

# **WORDS SO FAR**

**volume two**

a short story collection

by

**TOM MENARY**

# Contents

The Call .....	4
Caught by the River.....	8
Osabu and the Whale, pt.1 .....	17
Frozen.....	21
Holding the Branch .....	23
A Million and One Things Under the Sun .....	32
The Visit .....	36
Walking the Path That's Given .....	40
Osabu and the Whale, pt.2 .....	45
For Lovers .....	49
The Prince and His Princess.....	53
The Ring .....	56
Osabu and the Whale, pt.3 .....	61
Zoo.....	64
The Machine .....	66
An Accident on the Way Home .....	69
Gimme Shelter .....	72
Into the Night Sky .....	78
A Conversation with My Father .....	90
Boy.....	95
Master of Two Worlds .....	98
Until the End of the World .....	103



# The Call

*21<sup>st</sup> March, 2010*

*Picture yourself in a boat on the river,  
With tangerine trees and marmalade skies.  
Somebody calls you, you answer quite slowly:  
A girl with kaleidoscope eyes.*

—John Lennon, ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’

Joshua uses the high over-arm you taught him for the season, and the ball flashes past your head and into the roots of the hedgerow where the garden makes way for the bay.

‘Almost in the sea!’ you throw off, and make a show of ambling across the lawn.

‘Nearly, Dad!’ Joshua is beaming. You scoop up the ball from between the earthly tendrils, and when you straighten, the sun catches your eye. Through the glare, you see her.

She stands with her toes in the churning green waters, the mid-morning fog streaming around her figure, incandescent against the swirling sunlight—

‘Dad?’ Joshua tugs on your sleeve, and you know that if you look away, the woman will cease to exist. Nothing of her remains: The waters still churn, the sun still streams. The sea continues to meet the sky.

She surfaces in your mind’s eye for a long time afterwards—perhaps for the rest of your life, visions of a water-woman will rise from the pool of your unconscious. The ball-game continued, but Joshua became annoyed that Daddy missed his catches, and wandered away. You wonder whether you could have

shouted out to the woman, and whether she would have heard.

Your first thought had been of Sarah, but you dismissed the idea: Wherever in the world Sarah might have been, it was no longer in front of you. You know your Classics well enough to draw comparison to the Naiads and Sirens, or even the *Birth of Venus* or the mermaids of your childhood fables; but they were not the answer. Sirens lured sailors to their deaths, and you have never been a man of the sea, and mermaids, well—they're just tales.

Your father would have been interested. He often returned with a mindful of ghost stories recounted to him by the crew of the *Belfore*, and you still recall the warm glow that permeated your being whenever you sat to hear him spin one of his yarns. 'Men have gone mad just thinking about the things my lads have seen,' he would proclaim, and you would float along on his words.

You are not your father. The stories were hand-me-downs; you never experienced them as they were brought out into the world shining and new.

When Joshua left for Bristol under the wing of Harry Ketch the carpenter, their carriage disappearing over the hill, part of you rebelled in a strong, silent voice. You wished he had followed his grandfather's spirit out to sea, in the way you never had. That was a world you had never crossed into: Your young self had felt cold dread in the pit of his stomach every time he watched the *Belfore* sail away from his spot on the harbour wall.

The Channel was the great unknown, and you did not dare place a foot into that wide, deep pool.

Yet the urge you felt in that elastic moment of beholding the woman in the water was real. There may have been no Siren song beckoning you in, but you heard a calling nonetheless. It was something old; something you damped down when Sarah set sail.

So you sit out on the headland from time to time, and wonder if you could have not simply dived in and struck out for the apparition in the green-flecked ocean. Perhaps you will overcome your fear one day, and take lessons; travel to a port town and soak your soul in the unknown. Perhaps, one day, you will learn how to swim.

# Caught By the River

*11<sup>th</sup> June, 2009*

**T**here were two men, living on the outskirts of a quiet village on a hillside. One of the men killed another, in his greed. He cast the body into the river, and watched as it sailed into the distance, like a backswimmer drifting with the ebb of the flow.

The man, named James, turned away from the riverbank and began to trek back to his village, on the other side of the hill. At the top of the rise that overlooked the small, thatch-roofed settlement, James met his friend, John.

‘What have you done, James?’ John asked, and planted his feet firmly in the soil, rooting himself between the other man and their village.

James looked John square in the eye, and only flinched a little at the other’s steady expression. ‘You know what I did, John. I killed a man.’

‘Why?’ The question was simple, but James found he could not answer it. He knew he could never justify it to John, despite their long friendship. John waited, until he could not wait in silence any longer. ‘Why, John? Why did you kill him?’ he barked.

‘What does it matter?’ snapped John, waving his arms wide. ‘Is it going to make you feel better knowing I can explain it? He’s in the river, sailing out to sea! What’s done is done, and questions won’t change anything! Who will find him?’

Now John chose silence as his answer, as James had done, yet his quietness did not come out of fear. Instead, he lowered his gaze to rest upon the silver-link

chain that encircled the other man's salt-speckled neck like two sparkling rivulets. James had long ago fitted a loop to the chain, and from it hung the Crucifix. It was upon this that John's eyes settled.

And James, following his friend's line of sight, realized the enormity of his crime. He knew that there was always a witness to his actions, even when there were none apparent. James clutched at the silver cross in fear.

John, seeing his friend's anguish and despairing because of it, reached out a hand like a branch of the olive tree, and touched his fingers to James's, both resting over the silver cross. 'Let me help you,' John said to his friend. 'Let me carry your burden. I will bear the weight of it, and absolve you.'

'You can't! You'd have the devil to pay for it!' James protested in a watery voice. 'This was my crime, not yours.'

'But I forgive you of it,' John breathed.

'Why?'

John paused, and lowered his hand from the cross to touch two fingers to the hollow of his own neck, around whose trunk no cross or chain lay. 'Because your faith is not the same as mine. I can carry what you must not.'

And so James, with dread swimming in his soul, accepted the offer of his friend, and they both returned, side-by-side, to their home village. And in the morning, when James surfaced from the cradle of sleep next to his Laura, he felt clear and free, and his soul did not feel weighted, but buoyant. He kissed the girl at his side, and

went down to the field to gather the barley for breakfast.

He met John soon after, in the tavern across from the village square, and they shared a pint of frothing beer, and talked as friends, without a care in the world.

Although James felt he was free of his burden of guilt, he was constantly aware that he could not explain why his conscience was so clear. The transference of his sin to John had left nothing so much as a scar or mark, not even a ripple on the surface of his being. James refused to let himself dwell on such things, and turned his mind to his daily affairs.

As time passed, after Laura became first his wife, then the mother of his two hale and healthy children who went on to bring crops and good fortune to the village, the set of James's mind began to ebb. Perhaps, he considered on such occasions as he felt free to ruminate, perhaps his guilt had indeed flowed from his being, and it had come to settle like a seed in John's soul, ready to be disposed of if ever it were to awaken. Or perhaps, James thought in his darker moments, there had been no one to witness the crime at all. Perhaps there was no guilt to show. 'Perhaps,' he mused in a low murmur when he had firmly closed the curtains over his bed and lay wallowing in the depths of darkness, 'I did not need to feel remorse... for perhaps there is no one to whom I must account.' This thought had drifted unbidden into James's mind, but from then on, he found he could not dispel it.

James sailed through the cobblestone lanes of the village in the manner of a man caught in a daze; like a mariner confounded for days at a time by storms that buffet at his keel, except that James found himself facing the wet of the rain like a stone against the tide. He let it drift around him, anchoring himself to his idea of a free and guiltless world.

He gazed around at the people floating by him: Old Mr. Barmbridge with his bent-legged hobble; Mrs. Henshaw and her gaggle of tousle-haired children; the MacLaishes, out for a stroll to the grocer's. James could kill any of them right now – he could push them down into the mud and hold their heads until they stopped struggling, and the world would drift right around him. He could kick Mr. Bambridge's cane out from under him, or snap the necks of each of the little Henshaws one by one.... The thought was terrifying and giddy, and it made James want to giggle with the absurdity of it. And yet it called to something bobbing under the surface of James's mind, just out of reach in the devilish deep of his psyche. It spoke of darkness, permeated with the tang of bloody iron, and it chilled James's bones.

He knew John would be having midday lunch at the tavern, now under a new name which neither friend much liked. James found him sitting quietly at their usual table, leafing through the pulped pages of a book.

James brought up the idea he had been carrying around with him like it had been an itch he longed to scratch. 'Have you ever felt burdened, John?' he asked

in a quiet voice, leaning low over his pint of ale. 'Burdened by that which I gave to you?'

'No,' John responded. 'I don't quite know why, but I felt as if I had taken no weight from your shoulders at all.'

'I thought you relieved me of it only for death to take its place. But that hasn't been my fate...'

John bowed his head reverently. 'I'm sorry, James – is this about Laura...?'

'No! It isn't,' James replied with a raised voice. 'I know why there is no burden,' he proclaimed, and took a gulp of ale before continuing. 'I know why neither of us feel anything for what happened, and this is why: *There is no God to punish us.*' He sat back with a serious expression, his heart racing at having finally voiced his most private of thoughts.

John regarded him evenly. 'I would not know,' he said slowly. 'I have nothing to do with faith of that kind, nor it of me. But *you* do, James... or at least you once did. What has happened?'

'*Nothing* has happened, and that is the point!' James declared, the words streaming from him like a fountain that could not be quelled. '*Nothing* has happened! There is no recompense, because there is no guilt! There is no punishment, because there is no sin! No angel or demon looking over my shoulders! There is *no witness.*' He spoke this last in a hushed tone, as if this new thought was a fragile thing that could never be spoken, only breathed on the faintest of breaths.

Still John stared at James with an unchanging expression on his countenance, as steady as an oak. 'Do you know,' he began in a careful, measured voice, 'what my faith is, James? Do you know what I believe?' He did not wait for his friend to answer, but pressed on. 'You do not, because you have never asked. You have always assumed that because your faith lay in God, mine must have been a lack of God. But faith, James, is never lacking. It never wavers, and it never, ever changes its mind, as you have. It is constant.'

'Then what?' James asked with fearful eyes. 'What is your faith, John?'

John paused, sitting in silence, and all the while his eyes never left James's, boring into his gaze and seeming to penetrate his very thoughts. 'It's *you*, James. My faith is in you. That is why I took your burden all those years ago, and that is why I feel so very *disappointed* now that you tell me your faith has left you. You tell me you no longer believe in God, because you fear *punishment*. You tell me you have removed Him from your life, because you wish to hide from His gaze.'

John sighed, and finally a knot came to his throat. 'Now tell me that isn't true, James. Tell me that.'

James found he could not look into John's sad, wintry eyes any longer, and instead scrambled to his feet, leaving his pint unfinished, and fled from the tavern, followed by quizzical looks from the local patrons.

James ran across the village square, bumping and pushing through the market-day crowds, splashing through puddles of muddy rain-water, and kept running, out to the edge of the village, and onwards up to the hillside. He crested the rise, overgrown with poppies and lilies laden with dew, and found himself facing the long, winding river into which he had thrown the body of that nameless victim so many years before.

And as he stared into the waters, he found himself swimming towards their depths, and yet that did not worry him. He stared also into his own mind, and, as the rushing of the river filled his ears, James found there, sitting quietly in his head, the face of his God, wreathed in the same disappointment that had cried out from poor John's eyes. He felt himself falling into a steady embrace, and the crushing pressure that threatened to overcome him seemed not so urgent at all.

And James sank into His incorporeal arms, his vision blurring and growing murky like the scum-laden surface of a pond. The face stayed with him, behind the eyes, and it too grew murky. The eyes narrowed, and the mouth curled from a smile to something else. James suddenly experienced a brief and terrifying sensation of weightlessness; as if he were five years old again, splashing haplessly in the pool, scared of drowning in the deep – and all the while His eyes bored into James's. The moment passed.

Although the face in James's mind never spoke a single word, nor could He have been heard over the rushing water, James knew what the eyes were telling

him; the message plunging finally into his lightheaded state of mind as he descended:

Even though James had decided not to believe in his God, he knew without any doubt at all as the river carried him away, that there had always been one individual who had never stopped believing in *him*.

# **Osabu and the Whale, Part One: The Descent**

*21<sup>st</sup> March, 2010*

*Laura stretched her gleaming neck  
Like a rush-imbedded swan,  
Like a lily from the beck,  
Like a moonlit poplar branch,  
Like a vessel at the launch  
When its last restraint is gone.*

—Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market*

**W**hen the morning sun had not yet fully grown into its place at the top of the sky, Osabu brought her friend Ellha down to the sands at the foot of their home village, where they lay and sunned themselves under a cloudless sky. Osabu grew restless, and casting her eyes upward, wondered aloud: ‘On what does the sky hang itself? What holds it so high above us?’

Ellha did not answer. Osabu got to her feet and picked up a long, wooden stick from the shore, waving it about as if she could push back the curtain of the sky and reveal the space that lay beyond. Frustrated, Osabu skipped across to her companion and poked her in the navel with her borrowed stick, causing Ellha’s wide hips to jerk.

‘Stop it,’ Ellha admonished. ‘You are incessant.’ Ellha was beautiful but stern, and did not like Osabu to lie down beside her in the sun.

‘You are too prudish!’ Osabu retorted with a daring tone, her bare feet dancing over the crisp sand.

‘And you are addled! You talk as if you had been imbibing! Our fathers do not approve of these thoughts you conjure up—none of the aldermen do.’ Ellha shook her head, setting her golden hair flowing upon the wave of the wind. ‘You might wander out into the ocean if it took your fancy.’

‘I might!’ Osabu said, planting her fists on her narrow hips, and whirled towards the shore as if to do just that. She halted at the very edge of the ebbing tide, and peered out to the horizon with one hand shading her unblemished brow. She traced the shimmering line with her eyes then loudly proclaimed, ‘The sky is the earth, and the earth is the sky. So on what does the earth hang itself?’

As she was pondering this, from out of the water rose a whale-cow, sending a great funnel of air splashing upwards from the blowhole on its ridged back.

Osabu watched in fascination as the creature burst through the waves, and wished she could feel the spray of the water-jet on her upturned face. She glanced back over her shoulder at Ellha, whose eyes were closed, long lashes flicking feathery tickles over the curve of her cheeks. For a moment, Osabu wanted her friend to remain in that state forever; always at peace, eternally untouched by the world.

Then Osabu dived.

The water was warm like honey as she plunged, and Osabu sank into its golden embrace, letting it subsume her into its waiting body. She spread her arms and let the tide take her, carrying her from the sand and

towards the great whale-cow that rested seemingly at the core of the world-ocean. The waters rose, and Osabu rose with them. The maw of the whale gaped wide, the limbs of the sea gathering Osabu towards this tunnel into the inner world. Osabu felt fear, here on the threshold of the overawing mouth, and yet it was the kind of fear that propelled her onwards; the whispered voice nestled in the strands of her hair, urging her to swim faster, reach further, and taste all the fruits that life could birth. Osabu descended, carried into the beast's throat with a flow of sea-water, down into the chamber of its gullet.

# ***Frozen***

*18<sup>th</sup> February, 2009*

*A piece composed at the Barbican writing workshop.*

I am glad I am inside, because outside, the world has grown old. I've seen it before—not the snow; I've never seen the earth so completely hidden from sight until today—but I've seen the fall of grey flakes upon a million desolations over the faded land. The difference is, I can see no fires, here. I am cold.

But I am not alone. The others in the carriage are staring, too; and I am not surprised. There is something horribly enchanting that draws us to the windows, and not a one of us wants to miss watching the world freezing itself out. Except the Englishman, of course, glancing up every now and then from over his newspaper. I wonder how much repetition he has endured to make him so indifferent to the spectacle outside. The rest of us crowd together—we share a moment, though I find it hard to express. I do not know where the others are from, nor they me; but when the girl with the bright headband presses her button nose to the frosted window and smiles out at the isolation, we all understand. I heard in one of the stories that the brightest a star can shine is in its death, and I think I understand that, too, now. Though the world lies frozen in time outside, it is beautiful to us.

# Holding the Branch

*November 2008*

**Y**ou know the feeling you get when you're falling; the way your stomach feels like it's full of helium and pushing up against your lungs like a balloon in a hatbox? That fleeting second stretched out how you'd imagine your stomach is twanging like an elastic band under your ribcage, when your guts churn and your brain spins and you have no idea which way is *up* anymore? I feel it, sometimes, when I wake up. I think about writing it down, sometimes, but I can never seem to find the words.

It's the rush of the wave, that feeling: of reality getting a good run-up so you can see it hurtling right at you, like the ground welcoming you with open arms. It's happening a lot now that I'm waking up without Lizzie. If you dream of falling—and I do, sometimes—you wake up with a bump.

People think it goes way back along the evolutionary piece of string, flipping the pages back to the prologue: all the way to when we lived up in the trees, swinging from branch to branch by the tips of our opposable thumbs. They call it a survival instinct, when your guts try to throw themselves up your throat as a warning that *maybe* you're getting *just a bit* too close to that ledge; you've misjudged that gap by a millimetre, and your fingertips brush, just *brush* the next branch, and you lurch...

But I don't think it is. Preston had a theory about it, the one I learned the day after he said he'd seen an angel over the South Downs, and we all laughed at him. He said it's not about survival; it's not a genetic

holdover from the days when we were slightly hairier than we are now. No, it's something else; something darker, I think, something that displays just how deep the human psyche goes:

It's the urge to jump.

I think we should feel it more often. Think of it as our brains giving us a kick in the seat of the trousers. It tells you to *get up, wake up, get up to the edge and jump!* It leaves you breathless, and even though it shakes you up, it grips you. You want to rush off to the cliffs of Dover and let yourself go, just to see if you can.

Toby thinks it's a load of bunk. Toby would; Toby thinks a mammogram involves persuading someone's mother to deliver a kissogram. Now, don't get me wrong; it's not that I don't like him. Toby's my friend, but... sometimes he's... look: he's a lake in winter. I don't mean he's cold; I mean you can't crack the surface. You know it goes deep under there, but you just can't break through the ice. Sure, he's a sensitive soul—he cried at Auschwitz... but he only went there because Jane went there, where she stood outside the gas chambers and where he didn't mind when she almost threw up over him, and cried on his shoulder. Where he went to prove just how dreadfully, adorably sensitive he can be.

See? I tend to get bitter whenever Toby's the subject: He comes with a slice of lemon. We met years and years ago; one of those friends who always seem to stick around long after you think they should have drifted away. It was at a party neither of us wanted to be at,

considering it was all terribly precocious and ended with a big, sloppy bowl of punch and a game of cribbage, played ironically. Me and Toby, friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend, stuck in the middle of a menagerie of people who communicated in adjectives, and threw their shoes onto roofs for a laugh. We traded covert glances of weary resignation over the table, sharing a feeling of *Why on Earth am I here?* We sympathized as everyone stood around looking awkward while they worked out how to express *Quantum of Solace* as a charade.

If I'm sounding bitter again, I apologise. I don't suppose it's a very appealing trait in a narrator, but then, that's me. Inventing the character of a narrator, with his own, unique voice, is one step beyond me, regardless of whatever aspirations I may or may not hold; I'm not some writer's construct (or am I, said the meta-narrative from behind its wall) so I can only tell it, so the saying goes, like it is.

Anyway: Me and Toby: The party. We weathered the whole thing, and when it was all winding down and the guests were stumbling away and the punch was congealing, I sat there and thought about kissing him, except it wasn't that kind of party.

And now you're probably wondering where the hell *that* came from, and I could give you the old 'hey, it's the twenty-first century' line, but to be honest, I'm a bit surprised myself—although how often have you compared your friend to a lake in winter without some kind of romantic overtone? No, I don't quite know why I wanted to kiss him—narrative license, maybe? The sort

of thing you crowbar in to make sure your audience is still paying attention? Perhaps; either way, rest assured that it's not usual behaviour for me. I'm thinking it could be that urge to jump again; to close your eyes and wait till you land to find out where you are.

Toby has that effect. He jumbles you up inside until you either want to strangle him or make yourself think you'd turn for him. You never know what's in the depths of a frozen lake until you take the plunge, if you'll forgive a narrator his extended metaphor. Of course, the trouble with staring into the depths of a lake is that, apparently, the depths stare back into you. It's possible I scared myself away. It's possible I was never even interested anyway, and I'm projecting some kind of subconscious wotsit that I can't otherwise work out. It's possible it was just a boring party.

Anyway, it didn't happen, and I had a couple of girlfriends who drifted away, while Toby stuck with Jane, who'd almost been sick on him. And we began to hang out, me and Toby, because we knew the people who knew the same people, and about a year-and-a-half later, I realized we had, at some point along the way, become friends. It creeps up on you; when you're a kid, you think friends just click together like jigsaw pieces. You think you don't have to go out of your way to *make friends*, because if you have to prove anything to them, they're not your friends. Strange. Even when you go through college and out the other side, you think you've collected all the friends you're ever going to know, and you just can't wrap your head around it

when they start to float away and leave you marooned. Not that I'm getting bitter again. It's regret, more than anything, that I didn't take time to...

I just didn't take the time, is all.

So. Me and Toby; almost five years on, we're sitting in Bingo's Bar—which hasn't held a bingo game since someone tried to make off with the cash box two years ago, and was tackled to the floor by five of the regulars, one of whom was Marge, who was eighty-three and wore hobnail boots. There was a bar and grill on Thursdays, courtesy of the barman, Chinese Steve (who wasn't Chinese), though when we turned up there was no sign of it.

We sat and had a grumble about it over in the corner, though we didn't much mind, to be honest—and not only because neither of us particularly cared for Steve's steaks, because they were actually always Linda McCartney's. No, we'd reached the stage in our friendship when we were content just to go places in each other's company, without having to necessarily *do* anything. The 'comfortable silence' stage. It's rare to find a comfortable silence that's mutual. Lizzie couldn't *stand* a silence... but then, she couldn't stand a lot of things.

Toby thinks I'm bitter. He told me so.

'You're bitter,' he said. I considered saying I'd prefer a scotch—except I hate scotch, and the joke wouldn't have worked anyway—but he had that little smile on his face. You know, that tiny quirk of the mouth that tells you you're not quipping your way out of this one, even

if we are just two mates in a bar. It's a Thing that needs to be Dealt With; like Lizzie's scopophobia, or Ern's casual and utterly unconscious racism. That one still hasn't been Dealt With, because it's difficult to sit someone down and inform them they're being a shade too intolerant.

I'm not bitter. I told him so. He laughed. 'Sure you are,' he said. 'You're bitter 'bout loads of stuff. Lizzie, for one thing.' I'm pretty sure I hadn't actually mentioned her all evening, but then I'm recalling from memory, here. 'You haven't got over her,' he added, and I immediately disagreed because he'd pronounced it 'ain't'.

So, I protested for a bit, then Toby went to the toilet, and when he came back he started talking about cars, mostly because he'd watched *Top Gear* earlier and thought it was the sort of thing he should probably start talking about. I warned him he sounded like Clarkson. *That* started him off on politics, and how people have the right idea 'bout wanting a bloke like Clarkson for Prime Minister. He'd sort the country out, no problem, and it'd all be a big laugh anyhow. I didn't necessarily agree.

I guess politics is an abstract to me; it's something that happens *out there*; it's happened for thousands of years, and it'll go on happening long after I'm not around to be all apathetic over it. The world keeps on turning, and all that jazz. I think I prefer to see *people*, not *machines*, but then that's only the type of philosophy you get from someone's character who's

been so lovingly, painstakingly crafted out of big, wide generalizations. You don't go around saying 'I see people' in the real world. Maybe that's why I'm being so talkative right now.

Once he'd made his opinion clear on Cameron, and how he ain't quite sure 'bout Obama, but he'll wait and see. Toby paused. I'd say it was a pregnant pause if I was feeling Victorian, but it was at the very least a heavy silence. He blinked a few times, rapid-fire, took a gulp of his Guinness, and looked me in the eye, then down at the floor, and said, 'I love her.'

He loves her. He said he... he loves her more'n anything in the world, more'n... more'n... so much that there *is* nothing else; he loves her, and he don't love *anything* else, because she's everything. *Everything*. Back then, she was just a girl, really, just *someone* he sorta liked and wanted to show off to, but one morning he woke up with her asleep at his side, her breaths warming his skin, looking so soft and so *still*, and he realized that he could spend the rest of his life with her, just her. She's everything, mate.

And I couldn't say anything. He'd jumped; taken the plunge, and spilled his guts. I'm going to bring back that metaphor from earlier, because I think it fits: the clouds broke, and the ice melted, and this is where it falls down, because he's not a lake at all. He's just a *person*, and I'd never even noticed it. I was being all bitter and snarky and confused over... my best friend. There have been times when I'd not noticed that, either.

He looked vaguely embarrassed over having opened his heart quite so... openly; so I decided not to force him to wrench it any wider that evening. I left an adequately thoughtful pause, and returned to the Clarkson issue, for which he seemed eternally grateful. And so the evening progressed like any other, and at the end of it, when it had become too early to call it the evening any more, we hustled out into the cold and stood in our separate huddles trying to flag down rain-bristled taxis. We shared a cab, and the fare, and stood out on the pavement under the eaves of a tree, and I clapped Toby on the shoulder in what I assumed was a reassuring manner.

And then... nothing happened. What were you expecting? It was a moment of clarity, not a revelation. We went home, and went on living exactly as we had; I'm probably still bitter, though I don't tend notice it if I am. It's not an ending; it's just another *something*. The world keeps on turning, season into season. And the truth is that neither of us really jumped, or really fell, but I'd like to think we're a little more comfortable just hanging on to our branch. After all, winter's past; spring is coming.

# **A Million and One Things Under the Sun**

*March 2009*

**T**he world is young, yet many things upon its surface are not so young. Some are unreal, but they still endure; some are whispers that have breathed awake a million lives and blown down a thousand empires. And there was, as the stories tell it, a thing that was many things, and that was older than them all.

The Iroquois spoke of a thing that was older than the darkness between the stars of Ursa Minor. This thing of the Times before Time was struck from the mouth of the Great Bear by three hunters tirelessly pursuing the beast across the universe, and it fell to the earth where it would remain, a lost thing, until the Great Bear took it up again at the Time of Passings.

Among the early Pashtun people, the belief was held that it came not from the skies, but from the Earth itself, forged in the furnaced womb of the Earth Mother, and cooled by the breath of Al-Wāzid, the Manifestation of Unity. Here, and across many of the Islamic faiths, it was a stone, impossibly smooth, in whose surface was reflected every one of the stars under Heaven. Elsewhere, it was a feather plucked from a living eagle, which soared in the ether, seeking reunion with its parent. And yet it was also a rod of bone, that divined a wellspring of pure water in the heat of the Atacama Desert, and sustained a dozen tribes for centuries after; and it was a copper sceptre that bequeathed a wise King upon an impoverished nation; and it was a sword that quelled an insurrection of three hundred years in the valleys of the Urubamba.

And it was a Cortébert fobwatch, dusty and pitted, found in the crease of a cardboard box in an attic one spring afternoon. It had been an heirloom that had woven its way through a single family since the early nineteenth century, passing from hand to hand. Eliza May Cotton, once the matriarch of a family whose fingers spread over the Americas, to the plains of Connacht in Ireland, and even remote regions of the East Indies, decided, at last, to part with the antiquated watch. She knew it would have to move on, as it always had, for she had grown white-haired, and her life, which had been full and ripe with love, was slowing down.

Her grandson was in love with a girl, as so many grandsons are, and he had little use for a faded old fobwatch. 'Grandma, I already have a watch,' he said in as kind a manner as he could. 'You should keep it.'

But Eliza May Cotton shook her white-haired head, and said: 'It is not to be kept,' and she pressed the watch into the boy's palm. 'It must only be given.' Eliza's grandson looked down at the thing, then into his grandma's old, grey eyes, which still sparkled, and he nodded with a smile.

'Then I'll take it, Nanna,' he said, and patted her wilting hand.

'And be sure to pass it on!' she called after him. Her grandson gave her his word, and Eliza May Cotton died peacefully a few months along, sleeping a dreamless sleep.

Her grandson, whose name was Benjamin, was still in love with a girl called Unity Matthews, and one day, as

spring turned towards the warmth of summer, he met her in a park near the sea. She was perched on a short, stone-brick wall, her hair dancing in the breeze as she watched the tide ebb and flow, and Benjamin presented her with a gift. He hoisted himself up onto the stone wall and asked her to close her eyes. She did just that, and held out her hand, and when she opened them again, she found Benjamin's hand in hers. It was a perfect fit, and together they watched the sun go down, both of them perched upon the short, stone-bricked wall.

And the fobwatch was passed on, although it never was a fobwatch, but many different things, and the sun rose again in the morning.

# The Visit

*December 2007*

She would be here at any minute, any minute now, there would be that little knock! He had got up early, especially early, just in case she had already arrived. He didn't want her to be waiting on the porch outside, tapping her foot. No doubt it was cold outside, yes, it was always cold these days. That wouldn't do.

Oh! the kettle; all boiled. Had it been boiling? Yes, it must have been, a cup of tea is just the thing, warm you up on a cold day, yes. And two cups already set out, bone china, Willow Pattern, from the second cupboard, not chipped or cracked, these. Yes, because she is coming today! Yes, two cups set out. Best leave the tea for now. She'll be here any minute.

Is the heating on? It might get chilly, yes, because it's always chilly this time of year, even at night; going to bed at ten, always cold. The radiator feels cold... and only on four, that's too low, far too low, in this kind of weather. It should be on six, there we go, feels much warmer now, that's it. She would only mention the cold, and oh, it would be shameful to be sitting in a cold house with the radiators on four! That would ruin her visit, oh it would, and she would think the heating was broken, but it never was.

Only rubbish on television again, probably, usually was, full of nonsense. The blasted remote never works either, that's how bad it's all getting, these days, even the remotes aren't working. Nothing working, all these buttons and none of them work, it's a disgrace is what it is, a disgrace! Best leave the television, then... besides, she'll be here any minute, and she wouldn't want the

television blaring out music and all these foreign programmes, all there is on a Sunday. She wouldn't want that.

Any minute. What's the time now? She might miss the bus, if she's coming. Oh, that dratted clock, faulty thing just wouldn't work, would it, all of yesterday afternoon, had to take it down before going to bed. The batteries must have run out, so they had to be thrown away. They should make batteries that last, yes, all this technology around, and batteries don't even work for five minutes. But the clock's working now – that's not the time, though, is it? It's almost time for elevenses, yes it must be. New batteries, always having to replace them, have to scrounge around for them. Still, the clock's working now.

That tea must be ready by now. Ah, the kettle needs to boil again. Where are the biscuits, that'd be nice, to go with tea. Where's the tin... what's it doing in there? That's the wrong cupboard, doesn't belong in there. Someone put it in the wrong place. Maybe she forgot where it goes, last time. Ought to say, really. But no need to trouble her. There's no need to tell her about it.

Just have a little sit down, nice cup of tea and a few digestives, and wait. The post is late. Ah, and she's on her way as well. She said so, didn't she, yesterday, she said she was coming early today. Should leave the biscuits out, then. She might want a biscuit. There's no chocolate ones, though, and they're her favourite. Should get some in, really. When's the man coming, he'd get them. He's not been in a while, he must be

busy. Best not to disturb him, then. She would have to make do, yes, and no point in complaining, not if he's busy.

It's getting dark now, time's getting on. Needs some light in here, really, maybe the curtains should be open. Don't want to let the cold in though, just open them a little. That's better... Hah, and look at that! People out there with shorts on, as if it's summer! They'll catch their deaths, weather like this. That's how Ethel went, caught her death, she did. But that's a long time ago, now.

Time's getting on. Almost lunchtime. Should see what's in the kitchen, there's still some bread left, yes, because it was tomato soup yesterday, so there's still some bread left. Maybe some cheese to go with it. Although, don't want to use it all up, no, got to save some. She might want a sandwich, and she's partial to cheese; only the mild stuff, mind. Better save it, till she gets here. She'll be here any minute.

# **Walking the Path That's Given**

*December 2007*

I was scared to go to college. I am sure that most people are, although likely not with such an acute sense of fear as I carried during that bemusing interregnum between the final chapter of my secondary school life, and the start of a new, far weightier tome at higher education. It had been at school that the concept of college had been introduced to me, in some manner of advisory lesson on careers and so forth that means almost nothing in your fourteen-year-old perspective. It was the place where *young adults* went, to build up a career and settle down into a grown-up life. There, without comprehension, is the start of the terror.

In primary school, I had produced a crudely-drawn picture of myself as a golfer, labelled with the assertion that I would one day grow up to become one. It was a faintly ridiculous statement (in hindsight, at least, which is really the only time *any* statement becomes ridiculous) as the closest to professional golfing I had thus far come was a few rounds of Crazy Golf whenever we visited Auntie Sylvia and Uncle Clive down in Bournemouth. A strange goal, with that in mind, though in itself certainly not a lamentable aspiration. It was a solid fact at that moment, in my seven-year-old mind, that the future would present... golfing.

A flash forward is perhaps in order, to confirm that a 9-iron-laden future had not materialized. Instead, I had shifted from outdoor pursuits to more cerebral activities, chief among which was a propensity for writing. Hardly anything worthy of the Booker Prize, as my scribblings essentially boiled down to an evolution

from the adventures of talking animals to the adventures of those same talking animals, now joined by a variety of guns and spaceships, as I veered ever closer to my teen years. A world away from my innocuous golfing prediction, but at least a natural arc through the years. Secondary school brought insecurity and depression that caused a writer's drought not lifted until my college years... but I'm getting ahead of myself. The turning point here is the introduction to secondary school education. And the terror.

I had been warned about 'big boy school', and I had come to view the place as an assortment of cut-throat pirates rounding up the newbies to be thrown to the sharks. The analogy was not entirely accurate; the older kids merely sufficed by dropping and crushing a daddy longlegs down my friend's back on the first day of school, and after that, bullying and stone-throwing. A faux-dystopian view appears to be emerging here, which is *not* accurate at all, but the manifold moments of camaraderie and sneaking out of grounds for fish and chips are generally lost amongst those occasions of fear and anxiety. Good can only be defined by the actions of evil, just as school is validated by hair-pulling and name-calling. It was, in summary, a big change, and one I am not entirely sure I adjusted to. The periphery was the ideal place to be during those years, and it was there I remained.

A common conception of school is that the whole thing is character building, which is certainly true. It defines you through trial and tribulation, and allows you

the experience of a microcosmic version of the real world you will shortly be stepping into. Unfortunately, it is only character building if overcome; if not, it presents defects and worries that are subsequently carried across to that real world. Hence; I was scared to go to college. The experience of secondary school had built me a shy character, and the prospect not only of leaving my friends behind, but also of meeting a large group of entirely new and strange people in an entirely new and strange environment, was not something with which I could easily cope.

So I bailed. Excuses were made for the following two years to dodge having to situate myself in a group of people I hadn't met. The fear was an almost intangible dread coupled with visions of uncertain futures. The feeling is raw and basic: the idea that the solid, immovable tree you call your home today will be so much wet firewood tomorrow. To cling to the branches of the life you know, rather than letting yourself drop, in freefall, into the forest, is so overbearingly *human* that it is almost impossible to shake. Moving from secondary school to college is moving into a new world; at the end of an arduous journey, the path at your back is not quite as wild and unknown as it appeared at the other end, yet the one in front is more dangerous still. But the change occurs anyway, after excuses and cowardice, and the path is endured, and ultimately traversed.

Two years at college seemed to go by in an instant: I made friends, my teachers' enthusiasm for their subjects energised my own studies, and the whole

experience was just that: an experience, and one that would not be lamented at the end of the path. The journey had been worthwhile, despite its deviations and false starts, as all journeys tend to be, in one way or another. Cards and gifts and hugs were merrily exchanged at the end of the final term, with the looming prospect of exams now a few yards of roadworks in the rear-view mirror. It was a genuinely happy time, albeit one punctuated with bittersweet goodbyes, and it was something that neatly resolved all my fears about heading out to college; the jaunty little bow set on top of a glitter-daubed Christmas parcel. Hindsight tapped me on the shoulder once again, and pointed out how ridiculous my assumptions had been, that lifetime ago. Of course, a couple of months later, I found myself enrolled and ready to begin university. Which was *terrifying*.

# **Osabu and the Whale, Part Two: The Initiation**

*21<sup>st</sup> March, 2010*

*Lizzie with an open heart,  
Laura in an absent dream,  
One content, one sick in part;  
One warbling for the mere bright day's delight,  
One longing for the night.*

—Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market*

Osabu opened her eyes. She was in a swoon, her whole body tingling from the passage of the sea-water over it. But she was warm, though droplets still clung to her skin, and the space around her seemed bathed in a rich, golden light. Osabu stood with a wide and solid stance, and moved towards the unknown source of that honey-coloured glow. The floor beneath her was wet, and her toes sank into its softness as she padded through the chamber.

The light became so bright that Osabu had to shield her eyes from the glare, but she continued on, deeper into the belly of the whale-cow.

Finally, the chamber broadened, like the curved throat of a drinking-vase giving way to the vessel. A great, white tube ran along the ceiling. The glistening walls of the chamber were expanding and contracting in a slow, steady rhythm, and Osabu felt entranced by their careful undulations.

The girl's eyes, however, were drawn to the end of the chamber. There was a woman, her legs tucked under her, resting on her wide hips. She was beautiful,

with violet tresses flowing over her bare shoulders, and a smile like the opening of a flower to the sun. Osabu was hesitant to approach, but was compelled to move forwards, out of the dark confusion that lay beyond the mouth of the whale.

‘I don’t mean to disturb you, My Lady,’ Osabu said. The woman turned to her with sleepy eyes the colour of Ellha’s hair.

‘But you do,’ the woman said. ‘Only a mindful girl would willingly enter this place.’ She bade Osabu sit and cupped her hands under the tube fixed to the ceiling. After a moment, she returned to her guest with golden liquid swimming in the cove of her palms. ‘Drink,’ she said, and Osabu crawled closer. She stuck out her tongue and tentatively lapped at the liquid as a cat would, but she felt no shame from doing so. The liquid tasted sweet, but the woman did not refill her palms.

‘Thank-you,’ Osabu said.

‘No thanks are needed. The whale provides my sustenance, and I in turn sustain you. The whale is happy to feed me, and I love that which caresses me.’

‘I didn’t know people lived inside of whales,’ Osabu said. ‘Ellha will think I’ve got seawater sloshing in my head.’

‘You came here to prove your friend wrong.’ The woman was asking a question—and yet she did not voice it as a question. ‘Do the others of your homeland share her opinions?’

‘The aldermen sit in their huts and never leave, except for their banquets.’

‘This is your proving ground, little one; under the backbone of the whale.’ She gestured languorously upwards, to the dripping tube, then stood. ‘For now, I will retire. You must also rest.’

Osabu approached the woman tentatively. ‘Out here?’

‘For now, little one,’ the woman replied, and placed her hands on Osabu’s hips, gently stopping her in her tracks. The woman turned for the shadows in the corner of the chamber, and Osabu had to dampen a mad desire to run after her.

Left alone, Osabu’s eye was instantly drawn to the leaking backbone. She approached carefully, and stuck out her tongue to catch a single, golden droplet. It did not taste quite so sweet as before, and Osabu’s thirst was not sated. She caught more drops, one by one, but they fell too slowly. She stood on tip-toes and prodded the tube with a hand, hoping to widen the hairline break in its shell. Osabu tugged on the tube, and suddenly it fractured, cracking down the middle and loosing a spray of water that threw Osabu onto her backside.

The chamber shook and shuddered, the walls contracting in spasms, and Osabu was flung this way and that, like a rag doll. She scabbled for purchase, but the whale’s belly was too slick.

Osabu could only ride out the storm as it roiled within the whale, seeming to never end.

# For Lovers

*5<sup>th</sup> May, 2009*

**T**here was a bed, and it floated through forever.

Its frame had been carved from the wood of a eucalyptus by Aboriginal craftsmen, formed by bone-saws and blades of flint under a sky painted blood-red by the sun. Now its feet, hewn into the shape of the head of the Rainbow Serpent, trailed stardust in their wake. The stellar winds made the sheets billow and wave to the comets and the nebulas that passed by in the blink of a millennium. They were coarse, woven by the hands of five Celtic tribes, and dyed with the deep blue of the woad plant. Blue was the colour of infinity, and into it the bed swam.

There was a bed, and it was for lovers.

It was for Tristan and Isolde, in their three years of bliss; it was for Odysseus and Penelope, reunited by ten years at sea; it was for Antony and Cleopatra, whose courtly custom never grew stale; it was for Romeo and Juliet, who dreamed their dreams for one another, and made the dream real; and it was for lovers, running away.

Because there was a bed, and then there was not a bed.

There was not a bed in the places where it could be found. It was not between any four walls, nor balanced on any floor. It did not need to be locked away from prying eyes, nor was it stuck next door to restless sleepers. It kept itself away from friends, and relatives, and questions, and accusations.

There was a bed that kept itself free.

It floated on the wind, and the waves of pleasure, and the tides of love, because only some of it was real, and even that was but a dream. But it exists nonetheless, as all things exist, because people believe it exists. They believe, as they have for millennia upon millennia, that there is a bed that floats through forever, and all the world's lovers lay upon it. And because it is believed, it exists, and floats on, free to be dreamed.

There was a dream that was a bed, but dreams exist to be caught.

The bed floated through forever, but forever is a big place. So big, in fact, that it is not a place at all. And how can a thing that is a dream be caught in a place that is not a place? For this, there is no answer, only disappointment and despair; a despair that echoes through eternity, to strike into the hearts of the lovers. Tristan and Isolde see despair in the love potion that wears thin; Penelope despairs as Odysseus hangs her handmaids in the garden of their home; Cleopatra despairs at the Antony dying in her arms; and the despair that struck at Romeo and at Juliet is the greatest of all the despair in the world. The bed scatters its sheets, and the lovers tumble into the cold and the dark, and are flung apart.

There was a dream that was a bed, and it was awoken into the world.

But dreams do not fall to despair so easily, nor do they die upon waking. Their shadow remains, calling out from the soul of the mind, until they can be dreamed again. They are robust, and forever. The bed has sheets that can be torn, and flung far from sight, but the frame that holds the dream together is as solid as oak, and sturdy as the roots in the earth. It rises from the salt like the branches of the holy and profane Dogwood tree, immovable and everlasting as legend.

There was a bed that floated forever.

Because nothing lasts that can ever hope to remain, and yet that which is conjured into the world on a dreamer's whim becomes immortal. Tristan and Isolde, Odysseus and Penelope, Antony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, live forever. They reside among the words of ten thousand books, and a million voices sing their stories to a million more. And, more importantly than anything, they are together in eternity. The dream becomes real for those who dream it, and it is passed on, so that it can be dreamed over again, in the dark and in the light.

There is a bed, and it floats through forever.

# **The Prince and His Princess**

*8<sup>th</sup> February, 2010*

**O**n the day when the prince came to town, striding through the marketplace on his steed, he glimpsed a figure through the crowds: A woman of such beauty, the prince declared that she would be his.

He strode through the crowds and bowed his head. 'My Lady,' he said, 'I am Prince of all that you see, and I would have you for my Princess.'

The woman looked him up and down and said, 'You must be mistaken, My Lord, for I am only a seamstress, and not a princess at all.'

But the prince insisted upon her beauty. 'I would worship your body as my own,' he said.

'Oh,' the woman replied, 'you would have my body?'

'I think so,' the prince said. 'I think I would have your eyes, as bright as the sun.'

But the woman protested: 'I would be blinded.'

'I think I would have your arms, so pale and smooth,' the prince continued, to the woman's dismay.

'But then I would not be able to hold you away.'

'I think I would have your lips,' said the prince, 'so red and so full.'

'But then,' the woman countered, 'I would not be able to protest.'

'And I think I would have your heart, to see if it truly beats for me.'

'But then I would surely die.' The woman looked him up and down again, and said: 'In return, what if I were to have something of yours, My Lord?'

The prince smiled at the idea. 'Anything I can offer. What would you have?'

'I,' the woman said, 'would have your mind, so hungry and wanting.'

The prince took pause. 'But then I would not be able to think,' he said.

To which the woman smiled and replied: 'Then we shall live happily ever after.'

# The Ring

*22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2010*

*Those creatures jumped the barricades, and have  
headed for the sea.*

*She held the child and whispered with calm, calm:  
Belong.*

—Michael Stipe, 'Belong'

Elizabeth ducked out of the rain and under the overhang of the darkened bus shelter. She sat on the painted wooden bench and combed her fingers through her hair, shaking free the raindrops. The shelter creaked to the drum-beat of the rain.

'It's getting worse.'

The voice came from the corner, where the sodden wood breathed in weary groans; an old woman sat there, hunched, knitted gloves rolled over crooked hands, sunken skin clinging for dear life to her bones. 'The weather, I mean. Terrible these days.'

'Yeah,' Elizabeth said. 'It's a bastard. Um. Sorry. Where are you going?'

'Woodland. I'm from around the old school. We all went there, all the girls in the family. Is that a lily?'

Elizabeth idly flicked the petals of the sodden flower on her lapel. 'Carnation.'

'How was it?'

'I'm sorry?'

'The funeral.'

'Oh. Good. I mean, not good, but... you know. For a funeral...'

'The cemetery is on the other side of town.'

'I walked. Then the rain kicked in.'

'You won't catch me doing that, not at my age. My legs are playing up something rotten. Time was I ran about like a headless chicken.'

'Back when it were all fields?' Elizabeth muttered.

'Nemi made a den in Prop's Field. We'd duck out of class and run away—Annie with some boy or other, more often than not.'

'Huh.'

'She always was one for the lads. Helped her through Mam's troubles—she was the gentle sort; it's nice to have someone at your side, times like that.'

'Yeah. Mine doesn't do funerals.'

'He'll have to do one, at least, whoever he is,' she said.

'James. It's not like we're joined at the hip.'

'No, we never brooked any boys trying to split one of us three. My Edward stuck like glue, though. A real barnacle, he was.'

'He's in Europe somewhere. Doing his Amnesty thing. He got onto these websites—people e-mail in these stories of how some mystery guy brought coffee for the next forty people to walk into a Starbucks, or how the Japanese Mafia went around with food parcels after the Kobe earthquake. He loves that stuff.'

'Random acts of kindness. He sounds like a keeper.'

'He's in Europe. We can't get as much as a studio flat in Cardiff, the housing market's so up and down.'

'Mm, that was the war for us. Ups and downs. Fighter pilot, he was. Always on the move.'

‘Uh-huh.’

‘I saw hide nor hair of him for eighteen months in the last stretch. October, it was; he knocked on my door, and do you know, he got down and proposed right there on the doorstep. Traded in his Distinguished Flying Cross to buy the ring, the bloody silly fool. We married that winter.’

‘Marriage isn’t on the cards. No one needs it nowadays.’

The woman leaned forwards, the sharpness of her eyes sinking into hollows. ‘I’ve seen that look on your face a thousand times.’

‘What look?’

‘The one that asks the world for a reason to hate it. Nemi wore it often enough. You’re a Doubting Thomas, my girl.’

‘Yeah, well, love’s a lyric. Isn’t true, and it’s not real.’

‘Now you hold on, there. What makes you think that just because something isn’t true, it can’t be real? How many times have you watched the sun rise in the morning and considered it to be false? But where do you think we’d be if we ever, for one second, stopped believing in the sunrise?’

‘That’s just playing with words—’

‘Love is just a word, isn’t it? A lyric, isn’t that right? It’s whose ear you sing your song into, that’s what counts.’ She paused, carefully pulling off her gloves, one finger at a time. ‘But if you’re looking for something *true, or real...*’

She held out a bare, liver-spotted hand for Elizabeth, showing a band of burnished gold, decades old but well cared for, encircling her ring finger. ‘Sometimes you need to remind yourself what’s real.’

‘Hold on, you were talking about love—that’s just a ring. That’s not even words; it’s just... metal.’

‘Absolutely. This old thing is only filled with dust. You may as well take it off my hands.’ She began to tug the ring from around her finger, and despite Elizabeth’s protests, pressed it firmly into the girl’s hand.

‘Your husband sold his Cross for this—!’

‘Years back. That’s an old life, my girl, gone the way of the dodo. Everything has its time, and everything passes on. That’s what keeps the world spinning, you know: All these little things, moving from hand to hand. The love you take.’

‘We’re not even getting married!’

‘Then it’ll be something pretty to wear on your finger. It’s just a ring, after all.’

Elizabeth gazed at the ring for a long time. ‘Bus is late,’ she muttered finally.

‘There’ll be one along. There always is.’ Elizabeth stood, and turned her face to the rainstorm. The old woman’s eyes sparkled. ‘Mind how you go, now.’

‘It’s okay. I’m soaked already,’ Elizabeth answered, and disappeared into the rain.

**Osabu and the Whale,  
Part Three:  
The Return**

*5<sup>th</sup> April, 2010*

*Then joining hands to little hands  
Would bid them cling together,  
“For there is no friend like a sister,  
In calm or stormy weather,  
To cheer one on the tedious way,  
To fetch one if one goes astray,  
To lift one if one totters down,  
To strengthen whilst one stands”.*

—Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market*

**A**t long last, the whale became still, like the calming of a tempest, and Osabu lay in its belly, battered and worn. The chamber was dark; the golden light had long since faded, and the jagged shard of the broken backbone jutting out from the ceiling.

Osabu laid there for a long time, trapped in her newly-enclosed world, and wondered if she had enough air. The great beast had surely died, and its lungs would no longer be filled.

Presently, she fell asleep, and dreamed of the woman with the violet tresses. Osabu had wrecked her home, and the girl felt overwhelmingly sad for her.

Osabu awoke to a strange sound filling the cavernous chamber; a quiet, gentle scraping sound that gradually billowed in Osabu’s ears until the noise was unmistakable. Something was cutting through the very wall of the whale-cow’s belly. Osabu stood with her face raised to the ceiling, and a hole suddenly burst open, illuminating the chamber in alien sunlight. Osabu

shielded her eyes from the glare, and when she chanced to look again, the face of Ellha was gazing at her from above.

‘Osabu!’ the golden-haired girl cried. ‘What have you done? This whale-cow swallowed you whole, and now I find it washed to shore without a breath in its body!’ Ellha reached out a hand, and Osabu took it, allowing herself to be pulled up to the hole her friend had dug through the very flesh of the creature. They wriggled through the tunnel together, and the girls emerged on the outside as the sun was going down.

Osabu jumped down from the whale’s back and landed unsteadily on the beach wide-legged. The sand felt unfamiliar under her feet, as if she would have to relearn how to walk. She held out her hands, and caught Ellha as she hopped down, holding her about the waist. ‘Did you find out about the sky?’ Ellha asked.

‘No,’ Osabu said contentedly.

Already the aldermen were clambering over the dunes carrying picks and barrows, making for the lump of flesh lapped by the waves. Osabu reached out and slipped her hand into Ellha’s, turning towards the tree-line at the edge of the beach.

‘Come away,’ Osabu said, and led Ellha off by the hand.

# Zoo

*10<sup>th</sup> November, 2008*

*A 150-word workshop exercise composed at the University of Plymouth.*

**W**e pity them, poor little creatures. They stare at us sometimes, from behind the bars or the clear, reinforced plastic, with the wild streaming from their eyes. Mostly they ignore us, as if they don't even know they're being watched. They tramp to and fro in their compact worlds, prowling and chittering, singing and crying. They don't cry often, but when they press their faces up to the cage, we see the droop of their brows, and the hollowness in their gaze.

Sometimes, it's as if they don't notice us, no matter how much we stare. Between the bars we see them; tall and proud, short and fierce, living for themselves. They move in packs, cuddle their mates and groom their young, and we never see their eyes. These times, we don't feel pity; these times, they don't even seem to be locked away at all, but roaming into the deep world outside of the bars.

# The Machine

*18<sup>th</sup> February, 2009*

There's a machine on the wall and it has a face. It looks shifty, or sly; whichever emotion can best be conveyed by a semblance of wires and shiny plastic. It has a tongue that might be a bead, but really, it doesn't matter either way; no one's going to look at him—at it, the thing, it's an 'it'—they're not going to look and say

*How handsome you look with your big, green eyes and your tongue that might be a bead, you should be in Vogue,*

no. They're going to glance. Their eyes will slip over the machine's upturned, open face and on to find something more interesting. There's a mirror. Mirrors are always interesting, because they can pull faces or rearrange hair to look something sort-of a bit like that guy who's in that show. You know, that guy with the hair. Off of the show.

Mirror faces are never shifty or sly—unless they are, but that's okay because you want them to be. The machine isn't what you want it to be. You want blinking lights that make a *vworp vworp* sound all the way from the Seventies, and you want it to have legs—or wheels—or legs on wheels, and it could trundle around the place intoning things like DANGER CRITICAL SYSTEMS ERROR INITIATE COUNTDOWN and its blue eyes would turn red and you'd have to batter it with an axe....

Or you'd just sit and glance over it, and you wouldn't even pay it the slightest bit of attention because it's just a machine that looked out-dated when the ZX-81 was

around, and it's not a walking/wheeling dispenser of electronic death at all.

Except it kind of is. I mean, you've just read about its robotic power play—how it tried to shut down that global control network They're always banging on about in Hideo Kojima games, and that was real, wasn't it? It just happened; it's in your head, swimming around like a badly-executed metaphor of a fish. It has to be real, because it's got gills.

Although maybe it's not even plugged in.

# **An Accident on the Way Home**

*30<sup>th</sup> September, 2010*

**T**here was an accident while we were walking home. There wasn't much to see.

People compare being a guest at a wedding to playing a bit-part in the climax of someone else's love story. Something similar is also true of tragedies.

It was a busy road; one of the central strands connecting the A-road to the city proper, and a thoroughfare not only for vehicles but for foot traffic as well. People bustled to and fro, striding long-legged up the incline leading from the shopping centre to the crossing. Most waited for the green man; others dashed out into the gaps between cars, dodging death.

Whether he tried his luck in this manner, or whether he was simply standing in the wrong place at the wrong time, I don't know. We were walking in the opposite direction, and besides, the crowds congregating around the scene were too thick to penetrate. We stood and stared along with everyone in the vicinity, gawking over at the crossing like children standing on tip-toes to better see a circus act.

A car had stopped halfway across the crossing, and the passenger's side door was open. More than that, we couldn't see, and Rebecca was not inclined to linger anyway. It had been three days since Mr Richards had called her into his office to explain the circumstances of the so-called "cut-backs", and Rebecca was still sore about it. I had not helped, thinking of my own situation with the bank over dinner, and we had talked little on the walk back.

I felt that we should have said something then; some token to acknowledge the scene of shared tragedy. We stared for twenty or thirty seconds, and turned away when it became apparent that the initial excitement was over. We had, you could say, got what we came for.

We heard the man's last word.

We were too far away to hear anything of the conversation surely being conducted at the scene, but it was the man's voice that had alerted us to the incident in the first place. There had been no screech of brakes, nor one of those sickening, heart-stopping *thumps* that you anticipate immediately afterwards. The reaction had been more of a commotion; the act itself had been a quiet thing.

The man had yelled. The actual word, if it had been a word at all, was incomprehensible, but he had cried out nonetheless as he was struck. We heard nothing more afterwards, though of course we did not stay longer nor walk closer. Perhaps he had said something to a friend leaning over his broken bones, or whispered words of love into a receptive ear. Perhaps he said nothing at all, and his strangled cry, cut short, had indeed been his last utterance.

We heard nothing more of the accident, though I checked the newspapers for several days afterwards. We simply continued on our way home, and neither of us said a word.

# **Gimme Shelter**

## **or, The Road**

*28<sup>th</sup> April, 2010*

*You wear a thousand faces, tell me; tell me, which is you?*

—Scott Stapp & Mark Tremonti, 'A Thousand Faces'

It's two-hundred-ninety miles outside Modesto and the goddamn atropine has finally kicked in. The road stretches blue like a vein, bubbling with rolling machines—the dirty methadone clots in the blood of Highway 99. Jagger's speaking to me, pleading for shelter, but I still hear the sirens over the signal noise. 'We shudda brought fuckin' guns, man,' I say.

Roger says nothing, and *nothing* is all there is out here; the bulging belly of San Joaquin, big like you'd imagine God's to be. The flatfoot checkpoint is fifty kilos behind, but the grubby marks still show from where they'd bruised up the Buick (1953 Roadmaster Skylark, Series Seventy, electric blue, borrowed) before we hightailed. 'We shudda brought fuckin' *shotguns*.'

'Yeah,' Roger says, 'and how would that look, guns sitting on the backseat?'

I swing 'round and grin at the lady. 'Goddamn fine,' I say. She smiles back, the way alligators do.

She'd been hiking down the dirt track when I ordered Roger to pull over. I left him clutching the wheel and went back for her. Black as the ace of clubs, tall; legs down to her ankles, tits out past her nose, all that stuff. 'I must be dreamin',' I'd said.

'Or hallucinating,' she'd replied, and held up the 'peace' sign. 'How many fingers, chief?'

‘Ay, speaking of fingers, lemme show you a trick—’

She shook out her braided hair. A cube of pure brown sugar, she was. ‘I need a ride. Where you headed, chief?’

‘Goddamn *everywhere*. Joaquin for starters, then we’re rock-and-rollin’ over a million other places,’ I’d said.

‘Something’s rattling.’ Roger says.

I pluck a pear from the glovebox and slice it into quarts with my penknife. ‘Yeah. Me.’

‘Coming from the trunk, sounds like. Somewhere in back.’

‘Stop bangin’ on about the back, Roge! Quit your goddamn worrying or you’ll shake the whole shebang right off the road!’

The bloody fool’s hands only shake all the more. ‘I need my pills.’

‘Get a grip, will you!’

In the back, she starts to clap—slow *thwacks* of her palms, like meat on a slab. ‘And what the hell do you want?’ I shouted.

‘A lift to Joaquin.’

‘I already know that, you goddamn woman! Why’re you clapping back there?’

‘You turn on a dime,’ she says. ‘Do you worry sometimes that you’ve stopped being real?’

‘What the—’ I start, but my eyes are stinging. It’s all the smoke coming up from behind. Big rolls of it, galloping like horses over the Tehachapi jags. ‘Where’s my goddamn water?’

'You drank it,' Rodger says. *Do you think you will burn up*

'Stupid fool, that was a full goddamn bottle!' *or fade away*

'Well you drank it. About forty miles back.' *it's an easy trick all you've got to do*

'Uh—get some more! Pull in here!' *scrape Jimmy Dean's face off the wall* 'Huh—?' The storm is riding closer— *and wear it as your own*

'Shut your goddamn trap!'

The radio crackles with occasional pops of static. The highway *thrums* beneath the Buick's wheels.

'All right,' Roger says. 'I'll shut up.'

'And I haven't said a word for a hundred-forty miles,' the woman says from the back.

\* \* \* \*

I'd taken a leak after she jumped in back; a nice, quiet spot in the brush, far enough so's the engines were distant like birdsong.

She'd followed me.

'Come for a look-see?' I said.

*All the time.*

'Where did the car come from?'

'Buick. It's a Buick. Got it from a lawyer in Cali. Well, borrowed. Big trunk.'

'You don't have anything of your own.' She planted ebony fists on her hips. I zipped up. 'You're riding across America and there's no ground beneath your feet.'

She was beginning to rattle me. Her voice rebounded off the trees. I took out my penknife, thumb and forefinger, letting it dangle over the brown clay. 'Sure there is,' I said, and let it drop into the earth with a *shunk*.

'You're a pretender. Nothing you own is yours; you just gave money for it. Even your words are borrowed.'

'You should be seen, not heard.'

'You hear voices, don't you? *In your head*.

*Again and again.*

*Every angle.*

*Over*

*and over.*

Thousands of them, screaming for a mouth. Doesn't that drive you insane?'

I asked if she was for real.

'Would it help?' she said.

I shrugged, and tugged the knife from out of the clay. The blade was sweating with crystals of brown dirt, which fell one by one to the bruise-brown ground.

\* \* \* \*

There's another checkpoint before Modesto. 'There's still something rattling,' Rodger says. I tell him to shut up. The girl's slumped on the backseat, eyes closed, head still on her shoulders.

My arms hurt. Must be all that atropine. My veins are pulsing like there's goddamn cockroaches crawling under my skin.

A hundred miles to go. And a thousand miles behind;  
all the bumps in the road we've driven over, like a trail  
of blood bubbling from the trunk.

# Into the Night Sky

*14<sup>th</sup> December, 2007*

*'There is no greater misery than to recall, with bitter regret, a day when you were happy'.*

—paraphrased from Dante's *Inferno*

It was a little, tumbledown shack jutting from a jagged outcropping close to land's end. The surf battered a bitter wash of grimy seawater against the slime-ridden rocks, and cast salt-smoothed pebbles all about the pitted, desolate beach. Each inflowing tide launched its spray against the hut's worn boards, causing them to creak and swell. Salt droplets dribbled between the slats, seeking sanctuary from the chill outside.

Theodore, too, had been washed up inside the shack, and had called it home now for, oh, so long. A few months, at least, perhaps closer to a round year. He couldn't accurately know, but regardless never bothered himself to find out. After all, what need was there for timekeeping, out here, at the ocean's border? He could, he supposed, have divined his position in time from the sun and the moon, or however the whole thing worked. Theodore had never much involved himself with such arcanery, and what was the use, what with clocks and watches so readily available. Of course, that was all before... well, he hadn't managed to grab his watch back then, had he, damn fool that he was.

Theodore sat back in his creaking, wooden chair, straining the lengths of thin, knotted rope he had salvaged from the sand to bind the chair together.

Resting his head on the hollow pole strapped across the chair's back at head height, Theodore caught a sliver of starlight, glimmering through a knothole in the patched roof. He watched it until it passed out of sight, or until his eyes grew heavy and lent the night its darkness. His head lolled, his lank hair falling about his tired face, and he dropped into a slumber.

\* \* \* \*

'Are they closed?' he asked, smiling.

'Yes!'

'Promise?'

Annie slapped at him playfully, but Theo deftly dodged her blindly flailing palm and grasped her wrist lightly in his hand. '*I promise!*' she laughed. 'Get on with it!'

Theo smiled again, and steered her steadily across the capacious room. 'On three', he said.

'This had better be worth it', Annie grumbled with a grin, as Theo began counting with careful languor. She tapped a slipper-clad foot impatiently into the thick carpet.

Chuckling, Theo clasped Annie's shoulders from behind, angling her to face the bed. 'Open your eyes', he said—after an *age*—and Annie's lids sprang open. There was silence for a moment, and Annie remained very still. Suddenly, she shrieked out a gasp and jerked forwards, before spinning on the spot and jumping into

Theo's arms, nearly toppling the both of them to the floor.

'It's beautiful! Oh, it's *beautiful*, Theo, thank you!' she wailed, squeezing him so tightly around the middle all Theo could do was weather the embrace. He placed a kiss on her forehead, wrinkled up in delight, and she released him. Amid further squeals of joy, Annie plucked the dress from the bed and twirled about with it clasped to her bosom, testing its size, her face glowing. Letting the fine silk glide through her quivering fingers, she exclaimed, 'Oh, I love it!'

'Will you wear it, next month?' Theo asked, his smile slipping into earnest sincerity as she spun on her heel, the dress gliding through the air. She spun to face him.

'Yes! Oh, yes, of course I will', she cried, and flung herself at Theo again, still holding tight to the gown. 'Our wedding dress', she breathed, and fixed her big, hazel eyes on his.

'I love you', she said, simply.

Theo, who could never keep friends and who had ducked fearfully out of college, gazed back at her and said, 'I love you, too'.

\* \* \* \*

It was dark as pitch when Theodore awoke, starting with a cough and almost tumbling out of his groaning chair. He ran a hand over his sleep-lined face, then through his greasy hair, tugging it from his eyes. He no longer took the time to walk that short distance down

to the rock pool and wash the grime from his face: that futile act had been abandoned within a week or so.

Instead, he would simply sit in his little wooden chair, often having dragged it outside to his makeshift porch, and regard the ebb and flow of the ocean.

It humbled him, every time he gazed upon its turbulent surface, spread vast across the face of the world. It was so... big, so much more than him, that it made him feel even more isolate than usual. It was a feeling he had become used to during his solitude. Humility came easily, washing over his shore, inexorably eroding the rock that stood firm but to ultimately relent to nature.

It was the way of the sea, to erode that which it covered.

\* \* \* \*

They had married in a small church on a hill at the top of their road. It had been a very small, almost private, ceremony, and they had become previously acquainted with the vicar. They had both attended several of his sermons, though neither of them was devoutly religious. Oh, they had *faith*, they agreed, sure enough, but not *religion*. It was an odd thing, to realize that you had become a person who had, somewhere along the line, let go of God's hand, and had never quite recovered the touch. The vicar accepted them regardless, and they were sure to give generously to collections, and donated tins of peas and potatoes and

so forth in the harvest festivities that rolled around in the month following their wedding.

For Theo and Annie, the church was a sort of surrogate family, or, more approximately, a community of friends they were otherwise left lacking. The concept of heading out into the world with the express purpose of *making friends* was one that had eluded them both, just as religion had somehow passed them by without so much as a wave. But making friends, the act of it, was a concept neither, for reasons they similarly could not sufficiently explain, could entirely grasp.

It didn't matter, though, not then. They had each other, and, as anyone will tell you, this is all they needed.

\* \* \* \*

The sun went down. Its dying light fled Theodore's weary form, sagged against his abbreviated porch, as he slept fitfully by the edge of the falling tide.

\* \* \* \*

It had been a strange meeting. It had not taken place at a bar, or at the wedding of a distant relative-removed-to-the-*n*th degree, or in happenstance while emerging from the grocer's, or however two people went about meeting. Rather, they had merely seemed to gravitate towards one another, orbiting in ever decreasing circles like planets turning inward to their expanding sun.

Their home town was small, a tiny community of law-abiding folk and the odd eccentric often found chatting happily away to itself while trotting back and forth along the promenade. Neither Theo nor Annie had fit particularly well, and theirs had been a formative relationship built on the strange feeling of *déjà vu*; as if the woolly-hatted girl one had been sat a couple of rows back from on the 22C to Acksby was the very same who had been agonizing over which tin of soup (Vegetable, Serves One) to buy while you selected your own (an ill-advised Scotch Broth, For One).

Neither could even pin-point the moment they had fallen into partnership. Somehow, their planets had aligned at a bay side café with a shortage of tables, where they had ended up trading pleasantries over two full English's.

Even that hadn't strictly been the start of it, not if the chance meeting in the library the following week was taken into account. They had bumped into one another, each embarrassedly half-remembering the other, in the English Literature section, where Annie had tried to explain Emily Brontë over Theo's assertions towards the anti-heroics of Odysseus.

Their meetings had become more frequent after that, as petals shyly bloom on a sun-starved bud, and their encounters had slowly, carefully, blossomed into... well, marriage.

They had found happiness under the sun.

\* \* \* \*

Theodore had tried to build a fire, and had almost burned down his hut, despite the wetness of the wood – which gave some indication as to how out of control the fire had become.

Naturally, he had forgone any further attempts, contenting himself with lying on the beach to bask in the sun-warmed sand, though he had the unfortunate tendency to keep waking spitting mouthfuls of the stuff. Sometimes he didn't even bother making the infinitesimal trek to the beach, instead sleeping on the hard, chilly boards inside the hut. It so often suited his mood.

\* \* \* \*

Theo had made a friend, shortly before the first meeting (that he could recall) with Annie.

James. Good old James.

He had been Theo's foil, in a way: gregarious and popular, he had eventually given up on trying to introduce Theo to his manifold friends, for Theo often made some excuse to miss a second meeting, and did little to prolong any acquaintance into full friendship.

'You're a social black hole', James had noted, on more than one occasion.

'That'd be you, surely', Theo had replied, with a smirk. 'You're the one who draws these people in. Nothing can escape you and your ability to buy it a drink and get it talking about its life'.

James had grinned. ‘Yeah, sounds like me. Okay, not a black hole, then. You’re a star—and no, I don’t mean you twinkle away all shiny up in the sky, yeah,’ he paused. ‘No, you’ll get all old and grey, and implode’.

‘You mean a white dwarf. If you’re going to insult my social skills, at least get your astrophysics right’, Theo had laughed, and James had cuffed him on the arm before hopping up to get another drink and flirt quite shamelessly with the barmaid. Theo liked James because, despite these comments, he never pressed Theo to reveal anything about himself that Theo wasn’t prepared to share. Nor did he try to change his ways, though he often voiced the hope that Theo *would* change, one day.

‘Not in your lifetime, buddy!’ Theo had responded, and James had laughed and *tut-tutted* and shook his head.

He had, in fact, been remarkably prescient.

\* \* \* \*

Theodore remembered him, sometimes, when he dropped his guard in quiet moments—and of those, there were many. It was hard to forget him, honestly; you couldn’t forget his smile, that big, brash thing spreading hugely across his face, taking in all of life with a wink.

He cried, often. He no longer felt ashamed about doing so.

\* \* \* \*

He recalled the smell, most of all. His hands stunk of a tinny, iron scent, no matter how much he scrubbed at them with the stained, shrinking bar of soap. It made him gag and retch, but even the smell of his bile, the sight of its dribbled splatter over the tiles, mingled with tears and ice-cold water and fear, could not overcome that original, unearthly stench.

\* \* \* \*

Theodore saw boats from time to time, passing across the shimmering horizon like clouds across the sun. His first impulse was often to shout out, to wave his arms high above his head, to catch their attention and be taken from this place like a castaway saved from his shipwreck island.

But that was patently ridiculous. He wasn't a castaway. He didn't need saving.

He mused on what the ships were doing, out there on the ocean. Perhaps they were ferries, or cruise liners, taking passengers sailing through the beauty of the world at their leisure, holed up in their stuffy cabins, peering out of smeared portholes. Or maybe they were cargo ships, transporting crates of who-knew-what to distant shores. Theodore had no idea what kind of goods were traded by sea nowadays: the only image he had was of fine silks, and wool from Kashmir, handled

by rich trade barons and sped through the Indies by herds of sweating slaves.

A little out-dated, he imagined.

So he sat and watched the boats passing by, and let his mind wander across the exotic continents, to far-off places he would never reach, that he was not a part of. It comforted him, in a way.

\* \* \* \*

He had never shouted at Annie, no matter what had occurred; had never raised his voice. That was important, Theo knew. He recalled his grandmother, sitting alone in a house full of ornaments from all over the world, telling him about the Rule.

'It's the Rule, you know. Important, very important, is the Rule. Because no one likes to be shouted at, no, not at all. Makes you feel small and frightened, doesn't it? It does, and no one likes that. And it hurts you, too, down in your throat, makes you sick. And you don't want to get sick now, do you?'

'No, granna', Theo had mumbled, his little blue dinosaur clutched in pudgy fingers.

'No, no you don't want to get sick. So there's no shouting, never shouting. That's only for them who don't care about getting sick, and who don't care what happens to them when they do. Lonely sort of a person, one who gets sick from shouting'.

It had been a few months after her husband had disappeared, as Theo was told in later years. He had

disappeared, and had never been seen again. He had probably been very sick.

Theo had listened carefully, sat up on his grandmother's knee, studying the lines around the hollows of her eyes, and he had never shouted, after that. It was the Rule.

You must never shout, no matter what. Better to vanish, than that.

\* \* \* \*

Theodore slept under the star-lit sky, dreaming of blue dinosaurs lost in dusty attics, and men who vanished from the face of the world. Above him, the stars hid themselves behind roils of cloud, vanishing gradually from sight.

**(Fragment)**

# **A Conversation with My Father**

*5<sup>th</sup> October, 2009*

‘Why are you calling?’ The buzz of conversation, that muffled susurrus seeping through the plaster, almost douses the hum in your ear, but not quite. The long, loud silence stretches from a question asked to an answer not yet given.

The flow changes; the rivulet is diverted. ‘How’s the party going? Did old Ralph turn up?’

‘Yeah, he’s here.’ The shift brings out the maliciousness in you. ‘And so’s Jonathan.’

The hum picks up again, rising through the jumble of chatter, the report of party poppers; the punctuation of forced laughter. Faint fumes from the paint dried onto the receiver infiltrate your nostrils, trying to tug your attention away from the incessant hum.

‘...Oh,’ he says.

‘Yeah. Why are you calling?’

‘Look – can we – can you—? Are you on your own?’

*For the past seven years* isn’t what you reply with. Even as much as a year ago, he would have hung up on that kind of comment. ‘Uh-huh. They’re all in the lounge.’

‘Right. Good.’ You can imagine him flicking the bridge of his squashed-up nose with a forefinger, as he tended to do whenever he was building up to some unpleasant revelation or other. Your mum must have known it well. ‘We need to talk,’ he says, a tired sigh snorting its way out of his nose and along the phone-line.

You nod, invisible behind the receiver, but say, ‘We are talking.’

‘About – well, it’s to do with S—to do with your mother, really. And you. I need – I mean, you’re almost twenty now,’ *Three months ago*, ‘so it’s, uh, I think, maybe, it might be about time we, uh, we talked—’

You let out a breath and snug the phone between your shoulder and your ear. The party was clearly about to wait its turn. ‘What about?’ You hope, for a second, that he picks up on your weary tone. A fleeting second.

‘I, uh – I...’ he says, and the hum manages to squeeze in a good twenty or thirty seconds before he interrupts. ‘I’m getting married.’

‘Oh,’ you say.

\* \* \* \*

Ralph and Frankie are already sporting ruddy complexions and unfocused, watery eyes when you re-enter the lounge. The drinks cabinet has been opened and judicially liberated of its holdings, and the air smells of several kinds of burning. Mum jerks upwards from the table – Jonathan remains seated – and fixes a beaming smile in your direction. ‘Who was that on the phone, sweetie?’

Caught in the spotlight, it’s always the same; you start spluttering. ‘Nothing – no one – wasn’t anyone – just, uh, just something – nobody... really...’ You try to shrug it off, and let your gaze swivel across the room, looking for someone to pin itself to. Auntie Joyce, squinting at a slip of a joke from a cracker; Uncle John, trying to explain why his two nephews shouldn’t know the words

to *Norwegian Wood*, that they are of the wrong generation, they weren't *there* and it *just bloody shouldn't be allowed*; and an arranged assortment of brothers, cousins, in-laws and faces you couldn't pin a name to on a family tree.

The only thing you're sure of is that there's no one from Dad's side sitting around the table. No cross-contamination, please, keep inside the lines.

'Anyone we know?' Frankie pipes up, an amalgam of gin, tonic and an unknown third party sloshing around his thumb-smudged wine glass. He beams, too. You're getting sliced up by those beams.

'Uh – not really...' you mumble, but now it seems as if the whole room is gravitating towards your situation, their gazes galvanized by your awkward silence. The air hangs heavy mostly with stale tobacco smoke from various soggy roll-ups, but a wisp of expectation is drifting your way.

'Come on, who was it?' mum asks.

'Mum – it was – look, can you sit down a minute—?'

'—secretive, ain't he?'

'Perhaps you *should* sit down, Sarah—'

'—all the same with these youngsters—'

'Whazzat? Who's got a phone...?'

'—back in my day—'

'It's Dad. He's getting married.'

The silence is deafening. You could have served it up with the stuffing. The spotlights fade, lowering down to the floor or otherwise averting themselves to another point of the room. Jonathan radiates the feeling of

wanting to be a million miles away, and for a second you wish he was. Mum still stares, except the beam is refracted, dulled. Now she's just staring.

'Oh,' she says.

# Boy

*4<sup>th</sup> October, 2007*

**B**oy, there are things you must know. There are things you just *have* to do in this world.

You've got to think, that's just common sense; keep your eyes open, take all of life in; you've got to walk with impunity; you've got to make yourself heard above the crowd; food, definitely, the finest kind, that's important; you must show your face, don't be afraid of that; you need an education, and a good one; make friends to last, though worthy friends, mind, ones that treat you well, and whom you treat just as well in kind; keep a steady gaze, look them in the eye, shows you're worth their trust; you have to be diligent in your work; but be creative, and original; and never be shy over expressing your ideas; though, don't let anyone take the credit for them, so, you know, don't express them *too* much; be a good sportsman, son, just like your old dad was; you'll get injured, 'course you will, happens to everyone, you've just got to accept it and move on; don't be bullied, don't be afraid to stand your ground when you're in the right; but be careful not to pick a fight, you don't want to be injured, though it happens to us all, don't worry about it too much; oh, and be assertive, but never brash or arrogant; especially not in front of girls, it doesn't go down well (trust me on that); be courteous, but never shy... or did I already tell you that? Well, it goes double for girls; don't skimp on them, offer them the finest gifts; though respect their independence, you know, your generation has *equality* and everything to deal with now; but choose a good girl, like I did – pick a *wonderful* girl, son, you won't ever go

wrong; stand by her, keep each other honest, stand up for her if you need to; but be careful, don't get hurt, son – not that you will, just thought I'd mention it; don't buy a fast car, buy a reliable one, but of course a good turn of speed isn't a *bad* thing; oh, but you'll need a good job for a good car, so, you know, keep it up at school and college and university and everything; get good money, and a future, that's important; make yourself a career; but don't neglect your family, they must always, *always* come first; it's probably old-fashioned, but raise an heir, I wouldn't want the family name to die out, son, so do me proud with a grandson; raise him as well as you can, he'll grow up just fine; teach him all about the world, but give him his independence, son, you don't want to stifle him; oh, and make sure you arrange things like pensions and life insurance early, because you never know, never know what might happen, not that you want to be thinking about that sort of thing, because it's all years away; but above all, boy, of all of my advice, this is the most important thing you need to know: *be happy*. Just live your life, happy as you can be, until... well, you know. Until you retire and such.

I hope you take heed, boy... I know my advice isn't much, but it's all I can give. The rest is up to you.

Although perhaps I'd better hand you back to the nurse. Your mother hasn't spoken to you yet, after all.

# Master of Two Worlds

*21<sup>st</sup> March, 2010*

The HMS *Belfore* was hijacked three days out from the Plymouth docks. The pirates had no conception of our intentions, nor any consideration. We were pitched into the longboats and cast adrift on the North Atlantic, thousands of miles out from the continental shelf, with a storm rolling in on the horizon.

‘Lucky they only took our things,’ Morson said, hugging Lucille close.

It was the ocean that took more. Seven of us died before we reached the Chesapeake Bay. That took the heart from our mission.

When I committed James’s body to the ocean, I believe that took the soul as well.

We reached the Bay that Spring. The tempest passed over us, to broil on around the curvature of the earth, howling back on itself with ever-mightier swells of its lungs. The waters of the Bay still swam with the ghosts of ships sunk in the name of the Revolutionary war years before. Any one of us could simply have stepped from our boats and joined the floating souls in certain oblivion—but I came to shore all the same, as James would have wanted.

It was eight days before an envoy from Yorktown approached our burgeoning camp, and not long after that the natives began to arrive in twos and threes, gradually ingratiating themselves and offering food and shelter in abundance. It was this that returned the dream to me: I saw the wheels of Unitarianism turning

before my eyes. It was the Pantisocracy in effect. James would have been proud.

He came from a proud family; I knew this from our years growing up, when we first dreamed of the crossing. Every single member of his clan attended the day James received his Doctorate, and even raised a toast to my graduation, even though a Masters pales in comparison.

The natives came to revere us. We bestowed them with industry, expediting their farming and building skills, and ultimately consenting to breed with them.

‘They think of us like gods,’ Morson said to me once, as we stood on the bluff overlooking our village. I reminded him that gods are easily forgotten, and subsisted only on the genuflection of lesser beings.

I recalled walking with James across the headland of our home, shortly before setting sail. ‘The most important thing to decide,’ he told me, ‘is what shoes to wear for the journey. Sandals wear and moccasins wane. Boots are strong. A good sole is the strongest foundation.’ He had been proud of that turn of phrase.

The Pantisocracy was challenged, in time. Neighbours from Williamsburg set a haystack alight, which, according to the natives, was akin to a warning shot. They were demanding tribute, and we had nothing to give; our supplies were feeding two tribes, and winter was coming. Morson suggested gathering weapons, but I refused to hear of it, and I saw the gratitude in Lucille’s eyes.

That night, I sat on the shore until the sun sank below the horizon in a flash of green lightning. I was reminded of that day on the headland, with James. I had picked up a stick of driftwood, and scratched our names into the sand: James Manor and Robert Eldritch. 'We write our names in the sand; and then the waves roll in and wash them away.'

I called the village to order in the morning. I carried back two large planks from a shipwreck, which I laid out in the main square. We could tribute neither food nor money: The Pantisocracy was not built from such things.

James had taken the stick from me, and had driven it deep into the sand. 'Then we write our names in concrete,' he had answered. 'We carve them from stone, and burn them out of the grasslands. We etch them a thousand times over into the face of the planet, and then a thousand more. We send up our names in fireworks to the moon.'

And so I walked the plain between the two villages, a wooden plank under each arm, and I hoped that my decision had been well founded. I knew that it was not the tribute Williamsburg wanted, but I hoped it would communicate something. They may not have accepted it, and may have set our village to the torch: We can never know what repercussions our actions may cause—storm-clouds form out of droplets rising from a million spots on the Earth's surface, which never fall back to that same point of origin. All we can do is decide upon each destination as the path presents itself. We can only choose to follow the bliss that finds us. My

path led me to Williamsburg. I shared my bliss with them.

I gave them our names.

Each of us carved our name into the wood until every man, woman and child was represented. The boards were cracked and worn, but I held them up against the oncoming storm, and they sheltered me. I did not return to Jamestown after handing over the tribute: Instead, I followed the path out into the plains.

I was, for the briefest moment, the master of two worlds. I have left both behind, just as my England lies impossibly far beyond the ocean. I walk the Earth, my boots leaving no prints, and the light of the Pantisocracy glows in James's name behind me.

# Until the End of the World

*10<sup>th</sup> March, 2010*

*And in the end,  
The love you take  
Is equal  
To the love you make.*

—Lennon & McCartney, 'The End'

*I had a dream, which was not all a dream...*

**S**o, you're dead.  
They say you see your life play out in front of  
your eyes before you die.

You can see *everything* from here.

The forty-fifth floor of Eldritch Manor, at the cross-section of Marlboro and Buckingham Streets. The city spreads itself from the window outwards, its towers burning like beacons. The inner walls shine like liquid diamond, frozen in mid-flow, and there's a two-hundred-and-fifty foot drop to the concrete. A long way down.

Or, a long way up. You can say it whichever way you like. Whichever fits your mouth.

The tremors don't bother you. It's a constant aftershock, the building shivers to its bones, and it's happening all around the world. It's a kind of silence, drowning out every other noise. The kind of silence you'd expect at Hiroshima, or Enewetak, or Bikini Atoll. Those kinds of silences.

It doesn't faze you. By now you know how hard the world can shake you.

Only Joe remains new to you. He's here, now, at your side, his hand in yours, as the earth dies screaming around you.

And the rains start to fall.

The flood will catch up to the city soon. The Eastern State is already submerged, they say—except there's no one left to say it. That's the trouble with globalization—it's like linking up every computer on earth. Viruses travel fast.

Rivers run down the great, wide windows; even the clouds are bursting their seams. A half-inch of glass separates you from the torrent, but it is solid. The threshold cannot be breached.

You could climb to the roof and catch the drops in your mouth as they fall, planting yourself in the eye of the rainstorm rising up from the concrete, returning to the air, and from there....

Joe stirs at your side. 'The end of the world,' he says. 'Who'd have thought we'd live to see it?'

'There'll be other worlds,' you say.

He reaffirms his grip on your hand. 'Who needs the world?'

You squeeze back.

Outside, the buildings begin to fall, like dominoes. Like rain. You don't see them go.

You think about the animals, and wonder if they will be okay. There will probably be a flock of doves

wheeling across the sunrise tomorrow. It seems like the right sort of image.

'You thinking what I'm thinking?' you ask.

'I think so,' he says. 'Fish. Battered, drowned in vinegar, tasting like newspaper.'

'With chips. Blissful. Bit late for a takeaway, I guess.'

Joe releases his hand, but only to draw you against him, laying his arm across your shoulders. You hug him back.

Together, you watch the darkness draw in. There is nothing to fear from the night. It is where dreams lay.

They say you see your life play out in front of your eyes before you die.

It does.

It's called living.

**TOM MENARY  
2010**