

You are aware abortion is illegal.
I am a doctor. I am more than aware of the fact.
Yes – a doctor you are. And so you would have access to chemicals.
All use of chemicals is regulated.
But for a little bit? Just for an emergency? Eh?
I am insulted by the suggestion.

The older one gets up. Goes over to the main equipment switchboard. Tests a switch.

In the silence the other burns blue with her youth. It’s all right you know. Foreign women have weaker wombs. Lose babies far more easily. Biological inferiority that sort of thing. So it’s not really your fault. Nods.

And it was a male child. It died at what hour. We need it for the notes.
At one forty-two. In the morning. After thirty-eight hours of labour.
And he was born in what position?
Breech.
At what weight?

I give the weight. I give the weight of the placenta. I give the status of the cord. I give the photograph: his face post-birth. The purple torso tensed. Light on it pushing.
The younger does not touch it.

And then when the child was born.
And then?
What did you do madam.
I suppose I slept.

Felt him leaving me. Felt him slipping brief from the world.
That I can speak about it without screaming. Hurtling into earth. Shaving my head my breasts my milky fur.
An amazement: this endless ability to regenerate.
You will try for another child. You had a male child once that bodes well.

As if children are stacked in me like honeycomb. Lift one out. Hold it till it lifts a wing.

We will do our best.

Perhaps I was unclear. It is the role of women in this Regime to produce offspring to serve the Leader. If you believe yourself too elevated for that role you may damage your husband’s reputation. He is kindly allowing you to stay with us. He may perhaps not be so kind. His employers may not be.

I do not believe myself to be too – what was your word? – elevated for it. I may now be too old.

Perhaps you would be best relieved of your post until you conceive.

It would be my great wish to remain in the workforce fully serving the Regime.

Still that particular surgery may not be a morally savoury place to gestate.

Yes. The younger’s face is straining towards something. It has had odd anomalies in reports lately. We have them here. It’s not very good.

Alas I have been absent. I hope the Regime will carefully monitor our work and realise its worth and moral rectitude.

Morals are an interesting point. You also frequent black markets. You were seen on the seventeenth. Do you deny it was you.

I was lost.

You are the wife of a prominent man Doctor. We are here to protect and warn you. You must participate or I will be forced to make the recommendation that you must be relieved of work until you can be educated more fully. Your husband needs a strong wife of the Regime who can fill the role allotted to her.

What can I do to improve.

Join the Women’s Corps. The woman beside her murmurs. They confer. The older is indignant. The Women’s Corps.

She leaves to remake the tea. Don’t put yourself out Mrs Herbert.

Anne. Please.

The younger one leans across the table. So. Do you remember any words from your old language. I never heard any words from it before.

Not really.

You must remember some.
Languages are in possession of textures my husband says.

My own language he spoke only in licks and fragments. Touching its grain sparingly. Think of telling this girl about its hardness in the mouth. Compact: one word for ten referents. *Bread wheat cover small white-faced cowardly.*

A shorn word. Navigating by the smell of tone. Walking in a blizzard.

I tell her the word for bridal veil.

I tell her the word for late morning.

I tell her the word for body which also means pavement stone which also means harvest singular.

Returning with tea the older one says *Ah you’re reminiscing.*

Yes.

There are certain words.

Look: *gourd.*

*Leak.*

*Pregnancy.*

*Grass.* Like a caress to the back of the hand. To the cheek. To the underwear.

This conversation recurs throughout the evening. Long stripes laying through the windows.

*Do you ever wish to return to your homeland.* No. *But you must miss it.* I was young when I left studied most of my life I’m settled here. Such a lack of longing is unnatural. Then I am unnatural. *We beat you in a war once you know.* Yes I know.

*Is there anything you would like to tell us.* Something you have observed perhaps. *A suspicion you would like to report.* It’s all in absolute confidence. It would be good to hear of your vigilance.

*I saw a tramp a few days ago.* Nothing else.

*Do call if there is anything.*

They leave taking the photograph.
The younger wrapping her notes in cloth *to protect them from sunlight* she says neatly.

After the door is shut I stand. Begin walking.

Around the room’s edge. Counter-clockwise. Pressing the walls the wires the door.
I will walk into a calmness a cool. I will walk into proper mother proper wife.
Am I speaking I cannot hear. My palms ahead like torches in the night fields.
This is my scorched circle. These are my lungs stripped of breath. I keep walking.

28. The Dinner Party

Strange what composers feel about light.

*Fill it with light they say or there’s light in that chord.*

A translucence through which shows – what?
I am thinking about light in the open evening.

Dion beside me – smelling gentle of smoke and soap and health – and his long fading hair – and his silhouette against the high brick – and we are going, we are going to dinner – we are going –

When first learning music I thought *minor* meant *young*. A stripling sound.

Soured out. Thin-spined. Too unformed to support deep notes complexities altitudes; and ungraceful; and kneeling under the major supplicant; and shy against the rhythm-bone; and so mine, minor –

The Maestro hearing this laughing for hours.


Dion salutes a soldier passing.

Who laughs and returns it.

The two sides of their single simple grin.

*******

The Professor greets us –
My dear minister! Good evening! Come in – come in from this treacherous weather. It’s like treason out there – James, could you put on the lights, and that will be all, don’t hold the car. My friends! Put down your coats –

Expecting bowls and crystal – perhaps a candelabra – and cream thickening, and eighteen cheeses – and (why not) a gloss-soaked pheasant –


He says sotto voce I thought this would be congenial. Do you like it? It’s very bargain Bedouin. Not overly pompous – shall we recline? Like Romans?

I say Oh –

Take off our coats. Lean angular on cushions. Dion sitting cross-legged – and delighted; and reaching to touch; and smiling, smiling at the cushion, at the strangeness –

I say it’s wonderful.

He says Delicious. Wine. It’s in the carafe. I spent a fortune – but we must be blithe, for tomorrow’s summer! It being the season’s cusp. Outside women use the last of their Spring ration packets. Their fervent faces in the Stores. He adds - Hopefully this is not too military – for your tastes.

I say I never served.

He says No neither myself; we are intelligentsia, we are more useful! Dion? Do you like it?

Dion says Yes. Can I.

He says The food? Yes. Oh do disregard social mores. Dig in! We are tonight explorers in my cave of glories. Abandon your pretences! Be free! Minister, you are gloriously over-repressed, do loosen your tie.

There is a platter – fish; a bass, larger and thicker than the one I offered, foolishly – and sultry, sweetly cooked; but the Professor is gracious, means just to poke fun.

The hot evening. And the windows open.

I say This is very good.

He says You’re kind. Dion would you like some bread. Now taste some of this. It’s egg-baked – from the Eighteenth – see the design, you know how they do that? Trace it with your hands – go on – they make the dough, Dion, in wide white pieces, and they
lay it out flat, and then they carve it with knives! Into this face. We tear off his nose- so!

Dion eats the nose –

Leaning together they form a marcato.

Meaning play with insensible force.

Marcato: wake the dead said the Maestro.

The rhythm of the dinner is circular. The Professor proposes – a quaff a bite a sweetmeat – and Dion looks to me – and I accept – and so they eat.

The night draws its coat over – and I am silent; filled with the glow of good fish; and touching my hand to my breast I feel the taut trick, the quaver of the heart-beat – it stops like a gulp in air – and surges – and through my hand I listen, I listen -

Dion looks unpeeled in the light.

Would nuzzle any palm given.

And the Professor stands –

Dion do you know what a waltz is. It’s quite amazing. Do you know how to dance? - No! That is an astonishing oversight. Dance is glorious. Some dances are hundreds of years old – the waltz was invented for a King –

Dion sits in the firelight and glows – with his brightness; and I am thinking of light; and the Professor embalms himself with warmth – speaking, speaking – of the waltz, and forests, and music like the passing of water over stone – and hypnotic, the famous voice rinses us.

Simple – it is simple! Of course. Stand up now –

The two men revolve.

Dion prone to broken-open weeping. Their lit wire stunning his face. One coaxes; and dandles hands; and lures him out – of the fallen burrow of himself – brisk, brisk –

Thinking suddenly of the Maestro’s record collection – and his many scores; annotated Schuberts and Beethovens; looped over with thought – and the long singe of his knowledge touching them – and what after his death? Scattered; or stolen by the officers; or perhaps burnt – as evidence – or sold, sold on the black market –

I ask Where did you get this record?

He says An old possession, near-ancient. Since I was a student! It’s lucky that the old ones are so ingrained it’s useless to ban them. It would find a heavy price...
The smack at the door.

Dimly I note its shape.

Four long beats. On the stave it fills a bar with sound.

There are four of them – not soldiers; I can see their coats dimly, their bald faces smacked with light – but police still. Amateur watch. Strolling out. Curfew past. The night-patrol; and sticks on shoulders thick with reed – to play a drum-beat, on a hide, a living hide, stretched taut –

They crowd – and are fresh from the night cool; and one picks at the curtain for its thickness.

The music sucked out of air.

The Professor blazing, vivid -

Good evening, officers. I'm testing some new music for my radio programme. We've been working so late we've been eating like gypsies.

Loose – and without fear on him –

Not to my taste, Professor, that music. It is the main one – leading; one hand pocketed –

Is it not? What a pity. But let me introduce you – this is one of the great emerging composing talents of the Regime. He and I are collaborating. We shake hands – stiff, stiff, I straighten, look unstricken, settled as wine, look acquainted with obedient police – My secretary is taking notes. Do you enjoy working late? I can't say I care for it – but the deadlines for the show are dreadful, so we must furrow our foreheads into the early hours. Tell me, what hours do you honoured guardians of the peace keep?

Six till two, sir. Two men blow on their fingers – the air rings with heat –

Six till two! Unbearable. And on your feet?

On our feet indeed. On these streets, Professor, that's no joke.

None whatsoever. Your feet must need replacement every calendar year. I know only one cure for a malady of the metatarsus. It is – now quiet, quiet – a good dose of this – junipers only just burst, only just burnt into holy fire! No argument – the doctor has declared his prescription for your palates.

A drink together! The black-market stuff goes flaming down – and we're all jingling the glasses, white-lipped – and it's elegant, a soiree; Dion beside me apes, repeats, lifts and sips and nods – ardently – and we are cocktailing together, the four police and us!
That's very gracious of you indeed, Professor. Good stuff that. Sniffs it down. Rubs out his cheeks. Smiles – brittle – but polite; unstressed –

The Professor shakes his wide head - dismissive. No trouble. I declare myself horrified at breaking your beat.

That's all right Professor. Always good to see a man intent on his work. Have a good evening.

They depart softly – the feet go, fade.
Then Dion spits. Into the glass.
His puckered eyes. And says Splugh! –
And in the brilliant silence I am laughing – and the light empty; and the Professor laughs so hard he blows out a candle – and Dion smiles, smiles –
The evening floats in a glass.
Pleasure all along my body.
Stop the drum.

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No Dion you aren't coming home with me now.
He floats on the staircase – solid, solid, wanting his cave, his home –
And I further down, having slipped, having crept when the dance was on and they were cradling, each of them, cradling one another – snug in the silt of warmth – Dion rapt with the chandelier in the mirror; and having thrown on my coat; and taken the stairs; and gone into darkness – but then his voice after me –
He stares perpetually. The caught senseless hair. His half-open mouth.

You'll come home later. But right now you can stay with your friend. I'm allowing you to stay with him. Isn't he lovely? It can be a treat for you. No curfew tonight! You stay up late with him. Your new friend.

I am so near to the door – that my voice is white, and vague in the air; and so cooling, drawing from them, submerging into the blister of street dark – and could not return, could neither mount the stair nor stay –
Somewhere the Professor's voice.
Its shape curved by a tendon of inquiry.
Dion eternal on the landing.
Do you understand me, Dion? You stay here. This man will be good to you. He will teach you more things – and then you can go home late – and it can be our little secret. I won’t tell your mother. Won’t that be fun?

The violent gap.
In which my whole body fits. Its bruises.

*The pause said the Maestro is either fall or rise.*

Trust me Dion. Now go on inside. Go on. And he relaxes – and is suddenly his whole white life; and smiles; and is gone –

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His mother asks Where is Dion?

I say Oh splendid hello. He was having such fun I didn’t want to bring him home! They’ll send a car with him when the party finishes soon.

She says My little Dion! I was so worried. My heart went all night like this. Of course they liked him; he is a good boy, well-bred boy. You are a man, a gracious man, to do this for my Dion, eh. I tell people when they say things of you. I tell them. Thanks to you. Thanks to you.

I say Yes. You’re welcome. He will be home later.

She says Oh yes these parties. Until eight in the morning when I was young, before I was married! Yes I remember. Sleep. You sleep.

What does light mean it means strapped open-eyed. In your clothing. By the night window. Waiting for the split of things to become visible.

And hours later he comes; and washes his face in the courtyard tap; and the light still so grey as to be touchable; and walks (formless, shapeless) out of sight, up the stairway to his mother’s apartment.
1. The Composer In His Office

Touch the theme again – place it just lightly, lightly; like the stretch of an arm to a lover – her aria being so water-thin on the skin – and an arc over the octave, for her to climb, for us to follow – the brittle crotchets shimmering towards a semibreve, its held balanced breath – her outstretched hands –

The grip of it fading – the soprano’s death scene.

I take a whole cup of air. Hold it in myself. Release.

Return to this small office – as if slamming indoors from a storm, gasping, exultant in the sudden quiet. Unnoticed the heat has risen; the ridge of my foot, left in a drift of sun as I worked, is sore with warmth. I tip back my chair, watch the afternoon light fizzing the window. A good two movements done – the floating boat aria, and the death; and drifting from me, receding, the foam of the soprano, her soaring minor key; and in its place is uncovered a happiness; just small, palm-wide, but gripping the whole body from the scalp –

The Maestro could write unbending for hours.

No stirring movement no sound.

I will train. Into that concentration. That suspended gaze.

The orchestra leader opens the door. I wipe my brow – rise smiling.

*How are you getting on David?* Brief pulse of pause at the name – not yet sure in it, still testing its breadth.

*Hello Hans. Thank you – very well – I’ve finished two movements this morning.*

Uneasy – in his presence. This new ruler. Laying down tributes.

*Very good.* A beat. Spreads his shoulders, which are broad. *We’ll need to discuss those Eight Songs, tomorrow.*

*Oh I can change them – at once, if you just give me – twenty minutes* – Run for the pen the metronome; trained to be rapid, shifting entire symphonies up and down octaves, leaping whim to whim – *David this segment rewrite it you have an hour*; and living under his flexed bow waiting; and prepared – as a soldier can be battle-ready, gear strapped and shining –
But he holds out his arm. Smiles – at my snatching of paper! _No, nothing like that. They just need more martial parts. More trumpets. The censors like at least two war segments per one lighter one you know._

_Yes sir. Thank you. You’ve been – very kind._

_Of course. Always good to have a fresh new face eh. Clean slate for us, makes us all on best behaviour! Mock-dusts his shirt – comradely._

_Ah – yes! Is my laugh odd – does it come out crooked? The teeth are still misaligned – and the roots ache in the cool evenings; but he grins, ducks his head –_

_Excellent, David. We will be rehearsing until six. Goes -_


_And yet he said Excellent -_

_And it is real! The palm-wide feeling grows – grips, like dark wine, like dizziness. This work, this room, the Composer for the Theatre of the Parade Grounds – although small; and half the stage-lights burst on the rigs; and it’s crowded in the evenings by fields of street-mob who just want a loud, pretty lady-death and then a stiff beer and a dance – but good, good enough!_

_A fresh new face –_

_What I’ll give the street-mob to swallow. How they’ll reel astonished._

_Their bodies lit and held by sound –_

_I lean and correct the newest aria, fix its accents like small moons. Still struck with this serenity, its long unabashed held note. Even in this small space – with its ripped carpets, its lead actress dragged up from some red-light place to rouge her neck for the lights – there is room; there is room for newness –_

_The omnipresent radio in the next office. Its whir of familiar voice._

_It is hard to get offices. It is ruthless the competition. Of a theatre suburban small maybe off the primary lists even that. I balance my throat – in the spit of sun. The Professor did well. And paid. The orchestra leader perhaps. Or higher – higher – the Office Of Arts Appointments. Berg? Klein? Who knows. Shut mouth. Avoid questions. Lie still._

_All the great ones of the Regime started in this path – fixed to a sole theatre, one orchestra. Mulbar two years at the Theatre Of Our Noble Sons. Vincenze three at the Parliament Orchestra. I tore their biographies from the evening culture supple-
ments at the mines – brought in as waste to stoke the fires; and sorted papers under borrowed candles, trouser-smearing my hand not to smear the ink, nosing for music news. The youngest podium-men, popular sopranos on tour. Smoothing my square bites out under the lamp. Devouring them as the night shift men put on their boots for the descent.

And now the boys will read of me. And follow my line in the world – tracing me with their thick fingers like a constellation. And nudge each other over the paper and tussle for it. And whisper Look there he is pass me I want to see –

Hans even wants an original piece – for the concert cycle this month. There is my Fruit King – my frail thing, my drowned man – in the drawer; having been hidden – and folded away in a false folder - and it is safe; it is safe. I will not touch it. Though wanting to brush its long rhythms out. Tender. But will not touch it.

Speak of your work as a child or lover.

Yet more a geography that shifts.

Its river into which you dip your palms.

What is a man but music said the Maestro. Adding I myself am a Beethoven classic played increasingly on out-of-tune instruments by the deranged.

On the Parade strolling. With the martial movements finished. A good day. And so plentiful time – to parade like a gentleman; no hurry – and the grace of this, the luck, flushes up again; it is the sunlight, it makes me a struck drum. Two ladies pass, so one inclines one’s head – and what do they see but irreproachable, but serene and employed, holding a pass a wallet a furnished flat; and they turn and smile at my nod!

Stand upright from the bloodied shins, the mining dust.

Sluice silt from your ankles your mouth your eyes.

Eight years – I stand to wait at the road, parse out the birdsong rioting in the trees into arpeggios, one repeated stunned note of longing – of mushroom-glut in the dark. Grasping at morsels. Shaving the Maestro in the mornings. Open cavity of wanting – while his jaw scraped under iron. And it would have been so easy for him – to give me just one berth, one opening volley – to lay me out in the architecture of the music world, with a small job – rather than hoarding – and disappointed; disappointed. The bird claps its wings – makes its note again, wanting a partner.

A pause in music may last endless.

Rests designed to fill a lung. A house.
After it’s like a deafness broke in half.

But it’s past – and this happiness is so solid, so strongly muscular, that it
seizes hurting thoughts and pushes them into muteness. And it’s blissful – to be
placed, to cock a hat to the policeman, to give your rent on time! Where is the bird –
it’s got a snail, is smashing it on a stone.

The grocer, at the omnibus station. I take – it is easy, I have a salary, I am
joyful in the air, erratic – a bun, I buy it. The Fruit King rises – sings, in his flooded
voice.

Two other women in the grocer’s together – one holds a pen to the other;
the latter is indecisive, she pauses.

The moment is golden. Its beauty transfixes – a held note.

And I am watching; in the light.

Strolling – thinking of the sour note in the soprano aria, the one weak seg-
ment where it could collapse; and perhaps adding another voice – or scrapping half
the sequence? Splitting and mending the problem – and down a street and another.
The raw sunlight. Eating the bun –

I look about –

And it is familiar; the small gated courtyard, its fringe of stone – and the
apartments –

What has led me back to him. His life. His rooms.

A hook in the lung –

But unsurprising. This building being for eight years two-fourths, three-
quarters, seven-eighths my life; and cramming the bar, paring all else to semicolons,
quavers; and even in the silence now it breaks the stave.

Geographies being rhythm. Miners knowing that. Their coal-world for
which there are no maps. And caverns measured by the equal beat of step and pick.
And metres heard in dripping water.

Taut between two pegs my city.

This tower and my bed in the tenement.

Sever an instrument string it sparks a light.

But it is unsevered; and led back by eight years’ rhythm; and hesitation be-
ing suspicious (pauses allow for too much thought the Maestro says) I lean and fix my
shoe-tie; and it must be gutted – or else guarded intensely; his high-nested place.

249
Which was a top floor beauty. Which had windows to fit an entire double bass. Which were not flaunting wealth – but perverse obedience to surveillance; a flagrant uncovering – I am wide open, I have laid out the floodlamps, investigate as you wish – acquiescence being its own form of rebellion.

But the glorious windows are not smashed. And whole; and it is courting intense danger to go nearer, to link myself consciously – given that I am being watched, given that certainty – and yet it is perhaps courting danger to veer off – to shift from a perceived aim; and weigh these visible weaknesses –

Calculate the performance.

Smooth the hidden risks.

These daily subtle mathematics.

I cross the courtyard. Empty – which is threatening; and deliberately empty spaces mean post-tribunal clearing, observation from the upper windows, a stage for the hapless tenor to come to death – but it is a workday, the silence is merely absent workers, it is not fear –

The stairway is unbarred – and mounting – and will the other tenants recognise me, the eight-years boy? The guest of the deposed composer – for they’ll all know; despite avowing never to have noticed him, not even to have known (offering tea to the visiting Polizie) that he was a musician -

The great refinement of the State ear! Hear what is of use to you. Discard all the rest.

I have it planned – for there’ll be guards; and I will head forward in intent, brisk, without pause or visible concealment of purpose; and will stop, innocently confused (ah! Like the soprano who discovers her lover and her father conferring, and does not suspect, and flutters in shadow), and at last come forward, all enquiry, asking is this Number 46 A____ Street, that being the next apartment over and unclearly marked and so easily mistaken – and that I had a job interview, and has there been some accident; and perhaps after some enquiry (oh, it’s the next building? Oh, but I’m so unfamiliar with these places, I’m much obliged, you must have been here a long time, have a cigarette?) I will be allowed a peek at the deposed musician’s rooms –

I rehearse this several times. And yet mounting the stairs I am astonished. For the room is unguarded, and the door still on its hinge – and no breakage on the lock, no forcing, so he must have let them in, opened the door quietly to their knock and said, as he always did, Come in, gentlemen, do excuse the chaos –
I walk into the rooms.

The furniture has gone; and the long lights of the afternoon on the bleak floor – and it is cleaner than I had anticipated – their having taken all the materials for
evidence. Doubtless, doubtless; the piano, and all the books gone, and every symphony in its neat blue-ribboned file – and all the shelves are bare, assiduous.

What had I thought – a natural disaster, scarred and battered, an anguished room – but this is simply vacated; and open to all weather, a patch of rain under the
sill, soaked curtains – and brutal, somehow, worse.

Teacups on the mantel – and he would have offered them tea, before they
took him, he was always exquisitely mannered – and it could imply deep insult, it was
kindness in fretted chords. Like his buying me a new wardrobe on my arrival – and
saying It will help you fit in; and the old clothes burned, the sulphur on them fixed de-
spite my mother’s soaping, vulnerable to nothing –

Writing to my parents Of course I am keeping my birthday clothes clean and
neat tell Mother here is a snap enclosed that is the Opera House behind. These frag-
ments of lies that sugar the lives of others.

The medals gone. And to be melted for more materials. And to be recast
and given to more deserving idealists -

The furniture will have been split into legs and spine, for subversive materi-
als – facile, searching for ‘democracy’ written on the bottom of a cushion – and placed
in the courtyard, scraps and strings, tassels sodden. Silent markets in the communal
apartments are common – an arrested family’s guilt and misery bleaching in the open
air; and furtive, furtive, sneaking the dining chairs after nightfall. It’s rules, it’s honour
– only the other inhabitants can pick their fill. Carrion-pickers from elsewhere spat
on and kicked off. Where are the best pieces – oak and the splendid tables, with their
wrought legs – taken rapidly, reupholstered perhaps, submerged into other worlds –
walk into another apartment across the courtyard and see them, under a living room
lamp. New owner stroking the nap. This shamelessness –

Piano being trickier. Being laden with guilt. And will have been picked for
pieces. And wood and wire and old ivory in armfuls and gluts. And old women wear-
ing wire now to hold up their stockings. And ivory in their ears.

Would assemble it from memory.

Stick of the black keys in humid evenings.

Stain on the upper C like an open eye.
No heirs – and I walk to the window, to its warped latch from days swung open, the floor dark with the wet – and not named in any legal document; and a man unstrung from family, from slender stock that died early, sinking into ground – and so logically it was mine – it should have been –

Legacy of what, precisely?
Sixteen concertos a realm of ash.
Whole catalogue wedged in the dark underfloor.
But that must be kept – until perhaps there is a shift in thought; and the old traitor voices return to the radio, the banned degenerates, the pluck and hum of jazz – or even the merest leniency, a sentimental general who met him once, says *Ah it was a long time ago stage it nobody will remember* –

This being my service.
This being his deserving.
Thicket of his life works stunned in a hole.
From here the bedroom visible – and the bed still present; perhaps too difficult to move downstairs – being gigantic, being hand-carved, a sleigh, a romantic touch – and a hilarious prop from an Opera; a minister so taken with the result (enamoured with the tenor, they always are) that he donated his own bed for the final scene, the tormented death; and afterwards here –

And he is dead he is dead he is dead –

And what of this (I am shaking, I notice this as if from a seat in the top gallery, watching a badly lit stage) was not enough. And what in his art his insomniac hours said *Fling out the dagger*. And was composing the Leader’s latest birthday symphony as he did every year. And how could this be insufficient – except to the selfish –

Meeting him at sixteen having won the competition I was disappointed. For his smallness. And the concave fold of chest. And the hands the hands great knuckles like nuts. And this was all of the legend its whole weight.

The sore of a month’s rain from the open shutter. Ground swelling to a cheek’s fullness. I place a hand on the sodden latch.
In the courtyard a man calls and another.
Leave the place open to rats and the wind. Let them scour it clean.
2. The Professor Takes Dion To A Café

The boy has ordered carbonated water – lemon, lime, extortionate. The citrus must be cropped from some sour god.

The table-glass at this trite little bistro is tense with heat, a sheet of radiance, reflecting on us. It shows my own paunch – and his face is caught, its taut long planes. The Romans would have ravished him: he’d be the token of every Triumph, lips dipped in gold, crowned brow, bare back.

Meeting the Minister in an hour. The sheaf of papers in my pocket – a complex case; on its face just a dissident’s testimony, but he (of course) suspects a secret, some sequence of clues. It will be nothing – paranoia, a prick upon his thumb.

Meanwhile - just time for a brief tête-à-tête, to keep me upright until tomorrow! At present – there is just his breath, on the glass. And my longing to pinion, to parse the long architecture of intersecting groove and dip, to linger down his stomach-line.

He thumbs an ice-cube clumsily. Stuns its cool with thumb and finger pressed – a stress of hold, a warmth. We watch it melt. His palm is sapped with drips, he licks - like a dog.

I say You must be thirsty. Do you like the bubbles? I personally prefer the flatter waters – they are less active. In the stomach.

He says Yes. Still sucking.

I say There are parts of the world that are entirely made of ice. Did you know that?

He says Ice?

I say Yes. Whole countries, whole continents. They dress up in furs there, they worship the moon. Have wolves as pets. One day we’ll go.

He says Yes?

I say Yes.

His quietness –

A lake of ice. Deep in him fish are caught in frozen floes, breathing slow as history. I’ll cut a hole, I’ll thrust a harnessed hand, haul them to land.
It is enough – to know beauty. To hold one’s hands against its heat, feeling its fret, its frantic noise. Not to be young oneself – which was aching, wired with witless energy – but to know its knot on the snow, its glut of glow. To wed a young wife – and she’s no longer young, grows fungal, beached upon a petri-dish! But one tries, those pearls that were her eyes, one tries.

The hour grows closer to its curve.

Dion says Look.

Has a reserve of words, a starving few. Seeks to show me small things, holds revenants (a bug, a piece of glass, a postcard) with urgency. I dive to meet him in his depths. What is it?

Ah – the soldiers; two this time, leaning astride the bar. Of course it’s not the chins or shins he loves. It’s the uniform! Look at him – trembling to touch them. Even those offensively brash breeches. (Scarlet and gold! Are we conquistadors? Conquering Romans? Ridiculous.)

So many men dress their boys in drag, sag those shoulders with old bits of lace – or drape them in dark silk, in the soft milk of fur. I’d uniform you in an onion-skin of oiled satin, peel your petal, Dion, if it weren’t wiser, wilder, to leave you lushly bare...

Still, one must care.

That first night he would not lie down, but danced. And so I left his pants, and shirt, and underclothes aside. And glided with him, bridal, both fools to the old tunes – and recited expressions of thanks for this, my thirst for beauty, that brings me such gilded gifts. I’d shift to dry him off, to sluice the sweat and semen from his back, and he’d stand slack, still swaying to the beat.

But left him chaste. A taste was all-sufficient.

I say I have a gift for you.

A book of soldiers through the ages – Chinese, Spanish, Gaul. It’s pictures, textless: sexless creatures with an ancient gaze, each page ablaze with armour. Cost a crushing sum, but done – and here he holds it in his hands (had washed them, with him, in the fountain, kneading each knuckle free of its knot of dark), traces a face on the cover.

This part – here – is an epaulette. You wear them on your shoulders – here. They show what rank you are, what deeds you’ve done. They can be colourful, or full of stars. Can you say it? Epaulette.
He doesn’t try, is shy, but points again, attentive, angled like a child. *That?*

*That’s the helmet worn by men in China. See the long flaps? The neck’s protected from a sword or spear. They’re small enfolded iron, held by screws.*

*Iron.*

*Yes you work with iron don’t you. But this is smaller, much smaller, look here, the breast plates, hundreds of small pieces, layered like scales, on a lizard, it can move, but it’s vulnerable, find a point where it’s weak and you can go straight through.*

And yet he does not see a battle – or brutes, in ballistic vests; simply statues, invincible, immense, in their gorgeous glory. So easy to adore – this stillness.

*Would you get me a drink? Just get up and say to the waiter ‘Another’. Will you do it?*

*Yes.*

Rising, he’s suddenly riotously wrong for this place – a half-wit, towering in a tunic, all heft and matted hair.

The evening’s struck with sudden heat. The hush of it resounds along the street. Where’s David? In his new little lair, doubtless. He’s grown a gawkish beard – it shields the scar across his maw, his sores.

That Theatre job – I drop a finger in the dip of glass – was cheap: two hundred seats, a company half-hacked by cuts. Its thinness will sustain him. Plausible for a paltry start. No heart, no pound of flesh, no Bart again. My trouble there: no sanity of scale.

Watch Dion return. I am the shadow of his hair. I am the broach of his thighs in water, the slaughter of the night with sleep, the slough of dirt off darkened feet. I swell into the cracks, I wax, gibbous.

I say when he returns I must go.

I say *There’s an important man waiting. I have to meet him. You’ll see me again tomorrow.*

I say It’s for my work. *You know what I do don’t you.*

I say *Your complete lack of reaction is hardly encouraging. Is there a samurai in front of you? A lieutenant of the French Brigadiers? Has the entire Khan militia descended in purple and gold?*

I say I’m sorry. *I’m sorry.*

I say *Shall we walk? And see the pretty birds in the aviary of the Mayor? Shall we do that?*
The wash of anger fails, it pales into pleasure – this boy, this time. The Minister can amuse himself. What could it cost? The loss of half a star? A scar on the report? Let him retort. Nothing can hurt.

Dion moves – not farm-boy now, not some frump-haired slave, but brave, brimming with holy health, that wealth of youth. I take his arm. We exit palm to palm.

3. The Wife Goes To A Rally

Beatrice buttons my coat up to my neck.
Up.
To.
My.
Neck.

She says We’ll be late.
Beatrice being a woman who knows about lateness. Holds time in her legs and arms.
I myself trace things by anaesthesia. Its time similar to a touched thing.
Ten minutes he is under. Twenty two minutes he will start to convulse. Twenty seven minutes he requires a stent. Thirty eight minutes he must be packed in ice.

Long plains of different time laid over. The time it takes to leave the house enough to install a heart monitor tourniquet a limb place an animal on its side to press the lung. Insufficient to stitch closed a wound of more than four inches.

I tie my scarf in the regulation way.
Beatrice says Good. How do you feel.
Fine.
She laughs. Sound rubbing on a stone. It’s just women.
Women are very rarely just women.
You should be thankful. The Women’s Corps isn’t the worst. They could have said anything. Helping at the laundries. Cleaning the infection trains. Anything.
No I know.
After the third it is a snapped twig on the ground. Your life.

Some cool thing trails behind me on the path. I turn to look it’s gone.
Be solid Beatrice says. No lateness. Keep up.

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That is Luise says Beatrice.

Luise stark and powerful on a podium. Her face a shoved thing.
The factory floor disused now. Crammed with women opening their heads from scarves and hats. Like uncut crops. Long veins strung in their faces.

What would he think of me here. With these others. Trying to assume their movement their steady bodies. The pretence of it.
Luise takes up a glass. Silence. Begins.

When the Father Leader stepped into power he inherited a land in crisis. Unemployment. Famine. And it was women who bore the brunt. Women were dying needlessly for want of doctors, women were starving to keep their children fed...

The women beside me are breathing. I notice they hum. I myself am silent.
Woman to me means many things. Perhaps now a shifting thing. Not for gathering. Not to hold to oneself.

... the Regime has rendered us a nation of prosperity – and the Leader himself thanks us. And yet where is the equality due to us as servants of the Regime? Where can we serve as fully and as healthily as our husbands, sons, fathers? Where, women, daughters, mothers, are our dues?
I think of bone identification in medical school. Its blank weight on a table. Two minutes.
Find its width its cracks its pressure grips. Probe the socket for its mate. Say its name.
What is a definition. A joint finding a socket and turning.

... I ask where and yet I know the answer. You know the answer. You feel it in your hearts. It is waiting for us – trembling out of reach – waiting for our efforts...

In the corner several children sleep. The noise passes through them simply. They cup each others’ heads and are hot with tiredness.
I raise my head to catch the air. Its one sly finger on my crown. Slips into my mouth.

... And the philosophers, the politicians, the great thinkers of this nation, say to me How can women be as valuable as men? What can they offer? And I say Strength as great as mountains. And fortitude as deep as rivers. And relentless under unbearable suffering –

Her voice is louder. Dipped into a widening pool of sound. Pounds upon the lectern.
Would she touch me if she knew.
Repent I do. Repent I have. No water left in me. No soul to scour.
The point of death says the textbook is not diminishment of faculties but exhaustion.
The last time we were intimate I held each part of him in turn. He sleepy but acquiescent.
Myself set alight by my dragging desire.

- it is Time! It is Time to be alive, and make the Regime feel that the force of womanhood is a great limb which has too long been hobbled, too long been bound in splints as weak and defenceless! It is Time –

The women are rocking. They are unanchored. Some deep force.
What would it be like to vanish. This grip of women releasing me from them as an imposter.
Of course these are not new thoughts –

Woman beside me grabs my hand. Her face streaming. Sweat and open mouth. Sways.

Says Yes oh yes.

It is so simple. So tender in the stripping light.

Want want like a dropping thing in me. Its fall.

_I can see in your eyes you are frightened! I can see in your eyes you are holding back! I can see into your souls and what I see there is the roar of the greatest resource in human history waiting to be unleashed upon our nation! I can see it in you! Trust its power! Rise together!_

Holding me together with her. Smell her wheat-strong and smoky. Blonde in spooling plaits. Pulling me towards.

Luise has both arms upward. Think of her hot lungs. Feel them against my hands.

Surrender to scent and sound. Surrender the prone flaring boundaries. Step out of the failed body. Its searing deafness.

_women rise together women rise together women rise together_

And hold the breath –

And in falling upward the sense heats sweetness on my scalp, it pours, we are a mesh of us, the women, moving belly and beat, the many, the voice-box alight and burst, its music across the string of spines, thrusting the air, we breathe our wetness, the light changes, I close my eyes.

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The eroticism washes up against the front door. Recedes.

Hot blush lifts off my body. Leaves its tender marks. I open one gloved hand. Close it.

_You enjoyed it says Beatrice I can tell. You’ll be a natural._

Yes I say.
Luise would like to meet you. I'll arrange it. For Wednesday.

When she leaves the sky has broken into weak pieces.

For the first time since the birth I am remembering being pregnant.
Women speak of mammalian fervent scent. Sensitivity to sound. Strands pulling inward.
Instead I was petrified in love. No softness or plush hormonal burr. A stomach hardening into its arc.
I noted medically the stages. Drop of the breast points. Opening of the hip angles.
Press upon the bladder the child's apple scalp. Continuous arousal.

During pregnancy we made love more times than at any other point.
Float of my body on his sea. From behind both holding gently the underside of womb.

4. The Composer With The Axe

Chopping wood in the yard. The lift of my back into the space.

Having to keep Dion's mother onside – for the safety of things; having come across her boasting to the women at the laundry. My son's a bodyguard eh. Not like your sons. Doesn't do that dirty low work. On the rise. Their disbelieving faces in the hot mist. Bend over the rock, smack, rise, smash.

For he's a famous daft one. They sit in a circle and trim his hair, talk women's talk. Saw it in the evenings. Brushing out the long tar slopes of the Labour Yard. Once picking out shards of metal filings that scarred the long dredge of his back – some accident, some fall from a cart. Cooing over his placid face. The pet, the animal, the morsel-boy, sitting cross-legged while fingernails picked at the metal like meat.

I said to her later It's not wise to talk so free about it.

Is it not eh.

One must be discreet. You don't want jealousy. Or sabotage. It's – it's a rare job he's got.
It is. And feeding him too. He came home last week and barely touched dinner saves me money eh. Price of bread these days I was saying to Gert –

Yes. Thick sway of silence in it.

Yes oh yes. I’ll be quiet. Isn’t he turning out fine. Look at that. And no hope anybody had for him eh. And now a grand boy in the Corps. Would do his father proud.

What was his father a wood-hauling giant. Too heavy perhaps to sling along a woman and a son that size. Heft of him even in the cradle. A folklore babe but silent even then say the women – silent but for breathing –

It would. Does that wood need doing I’ll give you a hand. To keep her sweet – and her boy so busy, with his lovely job! A little labour’s appreciated everywhere -

It does and that. You’re good to us eh. You join us for dinner tomorrow.

Chop in the yard. Contemplating the next symphony, Hans says he’ll programme it – it will be my Fruit King; which was worked while the Maestro was still alive, which I have edited eight times, more, and still feels rough, unyielding. And yet perhaps the perfection is in the looseness – and my worry is just the Maestro, saying write it again, saying the chords don’t align, saying twenty drafts to every piece of worth. But good – inherently good; I feel it in the swing and slip of it, in this small shed. And worth performing -

First sonata (chop, sling) the Fruit King emerges, sings of his century-sleep, comes to the village dance. And hurting all over with mud with the knot of long-submerged hair. And his voice I imagine is percussion, beating up through the waltz, and shivering it, and the throng of rhythm pressing –

Second slow segment (chop, sling) he shows his miracles; fragile slowness of flowers on the village maidens, soprano sweetness, the main maid tempted away – and the tenor hero is light, is light, suspicious trumpet, and duels the smudge of sound – but is swept – and so plots –

Third is the village celebration of harvest – high songs, the farandoles, the flinging skirts and chorus! And as the maid is distracted the Fruit King is killed – while the dance flourishes bright and strong – and the creak of his drum-voice smashed to weakness – and she discovers; and the dance ends with her frenetic despair! The Seeking Song – where she takes on his beat, the maiden as drum, it is an unusual idea the soprano would have to be dextrous -
But last he rises. And completes the cycle – and the frill of useless village song erodes to just his beat – against the floor of the stage – one hand, two hands – and then one hand – and silence –

I grin and heave. Pleasure in the movement. It is strong – the old tale, they like the country stories; and flickers of the new, of beats and brash drums and the violent last dance – will distinguish it, will raise the myth as fresh. Fresh! The Maestro always so flush with tradition, the rigid arcs of three-part harmonies inflexible, rigorous; precise patterns of accent and tone overlaid, like mosaics on a tiled floor shining, _this is the only way to structure a symphony listen_ – and this will move further, beyond his daring, shake the soot out of the old ways! Hoist and hurl the axe, in a deep rhythmic pleasure, contemplating.

There’s Dion come in late, hauling the buckets; it being evening and the water soon shut off. It’s treaded into our instincts, we know within seconds the water-time, a ranking at the faucet. Last family always gets enough – that perpetual kindness. Once it disrupted and came on in the afternoon. Children got into the hose-pipes, but adults stood motionless, bewildered and sodden and half-furious at the disruption. Most of them turned it off until the usual time – regarded it fearfully in its new dripping.

He places the yoke by the door and passes in. Drenches the washing that lies in lime overnight. One bucket; two. Has been doing this nightly for years- but what are years to him, he flows along adjacent to time. Now he’s still, reaching a hand into the light-shaft for the motes of dust. A flickering thing! What an excellent companion for the sordid old gentleman of word and war. Possibly he’s learnt new manners, new dances. And isn’t it a gift to both of them – the youth for the old, the venerable for the unschooled? Wise, wise – and almost operatical, these great friendships –

Dion is standing and looking at me.

_Hello Dion._

_Hello._

_How are you._

_Look._

Absurdly – in the woodshed, in the dark – he pulls down his trousers. There are no underpants, the swell of golden pubis matches his hair exactly, over the brim of the trouser-waist.

_He showed me. Look._
He is delighted – and goatish, suddenly, in the light; a frank seductive being, weird and smelling of lime, and I will not move.

*Stop that Dion. Put that away.*

He never looks scalded – merely confused, merely unable to understand why he does not please me, why this new trick that must please his Professor gives me no joy.

Here is Bart in the shoulder in the body's line. The frank gold mirror of him. But younger, younger –

*There are some things you do only for the Professor, Dion. Not for me or your ma – or anybody else. Just for him. Yes?*

Yes.

A great friendship –

But he is so happy. And reaches again for the buckets to hoist out. And it cannot cost – as it cost Bart. And forgive them all their weakness. And Bart in the water slicking his hair. And the Professor playing the old records. And outside the rain begins –

Perhaps one day he’ll marry, it could be of use to him.

5. The Professor On Radio

Translation is a myth.

We are complicit in it, we bargainers and merchants of languages: hefting sacks of it, trading in an economy that has no base values, no communicable coin. It is our fiction, this idea – that languages bred from distinct roots, split and combed across continents, might reach and fasten and hold. How could it? Even within one language the spaces are rigid: between speakers, between words. You are alone in your language, an ark in the darkness! One can only ever approach another over the table, holding out the simplest flares, watching them fall into false shadows....

And yet I have found this blank fresh place, this roundel of sound. Onto which to press my own language. Listen to him and hear me speaking through his ribs, as somebody breathed through rushes to make the first music.
I am showing him my office recording equipment – used to test resonance, to transcribe fragile broadcasts and send them for approval. Not on phrasing, that’s decided six months before – the score of speechwriters finessing even the slight stumbles – but the parsing, the pacing, the slender pick between vowels. One must beat three seconds, one must remember to pronounce ‘oh’ in a sufficiently ambiguous way as to appeal to both the Northern and more city-based listeners.

Go on. Say anything. Speak into here it will be fun.

Holding out the microphone – its muzzled head. The fuzz of static’s a purr, an animal’s fur one strokes! He gazes, leans his head, tilts close, a strophe of movement. Formed into sound he’d be a single vowel. The curtains drawn, as with any broadcasting bout – and the servants all out, save Wulfson in the hedges, hauling up the roots.

Dion grazes his face against the fist of mesh – and jumps at the thresh of sound, the slap resounding. It’s all my effort not to laugh. Let’s try again. Just say one word.

Professor he says.

The sound reverbs. He fingers the wires, is inspired: holds a hand against the speakers, his hair, his entire head, and says You.

You want me to speak? Here. I lean forward. This is the Professor on his daily broadcast, one-time edition, for Dion alone. I know he’s a very special listener.

He’s thrilled, grinning – vibrates with the voice, his sleek body bound to it, throat to throat. I’ll armour you all over, breastplate of syllables, mail of verbs. Let me clothe your body with claddings out of sound.

A door below opens and shuts. My wife’s vowels grinding up the stairs.

If she comes here – she sometimes bends her head around the door, says How much more, will you come to bed – he could be engineer, or gear-adjuster? Sometimes a bulb breaks deep in the machine, and cleaning takes two men. Their aprons prone with glass.

And she will ask him down to tea. Like Roxborough – like all the trenchmen before.

Her step across the stair. Who’s there? We could be boys, held-breath in the attic, torch switched off and taut with terror. I guide him back behind the door, paw over mouth. He’s delighted - droll entertainment!

She opens – Hello darling. I thought I heard the speakers.
Hello. How was your day. I’m bright, almost alight with interest – full-blocking the way, my shoulders swaying frame to frame.

A flurry of coughs and colds. The season I expect. One classic lesion case I had to refer to the Upper Clinic. Why do people leave things untreated so long. She takes off one small glove. That rare control of movement. Never graceless. Makes me feel insane –

Ah not all of us are blessed with your sense. Besides it’s bravery. Perform the Herculean labour of outlasting the infection the broken limb, and earn your lion skin.

Unhealthy attitude. And now an operation – honestly. The other glove she picks at nail by nail. I’m trailing its exquisite slowness. Behind the door a shift, an imperceptible sound. I go loud, lean on my ground –

You must put it out of your mind. You cannot control the vagaries of human foolishness.

No. It makes me tired. I think I’ll sleep briefly – before dinner. Turns blessedly away – the long ache of her back goes up a stair. Looking at her hair I think unaccountably of Paris, putting lavender in the plaits, its wet nap soft on my stomach. The cold of the carpet.

Draw yourself a bath. We’ll eat late if you like. Don’t dream of old ladies’ lesions that will quite spoil your appetite. This cheer, this chew at my own cheek – the suspense is squeezing at my lungs.

I’ll think hard of sensible things before I fall asleep. Don’t work too hard.

She vanishes into the harder shadows. Pauses, closes the upper landing. I retreat into the room.

Wulfson I say into the phone could you call up the car.

Dion is silent still.

Remember the symphony next week be dressed on time I say – and slip him down the stairs to open air, the car, the smart of wind. David’s little new symphony on display! I dip Dion’s head low at the car’s door so he might enter without exciting notice. He’s shoeless, carries them in his lap.

A snap of wood. Wulfson is on the drive, dabbing and sweeping off the leaves.

Sending a parcel then sir he says as the car, carrying my crouched-down child of gold, goes round the gate.
Yes. This is the usual course – a forced and swift delivery of some direly important missive, missed urgently by some underling. Has he seen the gold hair in the car, the gleaming farce? He makes no sign, is blind – possibly purposefully. The Minister wanted to see the broadcast this evening. Impatient men!

Yes sir. So many types of men there are.

He takes up the broom again and bows. What could I ask him if language was free, if it failed to carry consequences? Of what he saw in our faces, our fragile links, our blinking at the light.

He must be my age, older, bold- brushed like a calligrapher’s signature.

But my tongue is clamped. This pressure on the larynx like a looping chain. Thank you Wulfson. That will be all.

Later, in the midnight prison, the officer says Tell us what he saw.

I am again translator, tricked-out in my dutiful duds to thud the soundings from another traitor. Why do they interrogate at such insensitive hours? It must be below freezing; I finger my fur wrap, think of Dion draped in sheets asleep. He sleeps on his back like a barbarian prince.

The prisoner says I saw the meeting. It was a close fit I nearly sneezed so many times. Please don’t let them hurt me it is true.

I say You were hidden.

He says Yes to hear better.

I say Why did you hide.

He says To do my duty to the Regime. I swear I am a loyal man. I hid and it was so difficult – please, I have a family –

I say Where did you hide.

He says Behind the door!

I am off, I am unlooped. Laughter slops out of me, it sluices the walls, appalling! The nervous tension breaks, it flakes off my face. Like a tendon severed shivering out its weight –

The men seeing me laughing close the door. One says Do you need water is he all right. Is he mad.

I’m fine I’m fine. Forgive me a momentary loss – of poise. The noise has frightened the prisoner into fits – he’s bitten through his lip, the grip of tooth in shock.
I’ve run amuck into a darkness. Drill myself back to the rigidity, the bridge across two tongues.

It is real fear. Her face upon the stair. Seeing him prostrate on the floor. The great split suffering of her face. Its life of grace.

6. The Wife Dreams

Why did they take the photograph.

Dreaming now – and aware that I am dreaming for the leakage of memory. Otherwise girded up behind solidity. Bone.
Shave out the black spots on the femur with the sharpened blade. Observe the holes the pips of air within the skeleton. Fill with fluid with blue water for a better scan.

Rush of it flushing and flexing over my hair. Crack of the dam over the reed-beds.
Paid six coins for the photograph. I had money in the delivery room because when the pains came we were shopping. Trying on gloves. Laying them against my neck to see tones.
Red leather not quite it makes you look like a burning saint.
Skirt they pulled so rapidly over my thighs the seams split. I thought vaguely that will need mending I wonder who can do it I know so few women.

In the photograph he seemed half-vanished. Loose fists. Already impossible.
It was medical. Evidence. There had been a child. They kept a copy of the photograph to put in their section for records. Deaths For Which The Mother Is Implicated files.

I had helped at births and so thought I understood them.

During the delivery my husband talked in my ear. Trying to draw the baby out with his voice.
Instead it hooked the other way. The baby died I will follow his voice anywhere.
Shift upward into sleep. As if trailing a boat its underside through a lake. Seeing the propellers vaguely turning thinking *There is my body asleep. There is the rise and fall of my chest. There is outside the window noise of a car.* Follow it through the water through the wall. Turning and turning.

I see them strip the photograph off my body. I see Luise giving me another but its face invisible I cannot turn it to find the evidence. *I must see it* I say *Do as I tell you* she says.

Faint brush against my face. Sulk of heat in my abdomen. Held down underwater by eight women's hands breathing it so easily the lightness. Tasting the salt. Lace of weeds of brack and tadpole clusters in the ears.

Against the inside of my lung the split of peach the happiness. Hoarded from the rally. *Is this the real sensation or a memory of sensation.* Outside the car draws out of the driveway.

Reach towards it without touching. Draws away. Pursuit. Hold it cradling feel its succulent burn.

Inside my husband's room a sound a fall of papers. Did I hear it at the time. A fall of papers. Whispering at the door.

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**7. The Composer Has His Premiere**

Curl the foam over the bone.
Sink into the hiss of water.
Carve yourself out of air.

Shaving; and the basin cooling at the hip; and open-shirted, singing into the light! For it's early – sun still dripping through the dome, its slippery sides; and the suds brightening in the slant of morning shine; and somewhere a bird sounds; and here is David clean, his thrust of hair, his newness.

Still early. And the expensive tuxedo brushed and still. Its held breath. And there is music in it – this tending, this stripping; the Maestro throat-humming as I foamed his lip; and the iron loving its duty, its plunge – bow onto string! I played him
mornings, scraping out his dullness, his overnight dust – bringing him into the clearest notes.

And now my own premiere – and shaving, shaving; to be soft, and supple – for the bowing onstage; and shearing the weak parts, the buckling –

Two days arrived from the country I was washed. Regulation said the official who came to the door for me. Every country immigrant. Keep your eyes shut for it stings. But I’m apprenticed I’ve a letter I said and they said No difference get in line. Whippet ribs pale as grease. Stripped down to skivvy, to sagged johns, sockless, blinking in the underwater light of the immigrant baths – and a queue of us, boys up from the mines for city luck, strutting and shivering – and boiled, shrill of the disinfectant on bareness, ached for hours – and the powder from high buckets giving us ghost-hands and faces – and rinsed, plush and weightless, pushed into the sunlight –

I would not cry. And the other boys some of them did. And I would not.

The delousing on the first day at least made your itching stop. This was just cruelty.

Excise all but the necessary the Maestro said.

What weaknesses – would I eradicate? My unsteadiness of hand. My voice. My need for sleep for heat for food. This wide-flat face shining in the mirror, the shaft of light. To be inhuman – would be simpler; to be unbodied, needing nothing, cleaving without obstruction against the pure vibrations of the score –

I wrench my sodden cuffs. Their failed weight.

Would cut out that deep rift between the eyebrows. A smooth scar.

Elsewhere above an oboe sounds. Its long cruel graze. They are rehearsing; and the filaments will soon be blinking, opening; and the stage scoured and vulnerable; and it is two hours off; it pares down to this, this slender part of time –

The shaver cools, and blanches the skin. And it has been years, years; eight waiting suspended, netted in hope; and asking Will it be this year; and he always saying Not yet; Not yet –

I look at the fine hair in the sink. Gather it across one finger. Scarcely enough still to fill a cupped hand.

Under the stun and flash of shaves a fear – that startles; the failure, its hum, its chord. Beneath my ribs its vibration. The Maestro right – not ready, malformed, barely moulded – and not real; just shuddering, just a falseness, an impostor – I slip.
Blood strings a slowness down.
A stain – upon the bowl. *Evidently you are not ready –*
Pause. Watch the streak – across the fat of lip. Here is David’s blood colouring. Here is his form. Here are his hands gripping. Here is his want – so full it hurts the room; so much, so much.

My face leans forward. Enters the water. 
Up to the ears its startling muteness. 
Pull the silence into yourself. Feel its drag. Be still.

*****

Waiting –
The stalls are filled – at least; though less below – one can see from this side-stage point; one can track –
Hans appears. He is smoking; rolls another as he speaks; is dirt-collared. Leans his head across. 

*Here you are. I thought you’d locked yourself into that bathroom for the evening.*

*Hello sir. My voice failing. Its tautness in the dark.*
*You didn’t have to buy yourself a suit. Ordinary clothes are fine.*
*I know. It seemed proper.*
*I suppose so. There are a lot of important people out there. You’ve got to impress!*

*Are there? But it’s so –*
*Ah, no offence eh. A small place. But good pedigree – the Theatre Of The Parade Grounds has held Regime premiers since the Father Leader’s time.*

*Really?*
*Yes. Met him once as a young boy. We all knelted in the corridor and he passed his hand over our heads. Shook for hours afterwards eh. Touched by a god – I still feel it now. Gestures to my smudged lip. Got yourself a wound then.*

*Yes sir. What David feels is truth. That he be bruised pulped exposed at the bone. That this damage is himself. That cuts are honest.*
Hans twitches the curtain. His carefully expressionless eyes. Good title The Trials Of The Worker. Looks nice on pamphlets. Looks at my carcass in the tuxedo. Its starch. A good debut for a young unknown artist – I think it will go well.

I hope so. Provided I am an unknown.

Oh definitely. He’s light-voiced, not looking at me – A boy from the countryside, self-taught, his first symphony. You couldn’t be more obscure – we even misspelled your name, I’m terribly sorry about that eh.

Thank you.

And he being no fool – and wanting nothing soiling his stage; under the Father Leader’s feet, swelling the soles of shoes. And so has unformed me – taken name, stains, memories of hands bound on the flagstones – and left the rest under the lights – to rise.

Perhaps later you can correct it. When things go well for you.

Perhaps.

We’re nearly ready to go on. Koch better turn up, the swine. We’ve had one less trumpet for a week. Holds my shoulder – and is gone –

The curtain draws.

Seeing from this point the slash of faces – their upturned bowls; the eyes, the eyes turning, their silence – and knowing their craving, knowing their healing scar – saying Show me, I open my mouth to you, just play me a thing that holds –

The Maestro said Give them one beauty they’ll follow forever.

Strike them like a gong on glass.

Thinking in this sudden splashless silence of Elke.

Whom I slept with all last spring – slept with one hand hooked in her panties protective, curled; quietly, sleeping breast to back; and the soft dipping rivulet of her hair – and sleeping she departed, back on the train to the summer flocks, she was rural, she was a season-worker on land, she threshed and milked and tanned - sleeping; sleeping together we farmed the small field of ourselves –

Her body spread out in me. Its fervent smell.

Elke who spoke in the up-down Northern rhythm. Like a spatula flapping. Beating the side of her. I made her talk for hours. Put her in bells in percussion in drum-parts; which were angular and startled; and the Maestro even said There’s flavour to these there’s a girl; but summer smelt on her and I still had no job, was just a mere seven-year apprentice, and she left –
Months ago.

What is forgotten. What is beaten from your body.

Tonight's piece finished she was already two days gone.

The percussion begins – its unsteadiness, its swerve around the floor, refusing to settle, unpricking from the brittle four-four signature – and rises. Elke speaks aloud –

Forget entanglement. Forget desire. Leave the body.

_Music is cruel_ said the Maestro.

******

The curtain has fallen – and the lobby fills –

Perhaps a few flaws in the instrumentation – must fix the aria in the first act; too high, too high – and the soprano a squeaker, fussing – but a flush, a crash of relief –

By the paths to the mines they laid burning peat for the night workers. Stacked crufts of orange embers half a man high. See the road laid out before you newly. Its belt of lights into the distance.

Duck into a rehearsal room. Long mirror slung into the corner. Go close – to crouch over the reflection, horse to trough; scrape at hair, at cuffs. The light dim. Filling the shape the strike of self. Crest of health, of happiness –

Could write to Elke – in her cut-grass croft of town. Somewhere North. A settled composer now. Good pay. Would you visit. A weekend – perhaps. Buy her hats – a long ribbon for the plait. Though not knowing – precisely her last name; but the Registry will have her –

Hear two men enter – musicians, must be, looking for cases; the smack and split of closing lids.

_Overheard them as I was coming out of the pit eh. Usual city lot. Reviewers from all the rags. A few notable ones it’s the slow season._

_Were they pleased I think it was a good one. Lots of solo bits for me! I don’t know. They weren’t talking about that._

_Then – ah. What do we do? Warn Hans? He may already know. He’ll have sat in the stalls._

_Pray to the Leader then – oh. It’s David. Hello._

272
Hello. You played splendidly.

Thank you. You look very well in a tux. Doesn’t he.

I say I was straightening up. Just going to go out front and do the rounds!

Lightly, lightly – the composer of note, the new rising –

A sudden startled note. The trumpeter says Now – wait.

What?

Pause. Flecked with a darker note. Well. We’re having a celebration back here – don’t you want to stay? There’s no champagne but it’s black-market red. And smuggled cakes we always do it for a premiere.

Yes – stay with the fun. The other – violinist – bends into the flow, reaches for my sleeve. Conciliatory, conspiring – The girls from the theatre across the road are coming.

I’d love to. But I must do my duty – and go speak to the reviewers – very dreary of course.

The brief split of their glance. Haul me to a side. Take out the score as if consulting it with me – its thin sheets, brief, our heads bent over –

Voice in my left ear. Unturning – fixed staring at the first movement. Its fraught smudge – cheap ink, the good stuff always hard to source. David do you trust us.

Yes.

Stay here.

What’s happened?

Nothing. One points to the top note as if querying. Moves his finger down the bar. I nod, play the part –

Did it go badly. Are the reviewers going to be cruel. Is that the point.

Soft left voice. They know – where you came from. We heard it.

Right voice. You can hear all sorts in the pit. See their faces.

I see. Scar on my name. Bite out the bone.

Turn the page of the score. The room now filling with the other musicians – slapping their cases, taking off ties – We don’t blame you. Gorgeous – we thought. A beautiful piece – and perfectly Regime, just those little experimental bits. But there may be fuss. Unpleasant. At least at the moment.

Right voice. No it’s not your fault.
The girls are coming in now. Just stay here. Leave the critics and the crowd alone – they’ll dissipate without a figure to focus on. We’ve seen it before.

Caught between two choruses. There is a term for it I’ve forgotten. Stripped out of me.

I step out of the ring.

I must go out and see. Perhaps if I explain it to them – that I was set free, that the police said I was innocent – they’ll know the whole story?

Yes. You’re so new. It might work of course.

Their faces without hope.

What did the Maestro say technicalities and politics. Hand slapping the stage. Fade to darkness.

Walking behind the crowds as they spool out – from the upper levels –

Feel suddenly wet on the cheek again – as if dipped into the bowl in the morning; and a line of water at the edge of hair; and the pointed tips of young curl at the ear just soaked, just lying flat to the touch –

Walk among them thinking Will you cry out and say it was heresy. Did you care or know about the slap of hands the experimental drums my dead master. Of course not. You are just sated – just distracted, a finger in the mouth – and home, now, smiling – and to read the reviews tomorrow, to know what you thought of it. Who’s afraid of you? Nobody!

And I must go to meet them smiling – and will convince them of its righteousness – of my pure intent – it is possible; the Maestro said I could be convincing on things I loved –

More accurately the Maestro whispers When you grip a thing you do it with all teeth and both hands don’t you David.

Split the lobby curtain – and move, straightening the collar –

Straight into Heinrich! Heinrich who was golden at the Conservatorium, six-year scholarship, lauded – and flat-haired; and rich-fathered, inheritor of lands, of offices –

Von Sayer having refused to teach him.

Saying The musicianship grand but in the hands no spirituality.

This signifying nothing –


I say Hello Heinrich. How unexpected.
He says Yes. Does not shake my hand. *I was unsure as to whether it was true – the rumours. That you were putting on a symphony. I thought you had died. I see that you have not.*

This said impassively, precisely, without offense – as if printing them on paper, letter by letter. He is leader of the Young Corps, moves with wheat-field grace; is solid, technically astonishing, have seen him step onto stages and play for an hour from memory – this great machine. Teachers referred to him as the future of Regime music. But precise – instead of experimenting, never fragile, never weeping at the rise of chords – just solid, fine-chested, long-armed.

*No. They let me go after interrogation. The Regime knows I am innocent and showed me mercy.* I am eager – perhaps he liked it, perhaps he wishes to give me praise, a few ideas –

*I see.* He bows his head. *But you are not performing under your own name.*

He has a programme in his hand. Hans’s judicious misspelling. That was to conceal me. And allow me to flourish in the world – unseen, temporarily.

*A mistake. The printers here are not very good. It doesn’t matter, I’m not offended.*

*That is not the point.* Has always spoken deliberately – arrogant. His high nose. *It is an offence to conceal or obscure your identity. Particularly after an arrest or trial.*

*I know, Heinrich. I have never hidden. All the musicians, all the members of the Theatre – know my identity. I have only ever been honest with my employers.*

And it is true – that they knew freely; and that the Professor arranged it in full openness – without concealment, without false papers. He not being stupid. And musicians not caring, not over-possessed with Regime feeling – if they get paid; and get tasty parts to chew, fragrant solos. But a misspelling on a programme –

He studies me. *But they, after all, are bound to you - by your joint commercial enterprise. It is crucial to be honest and open. To be judged in the eyes of Regime people as yourself, purely, in your devotion and your service.*

I recognise the phrase- from one of the Professor’s most famous broadcasts – and curse him, in my head –

*My music is purely myself. Did you hear any of the critics? Were you in the audience?*

The critics outside circulating. In long ovals like waiting horses on the hunt.
They were deceived, David. I trust you meant well. But it is not lawful. It damages all of us for you to conceal your wicked past.

What passes between us. Our two vibrating parts. The air’s filaments taut –
I am not wicked, Heinrich. You don’t believe that of me.
I will always accept the judgements of the trials, if that is what happened. I do not know, of course, how you really came to be free, and you might be lying to me. Says this without inflection. As if a violin plucks just one string, emptily, flat-handed against the neck. But your association with a known traitor must be worn openly.
I am as loyal as any Regime citizen. Hold my hands together – a stave locked in a rest – to keep them from shivering.
I hope so. But loyalty is not found in concealment. I hope that you will understand that I explained your background for the best reasons, for your own good. His eyes are wide open as a fish – glaring in the dark, sightless.
What? Silent ring in the ribs – like a broken bell.
He speaks slowly, kindly – It was my duty to alert all the reviewers to your association with Von Sayer. The work of State critics is vital, David; they produce the appropriate judgements upon art as judges produce them upon crime, and have a responsibility to their audience – to have all available evidence.
Shaking thickness of voice. As if through cloth. I understand. And so you told them –
He is serene. It is the only correct way. I could not let such a huge weight rest unsaid. It is for our own protection, of course. If you are harbouring the same sentiments as your master, if you are still a disciple of his horrific thought, we, the public, deserve to be warned. If not – you spent so many years in his company, we must all be guarded against his influence. Particularly you yourself.
I am innocent. They let me go.
I hope so. I hope that all evidence suggests that you lead a clear life devoted to the Regime, and have cleansed every taint scrupulously. You must take care. No tension or threat. Mere fact.
Thank you for your advice. I will make sure to take it.
He bows. And is correct, correct – while outside the critics devour – and are writing in their notes ‘traitor’, ‘could sense Von Sayer in the movements’, falling over themselves to appear correct and above board; and huddling at the score for hidden
messages, codes of evil – and *For the honour of the State and the Regime. Good evening.*

Moving away he adds *I am glad that you are not dead.*

Glad that I am not dead –
Feel my tongue in my mouth dry as if after a four-part symphony.
His bastion of righteousness receding –
So certain. And untroubled by nightmares. And born to high office the Conservatorium the ease – commissions waiting, piled on plates, for him –
Move away from a noise it narrows. Into a cone.

*Strike* at a thinner and thinner part of your ear.
*Aim those arrows at the eye* said the Maestro.

The back entrance doors hauled – and coatless; and my hands stripping the lock – and out – into the ice-splintered air; and lungs opening and ached; and leave -

Unseen. Here is David escaping. Here is Von Sayer’s boy – branded; and the stench of it on him; and strip and strip and it will never be silent though you scour; and fleeing oneself –

A guard calls *Hey what are you up to* yell back *Late for a date* he laughs – he laughs.

The apartment block bleached of sound. No light; but the woodpile by the tap (hem of the trouser sodden, feel its drag, accept the weight) visible. Dion’s mother said *Wood gives off its own light eh.* Strip off four logs; keenly, keenly – and splinters across the chest – and up the side of stairs, hugging the dark –

Three matches, five, semi-quaver of light – and the grille gasps and expands –
In my arms the heap of papers feels heavier than it looks – with wax, good paper, letters, ink; a streaming, water-flow, its edges escaping, flashing out, extending beyond reach –

*A miner’s son knows paper burns cool and swiftly.*

*Soak in kerosene it flushes white and grins.*

*Thinking of paper. And how little in the mines it meant. Afternoons with the women stuffing the pillows with newsprint, old letters; or pushed in thickness between boards to keep the heat; or matting down hair with it when hands were oil and soot. The fathers and uncles thick-breasted with it in the winters – for the descents; undoing their jackets a small rain fell – tracts, magazines, old card, sweated into a flake-mass – and moulded to their bodies –*
From this the Maestro’s love seeming manic – noting even the smallest gripped idea; found scraps saying merely *Symphony in G concerning underground city* or *Arpeggio* beside a wrinkled stave – and endless. A man of notebooks, annotations – spreading, pressing his hold on the world. *If I don’t note it down it will disappear* – this vanishing always, this precariousness –

Rule of funeral orations. Never say the name.

It takes four five six passages – from cache to flames. Here is David packing the sides into the swollen grate. Here is a mouth of ash it is his. Here is a smoked-hard body. Here is David. Wet on his face. Is he here. He is gone.

What can Heinrich do without his letters his smell.

In burning there is no music only voice.

The Maestro says nothing.

8. The Professor At The Opera

Nice little sing-song! I should broker more berths for boys with cultural cache. All sensible, perhaps a little stiff – but not once out of line.

Of course the drama’s denouement is not onstage but now – where the critics cast their votes. At least this is a fresh evening out - for old favourites, the Leader’s cultural loves, the reviews are, of course, pre-written. I could parse a whole one from its repeated parts (‘the heart of the Regime’s values’, ‘a classic that inspires the nation’)! And if they sense a falling-off in favour from attendees, they’ll deploy dummies through the crowds, actors loudly declaiming how delightful it is! Even a thick-headed grocer can grasp that.

*Did you like it, Dion?*

Yes.

He’s been well-dressed – a too-short suit, a cute bowtie. I sigh. I’d touched his thighs throughout; his muscles’ hum of heat into my palm.

*We’ll get you home. David will be too tired to see us now. We should leave him in peace.*

*Oh.*

*I know I promised to see him.* Drive the jealousy down. *But he will be exhausted. It’s been such a big night for him.* Look at all these people – wanting to con-
gratulate him too. The misspelling of the name – on the pretty white card! A clever touch. But it won’t do – to declare ourselves known, to behave as strangers while Dion drags at David’s arm.

Ah, here’s the opulent outlet of State outrage. Aleksander Czern: tyrant of the typed reviews, in imported shoes! His famous forehead’s its own foreign potentate, complete with ambassador, anthem, flag – but on such stunted stuff; a body barely fit for fuel. No fool, Aleksander. Has risen ridding the Regime of cultural rot. A spot from him and you’re made, or flayed in the square...

I brush his back. Ah, Czern. Did you appreciate the evening?

He smiles, shakes my hand. His is minute, mere sinew – but strong. Hello, Professor. Good to see you. The round of green composers begins afresh – and I’m one year older, once again. You, of course, never age.

It’s witchcraft, obviously. How did you like it? An interesting debut.

He’ll like the thing – it’s light, lissom, inoffensive in its bucolic bones. Folktales are always safe, straight bets, the Leader loving them so much.

Interesting! Stabilisation – the young ones always forget that virtue. We cannot allow cultural life to entertain these freaks of artistic caprice! He draws himself aloft. Protector of the public, patriot of the cultural good! What leads from things like that – a destabilised public mind, terror, the anarchy of twenty years ago? No - it must be ceased, one must be firm.

I quite agree. I’m startled – shock must show on my mouth, my teeth. Seek to draw him out – Even in such a subtle way –

Yes, it was very subtle. Almost naive – over-enthusiastic. And yet someone so young must be corrected – diverted into more correct channels – such bad influence of course –

He has a bad past? How could he know? Has David idiotically decided to be frank?

A citizen graciously informed me. Spent years with a known traitor. How the theatre put him on – You are not acquainted with him personally?

I shake my head, thinking swiftly. The author is – a person of interest.

Indeed?

I smile off-handed – Perhaps not to myself – but an official, you’ll know the name, wishes to see him encouraged. And one must answer to one’s superiors! Even at the expense of a Friday evening.
An official encourages him? How strange. His past –

Ah, Czern, I wave an insinuating hand, how do you think he survived? Powerful friends! We are men of the world, after all.

Still, powerful friends could get him a better stage than this. He looks distastefully at the dusty beams, the seams of rot on the polished stair. I flare with brief bile, and then regain my style; it was a choice, to cast him thus, into the lower castes. Less noticeable, a more natural narrative. And you attended in your superior’s place? You are a true servant of the Regime to sacrifice your evening - and your ears!

We laugh together. A flippant friend, Czern, but afraid; and conscious of the coils under our feet, their propensity to suddenly scorch –

I shrug. An attendance in person would raise uncomfortable questions – incongruities. I, however, am known to attend the opening of a ration-card envelope, and so can go unnoticed. It is all stage-craft, isn’t it.

I do quite understand. Discretion above all. Understand he does – the undercurrent, my thread of threat.

I bow. You will write a truthful review, I hope? My friend does intensely wish for an honest and accurate summation of merits.

Of course. It was an honour to see you – I must get the copy done before the morning deadline. I fear I’m being rude –

No, no. Godspeed! I look forward to the pleasure of reading your work, as always.

And I of hearing yours. Good evening.

That at least is fixed – he’ll stifle his invective with a milder milk. No fear inspires like a superior’s subtle hand!

Dion is restless. Urges at my arm.

Yes, yes. We’ll go –

But there’s the Minister! The afternoon of the aviary (succulent, those bird-calls – saying Dion here’s how you do it, moulding his throat for the cry) a month ago – and miles of silence separate us still. Had hoped to see him here particularly, for amends, to befriend again after that slip. Hopefully he’s still half-deaf –

Good evening, Minister. He is tall, tremulous – a stark-angled ancestor gave him the gift of that nose, that nascent chin, a near-cataract eye by forty! He turns, tries for a bow.
Ah, Professor, fine evening! I had near forgotten what your face looked like. You've been absent for so long I half-suspected you'd defected.

We shake both hands in the hideous Regime style. I am all apologies again. I'd prostrate myself if I wouldn't roll on the floor like a walrus. Bellies do get in the way of appropriate contrition. My wife's health is still delicate – but I trust you solved the problem?

We did – though of course your help was dearly missed. But I am being charmless – who is your companion?

Czern not having asked – being tasked with pumping me of precious data, and damn all others. A single-minded sort! But the Minister's of sleeker stuff.

This is Dion – a young friend in need of some culture. He works in the Labour Yards.

Dion, I notice with dark presentiment, is shifting with some subtle fear, a bull's bolting instinct. His face is fretting in it, though he stands as immobile as any menhir.

This must be a great change for you, Dion. The Minister's famous voice a vial of cordial –

The silence is startling, Dion fidgeting, and I find myself, alarmed, bending to appease –

Please beg his pardon, he's a quiet sort.

Now that's beautifully rare. Most men your age, Dion, you can't pay to be quiet. I have a few on my staff. Always declaring their opinions at top volume. What did you think of the performance, Dion?

Where is David? He'll coax the boy into a candid mood. Introduce his Queen to other, older men. That I cannot, that I am still provisional, is painful.

The baize doors to backstage are still fixed closed – and Dion's silence protrudes, it splits the air. I feel his sweat spread across his pelt.

The Minister's perturbed. I had always thought, he says to me, you liked the chattier types in your companions. Possibly this is a better option. He turns. Here, don't be afraid, young man, I'm no threat.

Extends his hand –

Dion, absurdly, angles himself behind my back.

Stop being rude, Dion, I say with a ribald rigidity, and then, I'm sorry. One must make allowances –
But the Minister, mildly amused, has followed – as if doing a dance; and approaches the animal not lightly, not lissomely as a fellow-mate, a friend in state, but swiftly – and surprises Dion with a Ha! –

And I feel Dion’s frantic hand, its paw mauling the air, its smack and spurt –

The remaining guests are aghast. Dion disappears – but here is the Minister, his massacre of face. He thumbs it wonderingly, rejects my offered rag–

The Guard arrives. Everything in order? An assault a guest says. A young Anarchist!

No anarchist, merely a frightened child – with an unfortunate story, I say. Serenity spreading my voice, sinking its taut tremor. Let nobody touch your turmoil. Let the narrative never leave your grip.

You are injured, sir? asks the Guard of the Minister. He shakes his head. You bear the full burden of the responsibility? he asks me.

I do.

That will be all. The Guard leave - we are adrift with a bereft silence. I’m secretly stark-shocked – can feel the old-man spasms, the sprinting heart. My body's broken its dykes, it shakes. I curse its weakness, its weary will –

There must be a word in English for the moment when two people, intent, begin to speak simultaneously – and refuse to stop, to allow the other leeway, but merely mow onward.

As I say You have – my deepest assurances that it will not be repeated.

The Minister says at the same time Your taste was always peculiar, Professor, but now it lowers itself beyond my sight. To bring such companions to public theatres is an indiscretion at best. The dissonance of our duelling voices. His endurance eking him out as the victor – echoing after I have sunk silent.

He’d rather I kept him indoors – as with whores! Yes, I can fuck the full fraternity as long as it’s locked from sight, out of the respectable light –

Regime Radio voices must be paradigms of virtue, Professor, not dabbling in disrepute for some bizarre amusement. I thank you for your invitation. Good evening.

He retreats. Regal – his ass solemnly puckering with its own self-righteousness!

Paradigms of virtue! We can talk the triumph, recite our little lines from any vantage point, atop a widow, from a beggar’s bed – but if we’re well-scrubbed in public all is well!
Dion, whom I thought had fled in fright, is still-faced in the snow. The frost upon his face. His fear retracts, rescinds its grip.

*Dion. That was my friend. Why did you do that? You were afraid? He wouldn’t hurt you.*

His shoulders now sunken again, now calm as cooling sky. Still my breath shakes in me, spits in my lungs.

*Did you get blood on your hands when you smacked like a beast? Let me see.*

He offers them calmly. This cool child. What does he want? What dips and moves in his monotony? He yields the field of himself for grazing, for my crops and looped hothouse blooms – but craves for nought; cries out in the night, and then is nothing. I feel the sting of snow on my bare brow, and breathe out.

All previous youths – whom the Minister minded less, their tresses being pulled *discreetly* – desired, drew blood, blew kisses for a price, and that was finite; the finger seeking honey at last met a husk, a hive of hunger, and retracted. Roxborough sated me in full payment for his state seat; we were satisfied, we parted passively. Bart broached the banks of want, and thus was drowned. The sound of this boy’s startled slap is foreign, fills me. The hands are cold but clean. I introduced him poorly – will pull the freight I must, to fix the offence. No matter.

*Shall we go home? Tomorrow we must write an apology to the Minister.*

Yes.

One’s appetites are never absolutely sated – but sliced, refined; until they’re slenderer than spines. Their points pinioning the skin.

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**9. The Wife Returns To See Luise**

*She wants to meet you* Beatrice says.

*Who.*

Knowing. In my lungs her voice. Drag of it across my throat.

*Luise. She says tomorrow.*

*The next meeting isn’t for a week.*

*She says tomorrow.*
Wulfson catches a fox in the garden. Its blood-muzzle sweet. Sniffing the livid air.
I let it nudge its moist forehead along my arm.
Prey being such a serene word. Lie down in its dark hinge. Feel the snap.

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To whom do you prescribe sleep the examiner says.
The old have no need of rest they are drifting into an angrier sleep. Hurting in the dark.
Children hurtle into it sideways. It pulls them over and their gravity lifts.
Sleep for the blistered the chronically pained the stubborn. Those who press at things all night.
Press press press.

Wake into this. Strange defining dream.
Its outlines brilliant on the shade of the lamp.

Luise’s office is brutally lit. No pictures of any kind. She smokes.
Woman like my childhood women. Hair in scraped braids. Keep it out of the mill the corn the wet of linen. Waist-heavy weight one carries.
Flat-faced so the elements run over. Women in my village live past husbands. Enter time without touching it.
Angry with effort. Sweating into the life-braids.

So what are your details. The cigarette slim and strange in her bash of mouth.
You know my details already. You have my Census.
Her smile a split bulb. Its slow unfolded surprise. They send us the details but I choose not to look at them. I decide for myself about my followers.
I am a foreigner.
Long pause. Scraped out of the walls. Think of the fox gleaming in its burrow.
You sound as if you expect me to be suspicious of you. I am not. Women are women.
Your origins are not relevant. Many of our most faithful servants to the Regime are foreigners by blood – though nobody will admit the fact. You are married?
To a prominent member of the Party.
She strikes another cigarette alight. *Fishwives are high members here alongside Parliament partners. Do not wall yourself into your categories. This is a trustful space.*

Hands spread steadily. Their grip in the dark.

*Thank you.*

*I have never seen you at my meetings before.*

*Do you notice everybody at your meetings?*

*Yes.*

*I was curious.*

Regards me. Sorts me into rotten wheat useful wheat parts for stuffing beds. *Beatrice said she had known you for years. Why now?*

*I was advised to come by members of the Census Committee.*

*You had not been fulfilling your appearance of duty then.*

*They said so.*

*Why not.*

*I had been ill. For months.*

*Illness is no barricade to service. Irene Kovich dictated eighteen diktats to the High Parliament while stricken with a recurrence of childhood polio. What prevented you?*

Prevented. As if it acted upon me. As if my own self did not seize me in rictus.

Never speak of the disease as fault. Never speak of the disease as problem. Never judge the body as a moral instrument of law.

*I was not fit to provide any useful service.*

She opens one hand. Single smoothness on the split palm. Blistered clear from years of grinding soaps. Called washerwoman’s blessing.

*You were not convalescing from an illness of the body.*

*I was not mad.*

*I did not say so.*

*It was a bereavement.*

*Many women grieve. We do so publicly. We make an instrument of our pain. We do not shut ourselves inside a house for months.*

Animal tenderness. Bite on the bone of the weak. The simplification of that life.

*I am told I say that I grieved improperly.*

*I did not say so. Press of her braids upon her head. Feel them weighing.*

*It was - a severe loss.*

*Was it a child.*
What.
A child.
Yes.
Hang it out on flags. Light its scars across my body. Let him say it on the radio.
I see.
Silence. Brief succour. Scrape of my hair on stone. I am water.
Luise rises. Smokes looking at the door. I am sorry.
Thank you.
She sits. Looks at me in the hideous face. You are possessed of an enormous strength. I see it in you.
You are most kind. My mouth dyed rigid. Its stain.
Your child died. And yet you are lucid. You stand upright without bowing. You are built of iron. This – is your triumph over evil.
Fallen into the radio rhetoric. I feel completely untouched by the bluster.
You appear unconvinced. What do you feel.
I feel that you are very kind.
What then do you think. You don't see it as a triumph?
It is not a triumph. Sitting burnt and hollow. I will accept my duty but I cannot be held up as a paragon of nobility or – or fortitude. I forbid it.
You do not believe yourself noble.
Of course not. The word is not – real.
Nobility is sustained grace before failure –
I failed. My child died and I am alive. That isn't grace before failure. It is simply death.
You are alive. This is unjust to you. Luise burning in her chair.
I should have died when my child died.
The pulse of it. This truth. Its mechanics that I thwart. Its virulent law –
Why did you not.
Perhaps she expects a medical explanation but I feel the rush to be honest. To crack out of my skin. Because I am – selfish.
What have I lost. My child. My husband's love. My medically functioning flesh.
But oh the snow; and his hair under a comb; and your women giving me their hands as I came in, and my servant singing; I desire it, like an animal. And it will not exhaust, it has never exhausted.
Luise waits watching me.
I am afraid I bore you I say. Voice half-drowned.

Pause. My body stinging with violence. As if whipped. As if given that privilege.

Luise says We are not prisoners of our wills. They are our instruments for greater purpose.

I see.

What remains of your life are its necessities. Suffering has stripped you of all that comforts, all that succours, and yet your core will not shift from its root. Mourning is ended. The time has come to shift that great pillar of strength outward. You are a woman who will be great in her time.

Thank you. Unable to let this near me. Its spitting heat on my skin.

It is true. It is true if you will allow it into your being. What restricts you.

What restricts me.

His kiss upon my forehead in the kitchen. When will you learn not to interrupt. Listening to his broadcasts in the dark to feel his voice.

This wordless thing. Its grind upon my pelvis. Only with love with love with love.

I say I don’t know.

In my old village I swam in the mornings. Dawn green on the banks. Dark suck around my hair. Once I stroked forward through weed and brushed another hand. A man diving.

In this held silence I think of that now. Bursting awake at the suddenness of touch.

10. The Composer Reads The Reviews

There are words that strike dark fear-notes.

Low in the lung.


Hollow morning. I put the reviews aside – but return to one:

Heinrich Rastaff, the shining success of this year’s Conservatorium showcases, also attended the symphony. “Considering his background it was a good performance,” he noted. Rastaff has himself just been offered the prestigious appointment of collaborating on an opera with the famous Steinal Prize-winning librettist Oskar De Witt.
Four reviews, then – and swollen with a hidden lash.

Considering his background -

Had struggled through frustrating dreams – of stuffed mouth and clay-spit; and beating on the piano crying *Again!* when the player (whom? some youth? some vague face) faltered; and a want, a want, that stamped through music's thinness, that stepped out of its traps and plunged – into a darker thing –

And waking – angry still with desire.
What holds beneath music and refuses it.
What will not be named even by sound.

Four reviews, all with that undercurrent, that thread that indicates implicitly that I am watched, discovered, that they sense the blood on me: *Has clearly had unsanctioned influences. Not perhaps from a salubrious place.*

It is not worse. It is not the door broken in. It is not Von Sayer’s traitorous disciple.

And yet it is not safe. Despite the changed name – and Hans’s invention, the obscure composer rising from the farm self-taught, a flock of birds scattering – they knew; it leaked into them.

The Maestro said *Use your anger.*
No chord can emerge from this.
Only half-formed sound. Twisted and singed.

See Heinrich slipping perhaps past the critics in their chairs. A light remark perhaps – or an aside; and drops between them like wind-blown seed; and is in their shirts their pockets their shoes; and begins – in the dark, as the overture strikes up – to grow –

One review says *This composer will perhaps do well to return, for some years, to the scores of true Regime compositional heroes.*

I thought – dropping the papers to the floor, their gentle sotto slur – that it would be enough. A good place, an innocence, the musicians and Hans, and a reputable job. But here is David, and here is the fear, and the stink of it still on him, as if coming out of the ground.

I will never escape it – it will dog me all my life; and be thrown at me as I claw out of the pit each time – to slide back in; and though I produce beauty, magnificence, they will whisper *He is an error, he should have been shot.*
My father not knowing. And wanting to know. What drew his son off. Out of the bloodline. And I took him into the fields. And it was autumn and the foxes were out. And I said Listen.

And he said It’s just mess and I said Yes just chaos.
And he said But it isn’t music and I said To me it is. It is.
I am trying – not to weep. The light outside is vivid and blue.
Dion’s mother says You are awake and I say Yes come in come in.
She says Yes. Good morning.

Her settled doughy face – and I hide my scorched angry shame; which is living in the room; and is an animal breathing; and smell it smell it smell it –

Did you give Dion a gift? She has something – holding under her jacket –
No. Never having given him. Only intangibles. A shave a lecture a hand onto the omnibus. A friend with a gramophone, teaching him to dance –

Reading her face. For a smashed distrust. For how dare you how could you.

I found this. In his bed he hid it. A book – large, beautiful, pictures of soldiers in the high colours of pre-war printing presses –

It’s a lovely thing. I leaf through then shut it with one hand. I’ve never seen it before. Perhaps his friends gave it to him.
Expensive these books. I know. Look at the paper eh. Not the recycled stuff.

Old – before the war.

She is watching –

Do you think so?

What is it Dion is doing. You told me a bodyguard eh. To a prominent man.
That is correct. A Professor.

But not for money. They pay him no wages.

No. No as part of his Regime Service – like the Labour Yards. A good position.

Reserved for the sons of upper families normally. And much less dangerous remember I told you.

Yes I remember. How did he get this. No wages.

Have you asked him?

Yes. He said a gift eh. From his boss.

Well then it was a gift. I am not patient –
Expensive gift. Look at the paper.
I know. Gifts are common among that caste – upper class gentlemen. No wages but tokens of appreciation. It’s perfectly legal under the Regime Service rules. Why are you worried - do you think he stole it?

My Dion a thief no. I don’t like it. I will make him take it back.

I pinch my nose. Then his employer might be offended.

How do you know this man. The one who gave Dion this.

I told you all this at the time. I know him through the Culture Ministries. Very high up man who needs constant protection and liked Dion very much.

I know what you said.

It is a compliment. It means Dion is doing his job well. You should be proud.

Give Dion a gift like this what has he done. What could they make him do. Anything.

There won’t be any trouble.

I know. She puts her hands down. Does not move.

It is a clear threat. She expects me to counter it. To trounce it with a larger, a harder; scare her into her hole her buckets; and split it her open-faced fear –

I assume a careless expression. I’d like a cup of coffee. Could you check if the water has boiled.

Yes sir. Wants to see if she’s rattled me. Looking over her shoulder as she hoists the kettle.

Fear in its loping furs. Licking.

Have you read about Schlogel in the Cabinet I say. Casting about for a thing that might. Trying the notes for an echo. In the papers today. On trial for treason.

His daughter was smart eh. She is intrigued. Trying to find my angle. Turned him in. Protecting herself a wise girl.

Hard for her to do it to her own father.

Good citizens denounce. It preserves our liberty.

Yes. The smoothness of face – that scourc off language; expressionless, her cheeks hanging loose as meat.

Though there are some people. She smiles on the kettle. Like the butcher down on the Square. Him he does it for extra ration cards. There every Thursday before the delivery on Fridays.

Smart man.
You don’t catch me doing that eh. Looking past my head. Playing her part sweetly blankly. *When I do it it’s serious.*

*How serious.*

*People being cruel eh. That family in your apartment. Wouldn’t pay. Said it was my fault they’d shut me down. So I went on them. Anti-State sentiments I said.*

Circling each other. Mouths bloody. Reaching for a grip.

*Had they said anything. My voice light, light –*

No. *But I go to prison what happens to Dion eh. What happens to him. The street maybe starving. For family you do these things.* Fretted over with Dion’s face hers suddenly. See the origin of him in the lines of it. Then vanishes.

There it is. The note.

*Yes. He would be quite helpless without you.*

Seizing it; her terror cracking and splitting in the air like a sheet.

She gives no ground. Holds the searing kettle by the handle. Turns and looks. A step forward in the ring. *But you know about that eh. That old master of yours.*

Let her think it.

That I smashed him into rock. And split his bones in half. And took the weighted flesh and ran and ran and ran.

I shrug. *It is as the Leader says. Citizenship first. Love and duty and loyalty to the State above all other ties. Don’t you agree.*

*Oh yes. Yes sir.* She is sarcastic. I want to laugh.

What now?

I rise for a shirt – languidly – *I will be back late so please keep dinner warm.*

*Your rent is on the sideboard for this quarter.*

*You are going into town.*

Think of asking her *Why did you never send Dion underground I know they must have asked.* Well-paid the small miner boys for their size. Cripples, orphans, hungry heads going spare from big families. Deaf mutes hauling coal. Dead by ten most of them. Sluiced into water traps or slides. Six hundred metres down from sky.

*I have business I say. It may be some time.*
Here is the city. Here is a woman opening her window. Here is light on her hands and arms. Here is David who is in the grip –

Will go to the secret services – for her to see; and wait, and perhaps pack her bag, two shirts, a book of prayers; and let her flex inside her terror like a bug in an amber bead – and so have no more trouble –

The threat being insufficient without performance. Onstage assassins have real daggers. The audience hears the flinch of steel and breathes, believes.

Once as a boy I pretended my own death – to see how they cared; and lay down in a hidden ditch lit up from within by anger – and the soak of groundwater in my heel; and the lights of lanterns and calls not quenching my fury, wire in the skin – but the cold, finally; and the strong seep of the soil frost to the neck – and carried home in long blankets weeping, they never knowing it was my own punishment –

The HQ is in a central plaza – and a café opposite, long windows struck to the floor, where I stop – to smoke a cigarette, to break the adrenalin’s long white note, to modulate it into the breath pattern.

A note held four beats is trust. A note held longer is suspicion. Humans said the Maestro hear in prolonged single notes only the call to war.

Take a table by the view – separate from others, still a burning piece, vibrating the atmosphere, a hum in the ear of any man brushing close.

Had come here to scare her. She having seen me mount the bus – shining; and it going only to one place – and now here is the plaza’s soundlessness. A frank place – exposed; and the buildings sheenless, without markings, shearing away –

And watching for twenty minutes perhaps; there are two types –

One strides in the open entrance, flagrant at the guards, ripping the gate; and staring round, full of vanity – and nothing to obscure, no shadow, the whole of themselves inflated to be unimpeachable – and passing through with smack of cymbals, with ring of drum, the processing marshal steering onstage to proclaim the villain’s plot, in a synthetic crown –

And others shifting; uncertain near the street lamp, the corner – and examining, eight times, the dusted merchandise in the unmarked window – unable to move, unable to play the piece– and in this café there are many, holding their papers, looking to the window carelessly, one drink, three –
What did the man entering to denounce the Maestro feel? Was he strident – and giving himself altogether, bright-faced, a lit bulb of duty – or less sure, drifting between pavement and road, broadcasting his hope and ambivalence?

It is not relevant.

It has been enough time. She will think of it now – as done; and I will go home and reveal her saved, and give her blessing – and that will be sufficient for good behaviour –

Rising I see a newspaper flying across the road – torn into flags by wind.

Feel Heinrich’s face receding from me down the corridor. *I am glad you are not dead.*

A flick of anger in me. Flat slap in the dark. It will always be felt – even alone, even years off, fresh-stinging as a newly severed wire. His lack of pity – for a man who’d done nothing. His precious Polizei had let me go, punched me full of blood and then cast me into winter streets with my legs smashed and blank poverty; and he decides that it cannot rest, that I cannot have a chance – just a chance!

I could burn every copy of the papers – run torchlit through the city seeking them – and still not be clean; never be clean of this.

In the mines they called a fresh man who’d never been down the tunnels *white lady.* And after the first days of dirt never again clean. But dust in the eyelids the gums the organs the watering mouth. And even in death the coffin pillows scattered with black –

The cold of the evening gets into the grip of cloth to skin, flattening the nerves up against my thinner surfaces – collar stomach wrist. Like an animal clawing through lake ice. The damage of just one strip of line on a dedication page – to stretch over years, to stunt a whole life at the root, drifting from half-dead beating to rat-hard holds on the merest scrap of work – it is not moral; it is not the Leader’s will. To be forever guilty.

I am fixed on Heinrich’s face, on his blank-inflected voice – and was he pleased? And did he go congratulate himself in a bar afterwards, toast to his duty, to the brutal condemning of a fellow being’s hopes? And then go home, to mutilate the feeling out of a violin concerto for Oskar de Witt?

I am hot; despite the cool. I am ablaze with weak moral rage.

The radio has said *It is the duty of the upright citizen to inform for the sake of moral and social order. It is the essence of commitment to peace and prosperity.* It is
the elimination of elements of instability that threaten your State, your trust and your happiness.

Heinrich Rastaff. Who works at the Conservatorium. Who is twenty-four years old. Who is fire in the window and in the roof and on the open walls.

Here is David. Here is his moral, deserving. Here at last – is form – I see the clock as I leave. They are lighting the lamps at the Opera House. They are setting the stage.

*****

The police hub a converted auditorium – in a huge arc; the central circle stripped to metal and wire; the desks sloping up on all sides to the ceiling – which is alone untouched, which is gilded with nymphs, a leering king – from some other time; too high to touch perhaps, too domed, and so left decaying into sky –

Along the king’s arms bullet holes.

The nymphs half-undressed plaster. Their angry nakedness.

The acoustics perfect – an auditorium’s surprise; not a single voice in the atrium unheard – but striking upward; all desks absorbing, recording the mass of sound, its precise edge – no whisper, no smothered sign, but bare noise – excruciatingly visible –


On the overhead speakers white noise. Breaks off – name room number – returns. Relax into its expanse its folding its fuzzing splice. Open nerves to its interference. Merge into safeness, do not raise your head, do not feel the healed ribs the half-hobble feet.

Here is no David. Here is no person. Here is scraped space.

On the forms given – I wish to report a crime I wish to report a fugitive I wish to confess to a crime – third option in purple I wish to denounce anti-Regime activity. Slight smudge on ‘anti’. Sweat of human thumb.

Go into the consulting room be witless be strict be percussion. Its austere mechanics. Bleached of anxiety the space between beat and silence.

Identity of the person you wish to report.
Heinrich Rastaff.

Occupation.

Composer – at the Conservatorium.

At the Opera House they will be opening the green room now. Woodwinds holding their communion reed on tongue. Violinists comparing resins their small edible hearts.

Age.

I don’t – about my age I think. Twenty-four.

Mute-shells tightening rods string cloths. Pegs loosening out the bowl of sound.

Residence.

I don’t know. He works at the Conservatorium –

Please detail the exact circumstances of the incident you wish to report.

In the pit there will be the chairs positioning. Their open mouth around the lectern. One stagehand moves a cello music stand to the left. Aligns their spectrum.

I heard him at a public house last night. After 11. Arguing about the Father Leader. He said he was worth nothing but trash and it would be – it would be better for everybody particularly in music if he died.

So ridiculous, so blasphemous – that it cannot be believed; hearing the words is an act of violence – against self. Will be laughed off. Will be dismissed –

But stay with the Opera House – its lobby brushed now. Box office dimmed for the last takers. There will be stage men testing the oyster-lamps there will be programmes still wet still sticking on skin.

Other witnesses who heard and did not report it.

Only – only me. He was ranting in a corner – to himself.

Steady voice. In the Opera House the world is rational. So simple the driving of noise from an open reed a swollen lung a lit horn.

Anything further.

No – no.

Has prepared – if they asked Why do you denounce this man was he your friend – but there is nothing.

In the Opera House the rehearsing soprano holds herself. Enters the audience a cell at a time. Haemorrhages them into her own body.

The light opens and speaks.
Thank you for your honesty and fortitude. Please wait in the anteroom and sign your statement once it has been reviewed. The use of X may be used for statements made anonymously.

All right.

Sign X.

In musical notation x marks indeterminate pitches. Spoken voice breaking the stave. Release of held pitches under pressure.

For strings it means ghost note.

*****

A few ration cards –

Done. No fear allowed into self. But brittle still. And unsounding. No instrument in the body. Move forward out the exit door as shown. Perform the display of passes as shown. A simple starkness. Rising into this blankness as a saviour.

Punishment being a structural element. That saves. Corrects the weaker parts.

Beat of the hammer against my ribs my flanks my delicate bridge of foot. For being unobservant for not sniffing the secret on him. Should have known it just from his movement in rooms his posture asleep. And so beaten – for being blind.

Or earlier punishments. The Maestro standing as I played and ceased and played and ceased. Finger pads bleached out. Saying Repeat. Saying Repeat. Saying Do you understand stop being weak.

Older things.

When they took out the Brodzik boy for whipping. Having been stealing from the mine. And his bunk emptied stuffed with minerals from the lode. Nubbins in handfuls. Shirt up over his shoulder for mopping the gouges. Foreman wheezing and leaning after six strikes of ten. Only lines of light left in the trees. And his bare knees in the mud.

Got to make an example. My father at my back. We don't like to be taken for fools out here he'll remember it.

He's younger than me I say and he says He's a dirty thief now know that and smacks me.

Neck aflame with it. Palm mark on the tendon. Sleepless that night.
Breathe. Steady into the beat again. Staccato of shiver.
On the way home now I vomit on a side wall. Mouth a breve. White noise passing from the body.
Returning I give the extra ration cards to Dion's mother. Her brief salt-stricken face.
*It wasn’t for you I say.*
*I know it wasn’t she says. I knew that.* Her hand as she takes the cards as bleached as the winter sky.

**11. The Professor at the Ministry**

What did supplication look like, throughout history?
The Greeks knew all about it. The Celts. Offerings and ribald rituals. The open smoking bowels of an animus, an animal. The honour of blood and bone on an altar – a feast, for gods, for emperors. Not enough to simply bring them your body, your musk-oiled muscle, your service – supplication was enrichment of your superior, glossing them with gold. Whatever you prized most you presented. Money, your daughter, lines of linen, the best and brawniest animal you could fetch off your field, shaking its skull slowly in its jewelled yoke.

The Christian supplication, all this bodily mortification, somehow seems vain in comparison. Chopping off hair, rescinding the world, paring off its excess like the rind from cheese. Somehow self-centred. Myself and God, together, conversing in the night gardens, the monks thinking they held him between their hands in that peculiar flatness, like a clap. When really there is no self, only God.

The art of survival: give what you prize second-best. Conceal the family silver, the farm’s best sheep, the prettiest son. Or else cover them with muck until nobody wants them.

I am going to supplicate to the Minister, and am wondering what to offer him. To please his vanity, his health, soak his bitterness in sugar so that he comes out plump like a pudding sopped all year. What does a man like that want? Women? Men? Audiences with other powers, myself translating? (The foreign potentates always meet my arrangements. I suspect they view this strange country as an interesting anomaly,
a weird animal, irascible but entertaining to watch.) A prime stint on radio, his own vocal show? These ascetics are so difficult to please.

He still has the plaster on his nose. It shows no great injury – a bruise, a fruity plum that blooms across the bridge of it. Perhaps he smacked it on to see me – not above a little performance-play, this one – hoping to goad me into guilt, a filtering of favours to his house.

Minister. It is gracious of you to see me. Honour to the Leader. We salute, shake hands.

Honour to the Leader. The marks are fading, you’ll be glad to know. He gestures. Is no graceless ingénue – no galloping round the point.

I am glad to know it, yes.

Where did you find him, then?

He saved me – from a motor accident. Bravely waded into the wreck. Best make him a wholesome hero – they hold flames for that here, the old Achilles idea. Barely more than a boy – no parent, that hideous job in the Labour Yards. Essential, of course I know it, but brutal for such a young man.

And you took pity.

I am human, I did. You remember the giant Warburg? Like an ox, but scared of rabbits, small children. Could haul a military sledge thirty miles overland and sobbed when his animals died. Died, alas – died drumming at a Rally, run over. Took ten men to lift his limbs.

I remember. Knocked on the head as a child. Your young man must top six feet.

For all that he is gentle. Skittish perhaps. Prone to making awful mistakes. I lean, seize the core of the cause – But I beg that you take it as my failing and give me the punishment, rather than crippling him with an offence he will not rightly understand. We must be generous to the young, to the innocent.

Of course you have your own ideas about duties to the young.

I will not deny it. Frankness is fair. Don’t rise to the snide, don’t give bite – just abide –

Professor, I will tell you – I thought to have him and you arrested. His face is white – powdered perhaps, to smooth the cracks. But I realised – of course – that you are of immense value to the Regime, that you bring worth and value to the evenings of millions
of subjects, and that such a rash act would be bringing shade across my own judgement. The health of the Regime above one’s personal emotions. Always.

I thank you for your dedication to duty, but would have expected no less. Flattery like butter – which is of course rationed, except to the higher classes.

However, this association must end. He sighs and smiles. Let your young life-saver go, Herbert. Education in this sphere cannot elevate him; he will gain no distinction from it, he will make faux pas, you will suffer. Go back to your lively ones in the army, in academia! They can conduct themselves in accordance with our mores, and they glean so much more from your favours than this boy could.

It is sensible advice. I choke in my collar.

It is. What can a young genial cretin give you anyway, old friend? You prefer yours bright. That was always the point that distinguished you.

I do not know. The notion’s not a new one – having toyed with it, tramped its edges. Enlightenment perhaps. A guardian’s feeling. It is strange to feel responsible for such an unusual thing. Perhaps you have experienced this.

I have. I have children. But he is not your own son. He has his own guardians, perhaps. David – and perhaps a mother, he mentions her. As if she’s worth his weight! And if not – who are we to adopt every wandering pretty thing that comes past! It is unsustainable. No, go back to raising the young bloods with the good brains, that was acceptable.

Was it? I never recalled much official sanction.

If you weren’t sanctioned you would know it, and you are aware of that. And you would flout it in any case. The lack of permission makes you keener. But we have eyes. Keep within the lines, Professor. Do not miss meetings.

That was an emergency –

It was, and it was perhaps not. It is immaterial. Your position is based on your exceptional knowledge of your duties, and fulfilling them gives you a certain amount of license, but there is only so much space we can give you. You are outside that space now. Do not stay in the wilderness, or we will put out the lights that would guide you back.

Thank you for your kindness, Minister.

You are welcome. I look forward to hearing better things of you.

The wilderness being lush, being bushes fervent with scent, being livid lion-eyes in the dark –
I hail a taxi, being moneyed currently – had packed a platter of banknotes, to grace his fasces, but picked the wrong player, the wrong stage. Here is a man whose love is what’s Right, what’s Rigorous! Rigid mores are like chorus girls in coats: the crucial fun’s all concealed.

But it could be so simple, so un-fussed.

Dion cast loose, vamoosed, gone back to his iron and dust and thrusting pistons. Pristine again my places, no need to scour for traces of his tracks. His trail of blood all cleared – and David perhaps an ear too dangerous to fund. That Sarabande! I shake my head.

And so a return to ritual, to rounds of army boys, to broadcasts and the broken nights of trials –

And Anne – perhaps another pregnancy. Perhaps that. All the hope’s not yet hollow.

The taxi’s caught in traffic, trawls across.

What’s the matter?

Parade, says the driver, naval I think. My brother’s in that. Same uniform –

And can see it – slim through the cars, their bars and stars – the stunning march, their arched backs bridling off the boat, sea-legs afloat on land!

I hand the man a tip. I’ll walk – thank you.

And cast forward to watch – the rows of mermen, fresh from the sea.

There’s no small rise of lust, no bust of ventricle for some symmetrical face.

I’m looking at their clothes – noting the green, the sheen of tilted cap as it lies flat against the nape, the small capes of the officers in felt. The belts and berets! Would he like this lot? He’s more an armour boy, likes metals, miles of filed-down iron…

Could pick one of this parade as favourite. Give him his fill of frills on the sleeve. But be bereaved –

It is worth David, danger, drifting blood. My fragile flood of hair. My child-bear.

12. Anne At The Wedding

Summer wedding. Come with us said Beatrice. We’re all going. The women.
Docile afternoon. Sky smacked to give it fresh cheeks. Barefoot in the grasses.

In the upper room as they soak the bouquet stems I dampen my face.

Had come home from the interview accumulating clothes veils layers.
Four coats on the body. To close the space. To swaddle what had been exposed.
But foolish. And even in the thick of cloth a scraped thing. A flaring wound.

*She is a witch* I said to Beatrice on the phone later. Still eight jumpers deep. Not weeping yet.

*She’s like that.* Beatrice deeper-voiced than I remembered. Weight of it on the phone line pressing. *She’d be a good Census-taker but she prefers this. The activism. You should have seen the Women’s Corps before. Just knitting and recipes. Now it has muscle.*

Silence. Having spent so many words on the ground. Having given my son to anybody –

*Anne. Are you feeling all right.*

*I think I may be ill. Will you give my excuses at the meeting tomorrow.*

*Yes. You stay inside. Nasty virus going about at the moment. I hear honey and lemon works well – your husband can get lemons.* Amused. She knows the lie. Could trace any falsehood from the merest shape in air.

And so hoarded myself. Rearrange the plates of the skull. Fasten down the skin that flew brightly loose.

Before anaesthetic they stuffed the mouth. Textbooks say perfumed cotton or any cloth.
If she had asked I would have told her his name. Weakened even to that point.

But to be alone with women –

Tempts me outside. Hold the morsel out for the tongue. Touch of paw to the smell.

Womanhood in my village a strict circle in the earth. Myself the fox at the fence.
My father separated me early. *No sons you’re the eldest.* Piled a barn loft with medical books a single generator lamp. Ladder out of the last wood of the year.
Helping my younger sister haul the encyclopaedia she said *It's only because you'll never marry.* Light cracking on the crop furrows. Feeling my own small bones tighten the skin.

Women here fatter. Spilled onto the flat of the hand. Ripe in the hip and axis. Better for children for lovers for grip upon the world. Weight in the spaces. No flickering but the strong single surge. This lifelong pull to heaviness. Curve of my husband's belly my sacred place. Press my forehead against its cool lay it with flowers.

And so convinced. And laid out the chiffon dress. And open-limbed in the grasses. Crack of the evening shower still two hours off. Can scent rain at the edge of a landscape. Its long hard graze. Who is the witch it is myself. *Rain goddess* says my husband. Farmer's knowledge. Fractious birds the settling of cloud. Edge of green in the wind.

*How's your face.* Beatrice enters the room.

*Scalded.* That make-up. *Did you put belladonna in it.* She having painted my lips my eyes. Two lips pressed to a tissue. This whispering. *Oh hush.* *Come into the garden.* *The evening meal's beginning.*

Lavender in the water. Perfumed nape. Sprigs plucked from trees only by young girls. Or else what. Or else wilting. Or else carrying their scent into winter.


*Why did you make me come.* Feel the weight of the hair on my nape its regional bun. That I found in a Regime magazine. Lift up two plaits as in Plate A knot as in Plate B. *The Womens Corps is of course optional.*

*But not for me.*

*But not for you.*

*It just feels so uncouth.* I stretch and grasp my hands. *The sweating women.* *And the rocking back and forth.* You understand.
Seeking to go behind the wall again. Beyond their crushing push and the weird chants. Back into the slender part I have carved for myself: Ink. Darkness. Pen. Every evening away from him lessens my memory in his body. Like drops leaking as a sheet dries.

Beatrice laughs. Face splits into hammy halves. *Ah that would be the reasoning behind extending you the invitation. To see our civilised side.* Her arm in my arm steering.

Is it possible for there to be civilisation in this. Silly women giggling and feverish in a deserted old hall – *Have I even met the bride.*

*Oh yes. In meetings.* What's her name I've forgotten. *Blonde young hopeless with needles. But it's a community gathering. Neighbours wander in off the streets for the wine.*

*A man at mine danced three dances with me before revealing he was an electrician who'd knocked on the wrong door...*

Later when the rain breaks the women gather in an upstairs room.

Sugared almonds in handfuls. Tulle across the floor. Small knots of kiss here and here. Somebody ties her skirt at the waist to bend for the ice.

They are in their best outfits – ordered from the catalogues. Starched collars that have been lying startled in tissue for days. Thickened shoulders shifting under silk taffeta.

I think of aunts in the village their taut evenings. Turning and turning the fist of meat.

Myself in the ceiling called down to slice. Surgeons’ hands they knew even then.

When Luise enters the room I am carefully pouring wine turned away from the door.

It is customary they explain to keep the bride awake all night. Make her dew-yawning and acquiescent at the morning vows. Lower her from the window in helpless silk and wreaths.

Smoking they brave the spray at the window. *These Regime cigarettes they go out at a droplet. Here have another. Give a candle more light.*

Flutter of a coat in the corridor. In this light they all seem the same. I relax into knowing nobody.

*Vivid with wine one woman leans and touches my arm. How do you perform a vasectomy Doctor.*
Yes she’ll need to know. If he gets too prompt in his attentions.

Snip snip.

I laugh and explain. The light goes on and off. White arms in long shawls flicker past my back.

The horizon rolls and scours with rain. The garden marquee flapping in the soak. I am beneath the surface of consciousness but can observe it as a diver can look up at the ceiling of water. Note its insolence its brush of casual light.

Now in the gulp of dark we are discussing weddings.

Beatrice was wed young and without knowledge. Her husband so incompetent he could not undo her stays. Her mother at her with scissors the next morning.

Anya married twice both to strategists in the army. Says it was remarkably silly the whole thing and nobody knew where to put their legs and in the end she pretended to fall off the bed both times to be allowed to sleep.

Luise never married but at her sister’s nuptials guests over-filled the church. Down to the end of the garden the full of the street. Hymns echoed back so that even when it was still and done some men at the rear were still singing Amen.

The bride droops and so is draped under her several petticoats and left. Many flowers left on her many roses.

Light sucked through the cheeks. Outside the layers and layers of darkness thicken into a sweetness.

Loneliness when I confronted him with it was a small startling animal. Fret on the crevasses of the neck the shoulder-blades. Its slender breath its uplifted wing. Crush it crush it.

Nonsense how can you be lonely he said.

This gravid slide away from one another. Parting without rips. As a cooked meat falls to pieces. Eat your marriage in the night grease on your dress.

They say to me Tell us about your marriage. Your wedding. Eyes of us all like night fur. Fragile whiskers of match passed round for candles.

I was very young it was Paris I said. I wore blue because white makes me look serious like a nun. Afterwards we argued loudly about where to go for dinner and then took a cab four times round the Tuileries.
Feel its distance from my body. The past sealed in another country. Fixed over its borders beckoning.

Strips and streamers of laughter. Poor cabman says Beatrice. I wore blue too – rationing. Rattle in me of a vessel’s parched depths filling with wine.

Why have you never married I ask Luise. Hoping perhaps for a stab a glimpse of bitter vein. Riposte to the skinning. 

Lack of quality candidates she says. Failed their interrogations. Smiles.

I slip into fullness –

The night is ripe and falls, the stun of women rising and fetching cigarettes, water, drenching the flowers at the window for freshness, the broken bowl of voices in their spill, down all dresses and soaks the legs the shoes, and that frenetic hardness of argument that comes from agreeing so seriously, so strenuous it becomes muscle, so bright –

By the skin of the morning only Beatrice Luise myself and a few others left awake. 

Snatching pens from one another to sketch the future. No but you see the campaign really should proceed from this issue. We’d need more members. Publicity drive I’ll rain leaflets down the chimneys –

When I stumble eight pairs of arms reach out to catch me.

Low skirts of dawn through the window. All the best religions say the Sun is a woman says Luise sleepily. In her exhaustion she looks soft as an animal’s underside. 

Gathering the bride awake I pass myself in the mirror. See only a spear of colour a splash of water.

13. The Composer Makes A Move

How long can white noise stay in the body.
A week and still the thick of fuzz at my edges. When I sleep. In any gulp of silence.

Carrying its glut in my nerve like a muted note.
Hans has come – and given the assignments. Back to the sorry haul of commissions. Short piece for trumpet. Martial quartet for the Film Department eight minutes long. Transcription of all parts of a score in triplicate.

*Normal programming* he says.

*Yes. I’m sorry* –

*Not your fault eh. Perhaps one of the musicians knew. And put it out. They all deny it but there it is.*

*I know.*

*I am sorry. It’s just not safe eh. I had Czern call asking for a quote. Why I took pity on an employee with your history. Suspect he didn’t print what I said.*

*No. He didn’t.*

*I’ve saved you the best one. Commission for the Hygiene films. They like abstract styles – your more experimental side will gel with it. Shorts of ten minutes each.*

*And they don’t show the name of the composer in the credits.*

*No. Whoever got you this berth – wanted you to be safe eh. Not to get into trouble. Keeping your head down now – would be safest.*

*Yes. I understand. Thank you.*

*You know, I greeted all of the critics – at the door. On the way in to the symphony. They didn’t say a thing. Extraordinary.*

*And that is the end –*

The door shuts. Here is David in his security. Here is David still bruised even now at the mouth.

The anger slips off. One imagines it grips and spits unfuelled but it willows out. Into a blankness.

Heinrich will have been arrested a week ago now. And shoeless in the cells. And perhaps his hair sodden to weed from the pail. And perhaps weeps. And in me only silence.

I try to focus on the Hygiene Commission – little pieces for four instruments on how the body fails – a single-violin concept of blood thickening (slow notes sneering down an arpeggio perhaps) – but cannot.
Is this all – now; to be still hungry and grinding the rock, the filing-pieces, the propaganda boating-chants – and settled underground, unable to shift?

Good miners never think of overhead. Regard farmers as unhealthy, air-sodden, plotting surface veins with corn, obstructing mines that go under a summer crop. Emerge into the light confused and bleary. It’s the ones who long for daylight that make crucial mistakes and leave.

But nothing has changed. The Conservatorium will simply stuff another in Heinrich’s place, fill up his open wounds with their gold, their straw, their fields of grain. And still I am on the outside, still scrabbling.

The Oskar De Witt commission – will be Lars perhaps. Or Aaron.

Films for the Hygiene Department –

I pass to the window. The cooling season fretting the bars. A scattered flank of birds over the river – rising.

Wouldn’t it be better?

It was not a vain thing – to denounce him. It was moral! It was a strike at the arbitrary circumstance – that stripped me, that left him alone. When it could have been any of us. Struggling.

I shake my head free of a headache. He will not have been badly treated – anyway. With his father. Guards smuggling in blankets. Stories in the papers – they get wine concealed in prisoner shipments.

When guilt rises in me - pricking, sore - I see his pleasant face; his bland I am glad you are not dead; and it recedes, followed by a wake of triumphant sour fire.

It would be a fair act. To take the commission. Otherwise it’s Dion risked and trained and given for what – a few whittled reviews, a life of whistle-songs for soldiers? So small, smaller than the semiquaver, barely audible. For no just reason!

And I have suffered so much. My nails – I look at them, white slivers at the nub – have only just begun to grow back.

Besides I’d have been considered, perhaps have won the Oskar De Witt commission anyway, in the other world that runs just whispering out of earshot. Where the Maestro is not ash and water, but rises from the piano and turns – and gestures to me to sit, to finish –

The chords of that possible world linger – are not yet all vanished.

I turn to find the telephone.
14. The Professor and Dion On An Afternoon

Late afternoon – and dreamily post-coital, drifting in a dark stream. Aware, still, of my cooling body, its bulge on the bed, its head pinned in by pain (the strain of bucking – a fuck’s no longer fret-free) – but arcing out, in wider circles, from its centre; touching the trails of clothing on the floor, the flattened stripe of shirt, the brittle light in the office next door – and expanding even to the ceiling; seeing us here, weightless.

I daub Dion with my dream-body, his back uncovered – discover his dark dips of spine, the line of them, lolling in sleep; his slop of forest-hair. Untouching him...

The telephone rings. It brings me thudding into body, breathing, baleful weight.

Having kept him inside, bridling him into this small space. The Minister’s spies in cafes, aviaries, our old haunts, can report nothing. To him, the boy’s obediently dismissed, back to his ditch, and I sail on serenely – while in this lair I clutch his limbs, his great handfuls of hair, and we roll on the hardwood floors like boys! It’s temporary, I tell myself, a tremble in the usual broadcast schedule.

Dion raises his huge hopeful head, then drops it down. He’ll drowse; never such a boy for sleep. Safer when he does.

Hello? If it’s the Minister I’ll deny, pry my way out. Was Dion seen smuggled in?

Hello, Professor?

Ah- it’s his keeper. Crouching on the desk – I’m still undressed, a bit of shirting wrapped around my flanks. Cheerful again. Outside the light has become fragile, a filigree across the slats.

Hello, David. How are you? They listen in to my lines. Lines – I think of the hooks, the fishing-wire off piers, the smear of worm on steel. The Minister plucking the wriggling catch.

Good - good. He sounds fretful. Did you give him a book?

Give whom? The eavesdroppers won’t know. Must be vague, pretend, fog the lens.
I only gave out one book recently. On soldiers. Careful as a crab. Has it been lost? Dion wouldn’t mention, wouldn’t mind. No kindness reaches him, no ripeness stains his face.

No, no. His mother found it. She had to be convinced it wasn’t stolen.

I laugh aloud automatically. The mutinous mothers of my generation! I taught them to be triumphantly suspicious. Ah. No, it was legitimately given and legitimately accepted. Reassure her of his righteousness.

I can see them now, flicking their codes and books, thinking it’s cipher. Books of soldiers, mothers! Dangerous, perhaps. I’ll wrap it up –

No more extravagant gifts to take home says David before I can. He can’t explain them away well enough, it gets problematic –

Yes, I see. No trouble – I shall refrain. Was that all? Want him to hear the ric-tus in my voice, catch the caution. The boy you’ve given is a grace that loops around my neck. Be light-footed.

No – do you know the people arranging the new opera collaboration with De Witt?

The new – Ah! Old Levin. Yes – casually, in social terms. This is safe! I hear my ribs relax, the lungs gone slack.

They want a composer. Could you place me as a candidate please.

Certainly. It will be a late-run entrance, though, David, that contest has been on for months...

I know.

They may have selected a favourite already. There aren’t many things harder in this world than changing the mind of a bureaucrat. Teaching a tiger to write Nepali, possibly.

If I get it I’ll be having late nights at the theatre. Times out of town. Overnight visits –

I suppress it – swiftly. And he brings it out so flat, so pat! The insult! There’s no need for that, David, I am happy to do it. I just wanted to prepare you – for disappointment.

Thank you for the consideration. I’ll be going now. Let me know when you hear.

Yes.

Yes.
David? Are you – is everything all right?
Yes.
Ah. Goodbye, then.
Goodbye.

I brush my beard, the build of salt around my lip. Hear my own heart flop-starting, parting from a rhythm, re-finding it.

It would get him from that theatre – and the glut of public view! Levin won’t accept any off-piste positions – that composition will be straight as a street.

I know Levin slenderly, societally – but he doesn’t play in the deeper pools. Just fuels some Party projects, precious cultural campaigns. He’s second-tier – my intimates are all inner-circle. I could ask James to make the request at my behest, get some more rest.

I dart a glance at the day-bed. Dion is wakeful, watching.
Did you sleep well?
Yes.
I have to make a call. Then I’ll come back. Don’t go anywhere.
Yes.

It will be sweeter, after all, to sweep back in after a break, bundle him close in his nakedness, thumb his thighs that have gone cool. I pull the door close to – so he can sleep. Where does he go, in his dream-worlds? Are they plastic, smooth, silent – as he is? So rarely he speaks. So rare his words – like unusual birds.

I dial. Director Levin, please.
Who is speaking.
Professor ______.
Hold the line please.

Will be simple – slick as a moment’s effort, but better to handle it personally than put it in James's hands and seem only half-interested, half-involved.
The Director is very busy at the moment and asks if you would call again later.
Her voice strange- suffused with some sleeping thing, a suffix I can’t trace.
Can you give me a time to call when it might suit?
I’m afraid not. The pause that follows flickers with a newly visible aspect, an apparatus I had not anticipated. She swallows; it’s a slow gesture, one of stubbornness.

Is he in a meeting just now?
I’m afraid –

If he is in a meeting I will wait on the line. I am irritated now – and naturally.

To be barred from speaking to a subordinate, stood waiting on his word in his outer rooms! She should have connected the call a minute ago –

That really won’t be necessary, sir.

I am prepared to wait. This is untenable! My name should never bar a door, should drop its bars, break off its locks.

The Director is very busy –

And so am I, and unused to bandying words with a secretary. It is presently just past the hour of five, after which members of the Regime bureaucratic corps are no longer permitted to hold meetings as it is now outside working hours. Am I correct?

God, the smallness of the world.

Yes –

Then he is not in a meeting, and I will either wait on the line until I am sufficiently irate to have you all immediately rendered unemployed, or you will put me through immediately.

The violence of this is in echoes excessive – but it renders the result.

Hold the line please.

A buzz, a brief bite of sound.

Hello Professor.

Levin! I had the devil of a time getting through to you. Your secretary is mightily stubborn. How are you?

Well. And you are well too, I hope.

Yes, good.

I’m very busy just now, Professor.

Again this business – again this break under the voice. I’m blunt, brisk –

Yes, so the secretary tells me. I am sorry for interrupting the rigours of your work, but I have a request to make.

Yes. Go ahead.

I put forth David’s case for the composer position – but all the time I sense a tension in the listening ear, a straining. Fear? It lacks the flatness – and the terror-stricken always try to please, give reasons, overflow with frantic sentences. This is starker.

After I finish, flourishingly, there is only silence.
Are you there?

Yes. Thank you for the recommendation, Professor. I will look into it. His polite response is plastered in hardness. Faint rustles on the line.

Thank you. I'll expect to hear the result in the papers soon.

How did you hear about the vacancy? Sudden shift – a lower register, a rounder vowel.


The man we'd lined up was arrested. Some jumped-up charge. Night trial.

Ah. The police have no sense of cultural importance, do they. I do promise that my candidate will prove to be more stable. Did David know – that their man went under? I suspect he caught a rumour and ran with it. Well, it's a good day for him.

Professor. He is quick, furtive. Look, if I'm to pick your man I expect publicity for this show every hour on your programme. And priming for the Department too. Quid pro quo.


Startled – into near-stroke. His violence - and bargaining

Good.

Shall we get together for dinner – soon? I haven't been at the club in a while – I'll have my secretary call you. Goodbye, Professor.

In the breach my breath seems foreign, bestial. Some frenetic animal’s.

I pause – by the window. What did he want? Was he having a bad day? I feel grim, doom-filled.

From the outer room Dion mumbles in his palm. He's playing with a piece of porcelain I keep on the shelf. Not Delft; something smaller, harder-edged. He's up against the window, I see now, drifting with his shirt half-done, his pale cock hanging helpless on his lovely thighs. The balcony shade isn't drawn – I open it at dawn for the new light.

Come away from there somebody might see you.

I'm sharper than I meant to be. His free smile slips off sideways and he comes back half-shy, fitting himself small, as if anticipating a hit. The Labour Yard boys must be bellowing at him continually: come down, stop that, put it away. Broad-sides across his back when he errs.

It stirs me to pity. I'm sorry. Look. Let's go to the window together. I come and hold him from behind, and look over his shoulder at the bold shadows coming
down. Drown in his flesh, his freckled neck. My stomach stoppers at his back; we’re equally tall, though when he falls on beds he’s heavier, less clever about manipulating his weight. _Here is the sunset. Isn’t it lovely? And the first stars are coming out._

Two naked boys against the balustrade in the wide light. A fight rises in me. _This is my boy_ I say aloud. The listening crowd behind the bugs and microphones can hear; I know they’re there, I feel them near. _This is Dion and he is mine._ I am loud now—and then still.

When he starts to whimper and shift I move back. _That’s enough now. Come inside._

**********

David comes to pick up Dion – to be his escort, he says, though I know it’s just show, a shamming of control. I won’t complain – cannot train Dion to be cautious, to slip out at the guard-change, arrange himself respectfully! So David’s his chaperone.

_I made the call_, I tell him. _It’s in motion._

He says _Thank you._ Seems far off.

After they leave I light a cigar I’ve recovered from the wretched public performance – pushing Dion to the window, calling his name.

Foolish, frankly, but this stifled cell was cramped; a claustraphobe would cry.

The post arrives.

_We are returning this TRANSLATION as unsuitable for publication._ Kindly REDRAFT to the specifications of the Department as expressed in Sections 8-26 in the enclosed Handbook.

And the Handbook included! As if I were a clod, a sweat-sodden graduate gripping my first folio. I smack the sheaf on the desk. Its weight wells up its sound, it rebounds.

The insult is intense. The evidence builds.

The Minister’s faction has aroused itself to action against me. Levin felt the pulse and picked his side; my hide’s in danger. Doubtless that draws a light onto this travesty at the Translator Department – a little nick, a wound. They’re hoping it won’t clot, and I’ll bleed out with shame.
Pick at my spilled pens. The pricks of splinters slow my supplicant bend of the knee.

It’s so subtle, one barely notices the beginning. Left off the list at a soiree, or snubbed at the park by a prominent aide. A letter’s unsigned, your passport receives an ambiguous stamp – it’s ever so delicately done. Like slicing a filet mignon.

Now, holding my poor rejected piece, I am seeing it – the haze on the horizon, the first hound at the gate.

Better men have tried to maim me. The comments on the reject-piece are useless – left unread. A better version, stellar, brilliant, will put them off-kilter, show that I’m at the height of my powers. I pull the sheaf apart, find its green heart – the number, knots of reference, name – and smooth it. Start.

15. The Wife At The Surgery

After the birth naturally I researched cleansing. Ginger to sop out the bleeding and taunt the cervix. Marigold in fat raw clusters. Take the bloom into your mouth. Hold.


When the soldiers arrive at the surgery I think of this.

Six of them. Hot in their coats. Strip them off their backs are still pimply. Malnutrition in the flanks. Pores wide open blinking.
We were sent to monitor the surgery activity one says. Leader with hair new-shaven. See the strict graze of burn along the neck. A few anomalies in reports. Continue with your work as usual.

Two at the door. Two in the waiting room. Two wandering.

A conference in the 1800s discussed whether to classify fear as a disease. Can one distinguish between unnatural and natural terror. Can these symptoms be calibrated across a universal spectrum. Can psychology direct the fate of physiognomy.

Ultimately discarded. Focused themselves upon the grind of lesions across the bare plain of skull. The many tendrils of schizophrenia. Lighting up.

Watching the smell in the waiting room alter I consider this.

Fear produces these attitudes. Stiff musculature. Dilated pupils. Frill of adrenalin at the glands.

Heart pulling pulling pulling.

Four men nine women today. Splitting coughs a wrenched cylinder of spine a darkened leg.

Certain congenital deficiencies (immune weakness sacral dimples rheum) we must refer to as natural aging or risk censure.

Within an hour most have departed quietly. The nurse calls names once. Twice.

Those left so fused into pain that nothing else enters. Blank instruments.

On the radio Eda says Now for a mid-morning stretch fill your bodies with air.

It would be easier if they were impolite.

Instead this uneaten silence. They ask permission always. One reaches to pick up a fallen file.

Outside a man considers the door the men trading a cigarette in uniform. Goes as if suddenly recalling some errand.

Strangulation being the longest execution method said the lecturer taking upwards of half an hour. Damage sustained after six minutes. After eight. After fourteen.

Passing Berger in the corridor I ask about scalpel delivery.
We need seven perhaps eight in the next shipment.
I don’t know if I can help.

As if we are speaking through earth. Buried centuries under the tarn. Settled in the mounds while above us soldiers move north.
One day they’ll dig trenches. Find our opened mouths. Teeth dissolved into water.

I don’t know if I can help.
Knowing a man you can step into the paths of his voice. See whether they turn left or right.
Thus I know this is his method of saying We will not speak of the tortured men. Do your exercises. Move away from me.
Knowing a woman I suspect is different. Though I am learning.

******

At the evening rally I am thinking of a city broken open by women's voices.
Arms round the bridges. Bare feet finding the open parks and smoother streets. Hair snagging on gables. War machines opening their mouths for the architecture.
No longer deep warm smooth moist but metal, digesting iron, voices pooling in the dips of terrain, holding the sky, handling the houses like so many apples, gathering wires in their verdant spreads, a horde widening, swelling into all sound –

It is a memory of the soldiers that snags my vision.
I am not submerged but bobbing helpless. The woman in front cries in her skirt.
They sense this in me the women. My bodily resistance to tidal pull. My weighting with stones.

After in the meeting room I take the linen and fold and fold and fold.
In my village the women in a circle weaving. The knot of them difficult. A woman returning after an absence found no gap for her body.
A woman says You seem preoccupied. Perhaps named Helle.
I’m fine. My work was tiring today.
What do you do?
I’m a doctor. A General Practitioner.
But you’re – you didn’t go to medical school here?
Foreignness a sparse thing. Small flourish of it between edges like wildflowers. Enduring any winter. Bite it off it grows.
No. In my home country and then in Paris. The Regime accepts the qualifications.
Silence in the room gripping.
We think of the body as silent. In its closeness a world of sound.
Surgeons 18 hours into shifts reporting deafness caused by patient’s heartbeat –
Luise stirs. There are so many foreign doctors these days. Thank the Leader for it. The stories I hear from the Medical School here. The way they treat women!
To her right a woman says That’s right. Tanya told us that they wouldn’t let her operate. On her cycle. It would impair her judgement.
I remember that. She had two scholarships but had to sneak in her scalpels.
A space cleared for me. For my lungs to expand and contract their so-small rhythm.

Slip inside each of these women. Their hair and face a pocket.
Bryn scraping the flax. Young married. Fearful of her sons. Stricken in the room a broken tooth.
Jana full-bodied and swivelling. Measures flour sacks for the Corps. Splashes her sound.
Carla hauls the banners up. Forty-eight and dried womb. Like an orange with no pips she says.
Others.

Somebody behind the linens says Is there any progress on the allowance of female recruits?
None yet. Luise rises to rinse a dirty banner. Feel the sop of it on her wrists pulling.
I’m working on admitting the bill to the Lower Parliament. We may get together a group of the younger girls for a protest on the steps. In uniform. Healthy voices in song and so forth. Wring till the throat of it is dry. Flap and swing. Sudden health of smacking sound.
Gina would love that.
Gina will bind her breasts and enlist herself as Gunther or Gerard tomorrow if we don’t make some arrangement. She’s so keen on it.
So frankly difficult to get these generals to see the expansive resource they’re failing to use! Women who desperately want to fight, to lead. What use do they serve nobly washing linens? Each of us to the best of our ability – the Leader says.

I drop a needle box. Its bright heart on the floor. Angry and flung open.

You are tired says Jana. Split of her voice down the middle of the room. You normally seem so inexhaustible.

Do I?

Yes. At meetings. At the wedding you never slept -

How do they see me. Bleached cliff-salt. High stone at the bluff-edge shouldering wind.

What’s happened?

I spread a hand over the unpicked linen. Its calm weft. My surgery was occupied by six soldiers today.

Chaos of sympathetic noises. Like pigs at the teats in the morning.

Oh that happened to Sylvan and her husband at their grocery. Their neighbours said they’d been forwarding black market goods do you remember?

Yes.

Were they well behaved?

I smile. Subterranean rip across the face. Like a light blinking out. Oh yes perfect gentlemen. As if they were at a dinner party. I half expected them to lay out forks.

Their manners do not matter to the patients. Luise leans forward into her interest.

No. It didn’t matter.

How many stayed.

Three. Out of a full day roster.

That’s bad.

Intensely bad for business. Sylvan and her husband they had to start in a new neighbourhood. That nice new bakery place.

I fold another banner using my whole spine against it. Well I suppose if it drains the surgery dry I will go into baking.

How long are they in for.

I don’t know a week maybe. Inspections of the books. How long does that take.

Blank faces.

What fortitude Swiva says it takes just to bear the grievances of this world.
I spread my fingers. Their iodine nubs. *Nurses are calling in sick which is supportable but we may lose a doctor too. He seems inclined to take leave.*

*Leaving you with six soldiers what a charmer!*

*Men never do cope with crises like women do eh.*

*It happens at my department twice three times a year. They come in to check the food’s not being siphoned off from the army accounts.*

*How horribly stressful how do you cope.*

*We get them all drunk in the cellars and steal their auditing forms.*

*Carla!*

When they speak of the Leader they say wolf eagle lion. Man who lopes the rooms watching. Can walk off a precipice and make the air hold.

Power being not mystical but data. An intimacy. Following the hairs of your skin.

Luise says *You’re folding that wrong you know. Now do it this way.* When she presses my shoulder I think of stains one cannot remove.

*****

When I return home the telephone rings.

Luise says *I wanted to call to check on your status.*

*Thank you. I’m all right.*

*It was good of you to stay. I know sewing and linen work are not your most comfortable occupations.*

*I enjoyed myself. I may do an embroidery stitch on a patient to practise.*

*What will you do this evening.*

*Perhaps a bit of dancing with the sailors. Stay out till four eating pancakes with my hands. The usual occupations.*

*Ah I used to live like that. Played merry weather on my face. What really?*

*My husband’s home. He’s working. I might eat late.*

In the other room he sinks into translation. First eyes then mouth. Dripping and strangled he’ll rise from it.

*Sopped with Charon’s water he said once. Revitalise me darling wife with your font of youth.*
Licking my temples. Smudge of mouth on brow-line. Thirst in marriage being a constant.

Ah so he’s home. In Luise there is a flatness that signals interest. Blocks out inference to focus. What is he working on.

A translation I suspect. I know the signs. Bad temper –

You don’t sit down together for meals? The Regime suggests it. In the Relationship guides.

No not normally. Something flaring slides into me – breaks its bulb – I think to get any attention I’d have to sabotage his work.

Yes says Luise. Voice plain as a face. Blush comes off me in peels. Sometimes it works like that.

I eat late often. It’s no trouble.

I myself rarely eat at ordinary times but then I have no family.

It is easier then I think.

Luise pricks the pause. I am sensing a difficulty may I tell you what it is.

Yes.

You lack control. Men come to your surgery your household disrupts your schedule. This goes against your natural tendencies.

My sole natural tendency at the moment is needing some coffee.

Your natural tendency is organisation. Preparedness. You are a doctor.

Doctors are distinctly disorganised. The body being what it is.

The body being what it is. Still. You take my point.

I do.

May I possibly suggest a solution.

You may.

Schedule your life with the rigidity that fits your mental proclivities. Sabotage your time to fit. You like myself are healthier in stringency.

A schedule.

Yes. Time not filled is time the Regime loses. And it suits your strengths to be restricted doesn’t it.

I don’t know.

Don’t you.

The impossibility of being in time. Of organising lust. Of possessing a body of genuine want.
These things I have denied myself. A water bead held in glass.

Would you like me to make a schedule for you.

Yes.

What is the time now. Six. This evening eat at seven. No later. A healthy light meal. Do you have eggs.

We do this week.

An omelette then. Draw yourself a bath afterwards. Allow no visitors. I gave you the Regime Handbook For Women read that. Sleep at ten past ten.

How many chapters.

Three.

May I have herbs in the omelette.

Not too many. Only sage basil. No more extravagant elements. Some white wine with it.

Yes.

I'll call again tomorrow. Follow it exactly.

Flaming up the sides of the walls the windows the door.

A surrender to actions. Take the heart from the cavity. Place it on the tray. Watch.

I pluck one basil leaf. Two.

In the deepest pleasures there is a white innocent part. Its slimness shining.

16. The Composer At The Meeting

In the halls of an Italian noble family there is a legendary double harp. The Maestro told me once. One string set vibrates to the other’s plucking. The first polyphony in history of doubled voice – two tongues in the mouth.

Feel it lay under yours. Thickening your palate. Wake to hear it singing its own songs –

Here are the steps into the greeting hall for Oscar De Witt and the Cultural Commissioner. Here is double-tongued David his scraped cuffs his sweating hands.

Every human I was taught in school has an individual sound. Frequency of body of sex of hair. Used to trace vowels on police lines. Print a man his face on his breathing. They can find you using just one word. Half a syllable on the wavelength.

Even trauma to the thorax does not change it –
I am thinking of Heinrich’s voice. Its educated slur. The dip at ends of words. High-bred flattening. It will have spilled – in screaming. (What happens to an instrument under pressure. Swelling and cracking of the vital elements. Superficial parts first. Then string. Then wood.) Feel its shape under my palate – pressing.

And it is rising – like a fragrant thing, like a blooming yeast, a block of air – against the glottal stop, pushing its shake up the throat, swelling itself to leap –

But be rigid. Hold Heinrich’s voice. And tauten the vowels the lips the ache of tongue. And back down into the lung.

I go through the door.

*****

Here is David at the table. Here is his mouth his extended hand. Here are the accurate parts. Here are the twelve famous men: Schuttel, Wegen, Levin.

Having long ago relinquished the idea that great men show their greatness. The Maestro being pocked, bent at the spine, hammered by age into a bleak line – and the Leader himself short; wearing this defect, wearing his strangled height, his stunted hands as an angry virtue; always beside tall men, always soldiers six feet tall, always smiling and gripping and making them kneel –

Film screens of him enormous. Flags eighteen feet.

A small noise amplified deafens.

These men following this practise. Being small. Being yellow in their cheek flats. Being swollen. Being unsturdy, and humid-lunged; they breathe wetly. A signature said the Professor to me once of a gas campaign in the Father Leader’s time. Corrugated many oesophagus with moss.

*Please be seated. Will you take the minutes Popov.*

We bow and sit. The room not elaborate. Plain stripped walls. Two hangings a Leader picture the slogan All Hands Working Towards Glory. The exposed acoustics. Thinning voices.

What had I expected – velvet; or embossed gold seats, or inlaid tables – softness, softness; the palaces the Maestro entered, enveloped with plush, to receive – medals, State favour, an afternoon tea –

Heinrich would not be disappointed. Would have expected. I am not disappointed.
The leader Levin lays his hands flat. Swollen palms. *Now what we want here is modern. Modern in the right way! Modern in the sense that it does away with any of the old weaknesses. We are quite clear on this. It must be sentimental and appealing – but strong.*

*Yes. I quite understand.*

Having had eight days. And Heinrich preparing for months; and no access to his notes no foundation – his apartment being blocked (not even bribes could help); and confiscations before the trial the Conservatorium raided; and so slim, so slim – what I could do to expand, to angle my small body into this space –

But sufficient. And adapted to the rapid the hunt. This animal training.

I take eight pages. Stand. *Always carry notes even if they’re restaurant receipts* the Maestro whispers.

*I’ve read into the plays and poems of De Witt a strong sense of patriotic history...*

A field of open faces –

What is standard form – simply over-decorated. For State compositions. Gloss of every commission I ever heard – with night readings, a cribbed poem-guide, half-words to plot a satisfactory narrative arc – and feeble, feeble, but clear –

*Excellent – one speaks – but do remember nothing primitivist.* Unnecessary volume – as if to embed it, to brand the walls – *There’s no room for experimentation. We want to be part of a strong tradition!*

*Of course. Here is David suave. The notes lower register. Angling the hand downward to reassure. Here is David his whole skeleton rigid with learned sound. It will all be very gorgeous, very hummable – nothing challenging.***

*Control. Yes, control. Excellent.*

*We work through the eight movements. Music by committee – and at least half unversed, unaware of the shape of a concerto, the division down the centre of symphonics – but spilling over with regulation, with knowing the unwise sound. Raising their hands to protest *Is it correct.* And grateful – for the correction. I think of the dogs – that guarded the mines; whose silver was useless for them, who understood nothing but Stranger and Come and Lie down – and knew by the briefest edge of scent the beginnings of fire –*

*Here is David practised for pleasing; taking an idea voiced, idly, and spinning it – two plates in the air. The lesson of apprenticeship being expansion – from*
the merest of traces; up, up, one word into a vocal line, one chord-set into eight-page sets, escalating – and elongating time, making the spontaneous seem considered, suitably referenced, sound –

Perhaps underneath the smack of hand against stage. Perhaps that one beat.

Well. I think that will be enough for today.

I hope we have made good progress I say. Stuck through with sweat. But upright.

And have played it – thoroughly. Served their every fancy. As if Regime-writing since infancy. As if this pap were my Mount Olympus –

Yes. Levin opens and shuts his hands. We are glad that you were our ultimate choice. Though some of us initially had doubts.

This being a clear challenge. And performed. And their faces all mute. And the baritone lays his line and waits for the tenor’s response. Which will match – and make the scene whole –

My apprentice days I say taught me a great deal about the misuse of gifts. And the worth of directing them towards service – rather than selfishness. I focus only on the future – not the past.

And it is truth – though they hear it split out and double-voiced.

Good. Good. Gentlemen I believe that concludes this initial discussion. We will expect the first drafts – in four months? Yes? With regular bulletins on progress please. They are rising –

If Lars could see it. And the rest of the Conservatorium boys. Tongue-lolling at the window. The ex-arrest, the soured apprentice – with his unlucky scent – conducting these great men – and all burning, the very horizon aflame –

Do I have access to an orchestra I ask. Casual, casual. For trying the parts – and of course the singers will need to be auditioned –

Yes. Yes I believe the Berghaus – is it? – has been reserved for you as a test orchestra. It may not be the final performing one we’re still negotiating with conductors.

They can be difficult with scheduling.

They can indeed. These festivals – Popov I know likes them but they are getting horribly in the way of organising the premiere... Do come have a drink.

They pass into the next room – one steering the poet, his ancient legs, and he is mute, he acquiesces to a napkin tucked at the chin – and old, all of them old, in young men’s uniforms –
A blind flaps. I go to secure it – this tedious, this ugly room –
But play it. Play it to the score.
Here is David. How many Davids. Multiplying – across the hall.

*******

What would Heinrich do he’d go to bars. Gather Conservatorium mates. Hold up his glass to the future.

The old places being safest – knowing the exits; and quiet places for slipping off, for telescoping into smallness, escaping from sight; and so I go to the bar by the river where we used to go after swimming, door half-held open by an old brick – and my face known here, but not hiding, not escaping witness, chin risen and proud –

You seem to be celebrating.

Tanya appears as I’m drinking. Spiked with shimmer in her black-market opalescent dress. She would not stop coming here. Because of Bart departing. She would lead her life rigidly. Her muscles squared into the same shapes. No grief leaving a mark.

I am. I found a good commission. Or series of them actually.

My advice worked then. She takes the seat – orders herself a cheap drink.

Your advice?

She laughs. Small teeth. Leaning inward to her palate. Give them what they want. Goat’s milk soap.

Yes. I found the goat’s milk soap. Though it’s slippery.

Yes. And gifts run out and then what do you do.

Get by on talent alone. And gifts from others of course.

We laugh again. Being the rising couple. Being completely ordinary in the music and the dark. Being a fit to any shape you give us.

I see you know more than you look like you do she says.

Shall we dance? I can tell you more about all the things I know.

Dancing –

Allowing a small freedom; and looseness of self; and slip of hand up arm; and what it is to be in control of such a small folded being –
The music of course being trite. But simple. Relax into the confines of what the censors allow. Four beats per bar enough for human bodies. Enough for an appetite that adjusts.

We retire to the courtyard – she smokes.

You used to be so quiet.

Was I? Thinking of my swallowing of sound. Hoarded for the Maestro – and all effort given to him, all exhaustion, all momentum; and that small sliver of myself for my own use; and ducking away early, small-mouthed, refusing pleasure –

When we would swim together. And at the club. Coco says she never saw you speak a word and now you’re in the papers looking quite the man of action.

I smile. She’ll be jealous of you tonight then.

Oh Coco has her own crowd.

I was quiet because I was weighed down. I served. Now I serve nobody but the Regime.

And now you are light?

Lighter than air. Lighter than sound.

I doubt that. Not by the way you dance.

She smokes idly. I sort the waltz into folds of passages. Forward backward. Forward backward. Flute to follow round the room. Leading you by the rib the chest –

I never used the money she says.

The money? I had been far off –

I hid it away. It would lead back to things.

Let’s not talk about it now. This being not entirely deserted. But still rotating smokers. And overheard. And so precarious both of us. So gauze-edged our trajectory.

Shouldn’t we? We’re the only people who remember.

Yes. But it’s difficult. And besides I forget. Don’t you begin to forget? Life is so full.

It being easy – to forget. Easier despite wounds and mourning and kicks in the pool of the brain. But the flow is interrupted. And disturbance is removed. And we continue on.
The widows of crushed miners. Spending a week in a darkened house. Then move into the world again. Active in forgetting. That embrace of the effective. Wash of sound over an open mouth.

Yes. It is full. She crushes her cigarette in a soft gesture. Being the most feminine she has appeared. Small wrist turning its key. Fingers arranged as if on a bow. Will you help me home.

In the morning I wake into Elke – knowing her thighs, her wrapped sound of sleep-breathing; and the movement of soft feet, of her swimming through sheets – and tangle, and bury myself –

But not Elke – and not David – and Tanya is smaller, cooler in sleep. Loop of careful knots on the scalp. Her head a series of interlocking plates like a dog’s.

I remove my hand from under her. The small twist of waist. Splayed into waking. And she being in the Cultural Ministry. And perhaps sent. And finding me in the bar-throng. And what were her questions. And gathering into her for new pay – to say David takes women home, is not a moral citizen, speaks of things, is no good no good –

I nudge her into wakefulness. You have to leave now.

What.

You have to leave now. It’s morning. No expressiveness – that could give further.

She raises. And heaves on shirt skirt shoes. And rubs hands against the cold. And says Where are my cigarettes.

On the side table.

All right.

And departs –

Relief being immediate. And smoothes across the stomach. In helpless long notes. And the briefness of her in the mouth. And one recedes into safety. Thinking of the Professor in his high room speaking to the microphone. The door shut on the inside. Invulnerable to touch.

And strip the side of her bed to cool from her body heat. And slide away to sleep.
17. The Professor At The Cinema

Whoever invented cinema must have known they were creating a heaven for lovers. So many languages of tactility begun by this introduction of intimate, acceptable darkness! Braille on the brush of thigh, a pantomime sigh: miraculous, even more than the opera-box. A society’s flirtations become fervent, faint – from the code of flowers and fans to a more succulent silent play.

And of course other purposes. Cafes parks libraries overblocked overseen overwound with straits of spies – rotted quite through. No thank you. A single ticket’s half an afternoon’s affair. Avoiding stares.

I’d tried to keep him inside, but he was bored, he brawled. A baby’s fitfulness. Listless and limp on the couch – and prowling the twenty feet square, plucking it bare for things to play or pinch or kiss. His boredom’s bodily, his frame needs full space to stretch its arch. So here’s a sneak, a giving-the-slip, out the back way!

The ticket official is female, fawn-haired, with well-nicked vowels. I can hear her before I see her face – sound reaches me first, lingers last.

Two please miss. Isn’t it a lovely day.

That will be six seventy. She’s sulky! Just a well-fed face, no grace. I’ll give her a lift, shift her smile up.

Ah, so you’re from Gracetown. Beautiful part of the world. And perhaps several years at a convent. I can tell by those very delicate ‘s’s, no other place teaches them as well. I can map the length of any tongue. The young are a challenge: their sallow mouths hold only the strongest notes, crop the top heap of any accent they scrape, but the older ones go deep. A dozen points on any sentence pin the man to his pilgrimage.

I do it at parties to please. Wait for her gasp, her tease and flash –

Wait for your change sir.

She’s unimpressed! Presses her hands hard to the counter, rises to take the ringing phone – and no blessing those ‘s’s, the little spurt of them shoots the words like a gun. Why do the nuns take such care? Is the sibilant innately sinning? I must ask when she returns –

But she’s holding the receiver close to mouth – and shields her teeth.

Two minutes – three. Official calls take less. She glances out – my face, my sweat-streaked skin. The boy beside me.
It must just be nought. Nothing! She’s been called by a friend, it’s friendly gossip, frittering the time; there is no more, no substance. I take Dion’s arm and pass into the theatre – breathing flat, making myself all pat. It is all nothing.

Why did I drill her accent into accurate parts? What vanity makes me so parched of sense? Go below notice, anonymous, no-faced.

The screen flares.

Outside I can still hear the phone ring – but it’s just bone grinding in my ear. Just fear.

As with all occasions where we are an audience, I am not watching the screen, the march, the masquerade, but Dion – his foreign country, his flare of strangeness in the dark.

He tips into the film-flow, forward, his face tilts, he’d stand in the camera if he could. This strange lack of boundary – what is sensed is true, is inviolate, imprints on him for hours. Tell him a story he’s gored to the spot, plots it in circles endlessly. A moving prism hopeless for light. This brutality baffles me: is he so simple, swept clean by sleep?

Anne when she sleeps is an animal, becomes furred and curled in a sett, returns via slowed heartbeat to some primitive place. To some primitive place she returns where I cannot touch her. What am I at rest?

What is it he says.

Be quiet I say gently. Hush. As if soothing a child. Kiss his wrist to taste its small sweat.

Morsels I feed him. Beautiful, I say to him, flaxseed, well-dressed, jazz. See them repeated by him, new and frank and flushed – and our shared space is spanned, we’re a bridge together, aren’t we? Beauty – what I do for beauty! Unfolding him perpetually.

The usher passes – is he patrolling particularly close? A closeness I can’t stand, a hand over my mouth. He’s watching, she has said, they’re here, the Ministry’s said keep an ear, and here they are. He stares, I sense it in my hair – but he is off, down rows and round a bend. Down rows he goes – and is just on his stroll, is not at pause! It’s all a false scent.

Onscreen the hero’s drowning. Suddenly Dion gulps and cries for air – he’s breaking the fourth wall, the caul between self and screen. I hold him hard for silence.
His noise streaming on me. Its wide tides.

*Would you keep him quiet please.*

A woman’s angled over the seat – can feel her heat bridling. *I’m terribly sorry he’s only a child.*

*He doesn’t look it. I’ve had about enough he keeps squawking he spoils it.*

I apologise.

*No talking.* That’s the usher – unblushing! When he’d spied, laid out of sight just long enough – I know his game as plainly as my face. And this woman, this confederate, it’s so clear it could be air.

But please, but please. It is all nothing. It is all nothing – and Dion is quiet again –

*I beg your pardon – we’ll leave. We’ll leave.*

Dion is pliable, he takes my hand and stands, we stroll out as if suddenly reminded of another appointment elsewhere. Keep slowness, even when it’s smouldering under the feet. The stares scorch – but no torch could burn him. He’s invulnerable – even to pain.

I shield us through another exit from the phoning woman, her fawn-haired gaze. I pull Dion – there’s a club nearby, we’ll try for it.

*Come on stop standing there.*

Entering the lobby. They’ll let you lick a showgirl’s stomach in a side-room here.

*Do you have your membership card sir.*

Small man – silken, splendidly attired, an entrée to the old days. Perhaps new? And therefore not nuanced in the ways of the noblesse – not yet. I smile my socialite’s smile.

*I’m afraid I was a member before the days when they had one.*

*Your full name please.*

No flinch when I unfurl the dread initials! He must be so shining-new he’s scarcely just been born. He yawns.

*I’m sorry you aren’t listed in the membership pages.*

*Please look again.* Dion is shivering at my side.

*It’s not possible sir.*

Whatever game is going on, I’ve had a gullet-full. *If you’ll turn and look at the wall you’ll see me staring serenely down at the front of that photograph.* President Pro-
fessor _______ of a year ago. President being principally honorary, of course, but the point remains.

I'm sorry sir. You and your guest will have to leave the premises.

Flabbergasted – and furious. Not at this failed pail-carrier of a doorman, but at the further, finer ears listening, silently. Their writ against me given by a witless page-boy. Perhaps she called ahead, to say they're coming, cast stones before their bread.

Harold don't worry they're with me.

The intervention is from the left – from Gregory Orostova, General, garrulous. He lays his hand upon my shoulder. Instantly the cretin melts, corrodes into his natural unctuousness.

Of course sir. The rules for guests are the same as usual.

Yes Harold. Come on Herbert. We find a side writing-room –

I shake my head. What's plotted must be counter-bluffed! Gregory is an Army head – chalks up career advancements. Appraises the young pullets himself before billeting them higher. We've shared some aspirers –

How are you old man he says. Dreadful weather.

Dreadful I say. You look well. Hide Dion behind my heft. Though Gregory likes darker, deep-muscled types, trench-diggers, hauling pigs on their shoulders. I've always been – more golden, more Grecian in my goals.

I hear you're going through a difficult time.

I give a brittle laugh. I hadn't thought it was so widely known. Just a private misunderstanding.

The Minister lunched here last week. He turns – the hiding's fruitless – Is this the young man who caught him so splendidly on the proboscis.

It's out – Dion is noise, is real, no strategy can secrete him, no silent space. Nothing. I apologised to him so often Gregory. And now to be turned out of the club. Yes that is Dion. But struck out of the club – and publicly, not primly as prude's honour dictates! The blow's brilliant strategically.

A pleasure Dion. I won't shake hands as I hear that leads to some surprises. Dion, whose stranger-strangling impulses have been lately limited, stands and smiles. Herbert don't take it so hard. It can be sorted out you always survived before.

I am trying but it takes such time. And effort. I cannot seem to angle myself properly, there isn't room. Thank you for the rescue -
You’re quite welcome. A beautiful boy I can see why you take risks. Quite astonishing that profile.

For beauty’s worth it –
I want to turn his face away – Are you still with the Guard.

Yes still. A resigned look I do not recognise. There are some internal ideology changes. On which I’d be glad to have an opinion. New young guns. These things move slowly but I can sense change.

Quite. I rise feeling my full weight. Come on old friend I’ll take you to lunch. 
If the Blanshard will still have me. Dion when fed is pleasurably subdued – his mood becomes inward. No meal conversation – but Gregory likes them smart, so Dion’s dull gorgeous cud-chews could be for the good. So beautiful he is.

Oh that won’t be necessary. We can dine here.

I don’t find the prospect so palatable any more. Do let me show my gratitude Gregory don’t be pig-headed. The walls are making me weary. Is it all nothing? It must be.

Of course you shall. We can just do the usual. Yes?
I don’t follow.

Now you go to the luncheon room and find a good table. I daresay Dion and I will be done in about half an hour.

What?

How do you subdue him to start I quite like my nose. That Roxburgh boy do you remember he was inclined to make tremendous scratches during. Though that of course was his pleasure.

I don’t subdue him. He comes willingly.

That’s rare.

Gregory it’s impossible.

Oh well you can bring him around to mine if you like. After six. What are you giving him he looks too young to be anything major. Though I gave a very sweet young woman the role of Deputy Head Of Propaganda years ago. She turned out to be quite good too. He being pluralistic in his tastes –

I will not be bringing him around.

You will not? Ah. But this is extraordinary, you know. We’re very old friends. 
Old friends take care of one another.
We are. And I take the utmost care not to offend you, but Dion will not be seeing you this evening. I hook a hand in his hair. It’s too intimate, too invasive – but must be marked, be mine –

The thought of any other man touching him – digs in my ribs like a rapier. In which case – Gregory spans his hands – I believe I’m unavailable for lunch. My apologies. You will have to be my guests here some other time, when you’re in a more amendable mood.

Thank you for your graciousness. I daresay I shall repay it.

He eyes me benevolently. The predator pales into a closer, calmer thing. You know you can’t guard him all the time. The Zeus and Ganymede attitude doesn’t become you, old friend. If I want him, I’ll have him. It’s the rules. We’ve always played by the rules, haven’t we.

The rules are just inventions for everybody to get their fill.

We’ll see.

The humiliation of the hustle through the lobby, hastening away from him, does not hurt – only spurts briefly, as a vein that’s cut and staunched with heat. Anne showed me that act. Her hands holding the cauterised haunch.

Out in the rain, rusting over –

Toska the Russian meaning an indelible sadness that will not sink. Wondering if Puccini knew this. Wondering if he bled his opera through with the blackness of language –

I smooth my suit of wet, and pet the damp off scarves and sleeves. One must look pleased at all times, here, one must be screaming with well-being! One must have nothing, nothing in the face –

Here is Dion speechless, a verbless space, no trace upon him. And elsewhere there is Anne, who holds all my weight, all my word and wit, and has long hair, is Atlas to my angry sphere. These two sides of my tongue –

Beauty being worth it all.

So here is silence – covering my head – and I will not speak – I will not speak.
18. The Wife Is Saved

A week of the soldiers in the surgery leaves bruises. Behind the eyes. Pressed along the ear.

Thinking of my father and his village men. Their logic-animal.
When electricity came they split a light bulb for carrying the light bare in the fields. 
Its nude round clove in a pocket they wanted. The raw pulse seeding the furrows. 
This was the logic-animal out nosing prey pursuing a pertinent want. Its monocular vision. Its reduction of everything to hunger/not hunger.

Later I saw a neon bulb break and shower light. Thought Eureka.

The Regime likes logic-animals of different shapes. The skeleton however a recognisable form.
These boys for instance pursuing I think a deer through the papers and records. What is a deer they have never seen one. But know its legs its bowed ribs its distinctive hind markings.

_We look for bad matches we look for false entries we look for smudges in the column._
_We hunt the scent through all elements. We are one-eyed we do not raise our heads or tire._

Hunger/not hunger. The logic-animal bows its neck and grazes.

I hold a syringe tap it four times this rids it of air.
The soldiers have declared this acceptable medical activity. Rattle the tiny lung. 
Strain it free of anomalies. One watched as I did it and said _Marvellous them things._

A nurse comes. _Would you come into the reception area please Doctor._
_Can Berger deal with it these syringes need to be done by four._
_It’s best if you come Doctor._ Her face seeming unsolid like wet linen.

Perhaps they have found the materials we burnt the extra bandages the linseed. Or identified the discrepancies in the O negative locker smelt the seed growing. Its hoard of wounds.
Hold my eyes at an angle. Cross the corridor bolting my head for the bruise –

Women fill the waiting room –
Fill it like heaved breath, like open buckets flushed brimful, like the harvest stuffing any available space with threshed grain, hat shoes undershirt, here are the women wedged even in small places, stacked and crammed, three on one chair!, see me they wave their blisters their knotted thighs their abscesses, cells blooming profuse and startling, the flag of them snaps and lifts –

As when one wades into a trench and discovers whole a living thrash of fish.
This enormity of gift.

Luise halfway through the crowd. Her singe of close-cropped hair against the walls.
Its half-cup of blonde.
The nurse says They all came. All at once. What do we do. The soldiers half-visible past the horizon of braids. One holding a shopping basket while Johanna removes hat gloves coat.
I feel my face loosen. Restrict it into proper lines. Get them all registered. Call the other surgery if we need more hands. Don’t just gape get moving.

Luise when her turn comes says I’ve a cough. I speak too much I know don’t try to tell me. Is it a bronchial difficulty.
I say I may need to refer you but it seems an excess of strain. No permanent damage unless you continue without proper care. Honey and the usual.
I say They can’t all be ill.
The nurses having to find chairs cushions spare stools. Having to raid the public house opposite. Having the soldiers to carry benches in on shoulders.
She says Perhaps there are a few triflers but we’re women who work. Twisted ankles bruises young Elke’s got that long burn. From the laundry boilers. And the view of doctor’s visits as admission of weakness besides. Home remedies instead – herbs and poultices! All nonsense. They need good check-ups to be prepared for duty – soldiers all of them.
I say You’ll be upset that I’m prescribing you a poultice then.
She says I deserve that. Unless it’s aniseed and I know you’re just doing it to be rude.
She says Will this do.
I say Until the day of Judgement most likely. Mrs Dyer has snuck into the queue twice al-
ready for different things insisted on paying both times.
She says We take care of our own. We have our honour.

Honour that finds the hand and bursts. Its seedless wealth.
Berger says in passing at my door What are we going to do about the scalpels.
I say We’ll make do. Even if we sharpen them with lathes like the Vikings.
He laughs. A strip of him tears off. I watch it blow down the corridor and turn to see
the next woman.

********

We’ve heard things. About your husband.
Luise and Beatrice cooked me dinner. Small arguments over bay leaves. Their hands
crossing in mid-air. Heaviness of smell raising the hair on my arms.
Now leaning over the platter the shared tortellini the tips of parsley. Which I had held
in my mouth and adored quietly as other people approach relics.

I look at the al dente portion gleaming on the fork. Is it the old one about me secretly
being the Devil and giving him all his success through black magic.
Oh that’s not news we all know that Beatrice says. Luise starts to laugh so severely she
has to replace her bowl on the table.

Well if it isn’t that what is it then. Is his beard secretly a wig?
Beatrice says Take a deep breath Luise this is serious.
All right. Luise’s recovered hardness seems stranger over the lushness of food.
Scored lines at the mouth. I heard it from a friend at the Cultural Ministry. Your hus-
band is a translator of sorts yes? As well as the radio show.
Yes. I stretch my back. Taut and hoarding its muscle after the day of bending. Treat-
ties and negotiations and so on. He’s the only senior person that speaks some of the dip-
loomatic languages.
The only person that’s interesting.
After the schools and Departments went monolingual. And the Immigrant Act.
Light falls across the steaming pans. Knots of rising sweat. The very edge of the cornice is prickled with damp.

My logic being not animal but procedural. Follow the first step. Take note of all things. Judge the ice the depth of water the temperature before continuing.

I watch Luise’s fine leaves of hair. Her complete hold on any silence.

*It’s not the point Luise.* Beatrice moves. Her excessive frustrated gesture as if unplaint after years of crimped stillness.

*No.* Luise looks carefully at the saucepan as if it had offended her. *It appears there’s been some dereliction of duty there. A few problems no overt scandal but there’s a movement against him. Not just in the Department. Across several.*

I am stroking my own wrist and stop. *A movement.*

*He’s powerful your husband. A broker of favours. The radio show gives him access to high places. So when he commits grotesque errors there’s talk. They think it shows signs of being subversive.*

The laugh in my voice is thin. Sheen of blood on it. *He’s never been subversive in his life.*

*Luise get on with it* says Beatrice.

*The Radio show is of course prominent so there can’t be any public denunciation not yet. But the word is a secret tribunal is planned – for next week. To demand explanations for offences.*

Outside there is Wulfson cropping the grass. There is the tree shadow smoothing his back. This small world we have built on these unstable things. *Will he have any advance notice* I ask.

*Traditionally not. And it’s at home. Not at the office. It makes it a more personal affair.*

Treated a tribunal subject once. Brought to the back entrance already swollen out of human into helplessness. Blood black in the nerves from trauma.

If they do that to him I will gore their throats. Nails in eyes in the soft the weak places. Flay them down the driveway till their skin flies like chaff.

When I began what did I imagine.

Words plucked loose at the root. Startling memory out of him through the pages. His head turned to me at night *A funny thing I just remembered.*
The hunger when silence claws up through a marriage. Building a shared language using anything. Rocks blood darkness anything at all.

Beatrice opens my hand which was shut. Around the fork. *Anne be reasonable. It might be good for him. To get the wind up a bit.*

*She's wise Beatrice let her alone.*

*Thank you for the warning.*

**********

Three things.

Forewarn. Hold close to him the words *investigation.* The words *sabotage by unknown enemies.* The words *safety.* See suspicion leak into the ground between us colouring the water.

Otherwise remain motionless. Act mute act vegetative act breathless. Place no resistance in relevant areas swallow the pen. Watch him walk opening his hands towards an unsheathed wall of arrows.

Otherwise conceal and work. Pulling threads in the night.

The appeal of this third option.
No risk of reveal: of thigh of ink of angry want. No spread of the rejected works under neon light with all my betrayals sliced open.

But acts will now occur as I demand them. No committee hurries it. The season is too early it must expand into its warmer parts.

Delay and dig deeper. Put unripe fruits in the ground.

Still in the kitchen when he returns. Hands rinsing and rinsing an orange.

*Are you working tonight.*

*No. Not just at the moment. I'm trying but it – doesn't seem to be able to coalesce. I am exhausted.*

*Let me get you some tea.*

*Thank you. I'll be in the living room.* He kisses and then finds the sofa.
His lean into me. His embrace of my scent. What wavers in him like corn through which I can spread my hands.

I think boiling the water of my little lost words. Pocking his work. See what they’ve germinated – a great strong bough of love, almost without his noticing.

I will follow the cracks along his brilliant skull. I will make him sink; and swallow; and cling to me for air.

I pass my hands over his hair. Do you remember that town with the red bikini?

Yes.

Tell me about it.

I’m very tired. I may not do it justice. But no hard edge – no subtle thrust of anger – and I plunge into the gap –

Your own voice does comfort you in your weaker times.

Cruel wench. He spans his hands out as I fold into his shoulder. Acquiescent – because of weakness because of the hidden campaign that drags on his arms. Well. We left before dawn. You’d had your exams and I’d finished the week’s translation scripts, and we just fled – abandoning rent, and bills, and one extremely unhappy grocer with our scrip for endless bananas! You and your bananas – you were rampant with them.

I laugh. I was studiously becoming an orang-utan. Go on.

We headed south, in that gigantic car that basically had to be hand-cranked, since it hailed from an era before the invention of sliced bread, and became thoroughly lost in the wilds of Europe –

He is changing the history! We did not, we stayed right on the coast road.

I am telling this story and I say the wilds of Europe. They were wild, anyway, those farmers chewing densely at those horrible clay pipes. Malevolent creatures straight out of Wagner.

You would make a nice memory into cultural monstrosity.

Did I order a chorus? Shush. And so we parked in a seaside bay and stayed overnight in the back of the car, and came out yawning to red-fingered dawn, to discover by the bonnet a flag pole. And what do you think? It had a red bikini blasphemously in place of a flag –

I note A large one, too. A woman of distinct assets had left it.

Just so. A veritable splendour of scarlet flapping and flapping. And we decided to stay. Which we did.
And made sandwiches and listened to the wireless. And whenever it rained we slept. Which was, Anne, a great deal. You and your weather-magic. I could take you to a desert land and you’d bring them inexplicable monsoons.

Here’s your tea. You look exhausted.
I am. Tired as Noah building the ark. The work is getting difficult. Or perhaps I’m old and it remains the same. Don’t assure me I’m not old, that’s rank with libel.
I wouldn’t dream of it. You are old. But not too old yet. Shall we?
Shall we what.
Shall we do it again. We have a season train pass instead of the gigantic green car and a hotel would be better for our joints. But we can still. It’s possible. To just pick up and go.

This being the kernel at the centre of the flesh. Bite into it. Reveal its fragrance.

Pick up and go.
Next week. Take your work with you it’s a replay week on the radio. I’ll be ill for the surgery. And don’t tell me it’s inappropriate or against Regime rules.
This is sufficient. To escape the intervention. Let them retract and seek a better strategy. Let them angle themselves over my heaped battlements.
No destroyer of this world save myself.

Where.
The seaside. Having never been for ten years. The northern parts. Some watering hole for elderly drooping aristocrats who were too wealthy to boot out.
He does not have the patience to be creative. Writes rapidly and discards. As if stripping a wound. Barely rereads. Forms the protein between two separate sides in several strokes.
Match his speed. But note the other side. Track both elements to form the web.

Are you scared of something he says.
Me? No.
I myself am feeling less than healthy. I don’t know. We’ll go. We’ll go I’ll arrange the tickets. And hide in the full light. Where else is it possible to hide here. My skull-heavy husband.
We are not hiding.
The possibility that he knew – that the tribunal is visible to him and that he had chosen to stay still, to do nothing – hovers suddenly in front of me. Makes me furious as a wasp. Where's his fight?
No. No perhaps not. I move to rise and he says, astounding, more miraculous than the gods impregnating swans, his voice opening, its layer of exposed need waxing like pollen, Are you going to bed now. Surely it can’t be that late yet.

To be in the position of giving! To bend and kiss his forehead and say I'll stay up with you as long as you wish, as if it grants, as if it overflows some offered cup!
And yet the gulf is still grinning and vast. This paltriness instead: Not quite yet. I was just moving to the chair.
Ah. Good.
Such a quiet night. I settle and observe his face. Not looking sideways but directly.
Yes. I think I'll sit and listen to the wireless awhile. You're sure you're not cold.
I feel fitter than I have in years.
Good. That's very good Anne. You seem much better. Do you ever have moments when you feel every inch of your whole age? I feel like that this evening. Every one of my years is on my body kicking its feet.
The great cliff of his shoulders. Their stoop into parabola. It's a wonder you can move under all that weight.
Get a wife they said, she'll comfort you when you're aged they said. And what do I get I get smart remarks.
Oh you're young in your mind you old goat.
I am indeed a goat, I eat everything. He reaches and strokes the down of my arm. This pouring into my empty places. This rush, this lissom frantic wetness. Listen to that orchestra. Aren't they stupendous.
Yes. They are.
The sudden flared perfection of this. The bulb of light in the hand.
The train-car is well-furnished and fantastically hot, the blinds fry and flap at the windows, but it is sufficient for a short journey; it serves.

Anne drops onto the cushions, lightly as a lamprey in a bucket on the shore. A sure and supple thing! Her ring swims on her illness-slimmed hand, she fans the nape of her neck and beckons a porter for water – we’ll be slaughtered like calves by this heat, or beached to dry. I cannot focus, my eyes water and bleach the scene. But I am serene, sailing towards the sea.

The sea! The ancient maps were flawed: the monsters are onshore.

Our train’s at pause, the station stuns with crowds. I say And it’s all right for me to bring an aide? I know it’s unromantic. Frantic bee against the glow of glass. I watch it beat its bulb in panic, puncture light –

The aide? Oh yes. Her dress is short, her shoal of thigh is high upon the seat. It’s sweet – and still so young, so vulnerable a vowel! I’ll consonant her, corral her on all sides…

I said he was a translation aide I’d paid for the trip, to lessen the load of the labour – a caper she caught like a hook, and took! No conversation but very bright on paper I said swotting at her brow with a smudged cloth, feeling the broth of her against my palm, the charm of this. Our honeymoon reborn.

A swarm – at my neck.

Had contemplated leaving him, and the city – and lingering by the sea, scouring off with salt his tremulous taste, the paste of sweat on his back. Smacking sense into myself. The lovesick bathing-cure; it’s stopped steeper sicknesses than mine.

And yet it’s no avail. Left on the shore I’d sculpt his languid legs, the link of throat to bone. Without him I am a quartered self: querulous, bereft.

Besides – a sojourn in southern sun will give him shelter. The General gobbling, grabbing him whole – a foal left on the open fields at night. And the Minister’s sight slipping under doors, through floors!

Anne leans the beam of her spine towards the light. Pull down the blind, it’s stifling.

Not yet, sweet. It’ll rattle when the train goes – let it sit. For I’m paralysed with impatience - he’s late! Despite the detailed training – telling him to be here now,
to recite the how, the when! Whole hours of it. And in vain – and what to do? Call David, dredge the rivers?

Perhaps Fate wants me loosed from love, that garish carriage – reserved for fresher horses, younger steeds.

Or he chose – not to come, to stay home. Would he? Where it’s safe, with his book and his precious pillow-bed. Did he choose the grinning General instead? His hair in younger curls, his pearls for eyes. Flies up against the pane. Or is it my pain – seeing them soft and stripped in a side-room at the club, clubbing one another!

Anne nods her head, its hive of bone. Her honeycomb of hair. I’m glaring with the gush of heat, the sweet sweat, but the sight of her gives relief. Rigid Saint Anne, revered for rendering the Virgin Birth from a place no man had plundered, her womb a winsome mine of gold.

His pale back’s aboard! He’s been hauled by the guard; he’s girlish in his whites, the winsome things I bought him at the Stores.

Dion! My delight spills onto the air, like strewn chaff. He’s a gap, a space in my voice. I am restrained – from rushing, bussing kisses at his broad upturned face – when my wife rises. Her reach of hand - says *How do you do*. He is all ears and fur, a fervent blur.

*Hello* he says.

Feel the hysteria rising – like a blush, a rush of blood – a boy caught snatching a peep-hole look. Its hook across my skin. So thin – and just beneath the scrape of vein.

*You’re the aide?* She leans, takes his coat. *I hope you don’t mind coming all this way to work. Though the sea is very lovely this time of year.*

Yes.

*Have you been long in the work?*

He says nothing – I say *He’s shy this one – not a great one for talk.*

*I see. Well it’s wonderful to meet you.*

Yes he says again.

*He’s very positive* she says to me laughing but he is already watching the window.

Seeing their arms stretched over the coat, the sensation subsides. It is so generous, so gentle – her receipt, his fold into his seat. Woman of a thousand women!
And it could be like this always – always like this. The offering of fabric, the fragile hands. A heavenly moment – into which my mouth moves, my body moulds itself.

_Dion you take the window seat. He's always this quiet._ It takes a tragic effort not to touch – to scotch the blurs of sweat on his neck, the mess he’s made of collar and cuffs.

_Ah, Anne says, all the easier for you to talk hind legs off all nearby animals._ Her bright biscuit of a voice. I take it, dip it in tea.

_That's not true. I tried for an hour on that fox Wulfson found. He remained entirely quadriped. Though possibly he was deaf._

She laughs. A man enters the carriage from the rear unseen and stares, and scares me half to startling – _What is your business_ says my wife standing, and politely demands his papers. My protective patrol! She rolls them through her fingers, examines his card. _He’s a collector, he wants the tickets_, she says, and seats herself back into her smaller space, retracts her flanks from their militant stance. _My every Grace! Who needs all three when I’ve a multitude in one, flinging herself at guns?_

_Dion I ask have you been on a train before_ and he said _Yes but of course he's lying._

_This heat’s amazing, says Anne, I’ll sweat my own ocean before we reach the sea. Dion do you want water._

_Most unladylike to perspire, I say, but her edges smooth, she’s moved to the centre of my vision. Her seat squeaks as she leans and pokes my cheek. Quiet you old relic_ she says – and we are sweetened, we are spokes wheeling out of time, back from the hospital and its hunk of loss, back from the cross that lowered and sliced her life, into our welling-time of white days and well-seasoned evenings. Back into the meat of marriage.

The hills expand behind her head and I kiss the hollow of her. _Dion, un-jealous, un-judging, watches, the Oracle with his over-widened eyes._ We three are trees in a grove, three plover’s eggs in nests, a bar of trio stars.

_When I wake my wife is sleeping. Dion is window-watching, enthralled._

_My pair of djinns, who visit me from realms outside the real! And now they're sunshine, they're suffused with light, their outlines brighten – and beyond their shoulders stretches the sea._
We have no record of a reservation.

The hotelier so small – a sneak. Strive to blank my face. Place nothing in their hands. The General’s stranded us by this beach – or the Minister. Who masses on the dock? A flock of soldiers, far too many – thousands. To march us off? No – cross your chest, keep your breast solid –

My wondering wife at the window. What are they all doing here? Are there manoeuvres? Below the troops are chaotic, milling out of rank – a Rally’s worth! This outpost is a popular port – but this is barely sport, no air to move.

The hotelier is softer to her sex. I do not know. Still they arrive eh. All the boat berths are full – it worries us. Normally we are notified before a soldier convoy – but still they come! And the phone lines all erratic – it is disaster for my business, eh –

I interrupt Could you look again?

Oh yes. Harassed. Ah! Here it is! He flourishes – and it was only fear, only a flux of confused papers – no more. But your train was early – perhaps you would take lunch here? The room will be ready soon.

Thank you. Come Dion.

He’s ecstatic – eyes the crowds. His brother’s a soldier I say to Anne he might see him here – to explain the delight, the dash to different angles. Such a sweet pleasure! Knows nothing but epaulettes –

There must be thousands Anne mutters at my side. The press at her hide. I keep her close, clothed in my bulk.

Perhaps some internal shake-up I say. Or prepping for a war game.

Have you heard anything?

Nothing – but the Army isn’t so much my line. The General may be here – a fear that loosens, lassoes all my ribs.

But here is Roxborough – promenading like an ass! Never any class. He fixes to us first and is upon us rapidly – too fast for me to fashion an escape.

Extends his impertinent hand to my wife. Anne! You look fantastically well. You just need a tan and then you’ll be fit for the Riviera.

Just being fit for here will do. I feel her form detach, draw itself straight. A freight of dignity in such frail features. How are you?
I've advanced a little since you saw me. See these stars? A commendation. I'm head of a regiment now.

Well, that's splendid news. See them together – trite, playing their parts, the paltry art of palms, pleasantries, tea – and feel a a jolt in the soul. His head bending to kiss her hand – damned, disingenuous. Why did I try for fun with fools like him?

You look well. Are you recovered – returned to work, I mean?

I have indeed returned to surgery. If you require amputation of any unnecessary thing, do find us at the hotel.

I shall. He turns, spurns my half-offered hand with grand abandon. The Professor was very kind to take you away to begin his retirement.

The gall is gigantic. I may actually swell like an unlanced boil. I am not retired. Merely on holiday.

I apologise. He grins. I must have caught the rumour incorrectly. A clumsy thrust – The generals will be pleased to hear that you remain active.

Anne says The generals are here too?

We're all out here in temporary manoeuvre barracks. We've been recalled from service. Even the navy boys. It all seems rather fruitless – but I daresay we’ll get orders soon.

See him bound away –

My wife says He's very young to be a regiment head.

He's a tadpole. Mentally as well as anything else. To try and touch our inviolate trio! I'm filled with family feeling. Dion's back, brushing his hair with his hands. I haul him in, small-boned Anne on his left. Try for some of the happiness, the cheer and clarity of that cresting moment in the carriage – but only the sheer sweep of soldierly remains.

She holds her hand out for my arm. I suppose your career advice helped him.

Last time.

What a strange thing to say. Let's go in and change.

20. Wife On A Walk

After lunch he and the aide return upstairs. He has work he says. I walk –
The promenade is radiant, and clean, and the scrubbed sky gleams, and I feel stripped down to healthy bone and veins in the glare, all essential parts, and light in my shawl, scraped hair to the shoulder, and the waves flaying rock, and birds skimming the foam –

Good sunlight holds the body in it as a solid thing.  
Turn my face towards the prime angle of brightness. Soak in the mouth of it.

Soldiers out in the water. Knee-deep in the shifting lucid green. Thankful bare backs. They raise a boat out onto their shoulders. Salt on their hair. Smacked swathes of sunburn at the collarbone.  
In my village men burned on the fields soaked whole shirts in night water. Lay in their own startled whiteness like spirits. Later I clothed burn victims in gum and linen. Tunics for a journey through scorched bone. Through the swaddle the light is visible.

I am hardened in the warm. A kiln-brittle rim of hips and shoulders. Feel the deep rattle of hidden water in the abdomen.  
The aide has thickened loam for arms and back. Perhaps a bodyguard. Perhaps that.

In the city they’ll be opening doors and not finding. Retreating to rearrange.  
Their splay of dossier with the failed segments highlighted. *Olive. Dance. White dress. All cure is only a respite* said my instructor in Paris. *The body will fail inevitably. Accept the boundaries of your control.*  
But what you cause you amend –

Guilt in its sudden fragrant flare.  
To be a whole woman. To not be scrabbling. To not cast spells and ruin meat for want. To not split the skin as a spoiled fruit –

*Hello. Hello. Who’s a doctor. A man’s collapsed.*  
Ten people twenty. Smack of white. The lace parasols floating. *Is anybody a doctor.*  
*I’m a doctor.*
The man is prone. Angle his boned neck upwards. The cheekbones flushed along to the vein. Pulse not paltry but brittle and sleepless. Pupils stunned to frigid black and blinking sweat.

Young man says *I think he's dying. Call a priest.*

Young man says *He's fat. It must be a heart attack. Mustn't it I mean.*

Several women weeping. Skirts wrapped at their ankles for shade. One has taken off his hat.

I say *He isn't having a heart attack. He just has sunstroke. Let him breathe a bit give me that water.*

Young man says *Oh but it must be a heart attack he's so fat.*

*Give her the water.*

*That's right.*

*There you are Wolfgang eh. Too much time in the sun watching the lovelies.*

*He needs plenty of fluids and a dark cool room for resting I say. Get him up now out of the sun.*

Wilful sinking pleasure. Like a circlet on the body the breasts. Like waking into scent.

The men leading him before me as a queen travels behind her sacrifices. Nobody touches me.

That Dion boy. So silent. Petrified perhaps. But could haul this man without aid.

His stricken look on the train. Bashful boyishness. It makes me thicken with a sweet scent – to touch and coax him into openness.

The son of a friend perhaps? Always wanting to see the ocean. Or – brilliant and expansive only in his element slipping dextrous between languages. Taught to be cautious otherwise.

A thing slips between my eyes – some uneasiness. Then vanishes. Sweat on my lashes.

Back to the hotel. Its white hat askew in the fanatic blue of the afternoon.

Passing barefoot over the grass I feel a single wing-beat of arousal. Its flick against the pelvic bone swaying. The hedges white and blazing with tennis-shirts rinsed in sun.
The door is locked –

Within no murmur. The closed mouth of deep concentration. Remembering his cry Dion! in the carriage. The cool plunge of it down the back. Delight as stark in him always as a shadow on a wall.

Feel the weight of pleasure lift off. Slice of body in the cool corridor barefoot. The underwater of the room pressing on them. Rampaged on the shore this afternoon like brothers. Calling up to me on the deck chair.

Bringing me shells starfish. Dion sat beside me and I took a whip of weed from his hair.

Perhaps the silent boy’s a spy. Sent to monitor the prize as he escapes the tribunal. It fits. Non-regulation haircut. Expressive mouth of the Renaissance Madonnas we saw in Paris.

_The artists used the same face for all the Marys one model a boy_ he said to me. Told off for nearly touching the paintings. His succulent frankness of love.

The soundless room. An unsettled noise like a shoe falling. I walk back down to the afternoon whip crack of light.

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In the evening the patio exhalas heat upwards through the bare soles of feet. Lanterns and strict-edged shadows on the piers.

We are eating. Shellfish a light lemon sole. Halved suns scattered on the cloth. The boy’s silence is a deep settled element across which we scull our boat lightly. Possibly he never tells secrets. Possibly that is his political gift.

My husband swollen and fretful with happiness. Reaching for water he spills salt and laughs. Tells us of the salt war or _Guerra del Sale_ in Venice in 1482.

_You’re a pillar of the best salt_ he says to me and raises his glass.

When he dies I will fill him with salt and herbs. Dry him out of language.
What will you do he’s so much older my mother said at the wedding breakfast. I said All the better to marry again after and kissed her angular forehead with its vast plates. Her thoughts visible under the thin bone.

His fear still rapid in him. Asks me if the soldier at the next table is listening. I say No darling no. I say Ask Dion isn’t that so Dion. Even if a spy he must want his subject calm.

Dion says Yes.

Looks like neither of us. Truss of straw for hair. Foreign as myself. Some brilliant country where the men grow eight feet clapped to the shoulder. What are they giving him.

I think we should go shopping for Dion tomorrow his bathing suit’s awful my husband says. Smiling and sweltering with heated air. All together. My fork against my lips.

Wants to keep us in the open. Walking in the shopping malls. Clever boy.

After dinner and a shower I go to the window. Night wind dips into the bay. Lies along the trees waiting.

Consider calling Luise. What should I eat tomorrow. How should I slice out the interminable time. What hat what kisses when should I bare my back for the burn.

Feel without her like a lost country. The husband the boy. Taking his coat his fresh white coat.

The stack of their papers on the sill in batches. Single weight on each. Two shoes. A radio.

They are walking together below. Spit of silhouette from the thrown light. My husband’s fragile beard.

Flay of my hair’s wet tails down my blade of back.

The evening garden. Oranges soldered in the trees. Offshore the warships careen with light.

I am silent – swallowing sound.

He takes a piece of ribbon from a pocket. Reaches to the boy. Ties back his hair.

Fatherly tenderness.
The shock of anger and grief at the simplicity of that action hits me flat in the chest. Coolly I lift the weight and shower the papers into the garden.

When they return bewildered with paper armfuls I am sleeping in the night room. Let them whisper and go shoeless. Let the day heat leak out of the sheet into the ground.

21. The Composer Calls

Learn to feel the players as parts of the piece.
Fretted with chords tensions bitter spaces.
One more dimension of the sound.
They are restless – and the orchestra pit sullen, prickling the air like sweat – not following. And half missing the cue which was transparent. And knotted into talk over the stands. And this fragile sense of a string tuned – to the wrong peg –

_Is there something wrong_ I ask the First Violin. A woman her hair in brutal plaits. Pulling and pulling the scalp. _Is the piece not working._
And unused perhaps to composers conducting. And the vanity of it –
_It’s working sir. It’s just gossip._
_What’s the matter._
I descend the lectern – the violins are only half-unpacked, a squall of oboe tuning – but not musical, not pleasure, just a calming movement, as a man who turns dice in his hand to soothe himself – a similar exercise of nerves –
_The second violas are Reservists they’ve both been called up sir._
_But surely that’s part of the service?_ 
_There’ve been no campaigns announced. Normally they say. Normally it’s in the papers –_
_And I’ve heard things from my husband an officer. Crackdowns. Pre-emptive shutting of the cafes. They raided Vivian’s last night._
_There’s something in the wind. My uncle said –_
_Your uncle predicted last year that the Leader would die and we’d all have to defeat the rebels with pick-axes._
Their voices running and clashing. No end or beginning. Flush of sound.
Well I haven't noticed anything I think you're all being paranoid. Second violin – young, his ochre rub of hair – just colours, when I shut my eyes, colours and their notes –

A flautist, light, her throat leaning backward to listen, almost blue: *The Leader's broadcast last night said everything was fine it was just the same -*

*You know they pre-record those darling. You know that.* Third cellist – knowing, knowing –

*Some of them are live* I say. Thinking of the Professor his oil-paint smear of voice. *They have broadcasting studios.*

*See?* The young second violin is expansive. *And the Leader would tell us. If there was anything we needed to be aware of. Probably it's just some bureaucratic reshuffling – remember when the Army had their pay structure rearranged, they were all on edge for months.*

Yes.

*But what about Vivian’s –*

*What about Vivian's. We've got a job. Until anything happens we do it.*

*Shall we try the second act overture again* I ask. They clutch at it – seeking a solid, a formed thing – and go to their places –

We've got a job we do it.

Somewhere a sheet of music rips, falls.

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On the way out of the Opera house I touch a hand to the great marble pillars of the entrance. Hauled upstream to be frontispieces. Ghost of white limestone still present in the graining, in livid marks on the skin.

Know a city by its stones.

This lesson from the mines.

The slap and smooth of them. Carrying their distinct sound.

Sprinted out in my first weeks as apprentice to see – the wrinkled basalt of squares, cobbles half a palm long and coast-hauled – and delighted; stroking their grain, feeling the weight suspended in the dome of the Parliament, its skull of poured cement – that had been lifted the Maestro said by thousands of men, and soothed into their locked place, like interwoven hands –
Stone in wealthier parts being silent. Being tuned out of echo. Being a chance to walk and not hear yourself move.

Pass for the guards. Their shining awful heads. One straps his helmet on. And looks at me sideways shamefully. Caught naked and fearful. Will I report him. _Young officer out of uniform on the Saddle Road_. Look at him stripped and wretched for the wet. They douse the young soldiers out of line. A whole bucket of potato water. So Popov said. Popov with his four sons in the army all of them Lieutenants. To be wealthy with sons. To be married.

He says _How was the rehearsal this evening sir._

_Very good thank you._

Put a button-hole. And smoothed the curl. And striped into this new shirt nearly all instalments paid. Ripe at the neck.

I pass – and won’t turn him in. Salutes me passing my button-hole my small briefcase. The leather sticks and has no rap in it. I took my knuckles to it but no answer –

Everything quiet is safe.

Pick the fabrics the shoes the voice that’s soft.

Noiseless as if deafened.

(On the bus I realise there were four guards – rather than the usual one.)

I can go through a whole street naming the metals the stones the component parts. A game my father taught me – to recognise ore by gleam or touch or weight. Even when working without lamps. Even when twenty feet away suspended by rope in a cavern.

_Aluminium siding. Serpentine inlay in a rich Regime office door. Iron struts scaffolding the Leader’s new statue in the square._

_The Maestro trained me instead to look out with my ear. Pull the music from everything. Nothing is insignificant._ Rattle of trams the high G of a girl’s laugh on a staircase.

_Dion being with the Professor. And out of the city. And bending myself gracefully to give them this favour. And all the time it is lessening – the grip of us. Dion seeing me fleetingly on afternoons. Giving him up in total all hair and weight._

Yet perhaps – I pull the door to the latch – it is not yet over.
Reaching the Professor at their hotel is difficult. Blanks on the line. The switchboard slack perhaps.

*Ah Professor hello.*

*David? David hello.* His voice! A round tone like a woman’s bottom, like a peach in the hand –

*How is the time away with Dion going.*

*Good. Good. He’s never seen the sea before I took him in a boat yesterday.* It was lovely.

*That’s excellent.* I can picture Dion on the sea – stroking a hand, surprised by the sudden water, plunging his face to the foam. It seems easy, correct.

*Have you heard anything.*

*No nothing in particular.* Why.

*I think the hotel is being monitored.* The gentleman at the desk. And no telegrams being received not one. *I was intending to move but all the others are full.* Full they say! Through the phone his voice seems cracked. And hemmed in at the sides. *And my wife is comfortable here in any case.* So we will stay and I will simply take precautions.

*You took your wife with you?* Astonishing man. Perhaps she sees his little boys as distractions – and welcomes them -

*She was ill she needs to convalesce.*

*You are very modern.*

*Yes. The sun is so good for her.* I’ve not seen her so healthy in a year. *When you marry you’ll understand.*

*That is good.* I am bewildered but conceal it. *I’m sure the hotel isn’t being monitored.* Everybody is feeling slightly on edge. *The strikes out in the Provinces.* You must relax and not let it disturb you. The thought of the four soldiers swims upwards – I wave it away.

*Yes. Thank you David.* I am being irrational – but so many soldiers! *You can hear them down the phone can’t you.* They’re all massed on the shore. *It drives me to distress and distraction I can barely sleep.*

So many soldiers. They must be doing manoeuvres – for the Leader’s Day parade, maybe. *Perhaps you should come back to the city.* Perhaps it’s not good for Dion there. Though he’ll adore it – all the masses in shiny uniform! The main problem is he might get too excited and wander off.
We’ll come back we’ll come back. As arranged. His voice thickens and calms. As if through forcible effort. It would look strange to rush out early. Unseemly. The clerks would talk. Perhaps I shouldn’t wear such a prominent hat. But no telegrams at all – have you sent me one?

I have not. Shall I send you one and see if it gets through.

Yes. Yes please David that would be kind. Just put something innocuous.

I’ll put Hope you’re having a splendid holiday stop.

Actually don’t. I can see him suddenly put his hand flat on the desk. It is the commanding tone from his broadcasts – but weaker, weaker; frantic, full of wavering. Don’t send anything. It would be strange. Leave it be I’m just being silly.

I shan’t if you don’t desire it. You’ll be returning for your Leader’s Day broadcast of course.

What. Oh yes. Of course. Every year. I’ll probably come home to a whole field of files about the suggested topics! Yes.

Will you be at the High Box of the Rally then. I have a pen in my hand I am looking at the nib in the light.

No. No they’re always so kind to invite me but I never can go! It’s too much of a strain after the hours it takes to do the broadcast. It has to be prepped and looked over by the whole Cabinet you see. Exhausting. I must lower this blind. Low rattle. I see him in the warm darkness by the seaside – paranoid, placing shirts under the door, clogging the keyhole with soap –

That’s a shame.

Will you be going. Your new friend De Witt got you tickets I suppose. A favourite a very old favourite. I quote him in the broadcasts often. Why is it so bright so late in the year. It’s awful.

I have no tickets yet.

But you hope to go.

Yes. A broad pause.

David are you asking me to find you some. Is that what you want. He sounds – not weary – but stiff. Straight-lined.

It shouldn’t be difficult. De Witt only receives one no spares. Otherwise I wouldn’t be bothering you while you’re basking!

David it is too bad. It’s too bad. No telegrams getting through. And four maid services today instead of just the one. No these things are becoming rapidly out of hand.
And a soldier followed us to dinner last night and sat right next to us. Plumb on the next table. Do you understand what I am trying to tell you.

It is not difficult, you just call –

David I cannot. I am very sorry but I must refuse.

I allow myself to be angry, to put force in. Herbert I allowed you to go away with Dion. I allowed you that. To take a young man from his family and his work and his carers, for the first time. You and I negotiated the terms these are the terms.

I was to help with commissions –

This is a commission. The Rally all the Ministers will be there. Kuklin himself the Chancellor in the High Box. Shaw and Fumanov were both commissioned after the Leader Day rallies. A meeting with Kuklin will make me for life.

You want to be with Kuklin – in the High Box? His voice turns weak, incredulous. It is impossible. I cannot.

I do not want to take Dion away from you. I do not want to do that. I do not want to recall him from your holiday with a telegram. And have him escorted home prominently attracting attention. And embarrass your wife and yourself - at such a delicate time.

He is whispering now. I can keep him. Away from you. I can keep him with me.

Where? I am crisp, defining all my consonants precisely. Wherever you go I can find you. I have friends now I am not powerless or devoid of connections.

Will this be the end of it. After the High Box. Will that be all you want of me.

I consider the point. I cannot imagine I will require much more that I could not provide myself.

And will Dion stay.

That is dependent on your behaviour. If it meets my approval and my ends. Best not to give it all up to him – immediately; best to keep him unsteady, not to give him certainties –

I see.

I will expect results before your return. The tickets are to be sent to the Berghaus orchestra care of my secretary. It will be just one call Professor it will be painless. And then it’s over.

Goodbye David. All the richness has been poured off his voice. Underneath it is clear and thin. As if coming from very far away.
22. The Wife on the Way Home

I am in the carriage back to the city thinking of intimacy. Its medical state. The glorious profound close-ness of humans in sympathy. So that barely a fleck of grass a breath could enter sideways. That hum that mesh of thought. And then suddenly a shift underfoot – and it yaws, floods open, the closeness is a room forty steps across, a cool remark dropped on the table, a window two floors above the ground watching white papers spiral and scatter across the night garden. This carriage is what three four strides from wall to wall.

In the other seat is my husband with Dion. Who is fresh-raw with sunburn. Skin of his neck gleaming with scented oil begged from another guest. Reading aloud from notes (the Leader’s Day address - too loud, he seems not to be listening to himself) my husband leans over occasionally. Smoothes cream on the red of the paws. Outside the sun pales and thins through cloud.

*Keeping your husband stringently moral and happy is the duty of the Regime woman* say the pamphlets. I am watching my knees move under my white skirt as some animal behind a screen. His clear radiant happiness. Thickening the air. Its rill of chord. I am conscious of it as radio hears and flexes to a station. Tuned all my married life to his palpable pleasure. Coaxing it from him has for me become a dark thing. Fingers tongue teeth. Ink in the night. Whereas here it bursts forth. Fills his whole heavy body. Easily as swallowing.

Jealousy ultimately turns on oneself. Why am I insufficient. What mineral in me does not form the flint from which he sparks. He looks at me and says *Anne do you have any salves in the office for burns.*

*Only for serious ones. Not for light sunburn. It will be fine.* Cannot for some reason bring myself to say ‘he’, to say ‘Dion’.
I suppose. *Do we think this paragraph is too extravagant.* Recites a long passage urging citizens to honour the Leader through obedience to civil laws and the Guard. The usual stuff.

I feel like the sharpened end of a spear. Brittle and vibrating in a fist. *I think you should say something about honouring their families. About children.*

*Hmmmm?* He is not listening.

Don’t worry.

Tying Dion’s hair in the garden.

My mother had time only to tie the younger girls’ hair. I taught myself to plait from the farmers knotting horses’ tails and manes for shows. Over under over.

*Anne you look tired.* He has risen now. Touched my forehead with the cool back of his hand. *Do you have sunstroke. You feel very hot.*

Could pull him down beside me now. Could whisper *Are you wise.* Could whisper *This boy I think he is a spy.* Could whisper *You old fool.*

I’m just tired as you say. Go sit down.

So close to his body it becomes difficult to see his flaws.

Bed-nestled in his warm his soft tum between his wide shoulder-blades. Honeymoon spent sheetless for the frantic heat rising from his skin. Sweet roundness of his ass.

No part of his body I have not found or lapped or covered with myself.

Proximity thins my betrayed anger into weak desire. The presence and smell of him.

I push him lightly on the shoulder to make him sit, and give me back my holy whitening fury.

Hours. I stroke the nap of the seat and skim the sweat off my neck.

Then the train hauls to a sudden stop. Dion’s glass goes skidding across the table.

Looks at me.

We are hours out of the city yet. Have marked our journey by the direction of the sun its slant on my hands.

Smack of a hand against the window. Splitting the light. Shouts.

*Don’t open it Anne.*

*Somebody could need help.* An accident perhaps. Some frail or stranded person finding the tracks.
I lean out and put my face and shoulders to the breeze. It is men travelling the side of the train pushing at windows with their hands. Twenty of them perhaps thirty. When one comes to us he gives me a red piece of paper and runs on. Mark of his sweating thumb still in the corner bleeding the dye.

*What is it.* My husband at my back.

*I don’t know.* I come back in scraping my elbow on the sill. The cool of the air still laying on my collarbone the curve of my temples.

He looks at the pamphlet and puts it down. *Rural unrest. Uneducated farmers against the yoke of organised labour again. I shall have to do a special broadcast when we’re back in the city.*

The train clips back and surges. I feel dipped into a separate thing. It clings to my body against the weight of the heat the stippled light.

*They didn’t look like farmers.*

*What my sweet?*

*Nothing.*

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**23. The Professor In Protest**

*Please fill out this form.*

*I assure you, I’m on record. Professor H____.*

*Off the radio?*

*The same. Possibly my voice is a bit misleading. Everybody always thinks I am blonde.*

*Oh I’ll see what I can do for you. My husband and I listen to your show every night he just loves it. I’ll just call the Minister for you. You go sit in there.*

*Do I still need the form?*

*No – no –*

I smile at the rattled brunette and settle into a seat.

Debuting on the radio I was already half-tipped towards middle age, sage and sagging. Bag of wattle at the neck. Flecks of mottle on the skin.
I was the last, the ballast of the boat. An empty slot in radio schedules, judged to be barely functional: that late-night gap, when dinner’s done and drowsy families come to rest by the wireless set, sewing and small book in hand. That magic hour when listeners aren’t lucid enough for laboured thinking, and discarded by the Regime’s decision-makers as too late for deep doctrine. But I knew: that the audience were vulnerable, vacant spaces, ears smooth in the dark, waiting for a sweet soothing voice to fill them, unquestioning, with dreamlike places.

The testing radio engineer said All right just this section please. Handed me a segment: a report on agricultural yields, district named field by field.

I sang. Sprung from a vein of tenors. Any language is tonal – not just the songbird calligraphies, the Japanese, but all voices, flat or fretted with threat, sweat, beating hearts. One day I’ll ask David whether he hears them – the voices, in all music.

After that, it was my own: my throne, my thirty-minute kingdom that expanded into an hour, two. I’ve moved the land, laid my hands across the foreheads of four million in their still rooms, blooming over their quiet with glosses of gossipy policy. That was my vocation – to be singular, a comfort, a fixed light. Not like Eda. There have been eight Edas, nine; she is eternal, elusive, each different vox run out through modulators to mimic the one universal.

I am myself. I am strict and unsplit and perfect. There have been no heirs, I’m alone on the air.

What will I do with him – after this mortifying mission, after David divests me of my duties? Perhaps the upper room. How soon could work begin to gut it into good open floors? The wood’s sound – perfect grounds for a young man. Anne could select the drapes and drawers – she’s got an eye, she’d buy well. Swell the house with sound! Our three-part round – a canon cresting, building from the core. She must adore him – he’s so fresh, so frank to please.

After an hour I’ve hollowed every magazine quite clean, down to its skeleton, begun to translate phone calls from the office. The woman’s bound to serve the queue – I’ll just slip through, and quietly collect –

The crucial office is just at the back. I knock, the usual rap –
It’s three young men. They’re startled at my suddenness!

Is this where I get the tickets? I am breezy, bruising –
You can’t be in here.
I beg your pardon –
You can’t be in here. Go back to your waiting room.
Yes. Yes, all right – but –
Go back to your waiting room. You'll be called.
The knock of it's a brutal hit. I sit for one more hour. Still and neutral. Let no language into my skull.
The whisper has gone around – that I've been found, that the Professor is fixed to a waiting room chair just as any other person there. They stare, they suck their teeth. It makes me seethe – to be brought down so low – but it will be brief; I'll get a reprieve, and leave.
In the meantime I put on the maximum act. I've packed a full sheaf of releases, each marked obnoxiously with Secret, Private, Highest Level Access Only – they're not subtle, those stamps. I fan and flick them, portentously. The message is clear: I am not one of you, yawning your way through queues and bureaucratic stews of paperwork. I am a favoured man, dipping swiftly to this purgatorial place before ascending again, to my actual firmament.
It keeps their distance. It will serve. I can't swerve them from their belief in my beatific highness.
At last a door opens and I am ushered through – all blue-ribbon courtesy and mannered bows. The standard stuff. I'm rough, slightly, to handle, decline an offer to draw out my seat. I feel cheated, embarrassed.
Hello, sir, I am the Minister's fourth secretary. What can I do for you. Barely twenty-two! And already hair receding, pleading for a full shave.
It’s a pleasure to meet you. Professor H_____.
Do you have a form?
Oh, the secretary told me –
I really can’t see you without a form.
Oh – I am underwhelmed with this game. I came, I have had my feet knocked out from under me, what shame do they want?
Here, you may do it here. Be quick please.
I do it swiftly, with a flourish. There, all done.
Yes. I see. Another ticket. Have you received your allotment by post.
Yes –
Excess tickets are highly irregular practise. We can’t go giving them to all comers. It becomes a security risk.

There cannot be that many applications for the First Box.

The First Box? Are you applying for that? They’re only given to top-level officials –

If you look in my file you will note that I have obtained two every year for the past twenty-two years.

This year your tickets are standing only. We must abide by the current rank in allocating more, and the standing segment is already over-subscribed.

I pinch the palm of my hand between my fingers. The number of generals this year has thinned. The Minister for Public Works And Maintenance is very ill and will not be present. There must be spare Box tickets available by the laws of mathematics. Let me consult.

Ascends to a top room – the Third Secretary, doubtless, dabbling in public policy for fruitless mucks like me! Returns –

I’m afraid the Box is full –

Full, or specifically full for me? I will not be attending. The ticket will be in the name of one David Ernst, a young composer. He would be registered in the ballot.

Ah. Clearly this pleases! Will you excuse me.
I feel the farce, but will not blaspheme it. Play the game.

The price will be six hundred.
I could get murder done for less.
Murder would not get you the ticket, sir. Six hundred. Cash.

Good. Fine. Here it is.
Six hundred for a single paper! Lay it down with diamonds, slaves! But nothing – nothing. And for freedom it is perhaps a frugal price. And the upper room – I post it rapidly – to get its scent off my skin.

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Returning to my office there is no James – and an open door.

I think of leaving. Grab a cab and run. But it cannot be done; you have to see the scar, how deep it goes, the closeness of the bullet to the heart. My mouth’s parched. I don’t want to see the dead.
The sockets swinging. Great haul of the equipment gone – that whole corner of the room torn out. A loose wire spat sparks that have stained the wall, like fallen stars. Some scattered rust, some glass – and space.

It feels almost graceful – in its gutted state. Ascetic; a hermit’s den. When I go to touch the vulnerable wall, the wrenched-out segments, I find fragments of the fat broadcast equipment left broken off in swathes. They didn’t brave the sockets to cut them all off. I sift them in my fingers, the iron nails, the fragile copper licks. Nobody changed the locks – which is luck.

The notice in the centre – the usual format.

_The Regime hereby relieves you of your State-sponsored berth and reclaims its tools/equipment/possessions. Kindly refer to your Handbook for process._

It is so cruel. Disembowel the fool. Cast his guts out onto the battlements. Let the people see him puppet headless, held above all dignity, shit dripping to his heels.

I take down the paper – shame steaming in my throat, my eyes – and spool the useless wires to put in the weeping walls. No use falling over and breaking my neck – no use recklessly giving them that pleasure. Measure what’s gone: the broadcast equipment, the best lights.

So: the fight is lost.

The recordings – every broadcast was carefully kept, in their vast vault, they showed it to me once – will be split, and cracked. As Avedure, and Von Sayer, and Carr. Burn-pits for them, smelt for miles. Is there voice in smoke? Will the people working fields, furrowing the hot ground, cock an ear and hear over hills the last drift of me – held in a pipe, a spool of leaves?

I pace the carpet, dizzy, dark with sudden sweat.

After the baby died – I slept in here, some nights, ear to the crystal set, letting the early-morning drone of the Anthem on repeat clothe me, feet to beard. I feared my own body, the vast shoal of my grief, its hidden reef. My belief in pleasure came from those plain nights: whitening, under the sounds of bright horns on repeat.

Of course they will have gone to the home studio, too. Torn out its tongue its fragile walls. I’m breathing hard now, floundering; see suddenly our house’s side gaping, open, a doll’s house, damp and fluttering with birds. Is it true? Did they bruise Anne, pull her by the hair, has she vanished now – into a leaving car? The vision seems real. I can’t tell, I don’t know –
I should call. But can’t. The phones bugged. Watched – from all sides. The ripped wall seems a punched-in mouth, mute.

The hunt is on for my hide. I must slide soundlessly from place to place. Give them no tooth, no tongue. The posters – will be gone too. And my station a gob of garbage-noise, pure white, they’ll tune in tonight and know then it never was, that I have been erased. Perhaps a new Eda – in the empty hull.

Everything seems to buzz, to boom. My mouth is open – I am making sounds, weak, panicky as an animal. I cannot tell what language, it seems so distant. There are other sounds emanating from unseen places - enemies behind the walls. My ears feel frantically full, with ash, with gashes of blood, though when I scrape them with my palms nothing’s there.

Nothing. My skull vibrates; I press it on the empty desk, hiding my neck, keeping myself low, slow-breathing. For the listening – for the listening men.

24. The Wife And Wheat

In the fields when I was sixteen a man fell. Sheaved at the bone. Scythe right through the rib.

My father’s men brought him shouting to the house. Laid down cloth terracotta bowls fine needles. Led me to the brutal yard.

Through his flesh was the speckled chaff from a fine evening’s harvest. Crop in his mouth his eyes. Drifts across his hairless arms.

Wheaten wound. Scraping out the seed I gave him my own dress to bite.

Circle of men at my head lighting cigarettes from the lanterns. Boiling instruments in the house.

If you leave it in there will it sprout asked my father curiously. Holding the pail as I flushed the sewn parts.

No. No never. We bury them in their working clothes. Overalls so stunned with seed-heads in the weft that squares of maize print the cemetery.

Rising the man clapped my head to show thanks and stumbled crying for his wife.
Thinking of this in the living room evening.
Dion the wheat-hair. That will lodge in the wound. And cover the body with wind-blown fields.
Our child in the ground is unflowering. Neat-napped grave with its regulation stones.
Not allowed to visit *irregular behaviour*. We were not fertile places after that it dredged the good soil out of us.
There is no son but our son. There is no boy but that.

Anger that is a shock to the hand like static.
Did he smell the slaughtered child on my husband's skin. And move into the space.
And wear for him the hospital swaddling the small identity bracelet the white paper cap.

Stand in the shudder of the dark. Breathing holding scarf to neck.
Think of the hoarded love. That was to be spread on the baby's arms and face. That kept instead in the lungs the hair the space under the tongue. Souring into abscess.
And he has spilt it – on wheat-haired boys –

It will be a slender thing. I go to the telephone. A slender thing to call Luise. Have him prised away. Insertion of one skewer. Flick split sing.
It will be *I hear my husband's new aide saying unwise things*. It will be *Perhaps this should be passed on I don't know who to call*. It will be *Could you take care of it yes*. Dizziness. I bite the inside of my cheek till blood comes.

Separate the failed limb from the bone. Cut and cut back to the good flesh.
Five seconds of breath to smooth out the rictus of fury. Dial the number.

*Hello?*
*Luise. It’s Anne.*
*Anne. How is the situation.*
The situation being what. The situation being husband fallen cut loose.
They had to find a way without the tribunal. Bloodless without unseemly scenes.
*They've only pulled the radio show. No trial or public denunciation or anything yet.*
Perhaps it's only a matter of time.
Wulfson let them into the house to gut the broadcast room. Loops of copper wiring the weight of a man. Vast wreaths of electronics like celebrations tossed from the window.
Can reach a hand now through the inner wall. Bricks cracked from the speakers. A nude room. Wulfson already in with plaster – but the rain beginning.

*Perhaps*. Her voice a taut rope onto which I lunge. My body in midair. *Or that may be the extent of his punishment.*

*It is extensive enough. For him.*

*It is convenient timing for a demotion. Internal squabbling everywhere.*

*Is it so endemic?* The papers are stuffed nonsense as usual.

*Fairly. If you could hear some of the phone calls I’ve had! Entire Departments upending their staff. The Parliament’s calling secret sessions. Something is brewing.*

*But that seems –*

*Most states have this period of frantic change. I’ve seen it before. Like a hibernating animal cleaning its cubbyhole.*

*Ah. So part of a natural rhythm.*

*Precisely. Excuse me for a moment. [pause].*

*Things sound very busy there.*

*Yes. Listen. This upheaval may work heavily in our favour. There’s talk of reinvention - a strong female presence in the governance. In the Lawmakers Court. I’ve had telegrams. Cautious but definitely making promises. They want change.*

*But that’s brilliant. That would be all our aims –*

*It’s not firm. One must never fire the arrow before the fog clears.*

*Of course.*

*We would want you onside. As part of the new front. Educated women shaping the Regime’s future, rendering its rule of law. Rather than this rotting old guard, this all-male club of tottering blusterers – but I am sorry.*

*It’s all right.*

*Do you think you were wise to flee the tribunal.*

*I had valid reasons. It just seemed so unkind. They’re brutal things. I thought they sent a spy – after us. To relay our movements. But nobody followed – I suppose I was paranoïd.*

*She sounds amused by the thought. It would have been hardly necessary. Your husband is a well-known man. Could scarcely escape notice even in this disarray.*
Yes. And a telegram dismissal –
Is more merciful. Precisely. And you are no bloody-minded thinker. It is a quality we’ll need in the new developments, after this.
Is that an offer.

If you could shoulder the pressure. If your husband won’t prove an obstacle.
Flick of my hair across my cheek. Whip against her back.

He is a good man Luise.
Yes. Any good man can go astray in a culture of bad habits. A misuse of talent. But renewal is coming. Will you do it then.

I would be delighted.
After things settle we can start meeting with officials more openly – But you didn’t call to hear me laud my vision for the future.
It was nothing. I had a thought but you answered it.

I am glad.

Replace the receiver –
Mercy in the cut of the flesh. In the peculiar vagaries of disease. Wrecking the body whole lungs untouched.
Without design without malevolence. Never hate the condition the lecturer in Paris said. It has no feelings for you or for its subjects. It is merely an organism attempting to survive.
Dion removed of his evil intent. No spy. Simply loosing his seeds – wherever they may fall.

Dark is full upon us now. Wulfson in the garden stoking the night blooms.
Open the window Wulfson is the master home yet.

No madam. Car on the drive now though. I gave up on plastering for the evening. Do you like the moonflowers. Weeds usually but they look so pretty now on the climbing wall.
Beautiful. Beautiful.
The startled pleasure of an averted decision – the slip of a caught beast back into water.
And Dion unflawed. Watching the flowers on the night wall.
He comes in and lays down. His face seems stripped to dark hollows. The fact of his dismissal seems so thin and fragile beside this heaviness this worn-out face.

*Can I get you anything.* I come to touch his hair.

*Hmmm? No.* He turns and looks at me. Smiles. *Perhaps read to me. Why did I never have you on the show? Your voice is excellent.*

*They didn't like my accent.*

*Fools. Were you on the telephone then. Were there clicks on the line.*

*No clicks, Herbert. No watchers in the garden. The post had been read as usual and stamped by the Censors.*

*Good. Good.* He turns back. Seems to be chewing some thick reed inside himself. Movement of his jaws over each other in slow circles. Hear him quietly speaking to nothing.

As I gather the cushions I lower the spear and strike.

*Were you with Dion today when the announcement came.*

*Hmm? No. No.*

*Is he a good worker.*


*Dion. Is he a good worker.*

*A good worker! Yes. Yes fine. And dedicated. Single-minded. Just what the Regime needs!*

His face sardonic and outward staring. Somewhere far off. A man of porcelain of faded glass. Voice the only strong part left in the vessel.

Pull of love to him like a hook in the mouth. Startling every fresh time.

*You seem unsettled. Let me get you water –*

Can hear him from the kitchen. Turn my hands under the tap wonderingly.


*To be conducting himself with a broken-down disgrace! It would be the mark of Cain – on his face. Consorted with a lesser being – and he deserves none of this spoiled meat. No it must be given up. So young, so young. Juventutis veho fortunas. Is that the water.*

*Yes. Innocent - yes. Did you know that St Innocent was one of the first linguists? True.*

He turns to me on the left. Soft neck wrinkles at the kissing place that hinges. Give me your body your disorder. Here is my dress for you to bite. Here is my needle in the dark.

*I did not know that. Drink the water.*
And so. He sips. Old lips when did they become so old suddenly. Caved in at the corners the sweet dents. I must give him up. Now – at the end of things. Very dramatic. Abandon all hope they who enter. Was it abandon I forget the quotation. Lasciate ogne speranza – but lasciate means such a raft of things. To leave, to relinquish. To release. A freeing almost. It is freedom – for him – from a bad rot. A bad lot!

You are not rot. He is not. A high building with a fallen tower perhaps. The architecture still strong holding it rigid against sandstorms bad winds.

I am, I speak rot. Total poppycock and rot. Focuses for the first time on my own body my face. Have I wasted all this.

Wasted what?

On beauty. Wasted all of my effort. On gripping it between my hands. Raises them. Their peculiar weight. As if the bones were thickened. Along my spine they pressed and nearly crushed me once. It shifts – and leaves me. You leave me. His voice wavers and cannot focus or light on a tone. It is an appetite – it is a gracious appetite, the heads of empires felt it, it is the worth of the world. Yes. The show was not a great thing. I wanted it to be a foundation a Corinthian column on the plains of the Forum, I wanted it to be strong! But it was dirty, sullied – and I worked at it – to make it great. It is not a waste – not a waste. He was so young. And he died. Why did he die?

He is rambling the fields of his meaning. Dion didn’t die –

Not Dion. The swivel of his great eye to me. The haul of sudden pain.

We don’t know. The doctors didn’t know.

Were we not good enough. Did we not make it beautiful for him. He looks away from me again. His ribs are shaking the enormous powerful lungs are rocking his shoulders. I worked so hard. And it is never sufficient. The rot always gets in. It all corrodes –

Come to bed – come to bed. Wulfran.

Who has come through the window having heard. The master’s voice splitting across the garden. Snagging his trees.

Yes madam.

Get the pills out of the top drawer you know where they are.

Your pills yes madam. He sees me holding the master’s shoulders as he mumbles and clutches his lips between his teeth.

Two I think.
The sedatives from the burning time. When it was easiest to be ash and coal. Undressing him in the bedroom I am chaste. Lay two hands upon his stomach to measure temperature. Hold the blanket as he winds under. Lie the grace of him down.

Are you better.

Yes nurse. Has surfaced closer to the edge of himself. Filled out the lines of his face. My thoughts feel like a calmed sea. The wine-dark sleepless sea. It will be sleepy soon enough. I must give him up. He will not understand. He'll be upset he'll cry – Quiet now. Dion and the child crossed in him. Two swords. Yes. I'll be quiet. You are wise. Taps his nose absurdly. I say with the casualness that a chess master knocks off a pawn Perhaps it’s not a bad thing for Dion. To be let go. This is a confusing time for you young people need stability. Click. Roll of the piece off the side of the board into my hand. Yes. He may have been looking for a new situation already. Boys being what they are. Restless. Always ambitious. Like Roxborough. Whom I know paid you for a favour. And perhaps the opera tickets the glut of eggs that month. Face when he came to tea a platter of sugar. Not the same. Where did he come from Dion. Do we know. I hope you were careful. A friend’s boy. Ah. A good friend. That’s sensible. I smooth the bedsheets. Sewing the chaff into the open flesh. Not like others. Beatrice was telling me about one woman an aide hired a young girl no references. Looked clean and worked hard. It came out she’d been sent to monitor subversive activity. Reports every second day by phone. Click. Click. Pawn. Then bishop. Then queen. Standard practise. Is it. Are you sleeping now. Yes. Yes.

What will deepen as he sleeps. Wheat into the wound. Its windblown thought. Let the small seed burst a crop across the fronds of nerve. Green shoots prised under veins lifting.
Dion not a spy. Simple like a fruit left laying on fallow ground. Clear flesh for the bite. But there are types and types of danger.

In the new Regime with Luise I’ll come home late in the car. Find him stooped in the garden perhaps or half-lucid at the gramophone. Rusted into his circlet of age. Will I say *How many times have I told you not to interrupt me while I’m working.* Will I leave him flayed in the cupboard. Blue dress. Olive. Kalamatianós dance. Never. Never this. Whole buckets and armfuls of love. Spread them on the floor for his old feet. Dance.

25. *The Composer at the Rally*

Volume is a trick.

Add ten trumpets twenty add four hundred crashing cymbals. The music remains single; and its own whole body is untouched; and the mere swell, the bulge of loudness, is just bravado, just layers of fat on the skin – and smothers even the clearest line –

But stunning! For the arena is forty thousand capacity; and down below one sees the State Orchestra’s marching hundreds, drilled in movement, a circus covering the slope – and the noise grips! Glorious bass drums – and the violins shrill – and it is not music but war, a wash and collision of several sides, roiling – and astonishing, breathless –

I turn to the dignitary by my elbow to declare it -

But he is turned. And pays no heed. And is of course oblivious to the suck of sound. And weary, weary. And reaches for a glass –

The New Year’s Box is filled. No man beside myself looks to the arena – but hands out cards or leans for a comment in an ear. And I am neophyte and young. And have exposed my stupidity.

For the music is for the common. Hordes grabbing their beer and hauling up for dances in the stands below. Shouting for the trumpets. Dirty collars scrubbed for the day out in the sun.

And this balcony is lesser. And light. And the hallowed space. Minor gods arrayed in a bored space.
A man brushes. Turns and takes my shoulder. The tag I affixed.

You are the young composer then.

Yes. A great pleasure to meet you -

Czern. The State critic. Charmed to match the face to the creation.

Czern who damned it – slightly. And flicked his review through with suggestion, a darker shape – floating under the serene ice of it, a drowned tree.

Your critiques were precise and helpful as usual. Mute the body. Press and press. Strain through to a clearness – a note performed high and without wavering.

I am glad you found them so. He sucks his teeth behind the contraband cigarette. Flat-faced. Slab of sound leaps at us from below then fades. Many men at the start of their careers buck from aid to keep them on the right path. But I hear you rise further with every passing week. The De Witt commission! The musical press looks forward to that intensely.

Bow slightly in the accepted manner. Single hinge from the hip. No arm swing. Brittle – brittle. I hope it will be satisfactory.

Tell me what you’re thinking of doing with the poems –

Some minutes of intellectual chat. Here is David holding a glass opining with a great critic. Here is the New Year’s Box. Here is all come to good –

Are you here as a particular person’s guest?

Anonymity as usual. A kind friend invited me. Too late I think this code could mean a woman. Or a man – who Dions me. As if any would find my kicked-in limbs and botch-up head a sight! We lesser beauties must go where we can.

Yes, I had heard you have very kind friends. A wise collection for a young man to cultivate. I smile the standard smile of the posters.

Collection – as if I hoard them. As if they grow on my windowsill blooming commissions in red petals. Pollen of invitations on my cuff –

If I may offer some advice – he is quiet; not stage quiet to be heard but dropping his words in one friend of yours perhaps is no longer an intelligent investment.

No? Feel the prick of sweat on my shirt –

Or perhaps he is not your friend – but he was at your premiere, in any case. Professor H_____ is no longer strictly in favour. Word is the crash will come soon. An ignominious end to such a glittering State career – Ah, but you look puzzled.
Rearrange my face. Its slanted bones that have long knitted into solid plates. And still carry the crack in them. And still the line of ache in the spine. He is the famous Radio man. Is he come to grief? I’m sad to hear it.

Does he believe it he does. The box is stunningly crowded the light hurts. A woman laughs into her glass. You don’t know him? Good. He takes another cigarette. I proffer a light – neat silver bought cheaply from an arrested family’s effects. Two thumbs of wheeled fuel. So thin – all of this. I confess myself reassured. You have talent – to come this far. A flair for the potentially problematic – but you are young still.

The Professor – diminished. And Dion perhaps taken in. Or too swift – escaping into the street bloodied. And broken in the eye socket. But what has he done? I still listen to his show every week.

Not for a great deal longer.
Surely there must be an outcry. Play ignorant, play the feeble tune. For such a popular man?

He does not smile. Short vain barrel-chest. Put him in a chorus he’d be a faltering baritone gulping the words. Ah, but there are a great many strange things afoot these days. You would be surprised what can rapidly become unimportant. I did not think I would live to see it – but the Regime will prevail. As it always has. And clear out the dead rot. And march onward.

Yes.
I will leave you. I look forward to the De Witt.
Thank you.

I stand, and I watch. The famous profile. The coterie of hangers-on. He enters late; a whisper of Kuklin around the box; is immediately handed a glass of champagne, beset by greeting dignitaries. He looks softer than I had imagined. Strong nose but uncertain eyes perpetually roving. Has strangely smooth temples as if rubbed continually.

Calculate – the beats of the step; then lunge, brush his side –
Oh I beg your pardon. Affect surprise - Are you the Culture Minister?
I am. He smiles – the ruse is clearly to his taste, adorable. We are in the joke together. And whose acquaintance am I now making?

David Ernst, sir. Composer. Currently fulfilling the state commission on Oskar De Witt. I shake his hand. His is a hard-palmed one that moves automatically back into a fist at his side.
Ah, yes. Our state poet. He is old now. Why are state poets always old? Perhaps they don’t fully appreciate in value until they go fully grey.

Perhaps not, sir.

A small break in the music makes us both turn – a trip in the rhythm. As if a cue had been missed, or a verse passed over by accident. The hitch makes the stadium noise briefly dim. Ah, is that – no. He looks then shakes his head. We have perhaps a little longer to chat. Well, I have heard fine things of you.

I beg your pardon – am I distracting you? He is still eyeing the box where the Leader is coming – at the centre; we will be able to see the lineaments of his face, his teeth as he speaks –

No, no – at least not yet. He examines his watch – a fine one on a gold band with blue enamel hands. It is strange – the Leader should have appeared a short while ago. The strike of half past. But there is no sign –

The crowd are bewildered at the skip in schedule, or ignoring it. The men and women in this box are more attuned – and are restless; comparing the time, pointing, leaning their heads to one another in confusion –

Perhaps he has been delayed.

Perhaps – He is still staring at the Box. Lost in thought.

I merely wished to say, that I am your humble servant, and that you may be confident that any commissions are –

He turns his head to his large companion – a bodyguard. Orpolov, are they late? Can you see?

They are. The man is well over six foot. A surprisingly thin chin in a heavy face. It is most unusual. The crowd are unsettled – the guard are being sent out to guarantee order – look. And indeed a line of green has begun to spool across the seats. Shouting begins distantly.

But why is it so strange? I wonder why this is causing such confusion. The Leader must be a very busy man.

Orpolov looks at me. Seems in one glance to assess my entire worth and weight in the world. The Leader is precision. Precision unbalanced even by the slightest measure is chaos. He turns to Kuklin – We might leave the Box, Minister.

I note *The band is striking up again – that will help.*

Yes. *Music does help, doesn’t it, composer? What were we saying?*

*I was just telling you – of how humbled I am by the great commission the State has given me. And beg you to think of me on future occasions.* For it could be great art. Even with the regulation trumpets and necessary moralising and refusal of all blurs and experimental edges. Even with that – I could make it great – for him.

He smiles again. *I like a young artist with manners. Don’t you, Orpolov? So often it’s other way – showing up at my office demanding medals and parades!* No, you have the right attitude. *I was the same when I went into the Ministry – never ungrateful* –

Orpolov, whom I could in this moment kill, says *I hear noises from outside.*

*What is it?*

*Gunshots* says somebody else.

*Surely not.* Kulkin strains. *A car perhaps. David, can you hear it?*

*I hear – something –*

Vague staccato. Beat in the wind. I think of the frantic drum of the Fruit King – hand flat on the stage –

A man cries *Look at the gates –*

It looks – from this high place – like a push of blood; the gate smashed and scarlet pushing in – but it’s headscarves, flags, I see an arm raised with a band of red tied to it – and roaring; and the green and blue of the Guards pushed at their rim like algae moved by water – and the roar of gunfire begins, an animal yelling in the dark –

*Evacuate – evacuate the box! It is rebels –*

On the panicked stairs on the way out I grasp Kulkin’s arm – to stop him from falling; and he does not look to me; but is gone.

When I get in the landlady grasps me. And sets me in the shelter of the ground-floor apartment which is vacant. And the press of her face against the door. And outside there are screams and cracks and sirens.

*He went to work I do not know where he is eh.* Weeping into her hand. Has brought all her clothes and dishes down. Gleam of that small medal a much-loved treasure.
Dion will be safe inside. They have protocols. He won’t be fighting. The Professor must have boarded-up rooms and spacious bunkers. I think of Dion lying listening to the gunfire and tapping his hands to the rhythm.

You are sure. She looks in the dim evening light coming through the drawn curtains faintly green. You promise me.

I promise you. He won’t come to any harm. He is as precious to his boss as he is to us.

So much glass. And the guns! He will be scared –

He is safer there with the other guards than here. This is true. What could we do – bash the rebels on the head with firewood?

Ha. Yes. You are right. He is safer there. She peers out the chink in the curtain and I see the sky is specked with planes. Oh it is like the rebellions the first time. The Blood Week. You do not know, eh, you were not in the city then.

I was a child – far off. It was a fabled terror we read to each other from the newspapers at night. Still in our mourning clothes for the Father Leader that had been black-dyed with walnut hulls and paint. The black arm-bands on the miners. Still a shade lighter than their skin. The papers said it was just a small riot – all over fast.

The papers! A shot comes – we stay low. She says in a smaller voice It was terrible, eh, fires all night, and sirens. I was pregnant – the noise, I thought it would bring on labour pains. But he stayed in me. He was so good, so quiet. The doctors said – that all the panic, that it shocked me, that there were things in the air, eh – and so he came out bad –

Bad Dion. Shocked into the world big and strong and with no more sense than a baby chick. This is his element then – he will find home in it, it curdled his brain once.

He is safe. He will come home once the curfew lifts. I head to the door. You stay inside here. You lock the door and shut the windows. Do you promise?

Yes. Yes. When I leave she is fumbling on the shade for the key to the window-locks.

I go to the telephone – recently installed, blue and green, a round solid thing with large white numbers – and only after I’ve dialled do I think the lines could be down. However it rings.

When she picks up there is only silence.
Tanya I say.
Yes?
It’s David.
There is no surprise in her. Where are you?
At home. Are you all right?
Yes. We were dismissed from the office early. Before the curfew.
Good. How did you get home?
The trains. She sounds merely tired. As if half-submerged in cool water.
There were guards everywhere so it was all right. Some shouting men at the station.
People panicked and ran.
I’m sorry.
It’s fine. I bruised my knee. That’s all. Frizz of irritation in her. The music of her body being angry. Being held-inside and compartmentalised and released as a pressure valve releases steam.
I feel my voice rock and swing. I just wanted to call and make sure that you were safe.
That’s very kind. She adds, I spent the money you gave me.
On what?
A ticket. The overnight train to the mountains.
I am surprised. You’re going on holiday? Or perhaps she’s visiting Bart – if he’s allowed out of the camps for the day?
No. No – oh, they broke the glass of the store opposite. It’s the Army Stores. I can hear the avalanche of sound surrounding her voice. Burying it in slivers and tinkles.
Is your door locked?
Yes. And barred. We’re safe. She breathes. It is good – to hear her breathing. Regular and well-tuned. David – you helped me once. With the money. And Bart always said you were straight. I think we should meet.
Where are you going? It will pass, Tanya, the guards will take care of it, my landlady was saying so –
But she drives through. Pizzicato across the smoothing lines of my voice.
When the curfew is up. There’s a café near your theatre yes? Meet me there.
When I can. If it isn’t safe –
If I can’t leave I’ll telephone.
I give in. Good. I’ll see you then. Keep yourself quiet –
Yes. You too.

26. The Professor Watches The Fireworks

New Year!
Outside the shutters the sky explodes. Explodes – and ploughs right through my eyes. The holy rood of year is splinters in the ears! I’ve stripped it down, now – to its bones, my bowel-apartment on the Boulevard. To its bones I’ve stripped it. The sofa’s ripped stem to steaming stern, whole fernfronds of its stuffing crush the floor. And looted the plaster, too – where all the bugs would be, the listening beads, their little dropping seeds and grapes and roots. No wire’s appeared, but it’s New Year – they knew that I’d come home, hone in, be dethroned.

I’m shirtless, girt by dust and paper, wolf of this turf. The whole lot’s spit underfoot – the rot, the books, the still-hot lamp. Wherever there were spies. I shredded, I gored their eyes.

I am lost. In this. Grab and it won’t hold. Scold, scald my tongue, it still runs on. I’ve never been silent – even as a small one, a peapod barely big enough for a smell, I howled and hoisted words aloft. Give me a crop of vowels I’ll graze it!

Dion’s by the window seeing the stars rain. There are hammering howls. If police-mobs mounted the stair, got chairs up to the doors and smashed the lock, would he give off a roar, gash them at their pikes? My Dion – dragged down to the deck, spiked through the neck. Bloodstains on the flags of the jails – where they beat the boys with botched tongues. Whose boys? I am confused, I cast for a light, a solidity on which to bite. A bit of furniture for steadying. Eddy time.

Dion. Dion come here.
He ducks down. Softnuzzles at his arm. If I smack him he sighs and seesaws out and in, but never shouts – only a pant, a prissy squeak when I’ve got his prick in the evenings. I put all of my sound in his stacked lungs, to slosh and spill safely – and lo, there was a hole, the ripened bilge ran right down, hot and hollering!

Dion do you love me.
Yes. He lies – his eyes wide.
How can you say that Dion.
Yes.

When you know you’ve spied on me. When you know you tell them everything. Trained – trained to track me, with his splash of gold stare, his gobbleup eyes! It must be acting – cataracting, spitting whiteness over my spectacles. I’ve cracked it open – like an egg. A boy who’s biddable, a servile biddy-boy – they did it well. Tells them all – my tactics, tactile parts, the heel to pierce.

But I see through it! You can tell them. Shake my fist. Burst boil of anger. He recoils. Stink of obedience on him like an oil. You can tell them that the old Professor plays the game. That he knows pawns when he sees them lurking in his room. You can tell them! Can’t you. When you see them. You can tell them that.

No.

He is stubborn – speaking to my knees. His furrowed brow speaks like a struck gong. Stroke my heart, Dion, make it drowsy.


No.

No? No. Of course not. Of course not. I’m weeping as a pig weeps, trotters up, snout down in the mud, muddling it with grunts and gnashed happiness. Oh they weep – sob at the slop-pumps. Dion you wouldn’t. You wouldn’t be one of them would you. You love me. You and Anne. You two.

Yes.

Yes. Yes Dion. Yes. I must sleep. Curl up on the split sofa – no pitter-pat, no rat in the wallpaper, not a crack for their gnaw and pawing. Settle my silly old self down – snug, groggy, bloodied. Wanting my boy. They won’t get a peep out of this place any more. We’ll paper the walls tomorrow. What’s that racket the parties. Tell them to shut it down. I’ll broadcast on it. I’ll tell them so. Tomorrow work begins anew. I’ll lie down. The world spins and is gentle. Generous to its gaspers, its great-voiced generals on the radio shows, who cover it up so warm and willing with their hums and strums and plummy noise. And then springing a voice speaks out of me it’s my own: Did I ever tell you about my son.

Relief runs through me – so loud it almost makes a sound. Stunning rush of it – the rushes of a river bending. Why is grief coupled up with relief? When it’s been stoppered for months, wax-mouthed, the welt of it unhealing under the ribs. A lost language appearing from under a stone. Welling up –
My son. When he was born you know he was so small he was like half a letter. 
Too small to even be whole, to make a sound. I speak him out of me. My wide mouth 
ushering him into the world. Mourning made me witless - too stunned then even to 
cry, to cradle. Ladle of him, little spoonful. Gesture to show it – his brevity, the 
brushstroke of his head. And Anne my Anne. Gave him a name. Light fluttering in the 
limp room. The great gift of it. That he didn’t die nameless, knuckling dumb into the 
earth, untouched by any tongue. That he was aloud in the world. 

The name. My son.

27. The Wife Refuses

I am working in the night surgery –
Typical to get Rally injuries. Drunks reeling headfirst into pools. Coming in laughing 
holding their own teeth. See these. If you can’t fix them string them I’ll wear them on 
my hat.

Stud a smile in sideways from the jaw. Haul the sinews upward. Pull the grin through 
eight layers of flesh.

Relax into the light. Stark regulation bulbs from the Ministry. No shadows even in the 
folds of nose or ear. The night courtyard a smack of weird white. 
The nurses shade their eyes under caps and hands but this startled glare is true 
pleasure. Throb of its press on the body. Like hands opening cupboards. Finding only 
guiltless space.

Thinking of Luise. We would want you onside –
Exultant as a rainstorm in the driest season.
The memory of that relief. Parched places swelling with growth, fragrant rot in the 
fields. Flush overflows in the dark tanks, flocks steaming under the crack of sky, and 
leaning over to dip your hat in a puddle and place it dripping on your head for luck –
What I thought I wanted from my life. Strigil the oil shave the hair silt the sediments. Be a pure wife. Be unquestioning factual love. When he first met me he said *You look like a single character written precisely in the Japanese.*

*What do I say.*

*I’ll tell you when you’re undressed.*

But then of course when two languages lie alongside one another there is ferocity missed cognition a great gap.

To be in a Ministry. And the Regime germinating with these precise-character women. And our whole language audible, multiple, frenetic, linking arms - *Keep your surgery as silent as possible* the instructor said. *Noise gives the impression of chaos.*

Look inside my body. Its whole brash honeycomb suddenly filled with gold.

A nurse enters. *The wireless isn’t working.*

*What?*

*It’s just crackles and relay. It cut off just before the Rally started.*

I rise and follow. Leaving the bulk of myself damp with delight in the future. Using only the rind for this present.

The wireless’s tender antennae frizz to the touch. Briefly I consider putting one in my mouth. Swallowing the wasp of sound.

She says *Maybe I can go borrow one from the clinic down the road. They’ll have a spare.*

*It’s just that station. Listen Eda is perfectly clear. It must be a technical fault – switch back over in five minutes.*

That impulse of the mouth.

In emergencies you learn to weigh the dosage on your tongue. Feel the belly of the syringe till it tips and taps the teeth.

Trimming his beard in Paris. Ripped-open evening. Humidity steaming hair away from the scalp. He said *Will you plait the hair into your own hair. It’s rather short.*

I said *No it’s better as a way to line my hat. And don’t make any Samson jokes.*
He said *That was his hair. His long golden hair. Or perhaps it was brown which I suppose is more likely* –

I said *Talk without moving your chin. Or you’ll end up cleft-bearded like the Devil.*

*You’d like that wouldn’t you. Persephone and the pomegranates.*

*Stop it.*

*People in one civilisation believed that husbands and wives when they lay together would begin to grow the same colour hair. Personally I hope for yours.*

*There you’re done now. And a mighty mess you’ve made of it with your insistence on talking.*

*I will never be done talking! I’ll talk past the grave, love, and half into the next age of men, and they’ll have to wire my jaw shut with pliers of gold. And you’ll always be there with me, listening with your big silver cups for ears.*

*It is true. Talk loves him like a brother. It spills out of him sleepwise.*

*Go back to bed. I’ll rinse the sink.*

He rose and walked out of the light. Body so ripe as to seem almost angry. Touch it and the raw blood rose to your heat.

I took the hair and swallowed. Be in me always. Grow great thickets in the lung. Plait down along the organs. When I have his child let it be furred like a bear.

Somewhere now a vague spool of noise. Like birds rising from grain. Clatter across the fields –

*Alarm in another district. Indistinct and brutal.*

Rising I see the night skyline has lines of smoke. Radio still whispering.

*What is it.*

The nurse has come to the window. Just three of us tonight. Barest number: one to chloroform one to be surgeon one to soak the muck off the table.

*I don’t know. An accident perhaps. Get the door –*  

For there’s a bash on the wood front. Small sign says *Ring The Bell Please.*

A guard is in the front yard. The noise here is harder. Sky spectral with ash.

*Any comers.*

*None.* Wrap of the coat around throats and knees. Exposed parts suddenly aching in the air. *What’s happening.*
Keep inside. Stay alert with your equipment we’ll need you later. If anybody else comes bar the entrance.

A drift of sparks overhead. One of the nurses says Oh the fireworks but I know burning wood on a breeze. Fires in the summer stores devouring the year. You dip your body in the pond and stay under till it leaps the banks.

I reach out a hand. If civilians –
Only soldiers of the Guard. Do you understand.
Yes.

The nurses are frantic. Is it a rebellion what do we do.
We all have our training. I reach for the white wall. Should I get them to wet their hair will it be fire that comes to the door first. What does the Guidebook say.

One fetches it. In the event of an emergency – that’s now – all Regime members of the medical profession must maintain a level of control befitting their high level State assignment. Assigned roles must be observed and protocol maintained. In the event of Severe Threat please stand by for instructions from law enforcement and instruct patients accordingly.

Eda on the radio is indistinct now. Outside the sirens begin.

I put them under the tables and pad the windows with cushions. If they look for light they will see only vivid lines a spindle’s thinness.
Were you ever in a fight says one of the nurses. In your home country it’s violent isn’t it.
I came from a farm. There was a stampede once. A cow got into our kitchen and knocked over half the jars my mother was furious.

They giggle weakly. It seems hundreds of years past: the shards of terracotta and wasted jam.

The broad flickering face of the cow caught in a small madness. Placing my hand on its side to feel the heart shuddering.

What did you do.

Oh we called my father he could talk a cow out of anywhere. He talked it out. Cows adored him he was probably part cow.

Think as I say this that they will not know what I mean. That they will imagine my father as pelt and hoof cropping the green.

One shifts. That was the door Doctor.
I draw back the window to look. The yard is a black sea but the shape at the door is visible. Can only see half his head he's leaning on the door.

*Open the door. Patient.*

To steady my voice I must place a hand on my chest. *Are you a soldier of the Guard.*

*Help me.* Then a series of breaths. I count them and hear their edges. Shock and a raw throat. Too slow and flat he must be losing blood.

*State your name. Tell me and I may be able to.*

*Just open the door.*

*For our safety I cannot.* May have a gun.

*I need help. Think I may have – bullet lodged in a leg – bleeding.*

I go back to the table and lean upon it. The women underneath can see my legs.

One says *He might be faking.*

The other says *Smell the blood.*

*Might not be his blood* I say. Though of course it is not true.

I think of Luise of her new frontier. The faint edges of my ecstatic hopefulness are still there, receding, a feeling into which I can step again, clothe myself in it like carved armour.

I press my head to the door and say clearly *I'm afraid we can't help you. There is another surgery along the lane – I'll die before I reach it.* Choke in his mouth possibly blood or mucus. Faintness as the breath shortens.

*Move quickly then.* I am within my armour. I am Luise's soldier her faithful Regime woman. I hold my hands to the door lock long after I hear him stumble away.
1. The Wife Afterwards

I thought the night would wake in a firmer place.
Fever runs off into sheets. Soaks the whiteness and clings. In the morning you wake
cold and burnt at the mouth but clear-eyed.
Wringing the laundry of the sick in my village was called *crushing the devils out*.

But the dawn is still sour. Sky flaring with ache like the sore under a raised nail.
Ash drifting in the trees.
And a held-breath sense. *Before you make an incision* the lecturer said *put yourself in a
calm place*. I would think of lying hidden in the summer hayfields. Creak of the light.
Crickets shivering gold onto my hand.
Looking out now from the upper rooms the city wavers, splits. The unsteadiness of a
jagged cut.

We shut the surgery when the lights gasped and gave in. Blackness bit down. Inside it
we moved from memory.
Wrap the needles in faint gauze. Hide papers flammable alcohols the copper wires.
Cup the quinine for its blue sleepless glare.
Heaved chairs against the dispensary door with bare arms. *Bars on her windows and
bells on her toes* I said aloud to nobody and thought suddenly of my husband.
Strike of fear against me flaring. Sulphur of it making me a light.

A soldier had beat at the door with a guard car idling. *Orders are to take Regime staff
home it’s not safe*. Crammed like starfish into the back seat with the other nurses, a
Ministry worker.
The little nurse’s mouth opening and shutting in tiredness. Stitching herself up into
sleep.
Hid under the seats when the gunfire came. I pressed her head solidly against my
thigh for the comfort. Strained smell of home-brewed soap in her shirt.
The soldier saw men pushing down a door and said *Fools tomorrow they’ll be crowding around desperate to put it up again. I’ve seen it before.*

We passed an open window heard a trumpet playing. Laughter.

Two hundred yards I walked uphill to the dark house. Terror like fur under my clothes.

The fact of his predecease has lain over our marriage from the beginning. Smothered laughter in my student bed what sort of man I’d find after him. What replacement desire.

*I won’t look for another* I said. *I’ll find an opposite a dark-haired woman with no vocabulary who has thin shoulders and loves – loves! – getting up early in the morning.*

*Nothing good ever happens in the mornings.* *I guarantee God didn’t start creating the world till at least noon, the Scriptures support it.* Rolled over.

*We have a good system, don’t we.* *That I wriggle out from under you and into the morning, and then crawl back into bed and tell you all about it.* *The birds, and what’s in the paper, and what breakfast experiment Myra in 18 is attempting today.*

*With me sleepily nodding and smothering you with my beard. Like Persephone returning to Jupiter after six months overground!*

*If you tickle me I’ll scream! And then you’ll fall down dead and it’ll be your own fault,* you old goat.

*Don’t talk about it. We’ll die at the same time, after a horrendously long life together,* whereupon we will whittle down to little twigs and blow away in the wind.

*Good. I accept.*

When Wulfson opened the door at four and said *They’ve brought him home* it was like a violent breath after drowning. Depress the lungs till the ribs break. Both hands over the heart.

****

He had told me about the first rebellion. Fifteen years before. The Father Leader dead and the boulevards strewn with white flowers. Ankle deep.

*What a waste you could have used the stamens for medicine* I said and he said *Try grinding the grief of a people on a rock Anne. See what you get.*
Women weeping in doorways.

*They were forgiven because it was merely another way to express loss. The authorities knew this and were merciful.*

To all of them?

No. Not all of them.

The curfew sirens have been on all night in the valley. Since the first light the telephone has been crammed. The Women’s Corps is rolling out its hands through the shared call list, checking, counting heads.

Trade of wounds resources advice. Lop off the broken bit it won’t heal. Throw a flaming rag. Boil the potato peelings the markets aren’t safe.

Often voices cross in midair. Several syllables at once.

*I can’t breathe for the smoke. They’ve blockaded my whole street there’s still fighting.*

*They say the Boulevard down to the parade grounds is bodies eh. Just thick with them.*

That’s just a rumour.

I grabbed one young boy’s arm. Said this is a silly way to die. He said I’m tired that’s all.

Just I’m tired and walked away eh.

*How long before the telephones go? Can we get some food to Anya? She’s locked in her room she says there’s sniper fire.*

Anne? Anne are you there?

One ear aimed at the stairs. Hearing him bruising himself in sleep. Rolling against its sides angrily.

*I’m all right. We’re up on the hill out of the main suburbs. My husband is in shock.*

When he’s bad he sleep-speaks in many languages. Crowds the room with pieces of syntax. Sentences into which I cannot plunge my hands.

Falls of breath down the line.

*What happened? This is a group call. Several people passing the set from hand to hand.*

*The aide who brought him home told me his office had been ransacked. Rioters got into the walls took the paintings. The furniture is torn to pieces. Like animals.*

Beasts says a voice I don’t know whose.

*Did they hurt him.*
No. Bundled in weeping. Had found him on the sofa wrapped in ripped parts of chairs, his coat, sawdust on his neck. Perhaps he lectured them as they drove clubs into the plaster. Perhaps asked them to have a little more rhythm. Or kept silent. They had grown up ankle-deep in his voice. What it is to share your husband’s whispers with millions. Like dipping your fingers in ink.

I have never entered his office. My private place he called it my temple. A man now without a god-place.

_How does he cope now._

_He gets better. Angry. How can we get food to Anya._

I feel suddenly altered – walled in. The light is the same – the sirens crowd the air - but Luise is not in the gathered sheaf of voices. It is her stringent ropes pulling my body that I need.

Their wide-open grazes of voice cut and the lights flick off. I angle down the receiver – ear, ear, click – and go out to the garden.

Wulfson bent over at the hedges. Has perhaps not even nibbled at sleep once. Spent his night crouched by the gate gathering us in. He looks at me. _Good morning madam._

_Good morning. The electricity’s gone._ The leather straps of my sandals lie cool against my ankles.

_Yes. The whole hill’s dark eh._ He gestures to the morning houses. The valley has swallowed light and sound. _It’s not the fuses._

_Damn._

_Better that than the water._

_True. For now._ The heat will have gone. Wind already picking up the edges of the grass and nosing up at the door.

_We’ll make do._ Candles. _Logs from the shed should get us by._ All chopped and ready down the slope I did it yesterday. _Might need some help with it._ Watches me. The meaning passing from one mouth to another.

_Where are the men._

_Gone._

Fled for fear or for fighting. Leaving the gate ajar.
These nameless accessories to our marriage. Who hauled and planted the jasmine hedge close to the house. *So she can smell it from her window in the evening* my husband said.

*How many of them were there? I never knew* – Perhaps a better woman would. A woman born in this country. Handing out coins to them from under her tongue.

*Six. I can’t do it on my own eh. Perhaps in the old days when I was built like a bear. Not now!* He laughs extending his silvering arms. Hairless with age. Note the liver spots the wind of veins in vines up the sinew.

I see the six men suddenly vanished into the bier at the bottom of the garden. The water up to waists noses hairlines. Lifting off their clothes their dark tongues their hard-worked skins. Married into the dank silt without smell.

Thank you for not killing us I think. Thank you for leaving us in our beds.

I rise. *We’ll come.*

Strapped bulk of wood for fires and fuel kept in sheds. Chopped from the copses in the spring beat-back. Bark peeled off in fingers.

Once a man after stitching gave the surgery nurse a bag of sweet-blossom bark. Fragrant shards we hung from the windows.

Pale nubs of resin down the logs’ smooth backs. Wulfson says *Scrape that off later with a knife.*

Trundle up the slope with a stack under an arm. Still in my house-coat. Pockets dew-wet. Sirens throwing up their own pollen into the air.

He comes out then. White-cheeked and triumphant as if he kicked sleep in the stomach and wrestled free. His age surfacing in a lazy glint like a golden fish.

*What’s this. Are we agrarian gods? Are we building a pious pyre? Something of the sort. We’re playing at the nineteenth century before they invented gas, come join us. The wood is a bit green so the logs might talk.*

This a village tradition of mine that he found pleasurable. Get the greenest wood thickened with rain. In the strong smoke and crackling beads of spark read the future.

*Good! We need a good fortune-telling fire. If it doesn’t light does that mean there’s no future?* I move to smooth his shirt – drop the packet of limbs on the grass. He’s beam-
ing in a wavering light. Half-asleep still. Crowds his speech with puns and fragile jokes.

*Perhaps. Put on better shoes. Then come to the sheds. We’re alone today.*

Once he’s put on boots we go down the lawn to the river sheds. Coppiced trees headless and tenderly frowsed with shoots. His hand on my arm to steady.

As Wulfson loads us with branches he makes jokes on progressions pilgrimages donkeys. Frantic shuttling between roads of meaning. I look at his eyes unmooring from their places. Perhaps tiredness. Perhaps the gutting of his room. Still flecks of wallpaper in his sleep-thick beard.

Back up the slope we pass a blank place. I think first of the city fires of last night but this is old burn. Finger-thin fringes of grass through the scorched dirt. Trees black to the waist.

*Where we have the bonfires* says Wulfson and I know.

They lit the crib and cradle first. Then mattresses the bad sheets of my sickness. The parcels of white linen for swaddling. Knitted flimsy hats and boots.

*The duty of a good Regime woman is to forget.* Regulation burning grief into this tender hole between the reeds.

My husband says *Funny I always thought the grass would never grow here.*

He had supervised. And gathered the bundles for the servants where they came loose. Filled my sickroom with flowers candles sage so that I wouldn’t wake and smell the burning on the estate.

One feels it regardless. A limb amputated gives its own sharpness for years. Edge of the knife still voluble on the skin.

*Good gardens like a burning* says Wulfson. Looking up the slope away from my face.

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He is stripping the kitchen for listening devices. *We don’t want anybody gobbling up our dialogue except for us.*
Not very nutritious anyway I say. Have laid good fires in the downstairs rooms. Gathering fingers of candle from the kitchen drawers. Idly I nibble some wax from a white tip in my palm.

Nonsense. The talks we have could feed a family for weeks. Turning his head towards the scullery. Where’s the kitchen maid gone. Have I scared off so many.

It isn’t their fault. I light the candle and suckle it to a saucer with the wax. A little doll erect. It’s near the holiday time anyway. Give it a few weeks they’ll be home as always. Better to let it be this way. The belief that they fled merely because of his fall in status.

What did they do to your office.

I have no office. He tosses his head like a bridled horse. Mannerisms of an actress in greasepaint.

Will you have breakfast. Could roast him some meat over coals. Leftover brisket in iron pans. Like camping pioneers.

No. I’ll make some calls. I am not yet defeated. Not yet off my feet. He is leaning I notice on the table. As if the weight of his head were suddenly extraordinary. A vine overburdened with late fruit left to rot. ‘Defeat’ is from the Latin, disfacere, to undo what has been done, did you know that? To erase all your enemy’s works as if they never were. The salt in the ground at Carthage. Touches his lips. Presses their sides. I didn’t know that.

Well if they try to salt me I’ll just cure, like good meat. Like the preserved hocks in the cellar.

I’m going to go into the city I think. Hot longing crackling in me. Lighting the blue undersides of lungs. To assess the situation. Get supplies.

Good. Yes. See what the people in the market think. Their Professor taken off the radio! They’ll be furious, they’ll be lighting fires for it. Calm them all: let them know I’m working to make it right...

As I leave I think of salted meat. Thickening in the stone-sided smokehouse. Lap and lap of the salt crust onto the prone swollen limbs and thighs. That act of tenderness. My strong animal-man in a coat of salt. I would bring him to my mouth for moisture. I would bury him in the frost to keep sourness off. Smooth crystals onto his brow with my bare palms.
I walk down the driveway barefoot for the soak of warm in the slate.
This small heat one gathers. Shoes in one hand hoarding the glow of early sunlicks.
Amazing that the body prevails. Broken windows, crowds of chanting men, guns in the rivers. And still it returns always in a swing to the purely physical, the graze of air in the lung, resting the sole just soft against the cooler side of the stone, dress beating against the knees thick with wind, the clot and rustle of senses, lightly in the morning –

Dying soldiers in the field hospices lost out of their bodies.
Myself slipped out of the failed boat when the baby came out. Tethered to it only by the briefest of red threads.

The basket against my hip. Purse of money in a pocket dragging my dress at the shoulder.
Instead it will be Luise. And the lecture house. And lines that she lays that make sense of all things. This language into which I may submerge and become a letter, liv-id, functional as a brutal grip.
Marriage is a language I cannot crib. But in his weaknesses we drift closer to each others’ islands.

The checkpoints are bulked and deafening with people pushing to get out. Sacks of food on their shoulders three pairs of socks. One man balancing an antique table – absurd – on his back.
Only one soldier for the gate in. I show my basket the inside of my coat. He’s looking for a gun I think but he says No scarlet or red then. No rebel flags.
No. I’m going to the market. Is it open today.
Yes. Take only the boulevards please. Be vigilant for rebel protests or bands.
Will it be over soon?
Yes miss. The enemy are being captured every hour. Reports indicate that the city will be secure and safe by sundown. He himself swollen and unshaven. A night without sleep for all of us.
Why are so many people trying to leave?
It's just a little panic. He looks indulgent. Paternal roundness of his gaze. Not more than twenty-two. We are refusing exit to all who don't live outside the checkpoint so remember to show your pass when you come back.

Of course. Good luck.

Thank you miss. Remember what I said.

Stick to the wide the well-lit roads.
I am tramping towards Luise and the lecture hall with a lantern-lit face. Proud like a trout on the table. I turned them away I'll say for you.

A silk-and-slipper offering of loyal love. What could any other woman give to compare. I broke the Hippocratic oath to those voices at the door as a tribute to my duty to you. I'll lay my head humbly and put both hands out.

What will her approval feel like. How will it settle across my body. There is distant gunfire in the wind but I am moving my gold bead of self street by street towards her.

When I come she is raising herself elbow by elbow from a chair. Sullen weight of her stomach and buttocks. Looks slow and mortal. Streaks of hair come loose around her forehead.

Ah. Hello Anne.
I am abashed by my surprise at her weariness. Come forward three steps into the room. I came to see what could be done – for our members caught in the fighting.

Bright and hard as a youth with my spine straight for her.

Yes. And the city journey wasn't difficult?

Many checkpoints. Nothing more awful than that. I shift in my clothes. Fidgeting like a pup. You're not – injured?

She laughs. No I was in here. Finishing the speeches.

I was at the surgery. We were evacuated. I add I thought it was needless but men do fuss. Seeking the other half of a smile. She turns her head to the roof to examine it.

Any casualties? is all she asks.

A few bruised heads on the guards. Thrown stones apparently. Several rebels actually came knocking for bandages! Shake of my laugh. Fragile as a wind through grass.
Slowly she nods and I feel the pulse of hapless pleasure in me glowing. Of having pleased her. *Always they come back to the State in their trouble.* Shakes her head.

*They raise a few flags but when they bloody their knees –*

*Straight to their Regime infirmary. With their ID cards! Amazing.* I plunge - *I refused to treat them.*

*You refused?*

Her silver still gaze. Press of it upon my face my burning shoulders. *Well – of course.* She says *I see.*

My voice feels thin as spit. *I thought it was the right thing. For the Regime.*

*You are a doctor. Your own conscience is your guide, not mine.*

We stand in silence for several moments. She adds *You seem displeased.*

*I am sorry you do not approve of my actions.*

*Why do you need my approval? Actions to save the Regime must be for the Regime’s sake, out of true loyalty to the cause. Otherwise – they’re just empty, to impress our friends.*

*I see.*

*I’m sorry Anne.* She wrings both hands on her neck. A washerwoman action to smooth the tendons. A movement out of a less dignified place. *It has been a hard night.*

*But it’s just a few young boys – wrapped in their mother’s tablecloths, waving guns – just silliness.*

She shakes her head. So bovine it is now. *There are women out there too. Else. The two girls from the South tapestry factories.*

Else with her white-blond hair. Biting the thread in meetings rather than cutting. Holding needles between her lips in batches bending over the banners. *There must be some mistake.*

*There is no mistake.*

She sits. The exhaustion in her body makes the room brittle and small.

*Have you ever studied military leadership techniques Anne?*

*No.*

*Men are taught it as children in schools here. I was an upstart even then I found the books and taught myself. The pillar of the teaching is that leadership is based on knowledge. On looking into the heart of every recruit. I made it my thorough practise –*
and we were strong because of it. And now I find that my knowledge was – incomplete. She looks sad and dignified as a martyr’s statue but I feel the anger.

Luise you cannot blame yourself for women who – suddenly decide – to throw out their ideals.

She plucks at the table. I tell you all this to show my own flaws. So now you have power over me.

I don’t want power over you.

Her response a grim flinch of smile. She turns her great mass of head. Its stroke of hair brought tight against the skull. Of course you do.

Pull and pull in my lungs. How can desire be so harsh so non-sexual. A cow’s rough tongue backwards across my hair.

I watch her move around the room. Strong strides. A tidal woman breaking the shoreline, splitting the waders’ nets.

Think of Else and her small neck with its love-bites from her husband.

I don’t understand. I thought Else was – I thought she was like us.

She has children. Two girls. Pale eyes with white swimming lashes. At the rallies they slept under coats with their knees pressed to their chests. Perhaps she felt it was in their interest – to sacrifice her obligations as a citizen. Luise’s face is peeled with disgust. The intimacy of seeing her so angry makes me startle and raise my shoulders. Perhaps that was her excuse. Weak people do strange things.

Don’t sneer.

Why not? She has abandoned her duty to her country. I can sneer. It demands it.

But if it was for the sake of – her girls –

She snorts. If the Leader had asked her to leave them by the side of the road then she should have done it. Without thinking. Simply gathered herself and walked away. It is what loyalty means.

Her children? My boy. Whom I held so briefly. His waxen smell. His folded palm that just fit one fingertip as if dipping in a pot for rouge or salt.

Anybody. Family, aged mother, lover. That’s what has brought us to this point. Emotional filth corrupting our sense of sacrifice. Spit has appeared at the lower edge of her lip. A good bloodletting will clean out the Aegean Stables of this rotted country!

Luise stop. Stop talking like that. It’s – it is horrible.
I am the truth-teller and I will speak it! Her eyes bulge. I am appalled. Was this a Sunday-school club for you all to come and say sweet things and sew – and then go home to your husbands and houses, to your little families – and cheat the rules to give them treats and hold your tongue when they commit treason? To wade in the morass of your moral degradation?

My whole body is gripped. Do not talk about my husband.

Your husband is an enemy of the State. The Regime excised him like an infected boil and you stand here with your wedding ring as if it excuses you from complicity. He should have been shot –

When I smack her the flank of her cheek is hard as cool slate.

I broke my oath for you I say and feel briefly shocked at the indignity of the lover-language. A handful of bad leaf in my fingers.

The heat of the slate drive is still hanging in me touching the back of my shoulders and knees.

Her expression when it raises and falls is only pity and disgust. Flattening the plates of her face.

I germinate suddenly with shame and wilderness. My hands when they shut the door are strange and wet with sweat and will not dry though I press them to my stomach on the way home.

2. The Composer Sees Tanya

   In the week since the start of the rebellion the city has sprouted.


   Some the full height of a man. One obscenity is crossed out and meticulously, tenderly re-spelled.

   I have passed the fire-gutted buildings down on the Boulevard. And their roots and jutting frames open-mouthed to the sky. And men walking in the foundations collecting ash or pointing at the sunken ceiling. Watched them scrape charred crusts of tapestry into the gutter.
Somehow the graffiti feels more violently burnt. Edges of fire.

I go to touch one. A wide fresco of the Leader’s maw eating a woman labelled Democracy in letters two feet high. Detail in the eyes, the hollow of her skin, the product of unhurried labour. Two types of paint.

Reach and scrape off the whitewash. Mark of fingernails on the Leader’s cheek. A lover’s pawmark during sex – or an animal’s graze; and perhaps he feels it absently in his war bunker – and raises a damp cloth to soothe the sores that open over his body, his country –

It is a frail fancy. And my hand drawn prudently away.

The Rally aftermath was bleary and disoriented. The stadium masses on the streets carolling rebel songs that swept from rank to rank. Curfews disappearing into all-night gun battles. Sound broken open by fear. Smash of windows overhead – and strolling I escaped; looking unhurried, looking unsurprised by mob and gunfire and the armed brute squads – and casual, nothing remarked, swinging of wide arms idly – and so discarded, left alone –

Keep to the rhythm though the piano breaks.

Though the ceiling of the concert hall cracks and gives way.

Though you are shot at the podium keep to the rhythm.

The De Witt composition due to premiere in a month! And will it be cleared away by then. And the last rebels dragged up to the show trials. Surely, surely – four weeks to scour the capital of a few yelling troublemakers –

The orchestra still turning up for practise. And craving the regularity. Though one night some rebels stripped the velvet from the chairs presumably for flags or patches – red, they’re all red, the cool blue-and-green of the Regime flag against this red-heart flaring silliness! Down suburban streets now flagrant scarlet strips hang in windows. And will be stripped off in a week – when the moment vanishes – and burned in a back place, dyed with rapid hands –

- And once a cellist came in dazed from shrapnel and a beating. And we must remain steady during the upheaval I tell them – for the sake of the population, who need beauty, who need their music unafraid and strong – and steady; though several flutes have fled (we will get others).

My fingers are white to the tips with the paint. Smear of it on clothes on hair – that will not scrub off. Marks that cry out in the dark.

Shake. Restore the rigour.
Hold the strings to the neck.
Push the stained hand under a running fountain and emerge clean.
Tanya is waiting at the outer seats of the cafe. A centre table – I am surprised by its obviousness. This is a country where men sit at the fringes of the room out of the light. *Ah you came* she says rising.

*Yes. The rehearsal schedule has been relaxed – during the emergency. We’ll be back on soon though.*

*Mmm.* The unsettled week of nights is in her. Eyes not slept in. Graffiti flares across her face and is gone. In my tiredness I think of touching the small of her back – daubing it with paint.

Instead I sit at the outstretched seat. *Why the mountains?*

She shifts. *My father’s family comes from there. The mountains. It’s a good place – far away from roads or towns, very quiet. Most of my relatives live there still.*
The sense of something unsaid in the centre of it. One gets wakeful to those notes.
The drum down at the very base of the chorus – beating unseen.

*I knew a girl from there once.* Elke rises briefly. Hair knotted at her neck. Then falls. Outside one man sweeps the broken glass.

*I leave on Tuesday.* She is looking at the street but not seeing. *I’ve sent my trunk on – I bribed the postage officer to make sure it would get there, but it’s chaos outside the cities, the whole train line down the coast is down – I should have saved the money.* Shakes her dark hair.

*Do you have enough?*

*Yes. Please don’t give me more.*

We wander through silence.

It seems so dim now – that I visited her in the sparkling arboretum, that I went to the Professor to plead, to see Bart’s ghost. And after all – such a small man. Belly-fat and goggling at a blonde boy. The sly weakness of him.

The coffee comes late and tepid. Waiters at a loss. One ignores us and boards the windows –

*The Department let you go?*

*They didn’t notice. It’s like hell.* Crosses her hands across her forehead – as if mounting a defence. Battered in at the temples. *All the windows smashed in one morning. And no boards to cover them, and the secretaries and ministers on their knees pick-
ing up glass... The ones who are left. Looks up grim and grinning. I spent most of yesterday under my desk. There was one bomb alert and I just couldn’t come out.

The Department should be better – at keeping them assured. My orchestra boys fighting through the closed train stations and whole neighbourhoods in lockdown – for a mere four hours tripping through a symphony! Staying up North with your family will be good for you. You’ll still have a job when you come back. They’re good about those sorts of things.

David I may not come back. Her face is wider than in memory – a bright fox-skull. I asked you to meet me to see if you – would like to come. We’re going – a group of us from the North. Perhaps we may go as far as the border. As far as that.

As far as that. And leaping over. And scattering out of the country like fallen chaff –

I laugh. I wish I could have a holiday, but this orchestra would fall apart on its own, it’s like dough –

David I am serious do you understand me.

But surely – you’re overreacting. I am gentle for her hysteria. The guards are still out – and the Leader reassured us on the broadcast this morning. It’s just a few rebels, enemy agents, they said it would all be clear by the end of the week – you’re being foolish.

A few rebels! She is staring like a fixed painting. All the soldiers have been recalled, there are fires all night – you must have seen. Four members of the Parliament fled the country – bad things are happening, David. And it will not stop.

Keep your voice down.

It’s too loud for them to hear me. Nobody is listening. Not any more.

Thank you for the offer. Weak – less than I had expected of her. But I will stay. There are people here – who rely upon me. The orchestra -

Your orchestra! She looks away – then back. I’m sorry. Bart always said you were a devoted man. You’ll stay then.

Yes. I’ll see you back here – when it’s all finished, and you return from the North.

Perhaps. Yes. She rises. You know, there are rumours – that the camps were being dismantled, that the rebels were freeing people. If Bart is still alive – maybe we’ll see you again.
Bart alive. And able to be told – that the name on his paper worked; that I have risen, slow grip by slow grip, and am fruitful, and am safe – and his face; his grinning face.

If I see him again I will say Look. What a change. All the scars on me gone! Do you recognise me old friend I thought you wouldn’t! Come down to the café let me give you some food some money. Let me give you some names on paper –

I stretch out a hand to her. Be safe.

3. The Professor In Pursuit

In the halls of my house I can already hear it – the falling away. My voice as dust – driven off the land. Mere dirt and glut. They say you’ll hear your death coming, drumming its beats – but I know better; it’s silence, smothering...

But I’m no fool. No fool am I. And have my friends. The population need my soothing for their bedtime succour, to toss them into Nod; without it they’ll go mad. All those sirens, rising up like hair – it’s there, it’s their protest, they’re restless without their Professor to pacify them. They’ll be smashing their sets. I can smell the radio wires, fried filaments on the wind.

I’m coming I say to the cool air. I’m coming.

So I’ve shrugged on a shirt and snuck out – lucked out, plucked my jacket and gone round the back. An act of drastic defiance. The sunlight makes me squint and hide my face. Grace gone, my grizzled cheeks – weak as a heron, flapping in a trap in reeds. I’m greedy for a fight –

The telephone is unsafe – so I’m undercutting all their plans, I’m going overland. Mapping my campaign as I move, walking in worked-leather shoes between the willows. I’ll push the opening of the cut-off lines, climb the poles myself to re-knot the wires – and find friends who’ll staunch the ends, fill up the feedback loops again with my addresses. Like hordes of fish beating at a dam until it breaks! The State’s made a mistake; they can’t garrote me off, a Hydra-head, without me growing back...

Hand over hand I climb a fence and, cresting briefly, swing, made dizzy by the fizz of blood. If I fell and died here, smacked my skull, they’d never find me; I’d go soft in the bog-ground, sop up the juices, the clover would climb out of my eyes. It would be peaceful perhaps. Et lux perpetua luceat eis.
Latin, said my father, is the limb of our language, it sits inside it like a bone. I lift my arms and lower down the struts.

I march straight through the checkpoint. In many languages the word for this is *control* but in English it is angled into *check*, flecked with kindness: let us examine you, let us turn the place into a gentler thing, a downward swing, *checkpoint*. Ha!

I am thinking of who I can call – the General, the boys I’d jammed into good jobs somewhere far up the spine of the Army, a Minister in minor disgrace; they’ll jar at the injustice, know the necessity of my voice to the nation – when a startling thing passes me: at a traffic light a bus slows, a man leaps into the road (a rabbit, a rapid bit of light) and throws through the window a gun, and bullets in a bag. Can tell it by the weight, the way it moves.

Is this for my benefit, am I to be baulked by it? Bullets, *bala, balle*: in French the word also means to burn, it means to husk a sheaf of corn. All words of loss – of dross pulled loose. The bullet bag is black, the driver whistles his thanks. He holds a bag of fire, of corn. It swarms in his arms.

Did I hear my own voice? I strain around – but there’s no sound, my ears have gone awry. It’s just the murmur of girls nearby, or some leaves falling. What’s speaking? Are they playing my old tapes to trick me?

I am staying soft and silent, close to the city walls, with my collar upturned. Trucks and cars flash by. Taking back roads. Nothing seems to stay in my cup of head but drips out, like the Danaides’ sieves.

On my body I can feel the pursuit. My suit’s a mess; should have dressed better. *Betty Botter bought a bit of butter*. They’ll be following me now over ground, tracking my sound: the emissaries of my enemies, eating my shadow. I’m swifter, I slide down behind a fragile fence, cut across a swathe of grass.

Who will they send for me? Villazon; prison-men. Tongues nailed to boards, gore in their teeth. Mouths filled with muck. A man is walking to me, and I see his face, and smother a scream – it’s blood, it’s smashed, a single bullet scored on the scalp, and when he goes to speak I can’t translate –

*Get out of the way!*

I rush and scuttle out of the path. Dodge the blow. He was no ghost, he had no damaged face, he gobbed spit in the gutter and moved on. If I don’t reach the office soon – for all it’s flayed, a field-surgeon’s delight, it is at least bloodily de-bugged – I’ll come apart, I’ll start to leave limbs by the way. There goes my leg, would you be so
kind, I’m lugging around a pile of hips and bits as you can see. Shedding in leather strips under my palms. I come to the last corner.

And on the step, hands clenched at his knees – is Dion!

My dearling deer thing, my dark-eyed boy, my gold from Troy, dug out of ashen hills! I fill and brim, I blink so he won’t be all blood, like the boy on the path.

He looks and smiles. A djinn, an apparition – but I press his head to mine, feel its weight, its wonder. Last week has crept back – how I slept and wept, how I felt deadly doubt, nearly cast him out. I’m mute with shame – could maim myself. Has he been here all this time – waiting for my return, a Jew’s empty chair for Elijah?

_Are you all right. I’m sorry I yelled. I’m so sorry._

He grins and grabs my hands. The palms are coarse and cracked, half-black with brute grease, the creases hieroglyphs of love.

_You’re filthy! I’m a river of relief._ He offers up his arms so ardently, an abolution. _Let’s get you washed up._ We go in and mount the stairs foot by foot.

The door still swings. How did I get home? A hustle of men, the headlamps of a car. Far-off parts of the night detach and float forward. I take him to the sink, still blinking from the dark – I must have smashed the lamps, pulled out the guilty wires.

It all feels deaf, dim. But his body brings up new clarity. Paring off him and falling on the floor his light, his whiteness. The mirror holds us, hands us up together. My old bleak-winter face. His lap of pool, his lulling for a fool like me.

I ring out the grease with my thumbs. The water pipes are still voluble, creaking under the eaves.

Afterwards we fuck, gracelessly, my great hunger gashed open by flashes of fear – who’s here, who’s hearing. I hush his mouth and he moans. My own homemade crystal set, my pet diode dying to cry out. He pushes back and we go slack.

Lay upon the ripped-up floor, lolling, concubine and king. I want to tell him about Augustus, about olives in Greece, about words split wide under the knife; but forget, can’t find the parts or points. He won’t get up, but clings; wants wrestles, wants to take off all my rings, to suck my fingers, play. I want to stay like this. Plains of my back in dust, his wriggling restless love around my waist. This is our place, our hole in time, it is mine it is mine.

_I’ve got to go, to make arrangements._ I rise and fold his shirt. _You’ll come and live with us, now, you’ll love our house._ I can fit out the old broadcast room as your bedroom. _Anne can teach you how to talk._ Bring all your clothes I bought you.
A thing flares in my head, falls away. Some want – some thing I’d worried for, some cause. But no, I had come to see him – yes. To see him I had come. Is why I groped down from the hill and hammered through to here. Visions of wire, of bloodied gabbling men – but I can’t parse them – what they signify, where they hook and hold. I chase them but they all disperse. We did not leave at all – but stayed here all week, holding each others’ hair, in our lair! We have. Have been here as the light raised, fell, raised. Haven’t we? A graze of memory across my eyes – and then is gone.

*How long have we been here?* I ask him. In answer he giggles, holds my belly to his mouth. I knew other languages once. I can’t feel them in my body; they’ve flown up and off, leaving only these flat sounds, his hands upon my thighs, his shut eyes.

### 4. The Wife Salvages

Wulfson has dug up the potatoes too early in the year. Sallow flat greens. Left longer they’d fatten into sweeter sleep. But the shops are shutting or smashed and so we scratch into our reserves. Carrots in a hoard under a plank. Packets of dried fruit two seasons old. Dregs licked up from jars.

What you learn from bad harvest years.

Boil and scrape and pad with sweet grasses. Hold for minutes at the base of the tongue. Swallow the sour the just-sagging with rot. Starvation if it comes will be democratic.

When the phone rings he has just brought in rabbits newly shot. Fur gritted flush with powder from the guns. Will the liver the stomach smell of our fields I wonder. Hedgerow nuzzled in their throats.

*I’ll get started on the skinning* madam he says. His face red with love. I want to kiss his palms fervently but instead go to the landing.

*Yes.* Electricity comes in brief gifts of an hour or two. The telephones have been down for days.

Am hoping for my husband’s gleam of voice. Gold leaf of vowels peeling off.
A week he’d prowled inside. Checking the wires the lamps the loops of fuses for cameras. I could hear him sleepless in his gutted-out radio room probing the walls with his fingers.

*I have a good plan* he said to me passing in the corridor. Flushed up to his eyebrows. *But it must be staged carefully.* *I must hold out for a week or so to give them a chance to see – what they have dismissed, what they’ve missed.* And for public protest to foment, to ferment in peoples’ breasts! *Then I’ll strike strategically. But must now be aloof. Have you inspected the roof?*

The medical textbooks say *a man after a great shock must be reminded of his duty his friends his Regime must not be allowed to dissolve into feminine self-pity or disgusting disarray of faculties.*

And yet it’s tender. To be laying tea by his door. To stay late with him plotting his renewal for all I secretly see it vanishing. This withholding.

He says at one point *Olives why am I thinking about olives. Help me Anne.* Looks up at me from work with unfocussed eyes as if turning from a light. The great knot of triumph that releases in me.

This morning he went out at last to ferret for goodwill he said to look for friends. The expression *I hadn’t the heart to stop him.*

I grip the receiver and think of my heart. Broad and bald now from illness and strain. Silver firework without a lick of spark to spare.

The voice that comes is brackish as bad water. *It’s Berger. Do you want to come to the surgery see what we can salvage.*

*Is it very bad.* I pass a hand over my forehead. In the kitchen Wulfson is moving the chopping block over to the window to get better light.

*I don’t know. The nurses won’t go back.* He sounds not unhappy but annoyed. *We’d have to be quick. Carry something red so we can get past the rebels.*

It is early. My husband not back for hours yet. *Yes I’ll come. Some glass was smashed so wear thick shoes. Give me maybe an hour.*

*Good. They might not have taken the heavier bits of the machines – I’ll bring some rope. See you there.*
I tell Wulfson to keep the bones in cold water till I get back. He raises a piece of the rabbit’s throat to the window and nods. Is looking for its age whether it ever bred.

Have worn my bleached doctor coat with the pockets for instruments. It makes me a bright target (for whom?) but it’s neutral. Hospital scrub wear.

At the checkpoint the guards are younger. Rebel kids. Red ties through their hair and feet. They check identity cards jokingly as if it is a playground game.

One looks at me out of one eye. *Any blue on you. Any green. Show your pass the underside of your shoes.*

*I have no blue or green on me.* Regime colours. The Leader’s flag always looked I said to my husband once like it had been dragged through the sea and he said *Don’t start.*

*No red either.* He points to my whiteness. It is an unusual colour people here wear it in hospitals or for mourning. *Do you take me for a fool. What is this.*

*I am a doctor. This is a doctor’s coat. I worked at the Surgery on ______th St. I’m going there now to get medical supplies.* Hot hair around my neck.

*Yes to sew up Regime boys to come and mow us down. I’m not letting you through. Do you take me for a fool.*

*I do not take you for a fool.* I am still. Little firework spinning and spinning.

*Well then where’s your red scarf. Or a little red lipstick. To show what side you’re on.*

*Or do you still think your Regime is coming back.*

*How did you get that wound on your face.* Diagonal with some contusions. Possibly shrapnel or combat wound. Stretches from his chin to his eye. *Those bandages look dirty you need new ones.*

*I know that. I’m not an idiot.* The bandages must be at least a day old. Colour of the blood consistency of its hardness in air. *It’s a graze from some motherfucking Regime bullet.*

If it becomes infected he’ll lose half the chin thicken the tissue. Possible pus leak into the eye. *I’d take off that bandage if I were you. Not a nice place to get an infection.*

He unwinds the bandage and throws it at my shoulder. Grins. *There now you’re wearing something red.*

*Thank you. I leave it on me like an epaulette. Now wash it with soap and clean water.*

*If you don’t have bandages boil some cloth to sterilise it and use that. And don’t fiddle with it.*

*Yes Doctor.* He snorts and waves me through.
Berger is waiting at the doorway. Long hair of burn down the sides of the building. What must have been a blast overhead. *I thought we should start together.*

*Thanks. I was held up by a checkpoint.*

*Regime or not?*

*Not. No soldiers in sight. I need to burn this later.* I toss the bandage into a bucket.

Am expecting him to look older but he remains set in his lines. A carved miniature held at somebody's breast. Cruel in profile. *I thought perhaps they'd leave us. Because of the back-door stuff.*

*The torture victims? I shrug. Best push it out into the air. So long it has been tied in us. That was word of mouth. We kept it so close. It was never going to protect us.*

*I know.* He moves to unlock the door – automatic courtesy – but it’s booted in. The hinges are startled like uplifted hands.

One window open. Gracefully levered up rather than smashed I notice. A rebel still following his mother's admonishments about glass, respect for property of others.

I have thought a lot about this: how you would notice if a room had been entered in the night. What would be visible. What shifts would graze you first and painfully.

Floor sodden with night rain. Half a curtain torn and flayed into strips. Fragile things.

He says *Check the cupboards in here be careful of the ceiling.*

Both knowing that the army lays bombs in roofs. Men burnt from the crest of the head down. That part you press on a baby's skull to feel its dip and thinness I can't remember its name.

Burnt to their felt purple underskin past the nape, the nipples. Burnt beyond animal into stone.

*You going to the store room?*

*Yes. Give me the bat.*

If there is still a man in there holding up a knife what can we say. Come out we'll feed you. We won’t sew the knife into your abdomen so it slices you from the inside though we could. Though the doctors in the prisons do.

*Cover your face in case there are fumes.*
Chloroform bottles made thick so as to be deliberate. Tipping them from the under-
side with a knuckle in the steadying hollow. After years you know it one-handed with
no light.
Strike no match. Move your ankles so as not to spark the tile.

He dips a towel in water from the sterile store and holds it over his face. Suddenly
anonymous. Wide hands that could hold down a neck.
I kneel to hold the broken X-ray plates on their fresh edges. Gaunt pieces each with its
own flank of old burn.
It could be mah-jong - washing the tiles. Or collecting old crop in an apron for the
boil.
The machines are hot bad flails of wire. I expected to feel tender but do not. Smashed
things no longer raise the wave of deep knowing in me.
After the birth I looked for ruin to place in myself my mouth my angry neck. Hun-
gered towards it like a deserving. A woman who knows her lowness.
Recently however I walked out of that ring of held chain. And started wearing fresh
linen again. And scratching my skin found gleams of silver.

I think of Luise and lean my head against the cool of the sink. Press of the porcelain
like a circlet.
Absurdly someone has slashed a pillow from the consulting room. Perhaps wanting
feathers (drama, drifts, thick air) but it’s been foam for years – so just this sad split
whole of yellow, halved like a boiled yolk.

Knowing Berger’s moves in the next room. A step over a prone desk. Bodies twin
with so many other bodies.
It was always my husband’s palms I could feel moving in the dark – half a house away,
flush to the wall, grazing waves of sound, inky finger-pads; and always relative to my
body, the bared length of my stomach, like two sides of a bowl each thinking of water.
The still rooms a secret mass of vibrations. Every light with its own sound. Every sur-
face a struck hum. And in the centre his weight, pulling down the world.

Berger returns grappling the bat by the wrong end.
Door was still locked. Most of the stuff’s smashed probably from the blasts.
What a waste. He has a hole of ash on his cheek. Hit up against a smoked wall probably.

We can save some of it. The bigger bottles and plastic didn’t crack. The sterile gauzes are soaked though. You packed up the iodine and antiseptics in here?

I touch the boxes. Still snug like cupped animals underground. Yes we had time.

Good. Divide it up we can both take half.

Any injuries on your side?

No. My wife’s keeping my daughters indoors. They’re getting used to it. It was hard for a few days their bicycles are outside.

Is there water?

A bit. I do trades with my neighbours. A bit of antibiotics or bandages for bread. They all have kids too so it’s hard. Your husband?

He was lucky. The radio program came off the air before it hit – I think they knew it was coming.

They should have prepared us. I could have made a medical kit actually bought some salted meat or preserved fruit. The girls are so young their gums will go soft.

Make sure you get some of the vitamin C supplements for them. And iron. How old?

Three, five, nine. We wanted another, a boy.

Maybe when things get better. Four is a good number for children. I had three sisters.

You were the eldest?

Yes.

I thought so. The nine-year-old she’s bossy too.

You never talked about your children.

He raises his head then drops it. You keep them away from things. In a place like this. I don’t know what will happen now. I suppose many people are having these kinds of conversations.

Probably. “What do you mean you have a husband and four elderly aunts?!” I reach into the coat pockets. Here I brought some jam it might be hard to carry back.

Thanks I’ll wrap it up. You made it?

Yes. ‘Grieving women must be given projects to benefit State well-being.’ Marmalade too.

Ha. It was so hard on you. I’m sorry. I should have tried harder.

You were very kind. Here take the end of the rope I want to bundle up the metal.
What will you do now.
This will help. The water purifier we can put on our roof. I'm glad I got the sanitary pads my wife needs to feel human.
Get her soap too. And the towels.
Thank you.
But you'll stay.
He shrugs. Where can we go.

*****

The surgery courtyard is thick with quiet when we haul out the salvage.
Temporary truce to haul and wash the bodies. Sew them between the bleached white palms of their shrouds.
Into the morgues of this country the women are dragging iron sewing machines. To stitch their beloveds into their last clothes.

All over the city people are digging into sleep in the sudden hush. Bombardment and chaos having drawn it away from them in nets. Beyond their clutch.
Exhaustion makes you bend into the nearest silence, curl against its edge like a pearl.
Humans will chase sleep anywhere, will trade anything for its ballast on their temples.
Have seen patients unwinding their bandages to stuff in their ears and eyes for a peace, for small mouthfuls of rest.

After the birth they made me sleep for weeks while my body reformed. Blue-striped ribs the lines of smashed pelvis.
When I woke I was terrible but whole.

You should get home says Berger. The ceasefire will only be temporary. God knows what they're planning next.
I do not ask which 'they' he means. I'll go through the centre then. It's faster.
Riskier. You look like a lantern in the middle of a sea like that. He eyes the coat. Leave that here you can pick it up later.
I'm not wearing any colours though.
Good so neither side will shoot you on sight. I nod and take off the coat.
I am making my way across the halved centre, keeping step with a red-knotted group of boys, when the plume appears above the buildings.

The Census Building is on fire.
A woman asks *Who set it.*
A man replies *I don’t know. The rebels maybe. Causing chaos.*
*Probably the old government. To get rid of all their records. Incriminating eh.*

In the fields fire lit the air from the underside. Smoke in the weeds the sink of ponds.
Men in wet shirts opening the sluices, passing down buckets gourds hats of water, throwing steaming sheets over to smother it. Stray spark in the hay store making it flare and whistle with heat.

Afterwards a cricket burned to a stalk with its wings extended. Glass frill on the dark plain. Touch it and it folds into dry ash. A shape that stood where the light left it.

In the square now the burn is thick and blind, not straw-fed, not sweet with the crackle of wheat singeing till the grain bursts. The marble of the Census Building sweats and darkens like a face. If I put a hand in the air it leaves a hollow.
The sky is blue smoke and yellow records, long facsimiles drifting storeys high in dress-length swathes, streams and stars of papers trailing comet-fire, the stringent archives of a whole people made blowsy and useless. Fragments fall in profusion on the neck the upper arms.
I see paper burning like skin through the layers, peel and curl away, a thing seeking its lightness.

A man says *Look.*
The blue-edged flame and chemical blanch stink that means the photograph stores are being burned.

My white son’s face in his cool of a body, pressed once twice onto a paper like a kiss.
That they took from me in the purple folder and said *Join the Women’s Corps* and filed in their underground cabinets in what they knew was eternity.
His mouth so softly open so the dark tongue is visible. The curl at the nape of the neck. Startled crown of the head I could never look at directly.

The ceiling wheezes and lays in on itself with a fever-ring of smoke. We hear the beams snapping their struts.
I am waiting for grief to come down on me in the square as the fire strips the last piece of him out of the earth. I am waiting to give out, a beaker over-full, a shroud with weakened seams.
But he is dead. And has been dead. And will be dead. And now is beyond knowledge or inquiry or the fingers of strangers. And is purely elsewhere now, purely himself, as round and plain and besotted as he was born, purple with the strain of living, pulled white-thick as a bulb from my love. And feels no burning on the last flash of his face. And is loved.
I press my hands to my cheeks. Always and always and always.

When the shooting starts from the upper buildings I am under the whim of this unexpected grace.

Sniper yells somebody and a bullet smashes a black window. Are they shooting the smoke I think. Are they exorcising demons in it.
Then the crowd in the square scatters and seeds itself away as more bullets chip the stones. Sniper wounds are always from above when tracking lines of damage. From the skull to the chin from eye down to shoulder.
I want to preserve my small moment the bell-ring of it so I stay exposed. Eyelashes ringed with ash.
A young man drags me behind a car by the coat and holds my head to his shoulder. I keep my eyes open wide open. He smells of parchment of sour resin. He must work underground.
When it stops and we stand up together we are holding both hands like children in a game. Then we part and run in opposite directions.

*****
Wulfson speaks out of the kitchen when I return.
Women called for you while you were away ma’am. Beatrice from next door and another one.

The other one will be Luise.
I am untethered and unwound. I am the rope that splits at the end of autumn after too much wet hauling and is taken out of braid. Nothing more holds me save myself.
When I come in he has thinned the meat to its sparsest threads and laid them snug with the block. Long hairs of blood. He hears my breathing and straightens out of the sink.

Wulfson.
Yes ma’am.

How much is left in the storage room. The boxes of papers. I don’t know ma’am that’s the maid’s. Shall I go look.
Yes.
He goes and then returns. I counted fourteen boxes.

Good. I am in the study and he follows rolling a towel over his gored arms. Round and round his wrists. And these on the floor. That would make what twenty-two.
I am lifting down the hauls and heaps of my husband’s records. Years thick and hard as wax they come: old translations and radio transcripts and letters deepening to an undergrowth.
All traces of his work. Anything half-marked or typed that bears his name.

Do you want me to bring down the boxes. Wulfson is watching me move.
Yes. Don’t bother to fasten them.

I am doing a service. I am uncoupling him from what holds him clasped here.
I will say when he asks They took it they took it all.

Wulfson returns to find me looking at the cupboard.
Help me with this it’s locked.

That’s good wood it might need an axe.
I baulk visibly. A wolf against a wall. Thin flexible spine turning on itself. I can’t do that. It’s beautiful he loves it.
Aged wood in carved panels. The cupboard is himself for all I have slippered inside it in my honeymoon dress. Horde of stored papers in great slabs. There is only so far I can go into his places bringing knives and the smell of burn.

Wulfson considers. Unlike my father he throws his hands behind his head and puts movement into thinking. A man always linked to the motion of a thing. 

*Lean on that ma’am.* Puts a lever into the thin line of the cupboard. Through which I have seen the room in vivid dark, inhaling silence. *Good.* We put our weight and the lock breaks. *There you go eh.*

*Excellent.* *Out we come.* *Just put them there on the carpet.* His whole life in papers. Bound like small animals. Mute for the chop.

*I know.* *The ground would just soak it. It’d be like bad hay.*

*You never handled hay* he says in cheerful disbelief.

*I did a lot of things. It will have to be burying then. Or putting it down the river.*

*No use in the river. This is good paper no dissolving it that way. Ground’s better.* *Eat at it properly.*

*What if we shred it* I ask.

*Take a long bit doing that.* Our sentences are cut up in pieces. Knifed down the centre like good greens. *There’s fresh ground up on the lawns. Turned earth for the new grass.*

*We’ll have to put it deep. So the topsoil doesn’t wash.*

*My earth’s too good for that ma’am.* *Nourished it myself. Is he out long then? I don’t know.* *Chasing up favours. We need to move.* *Take the phone off.*

*Yes.*

*And get my jewels out of the closet. I know a good place for them.* The black market street for the ink. Putting my head in truck windows. Nothing seems without necessity now. Every move a right move.

Handling hay in the sweet light as a girl. Shot thick through with frail gold your hair and sandals. Grasses bound mouth and foot on the backs of truck-beds.

I liked winnowing the chaff more. Measure for the wind by turning your ear to it. Let the heavier parts fall back into your hand.
Always this fear in marriage: wake up into a thinner line. Looking across the room to find a thread pulled loose from your attraction.

Long bull rushes we dredge and thicken up to our knees and hope they'll hold. Then age scythes down the paddocks and up flies your hidden heart like a rattling bird.

5. The Composer Goes To His Meeting

Outside the Culture Ministry I am thinking of cellos.

Their sound climbing through you as a rope. A thickness, a corporeal thing, latching to vein and lung, hoisting and immediate. Your body a bowl of round low reverb. And cut out from their real name: violoncello. Orphaned into an abbreviation that severs from their origins, their family.

The Maestro refused them. Thicket of sentimentality he said. Syrupy things. In me they lie open.

Stun of the bow on the gut. Pleasure like a strike on a bare back. Or a dancing woman.

Will convince the Minister of the value of multiple cellos. State orchestras brimmed with them. New masters in the Conservatorium! And a fund for young apprentices for the major places. Perhaps should have brought a record – showing off their rise and buckle of sound.

Propositions for him. A new staging of the favourite opera the Greek tragedy they famously gave a happy ending for cultural improvement. A history of the Leader's family with harps spinning drums the coarse instruments from their remote village. Sets of choruses for celebration days for sixty women forty ten.

When she comes back from the North I will ask Tanya to sing one.

And then I can buy a thick blue coat – like the ones the critics wear; gold buttons in strict lines, knotted twill, an acreage of satin in the sleeves – in dark green, the Leader's colours. And two-leather shoes stamped with holes like the reedpan of a concertina. And a new apartment – in the higher parts, the hills outside the city, where the mansions of the old rich were divided among loyal Regime men, and the long avenues are silent and lined with cypresses; and I will have parties, lighting the cool with lanterns, slip of violins spilling onto the grass –
I go through the huge doors expecting to find the guard in the lobby, to give him a magnanimous coin. But there is nobody; and a strange drift of silence; and the click of footsteps far off too fast for unhurried walking – but pounding, a heart-snapping sprint, somewhere in the upper halls –

It falls away. The place resettles into soundlessness. A telephone down the hall rings, stops.

Confused I mount the wide stairs. The Leader’s mosaic gleams and is still.

Where are the people? Once under the Maestro I was caught in a city holiday, came stumbling up late after struggling in rivers of confetti, streamers, half-drowned in parade tunes; and he unwound the crepe from my shoulder and threw it cursing out the window – to the cheers of some courtyard children –

Who perhaps made crowns of it. And talked of the Maestro the kind man who flung down playthings for them.

And I am out of step again – and walking upstairs expecting every moment the surprise, the officious notice, the sleepy disturbed guard – who marks me out as foreign, as not-understanding, flung out of the rhythm of this place. Rhythm which I have been fastening carefully to myself all these years – but still it gapes, it comes loose, and I am lost –

I pass a window and see red-scarved men running in the square. Perhaps the staff have been strategically scattered, then – and told to go home, to leave the place a judging echo till the rabble handful have dispersed; in case they come in asking, shoving their fists, thinking up small demands, and find instead a deaf house, resilient and closed.

The Culture Minister’s office is well-marked. A famous man. I hear the sound of movement, a half-murmured voice, and lean into the door, which gives.

*Good day. David Ernst.*

He turns – bright-haired even in the dark. His light’s turned off; and he is at the window with a glass in his hand.

*What.* His voice pricks over with white noise – a radio got untuned. Hear the rasp of his larynx straining.

*I’m sorry to disturb you. We met at the Rally. You said to come by.* I approach with hand outstretched. See his shoulders sloping to his sides. See his chest collapsed inward.

He briefly considers. Then takes and shakes it.
Ernst. Yes. What’s the news who sent you.

Nobody. The glass in his hand I see suddenly is not a glass but a gun. He hoists it to his front and tucks it into his jacket. I feel its weight pressing across the room. Push of it down on the strings making the sound hurt. I just came to see you for a chat.

Sit down. He turns on the light on his desk. It casts a circle on the ceiling and his face smoothes. Do you want a drink. It’s good to actually behave like a person briefly. What a relief.

Should I put on some music. There is a record player in the corner – good wood. Old brass bell from the previous century folded like a shell. Stacks of records with Ministry labels – the blue sleeve and the Leader’s profile.

No he gestures then we could get the snipers targeting us. They might hear it. I touch the door with a hand for privacy and then pause. There’s nobody here.

No I sent them home. The Culture Ministry is finished. We were all dismissed this morning. To defend the Regime. I’m just here to – clean up my work. He lays his hand upon the files on his desk. Perhaps I should burn it.

Please don’t. Astonishment pricks my eyelids and scalp. Your work – you’ve done so much.

There is a musical term esperando, to die, to move down into silence, absorbing quietness slowly until it fills the instrument. The Maestro used it as a trick – to give the audience a fading, a deep sigh, before bursting forth with new rigour, new light. I am tensed for this moment, the falsity to be over, the band to strike up again in relief – but the Culture Minister is rigid by his desk.

I have a communiqué from the Leader thanking me for my years of service. That this will be over soon, that it will be brief and painless and the Regime will rise again. He is no longer looking at me. I am chorus, I am invisible. I do not understand. Why dismantle the Ministry if the rebellion is nothing? Why lie? He raises his bear’s head and runs both palms over it. Maybe he isn’t even writing them any more. Maybe he’s dead or disappeared. I never even saw him. They said he used doubles at the Rallies.

Minister!

He shakes his long-boned body. Excuse me. I have no right to speak in such a way. Have another drink.
When this ends and the Leader returns in all his glory you'll be proud of staying and keeping your work. Perhaps looking to the future will help you. New plans. My plans. I'll drive the focus gently. I'll cut the knotted strings that mar the snarl at his tuning-head. Give me a knife.

Distantly there are shots. We turn and listen but the sound is contextless, without narrative or note. He nods. You are loyal to the Leader to the very last.

He has given me so much. I want to serve him. The sentiment frills in me. A soprano’s fan opening under my throat.

Youth is wonderful. His voice is hurt through with sarcasm. The Leader’s forces destroyed the 16th century pianofortes in the storerooms yesterday. The whole collection of medieval violas years of acquisitions. They said the materials could be used for rebel explosives. Centuries old. Wire that could sing like a boy. He turns and I realise from the movement of his back that he is crying.

I think suddenly of failed mines. And the last machinery winched up to be used in the next seam. And pulling out the struts the planks the iron preserving arcs at the mouth. And passages flooded and filled with silt to forestall sinkholes. And desperate sleepless men rising out of that ground. Their faces in his face.

A pale man hurting inside sound. Holes in him too big to make it into music. Ruined beyond the ability to hear.

I can’t believe it I say and wish he would stop weeping. This ridiculous weakness. There will be other pianofortes other frail old starred bits of wood.

Feeling increasingly like the chorus who comes and cries stern truth on the stage with her blood-ribbons. While the baritones all tear their garments about imaginary monsters.

Sorry. It’s just that I am so very exhausted. From years and years. I’ve been listening to the rebels outside all night. I can’t go home they’ll see my face and shoot. But I am too cowardly to fire at them so I wait here for some turning point, some break in the situation. We were building such a great thing, Ernst – such a great future! And now it’s over – and I am frightened.

It isn’t ended. This is just a break in the eternal reign of the Regime, you must see that. In the history books it will be – it will be a paragraph. No more.

I have no hope left. I did such things for this Ministry. I let other people do such things. For the sake of our Leader and his legacy. Terrible things. Do you want me to tell you.
No.
No. Well. Will you take another drink.
I won’t.
I’m exhausted. Haven’t slept. Is that the door.
It isn’t.

Have passed rapidly through anger into bewildered love. And want to hold his drop of head in stage curtains with their tassels on his brow. And wrap him in the strong soothe of a darkness swelled with open violins. And let him be borne out frail and willing on the bone-handled lid of the drum.

It is sufficient. To serve under the hem of these great men. And dress them in their clothes for the day. And push them out sweating and heavily rouged into the light.

Are you feeling better?

Yes. Yes. His face is angled away from me but I read in his voice long lines of calm; as if a seam of angry water has subsided underground, leaving the tunnels wide and silent.

Take another drink. I’ll get you home. Can bribe a car perhaps to take us. And deliver him to a weeping thankful household. And they will press coins into my hands that I will of course refuse. You can rest for a while. Come back when this moment has passed and normalcy has returned.

That’s very kind. Yes. Could you go and answer the telephone. Tell them I’ll reply as soon as possible.

I will.

When the sound comes I think it is a broken or a split thing.
Sharp and hard. A note falling from a great height.
Perhaps he’s tripped – and so I go back in. And he is lain across the chair. And eyes upward. And his brain half-open under his hair like a peeled mandarin. Its white fringed shreds waving in the light.

I think sniper but the window is blocked and shut. Look for the flutter of his throat a wink a sign but nothing. Blood darkening the leather under his head from the inside as if rushing to a surface.

Try to cup the brain back inside the head absurdly. It falls and parts under my hands. Can see his tongue still curled pristine under his nose and wet cheek. Both his palms flat on the desk as if pushing downward. I lay paper on his head to bind it
and it sticks and soaks. Thick ringlet on his brow from what I can scrounge from his documents but still the blood and the fat white of the brain unheld come rushing.

Gun under the desk. I touch it and it’s hot so I leave it alone.

I am kneeling. Stroking a hand over and over his lapels. And cannot carry him to hospital like this for the brain will hang and fall. And pressing my head hard to his chest there is no sound though I think perhaps the body must still be failing - the lungs folding up and the liver slowing. Or is it so sudden – like wind sucking fire from a room?

Then the window bursts and the sniper fire comes. Having heard the shot and seen the one light in the building. And glass on my hair and through my shirt. And I drag him down to the floor to protect him. And there are four shots or perhaps five. And I reach and turn off the lamp.

The gunfire stops.

In the dark I lay for a long time.

Before I leave I roll the Minister onto his back and cross his arms on his chest. A noble position for a warrior. As they carry Wagner’s heroes across the stage to be burned. Along and over his body I lay his work: the proposals and telegrams and drafts and detritus of his room. Burying him deep under the white strata of his effort like layers of soil and rock. When they come to find him they will have to dig the whole sediment of his life to see his face.

Then I crawl out and away in the shadow of the empty building and into the new air.

I am trying to think of grief. And feel its pattern its violent swell. But all that comes is pale echoes. And the startling salt of my tongue.

I can no longer hear myself. I think perhaps the sniper fire has deafened me so I stop behind a building and put my wrists to my ears for the pulse. The soft inward tick of my body. After a while it emerges rackety through the fuzz of the skin and I sit waiting with it to cool and halve and come back to its centre.

Sadness has deserted me. The capacity has left my body. The ladle comes up from the well as dry as sand.

And now it is unbearable and must be taken off me. The pressure of the light in that room. And I strip the coat with his blood down the sleeve off my body and feel my shoulders free of it begin to ache in the cool. I think suddenly of how in dark winter I would sweat myself through the night in shirtsleeves at the piano, like a
pared potato or a white seed; because of effort, because of my arms and spine thick with heat as they moved over the keys; and I am brutally cold.

Disappointment is a sore thing. I have put so much into this city and it has failed me. I made sacrifices and spent nights awake and this is all, here, that is left – a torn coat on the ground.

In an open square across from the Ministry buildings a whole block is on fire. In dumb pursuit of the heat on my animal body I come down to the watching crowd. Still faces upturned to the ash. The roof caves in and the air briefly washes with smoke and scattered reeds of sparks.

The snipers start again as the flaming ash falls.

I drag a woman back behind a car. I am expecting others but there is nobody. We are not holding hands but I have my fingers inside her coat fastened onto the lining. I can see the seam of her hair parted on her white scalp. Too thin for a good voice. She has covered her face with her palms and left the ears exposed. I would cover mine which are now bell-filled from the deafness but am locked to her in the absurd sense, despite her complete stillness, that if I don’t hold her down with me she will run away. From an outside vantage point it would look sexual.

I think of getting underground (basements, undercrofts of buildings, the sewers) and immediately dismiss it: fires moving under are worse than above. The belly the vulnerable part.

It seems to finish briefly. Perhaps they are simply bored and firing at random. The woman has blood on her knees and torn stockings. The blood from the Culture Minister cools on my coat that I left behind. We stand up together, interlocked, holding hands too long, then run in different directions.

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In another life I am walking with the Culture Minister around the gardens planning a symphony for the new city. And Dion is marching in the corps beaming while his proud Professor watches. And the sun is out on all things.

What do you do with the dreams of your life. Where can you lay them on the train tracks as you leave. Where can you throw them into the water and watch their colours come loose.
I have with me in a satchel my best pieces. That I would have shown the Culture Minister. Fanned them over his desk to impress. Copied in best ink with all the movements in neat copperplate. _Adagio here staccato like a mouse stealing across a kitchen floor._

Saw a bear once tied to four posts. A travelling band took it between the mines for evening entertainment in the dark parts of the year. The bear thin-furred and juvenile its eyes wide apart on its skull. Huge sleeping paws with sores on the matted wrists from the hand-knotted ropes.

The boys and I heard the roar and the raucous crowd and snuck along. In firelight they had it between the four posts hammered into the winter ground and were making it dance for chicken. And our fathers smoking and seeing its pink stom-ach bare and shameful as it lunged round.

But winter ground is treacherous and swells with late ice runs that soften the mud. And the posts slipped and snapped upward. And one and two and three of the bear’s ropes came singing out of the dirt and swung against its back. And it swept and knocked the bear-boy over with a wet shoulder and the last post snapped. And as we fell back and it reared to full height before being shot I remember the puzzled flex of its feet, feeling for the restraint of all its life, stunned and strange in the frosted clearing, suddenly foreign to itself –

And I will not stay to be shot. And the posts having snapped. And all ropes of this place split from me. So that I float.

Dimness in my body. As if it is talking from a far distance.

I reach and take a man by the collar as he passes. Cheeks fallen in; as if punched.

He struggles. _I didn’t do anything I promise I support you._

_Who do you support?_ And I am not asking this to be cruel; but seeing his confusion, his brutal conflict as he eyes me to see which side I could be and how I might kill him, makes me awake, makes me hold my hand steady in the grip.

_Is there a safe way to the station? You just came that way._

_I don’t know. Yes._ His face softens into surprise. The taut drawn head of a drum gone slack. _Under the bridges. They aren’t sniping under there it’s safe. And there are passages through the pylons to the alleys over the other bank._

_How do you know._

_I worked on them._
If you take me I will pay you.

To the station? I don’t need money money is useless. His eyes coast down.

Give me your shoes.

Fine. I reach and unlace and give him the left. One now one after you get me there. So you don’t run off and leave me.

He laughs admiringly. You’re mad. Tucks it in his coat. Keep low and don’t let go of the chains the river’s high.

All right.

Travelling pilgrim-light. This feels appropriate. As if removing a stain from a mouth. In opera the pilgrim characters always have light voices unencumbered by the weight of bass. Moving over paper landscapes singing clearly despite their supplicant bowing.

So I will not return to the apartment. And the instrumentalists may come to the opera house and find it bare and bolted shut. And understand that the finale, that we planned so long, is to be played privately now in their own scattered rooms train-routes hiding places. And the whole swell of us along the line of the country, playing our separate parts to open windows, half-awake wives, cold fields, synchronising not by ear but by the earth –

It is a beautiful thought with startlingly sad edges.

The air under the bridge swings and fills.

And my soft single sock against the sodden iron.

An enormous instrument against the wind. And hard water below smacking the pylons. Its tension is beautiful; and I pause underneath, suspended on the worker’s chain-bridge, to hear the wires hum, the thick struts fructify with sound.

The man says You know bridges?

No just metal. When I was young my father said they winched up children from the orebody. Found them clinging to the lines the chains like condensation; and when you wished for a child you dropped coins down the shaft; and babies would come up, silver-faced, blind, wailing to be suckled in the light. We come from the ground we go back to the ground he said.

The man says Come on then; and so one-footed I follow on through the pylon dark.

The station is full and fistfights are breaking out. As I hand over my other shoe Regime soldiers are trying to hold a line but the press of people against them is
pushing them wide. The long-distance train drawing out off the platform is hung over with bodies. Men straddling the carriage links holding onto bare iron.

As I watch a man falls off the side of the carriage while climbing in a window; and is mashed up under a moving set of wheels; and his crushed leg and scream are both visible, tangible, hot in the air; and women are pushing over the platform edge, holding their arms, weeping; but there is a spare space, his body has left a blank to be filled –

I get alongside the carriage, hand a man my spare food through a window and he knuckles open a door and hefts me bodily in. I feel hands on my hair my back but the door slams.

Painful silence in the carriage. And the flat of its hands on our foreheads. And passing through a terror. And I sit and feel my socks begin to stretch and dry flat. And stripped of upper mouths of the soft part of the throat of any surface that could resonate. And bundles of shirts of bandaged shoes of threadbare things is all that’s left. Nobody carries an instrument.

Dregs and sparse elements. What you drag up from a drowning in a mining pit. Gloves and shoes pulled off in the suck of water.

The man who pulled in my food is handling it into his case. _What’s in the bag_ he says motioning.

_Nothing. Sheet music._ I show him. He puts both hands up and turns away – startled.

And I understand. Music is not self-protective but expansive. Throws open its arms. Reaches into other breasts, other bodies. The vulnerable second in which the poised hand strikes down on the keys. The unsafeness of it – he and I feel it – close to our skins.

They have cleaned the man off the wheels and we’re stripping out of the station at high clip. I remember fleeing a place.

When I entered the competition for the Maestro I was sixteen. _Fill eight pages of music said the paper entry form write your name in clear text your ID number your town._

Post to the City was irregular so sent four copies. Half my wages each time. Scrap paper from the boilers. Evenings at the church piano trialling till the electricity failed.
Never saw a violin a cello an oboe except in newspaper sketches. They existed in space – shivering off the records in the bedroom’s dark. Pass of the resin bow over the scraped hole. Pegs hoisting the note. Different resonances of wood sensed through the radio like textured sheets.

Give me a lathe I could make it out of nothing. Spare wood and guts. Build it around the sound.


Miner teen down in the mountain halls. Knowing the fix of the lantern the split scent of gas. Shaft-hauling the wheelbarrows up on the shoulders singing. The other boys singing too – hymns to hear each other and bawdy songs. Hundreds of feet underfoot a whistled Father Leader Birthday Song – up through the grass.

Young men leaving in a fat stream. Blood leaking out of the town. To the city for factories Labour Yards train works. Apprentices all in our hot suits and borrowed shoes. Returning sometimes nostalgic with a new wife for the steady coal shifts. Turn into your father your grandfather their stunned eardrums from the dynamite their white-bleached skin. Anchor like rock to the earth.

When I brought the news in from the post it was late evening.

*You’ll be leaving then. And before the good season.* Winter the flush period – welcome warmth in the shafts and high orders from across the flats. I held the paper and said Yes.

*Good shoes you’ll need eh.*

*He says he’ll pay for a new outfit –*

*You can have Wulf’s. Laid up for the whole winter he’ll be. His wife will oil them. The union will get him some others. Leather.*

*They’ll have leather in the city.*

*They will eh.*

*Yes sir.*

*Not as good as here. That way when you come back and he straightened from the bed where he’d been lying to rest his spine you’ll already have workman’s shoes. Can start down the shafts straight off eh.*

*Yes sir.*

Wulf’s shoes now paired together in a bridge-worker’s coat as he sprints home across a sniper-shot avenue. The good leather in a shameful lug-shape. After I
sold my other shoes for leather I made Dion polish those and gum them until they stood fearless under rain.

Where is Dion now? Probably the Professor snuck him out. Furs and humbugs on a yacht to a sunnier place – with the other bigwigs throwing their Regime hats overboard, dressing in European white coats, natty pocket squares. Dion in another country, shot full with foreign sun, hammock-swinging! It’s a sweet vision, I sit in it – the gift of safety I gave him; good friends who took him in.

Now I whistle a low tune for a swaddled weeping child and it gulps into a transfixed dumbness. And is affronted by this invasion of its private anger.

We are headed to the Koeppen. And perhaps I’ll sleep out in the fields the fringes of wood. And a good lightness to the sky no rain. And barter for a set of shoes – my waistcoat or my buttons.

And then? Travelling musician. Wind-picked piece of seed. Wherever is away from this. Like those Japanese exiled poets with a bowl and a flute wandering the mountains. I feel dizzy with lightness and fear.

The man with my food leans over conspiratorially. We’re going to try for the other city downriver. Hear the Regime’s massing some good troops there for a push back. Want to come along? You look young good with a gun. Shows me the blue-green tattoos on his arms the Leader’s face stitched upright on his jacket like a child’s doll.

All right. I’ll slip free of them when the river widens. Head out into open ground.

The train halts on the head of a hill. Can’t haul its shoulder over the break can’t flinch further under the gaze of the larger pressing thing around and within it. Damn thing’s busted we’ll have to walk says the man swinging down to the gravel.

Hordes of people out of the open doors down onto the tracks. And no radio is playing.

Amber forms around the moving men. Hard slow sunlight.

There is an arrow shower of new sound. Shots coming up from the back. I see flecks of scarlet in the tree-line; a rebel platoon in full regalia have come out of the side ditches and are lining alongside the track. But it is better to release. And go into silence. And place your hand on its thinness from the inside. Push against the wall.

We walk together over and downhill into the water.
6. The Professor Waits

I'm spinning, sparking, in the marketplace by my office – and sweet with love! Clear between the ears, a Pharaoh, all fearless. I've set the windows open, to flap and flush the place of spiteful spirits. Feel calm; the palm of my hands no longer quivering. Palms, psalms, I press them together like prayer.

We said four so he could go home and gather parts, shirts, starched underwear. And join me back here. Four! I'm slippery-sliding, I'm delighted. Am I here? Where are my feet, I'm all asleep, I'm grunting pig-happy in my little light-patch.

The sun is hot and honest. I feel the touch of language on my tongue, I'm voluble, I'm vast and virile! It's puerile, how little pleasure perks me up.

He must not want me truly. Not this pooling aging vehicle of veins, the plains long plumped out into mounds and sags and furred crevasses, harvests of hair that could clothe a bear. And my sex has stumped! - gone from a fruitful oak to barely a finger-width, a greying soldier praying for a pension. Not wanted, not here, not this bear-bastard. The voice is still in brass and bottle, but it's frail, it's tail-between-legs down in my gullet, grubbing up spare air. What joy is there?

He must not want me truly. Upstairs the windows flick and rattle in the breeze, ballooning – beautiful.

I am not all unaware. I know that bare parts of my brain are cracking loose, like cables burdened with snow. I know that I am swimming out from sense, seeing its shoreline swing and dip on the line of sight, its light diminishing as I drift away to darker currents, deeper seas. It is a place I've met before: the sore part where the languages rub, their substitutions all silent; the radio's irrational hum, its dumbness at the root of all speech. The sunlight breaches the head of the buildings and starts bruising windows; it must be peeling far past noon.

But in this still moment (breathe in, out, find the rhythm, centre on its single line) I can still speak – and run my tongue along a lover's line, and smell the salt of pork pan-frying in the square, and skin a pear by slitting it nail to nubbin. It's pleasure that's life – and so little, so little: a drop of oil on the plate, a pass of hand over hair, one violin at night. Better to lick this edge, to feel its blood, than sit in safety and dissolve. When I take Dion home –

When I take him home! I think of the songbird Sundays in China, where pretty pet birds are carted to parks, to communal trees, in cages, and hung like lamps
together. They sing better en masse, as a class: a flock hearing and echoing itself while owners smoke and sleep beneath. Sepulchral. The word comes out unbidden, I do not know it.

My several songbirds spooled into one tree, to sing sweeter – and he could live with us, wrapped in roses and ribbons, like a saint’s statue being dipped in the sea; and Anne could teach him dances, from her country – and we could marry, merry, all three of us together, touching lips at the corners -

It gets past three. I’m sticky-mouthed and gleeful, but the sink of light makes me frightened, and I kick the shadows with my foot. The shop-fronts are shut. Inside they have their regulation radios, and perhaps I am speaking to them on it even now, urging caution, reiterating the old rules, from my ample armchair, swearing that all is right and tight in the world; and time has lost me, I have lost the time, keep talking and you’ll never lose your spot, never be caned for skipping out a verse.

It is a myth. He never was, I never, we never. I sit and eat another pear, and feel fear brutal on my back, and will not turn. Men all in red – red hats, red eyes, red feet – crowd up the bar and roar their songs. It’s nearly four.

Were you there?

I am there. I see him swagger into shot. Dion all dark in the hot sun. I do not know him first, because he’s got himself pursed up in Regime soldier-gear: the proper purple, propping his spine inside an epaulette set, strutting in borrowed boots. My darling boy! Where did he get the stuff?

He struts in and grins. All wrinkled shirt and dirt upon the knees – he’s dragged it off a drunk for sport, he’s disporting himself – in some now-naked snoozing fool’s fatigues! And yet he shines like Gilgamesh, like the sun-eater, feeder on ants – swallowing the stars, his hair is arrows and blood, he is a young and blissful God. His beauty makes me swell and start with tears. An old man’s fears, his trembling vicious heart.

I loved him till his chest caved in.

They – they shoot him. I hear the clap, the collapse of sound. The red-coated boys, shouting, seeing his broad-shouldered back, downing him through the chest. The bullet crushes his breast and still he stands, startling the glare, unaware, bright in his life! His lips all white; and then the knees go free and bring him down. No man moves to him. He was too beautiful to bear.

I am there.
Mea culpa: cup the boy in your hands. Kneel to his throat loosened with blood and broken open. The pulse must be there but it’s too loud to hear. His heavy head with the Regime cap fastened at the neck.

I speak and speak but no voice comes. Is it me howling his hands his hands which are still clean where I had washed them. Which I hold. Where is. What am I. Where is the chorus to wail, to cull his hair (here, Haar, hold it in your mouth till it speaks its own name) and scatter it over the city, so that men and women raise their arms and weep? I am there. I haul into the silence I rip and fight and still it holds. I tear my garments and roll in the dirt by his warm belly. I have no tongue – torn out, I am biting it off. I am being lifted, lifted, by the hands of others. There are no screams for what I know. There are no sounds. No there is nothing look in me look in his ribs that are hanging here spilling on the dust there is. Nothing.

7. Anne Is Finished

Wulfson asks if I want to save anything from the burial bundles and I say Nothing. He is giving new sod to the tops of the ground. Will seed fresh lawn on it so that it goes lush and frantic and blind.

I think of my husband burrowed in a bowel of soil like a root. His snoozing hibernating burr of sound. How to keep him safe and safe and safe.

I had hoped to do the old spells.

Speak the name and summon the named thing. All wrinkled fur and burn. Stepping out of the firelight with paws full of coins.

In my village the dead had new names so that nobody could call them back, absently, while flapping out a sheet or singing.

All this time, I know now, I was speaking him, my husband, with my ink in his ink: his flat feet with the half-crescent sole, hard ball of calf riding high under the knee, hair in finger-curls all the way to the thigh, where sweetness made him bald on the inner part, years of pressing limb to limb soothing the hair away; the infant’s indulgent belly, curled under my palm, the small softness under the spar of the collarbone, that
vulnerable stretch of sail, and its matching triangle down between pelvis and thigh where veins meet and lines of touch converge. All this time I was conjuring him out of the light.

And our boy, too, who was unspoken by us, who was not mourned aloud, whose parents could not talk of him or pass him between them like two halves of a love. I sang him, his skin-bone yellow strangeness, quiet as a pastor, eyes folded shut with the spray of eyelashes, still and all-accepting, letting all things into his small scraggy self, and his tiny folded heart, the little star that blinked once and went out –

The ring at the door makes me run. If it's rebels this time I will let them in. Tear up the house for bandages. Pack their water-cannon contusions in ice we cannot spare. It’s red-clad men but unhurt. Between them they hold a thing that fills my throat with a wine-cry of angry love.

*Does this man live here* says one.

I am touching my husband’s face his hair his neck. Pores flown open with blood. His eyes are shut he seems to have fainted. *He’s covered in blood what happened.*

The soldier shrugs. *I can’t get a word out of him eh. Got the address from his pass. He was bent over a boy in a square. The boy was killed some mistake.*

Not his blood. Wild pulse but the body is sound. A ripped knee and clothes filled with dust. He sags and rolls like a drunkard at sea. I want him to speak but he will not.

The other soldier sounds defensive. *Some mistake. The boy’d been dressed in a Regime soldier uniform. Basically asking to get shot.*

*My husband is old and weak. Please give him to me.*

Wulfson comes to my shoulder and takes half the weight. Gives no attention to the soldiers though they eye him.

One trawls the whole house with his gaze. *Was he some kind of Regime big shot? Have to be, living in a place this size.* Spits. *He’ll be summoned to the trials soon enough.*

The second dusts his jacket off. *He tried to fight us. Old fool.*

*That’s enough. He is an old man.* I want to nuzzle his hair to rinse his eyes of grit but I stand still and give them my hand. *Thank you for bringing him home. Come on darling. See you at the trials lady.* They whistle off down the drive. One grabs the other’s hat and laughs.
Wulfson and I put him on the sofa full-length. Grim and grizzled in his suit. I fetch a basin and begin top to tail to clean him, links of silver chain in his beard and hair, the deep fossil runnels of his eye-edges and mouth-edges, pulling them out like fresh archaeology.

He blinks and purrs. My world of man my ancestor of love. He stretches out an arm and holds me without seeing who I am. Small startled moments come and flee across his face.

I’m so sorry. You’re at home now.

Am I? At home. Yes. Bits and parts of speech fly up and round him. He seems not to grip on them but only to glance off. Home. Yes. What are you doing.

I’m cleaning you.

Cleaning.

Yes. You’re covered in dirt. I do not mention the blood. His eyes are wavering, already filling, he is weeping without knowing it, without altering his breathing.


You’re not lost. You’re with me.

Yes. Yes. He releases his fearsome bear-grip and lets the tears go. Are you still cleaning me.

Yes I am. I love you.

Yes. I feel as if the world has come in on my ears. Everything is gone. Everything is gone.

I’m not gone.

No. No you aren’t. Brief flick of grin. I put a hand on his pate to steady him.

Was it Dion who was killed?

Dion? Dion. Never was. The name brings out a deep body shiver. The boy lying in the dirt. A Regime uniform was that a kind of game.

Wasn’t he? I suppose not.

I dreamed it. And then a chorus came I think. But then they dragged me away from him.

Shhhh.

Anne. Don’t leave me Anne. I am so tired. I can’t see very well.

I won’t leave you.

I won’t survive without you here.

I know.
It took paintings a full roast ham from the icehouse a whole roll of copper wire for the tickets. Carried its finger-thick reel around my neck like an ancient torque through the checkpoint. Like your style said a red-scarfed guard. Good to see the ladies out in their best for us.

The black market trains leave from a disused platform outside the walls. It’s where they brought in the treats for the higher-ups said the seller through his car window unstringing the ham. Slicing a piece off the top and chewing it reverently. Fruit in crates restricted wines. My friend who gets them says he saw a whole carriage of live pheasant once. Another one filled to the roof with flowers some General’s wife. Amazing.

Painted our car with scarlet varnish left over from the window-sills. Good for keeping off the pigeons Wulfson says it’s sticky I made it myself eh. Rebel symbols on the doors, the roof, the wing mirrors two startled red eyes. Added trails of nail polish on the windshield in riotous scrolls.

I wipe my hands on my old dress and watch the smears press deep in.

At the platform my husband leans and opens his mouth to the light but does not speak. Three jumpers under his coat to cosset him, to keep his shape from dissolving. His thin skin so cool. I put my hand upon his arm.

We’re going to go on a trip now. You always wanted to see where I was from didn’t you. We’re going to go there. I organised everything I have all the passes. Don’t you worry about a thing.

He leans upon me, heavy, vulnerable as a lost animal. Nods. Watches the movements.

The platform feels like a relic, a stage set: huge cranes for the lifting of crates of chocolate, fine flour, perfumes. Now swinging their held heads in the solitary daylight casting small shadows. Behind a dock a packet of expensive shirts drifts forgotten, the plastic windows bearing a German legend, a small visible pocket of rose paisley.

I am in old furs – doctor’s coat underneath. Signal your value in any given situation. Immediately stride into the crowd saying Doctor make way.
Wulfson drove the car, still gummed and fly-catching with its red unguent sides, rouged up like a whore in the dark. Had bravely put dyed-red streamers in his hat and answered back the rebel guards with deadpan charm: *We’re going for a celebratory drive like at Christmas. Dressed up the old thing in new colours looks grand eh? Historic day. Got any more scarlet for us we want to put a flag on the roof –* So we got out.

Train from here over the border. Then another across to the airfields where the planes go out for the capital cities. Then six hours overland in a bus heading down rutted lanes toward my birthplace. Now a town, my sister’s letters said before the censors gutted them: its own hospital, a smart set of shops. *We miss you come visit* and the next few words, doubtless brief anger against my new country my goat husband, cut out.

*Get into the carriages if you’re coming now* says a passing engineer. *Not looking straight at us. So if questioned he cannot describe our faces.*

Wulfson hauls my husband up while I pull by the wrists. *Thank you Wulfson.*

*I’m coming along.* He hefts himself alongside and hauls a seat. *You can’t handle his weight on your own eh.*

*But I have no ticket for you.*

*Got my own ma’am. Amazing what a case of imported whisky will get you. Took it off the master but probably he doesn’t mind now eh.*

I laugh and then cover my mouth. He smiles. *Didn’t tell you so you wouldn’t talk me out of it eh. Besides. The old house is empty now.*

*You were there when we came.* How many years are in his body. Strip open a bone a liver you can track the drag of life through it. Aged organs will thin down to translucence, to pure membrane and hinge.

*Since I was a boy ma’am.* Sparse grey loops at his temples. *I served the rich men there and I served the Regime men when they cleared the rich men out. I ran the bath of the Father Leader himself eh when he visited overnight. Long before your time.*

*What was he like?* In the State portraits he’s gleaming gold, an eternal venerable thirty-five, eyes wide benevolent pools engulfing the whole nation in a blatant stare. I always found them plaintive, unlike his son’s pictures, which were all metal and stern chin, an ammunition belt painted strung across his chest.
We weren’t allowed to look eh but I peeked. I was fifteen. His voice is wide open and calm as if entering a warm place. He was skinny and old by then. Naked as a plucked bird. Looked like any wrinkled man. He had a beautiful voice we used to love to listen to it. On the wireless. Seems strange he’s been dead so long I can still hear it.

My husband speaks as if set alight suddenly. Voices of the dead. Voices of the dead in the wireless. He points at us unsteadily, unable to fasten, to place name on thing – a creature unmoored from the hooks and eyes of signs. That’s where they live.

Yes. I pass my hand along his hair. He eyes the light in the windows and says with more focus Anne it’s warm today.

I know. Isn’t it a beautiful day. Having bought tickets for the most luxurious trip, the late-afternoon that served meals to the black market haulers, although we agreed that would be unlikely and packed whole baskets: thick fatty tongue, salad sliced early from the kitchen pots, pink-pale onions pickling. Will barter for water at the stops.

Yes. Listen to that bird I do believe it’s an early thrush. How surprising. Has the happy guileless expression of a child with a gift. Open bowl of a face. Into which I dip and breathe underwater.

What has been lost from him is not a mournful thing. But just spare, unneeded, all the flotsam of a boat thrown overboard in rough seas so that it can coast unencumbered. The ropes of his sails cut free – and his tiller smashed – and myself at the oars, riding the tide with my bare arms, pulling us home.

Dion shot in a square. I think of his blonde hair on the beach rising against the foam and then release it. It does not matter.

We lay blankets on his thin legs for the cool edge of the afternoon. It was a good house says Wulfson tucking the folds behind the knees but it’s old and I’m old. Straightens up and adds tentatively I’ve never seen a new country. What’s the food like.

I laugh. Very good. You’ll like it. My family are famous for their cooking. Believe it or not.

Leader help us he says and then Must get out of the habit of saying that eh.

It’s a beautiful country. Long blue fields. The sky at evening fills up with birds so you can’t see the stars. The cities are filled with church bells. My brothers in law will have to teach you the new crop cycles.
I might be too old for that. Might marry a foreign woman. Settle on a smallholding. Visit you two in the evenings so he can tell me stories like in these old days.

My husband looks up and smiles. Stories he says would you like to hear a story? I know some fine ones from the French.

They feel already as if they are stretched out behind us in the finest membrane – the past; this country, our grief, the plains of our memory; and the train starts to move; and the caul snaps and is broken, swinging behind us, its pale veil against the sky.
State your name.
David Ernst.
Your occupation.
Composer.
Were you employed in any capacity in the old regime.
In a certain sense –
Please answer the question.
For a short time. Yes.
Please give details of your employment history. Be thorough, please.
Of course, Interrogator. I was apprentice to the famous composer Maestro Von Sayer for eight years. Between these dates. I have clippings and my ID from that time. If you wish to see them.
Von Sayer was executed in the year before the overthrowing of the tyrant, yes?
Yes, Interrogator. The winter – here is the date. They dragged him out in the middle of the night. Put him on the Banned Composer list – they took all his works off the radio. And off the repertory. They burned everything, all his papers and works – it was horrible...
As a condemned traitor. I see. He was denounced by an enemy.
No. No, it was his own doing. He declared himself an enemy of the state. He wrote ‘For Democracy’ across the top of one of his scores and gave it to the conductor. It will be in his trial notes, if any survive.
Extraordinary. A supremely brave gesture of rebellion.
Yes, Interrogator. He was a – a very brave man.
And you were his pupil.
We never spoke of it, but we knew we shared the same convictions. He would not have employed me otherwise. He had no family, no associates – only myself...
The police suspected this too?
Of course. They arrested me as an accomplice. That alone should prove – that I was honourable.
If every person ever arrested by the Regime were an upstanding freedom fighter, the rebellion would have only required a single trumpet and a pop-gun. No, it is insufficient. Persecution does not mean innocence.

They - they tortured me. They smashed in my legs, my lungs. They played songs on me with hammers and asked me to name them. There are still scars on my neck - here. I can roll up my pant legs and show you where the bones came out.

That will not be necessary. The police station, and the date? It was the one in the centre of town, on the day of his execution. The one with the high black wall. Perhaps thirty-six hours? Less? I'm not sure.

I am sorry. But you were not executed, Patriot Ernst? I left no trace of my thoughts, there was nothing with which to charge me officially. And - I was so bloodied and broken, they likely thought I would die anyway. Without their wasting time to dig a hole or file the papers. I was lucky, Interrogator. If we discover records of you betraying others for your release – what then.

The idea is – ridiculous. I was strong for my Maestro – even when they came to tell me they'd shot him in the head. I was the dirty pupil of an enemy – all that saved me was indifference.

And then how did you survive. Life would be hard for a suspected collaborator with democratic leanings.

Friends. A man who went to the labour camps gave me money. I don't know what happened to him. My landlady helped me walk and gave me a place to stay. Sympathetic people gave me small berths to eke out a living.

What are their names.

I can't give their names. They are dead or disappeared. Or would wish for anonymity.

Inconvenient. So you worked in Regime spaces with Regime loyalists.

Hating them all the time in my heart. Thinking of my Maestro – who had made birthday sonnets for the Leader! A genius who brought them glory and beauty they couldn't appreciate, and they killed him against a wall, like a rabid dog. Disgusting. I spit on them –

You were loyal to our cause but worked silently for the Regime? It is a flimsy argument. Listen, I expressed it in my music – in oblique terms, but the critics understood. Look at the reviews. They thought I was dangerous, that my democratic leanings and my associations poisoned my musical thought – and they had, they were correct, in a way.
Yes, I see. They are very cruel to you, the state critics. You risked a great deal to be so outspoken in your music.

What had I to lose. My great master was gone, my body was broken. All that was left was the fight of art. As long as I stayed alive and was heard, that was enough.

And you took on more commissions? You did not flee as others did?

I was fighting the beast from the inside. The more vile commissions I pumped out, the more they trusted me – and the more I could leave my little codes, my angry protests. I – I couldn’t move outright – I would have been killed immediately, I was under surveillance – but my music is rebellion itself. Listen to it – you can hear the anger, the force –

Perhaps later, if it is necessary. Von Sayer was known in other countries. You will be pleased to hear that although our country’s stores of his work are largely lost, his recordings are played on foreign stations and performed. There is no risk of their being lost to posterity, like his papers.

Thank you, Interrogator. It is a good remedy for grief, that knowledge.

Please sign here. If the commission clears you, will you stay in the country? We need new songs, now – new visionaries of a great future.

I – don’t know. Such things have happened. There is so much pain, in this place. I saw awful things. I saw my friends go to the camps, my own countrymen held me down and broke my legs. I saw noble men commit suicide. Years and years of death. How can we feel clean? How can a cello ever play here like – a proper, a pure instrument again?

It is still a great country. It is still beautiful – there are parts untouched by the Regime. Nothing was untouched by it, Interrogator. Nothing we can remember.

Ah, we will forget it. When things are well and safe, the bad times fade into bad dreams. This will be a good place again, Patriot Ernst.

Yes, Interrogator. I hope that will be so. Please tell the commission – please tell them I want only to be of service.