LOVE’S CURRICULUM

a novel by

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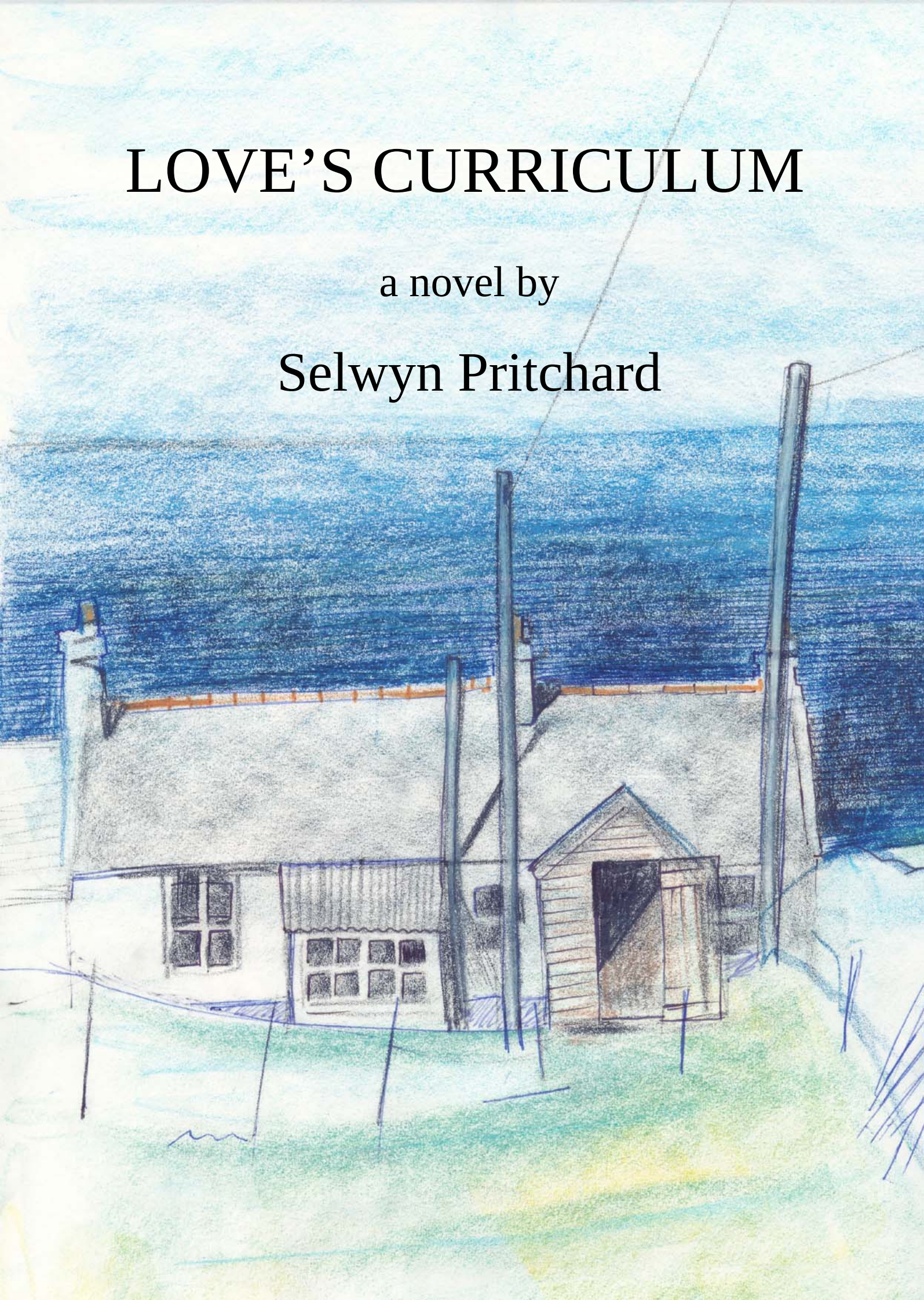

i.m. John Maclean

Cut the runes and be content with silence...

- George Mackay Brown

Thanks to Joe Cathcart for technical help.

At the edge of Europe, driving North, you enter ochre worlds
of peat bogs under a frieze of mountains and the sky expands.
The embanked road across the wilderness shelters a few farms,
squat amongst warped trees with black cattle immobile.
Often it is empty enough for fighter pilots to have target practice,
cracking open the clouds, ripping reality across
with their hurtling violence, so that you brake, knuckles white,
your senses seared, and the arrow already out of sight.

But if you get out, it is the totality of the silence they leave behind
that stuns urban ears: bubbles pop distinctly in the mouth
from the tilted drink; birds' wing beats seeth and the wind's energy
frets in the yellow grasses and white bog cotton. Perception
seems infinite and wonderfully cleansed.

Such moments always made the journey an escape,
an adventure, of the midnight sleeper North, and offset
the short, narrow couchette, stale air, continual aggravation
of doors slammed, porters' echoing yells on platforms
of sleeping cities on the downline North from the capital..
Somewhere short of the border I fell asleep to be surprised
by the attendant's knock, tea with soggy biscuits, the express
hauling itself up the pass in the Monadhliaths.
Shaving I might see snow banked in winter star glitter,
but that morning had been clear blue as we coasted down
to the end of the line, the train full of summer tourists.

I reversed off the train, parked, and strode the streets
to find some breakfast. There was always a choice
if you were going to drive to Scrabster for the ferry:
set off without breakfast and hope for no hold up, or settle

for the evening boat and eat. At seven most shops were shut.
In the wet, cobbled street, but in one a bank of TVs glittered
in a silent chat show from the capital I had left.

I stopped, stepped back: Ainslie! Her multiple image smiled
at me, her hair was tied back in a way I had not seen before
but she still tossed curls away childishly as always when nervous.
She seldom was. I had to watch. She was more used to asking
than answering questions. Her hands made eloquent
gestures, moulding the air to the other media queen's clear
admiration. I caught a glimpse of myself smiling in the street,
then they were gone and I was left transmitting
her name as if I might call her back...

Instead adverts blazed, then the weather map showed
frost overnight. I had made the right decision. Martial said:
'I fell into love like a cockroach into a basin.' I walked away.
At least I could fill my empty belly, take my time driving North,
stop and draw, have a bit of a paint, watch a few birds even,
but I never did. My brief television career had reinforced
military training: I was always in good time. I was not happy
until I had a clear view of the sea and what was on it,
then harbour and the ship's red funnels securely in sight.
It had only needed one experience of finishing that long drive
on the end of the quay watching the huge black doors closing
and the wake start to boil as the ship slid away to teach me punctuality.
I thought that they wouldn't do that to an islander.

There are thirteen lunar months, each with two 'spring' tides
when the pull of sun and moon combine, with a force which
flexes the Earth's crust and tides reach high-water. It was then,
when the sea lined up its flotsam, jetsam and detritus,

that I spent two or three days walking the island shores,
counting the corpses of birds, noting their species and if
they were killed by oil, repeating a survey done ten years before.

I trudged the coast with my notebook and drawing satchel,
sketching bones and feathers, shells and wrack, dead seals;
I took photographs sometimes, but often just stood about
by that fierce sea. I liked the solitude, the cobalts and viridians,
and wild whites of its smashing amongst the rocks,
against the cliffs. The fact was that the writ of the schedule
and timetable did not run against those elemental forces:
I took my wrist watch off when I got to the island.

And I could be anonymous, still finding myself too often
recognised from the TV show on which I had been
the noble savage, crassly honest, fecklessly rude,
artist-champion against the philistines. It was crap,
but made people argue about art, which was my hope,
and my agent, of course, urged me on because it sold work,
but I was aware people watched in hope I would fly off the handle,
and that Ainslie, who fronted the show, had more influence
than its producers on me. One claimed she was a witch.
My partner, who loved the glitz and glamour of that world,
aided and abetted her in arranging my weekly indignation.
They loved it, grinning and gesticulating off camera until I
Took a swing at a right-wing prat of a pompous novelist,
who also made a living out of being rude to people on TV.

That was the end of that...and my ‘marriage’; then my painting.
If I had not been famous for that in the first place,
I shouldn’t have had the chance to make a bloody fool of myself.
They had turned me into a post-modernist act, an oik,

an unauthentic role-player, an entertainer. I blew up. Art
is not entertainment, good-mannered, nor even kind.
Of course, it doubled my income and it was heresy not to cash in.
The painters who said I only did the show to hike my prices
explained my rejection of notoriety by the same motive.
I don't know why I expected any sympathy from anyone.
I became a recluse, returned to the studio, where I was sterile,
then at last came found the croft on the island to hell out of it
and agreed to count dead birds for the R.S.P.B. whenever I could.

So at last I parked behind one of the lines of vehicles on the wharf,
switched off and got out, zipping up my jacket, feeling as if
all my clothes had become thinner in the sharp, Northern air.
I jammed my hat on against the swirls and gusts in the harbour
and set off for the ticket-office feeling stiff-legged, pretending
not to be. The day before had been my forty-third birthday;
I was feeling my age and the islanders, who were great ones
for the gossip, were lined up drinking and munching in the caff
and milk bar, waiting for the ferry so they could get aboard
and start again They might not exchange a word for months
with neighbours in the dour work-a-day world of the fields
or the boats but chattered away like lost friends on the ferry.
Eric Dunbar, my friend who was Rector of the Academy,
theorised about the consequences of the brightest, year by year,
being cropped by universities and colleges in the South,
leaving the rest juggling wills, inheritances and fence posts
and marriages. Of course they had reason to complain about
people like me, who bought places and did them up for holidays,
so the young people couldn't afford a place when they married,
and many ended up lawn-mowing and maintaining empty homes.
Many thought it was a plot even if it was called 'the tourist industry.'

I collected my ticket, stood and watched artic terns flutter,
then bomb fish caught in the harbour. Above them skuas
angled, waiting for a tern to make a catch, set off trying
to swallow, twisting away, triggering an attack which ended
with the fish dropped and the artic skua catching it in mid-air.
Between the poles for ever the pattern had not varied:
I knew on what day the terns should arrive on their breeding site
each brief island summer. Another tern bobbed up and shrieked
success but the skuas were elsewhere: it was lucky, unlike the fish.

I was thinking of him as I walked, looking forward to seeing him
on the quay as I drove up or down the ramp, depending on the tide,
in one of his assortment of hats. I always sent him a postcard
in good time and we always had a couple of drinks before I set off
across the island to my place on the Western Atlantic Coast.

Amongst the heaped lobster creels I met an islander, humped
against the wind, new cap pulled low on his brick red face,
spatulate hands cupping a smoke. "How like are you today, boy?"
The fag wagged in his mouth. It took time always to adjust
to the sing-song, more Welsh than Scots, Norse not Gaelic
in its roots. "You've come to see your friend away then?"
I turned back. "You no ken who' sin the casket up there?"

I followed his look to the head of the first queue where a hearse
had been given pride of place. "It' sDunbar, the Rector, himself."
He saw my disbelief and almost smiled. I held on to myself.
"Ticker," he said, slapping his plastic mac. to confirm his words.

But you never went South before I arrived in summer; that was
the first grief, that you had, without a word. “Some joke.”

"No joke, boy. I heard it Sooth on the car radio, y'ken.
He and his wifey were pulled from the loch. Radio Scotland..."
He was proud that the island had a mention: " She said he just
laid his head on her shoulder and she tells him not to fool about,
but when she gives him a push, boy his face is all clammy an'
cold...Clammy!" He stretched the vowel as far as it would go,
flicked his cigarette, the story-teller, watery blue eyes wide.
"Last thing he did, he took his foot off, then they was
doon the bank. Y'ken. It wasna deep."

"I wish I hadn't bought my ticket," I almost shouted.
He laughed. A kind of bark of surprise and suddenly the ferry
was looming above the sea wall, its deep bass booming,
stopping thought. I was walking towards the hearse.
It was streamlined, if dusty, and had fancy little curtains.
I stared at its pale yellow wood and silver handles for some
Confirmation, side-mouthed “What have you bloody done?”
People were trailing amongst the cars. I was under observation.
“Eric, you old bastard!” I had a fist of coins gripped in my pocket.
The ferry was in the harbour, engines boiling in reverse,
passengers looking down, some waved. The huge noise
reverberated pointlessly again. I smashed the coins into the sea.
A black-headed gull side-slipped sharp-eyed, then veered away,

"Hey! hey you, yes you!" I turned. "You can throw some of dat
dis way." Eddy was grinning gap-toothed in his black beard.
His hair was cropped and he wore a brass earring you could
hang a curtain from, and sat huge next to his wife and baby
in his old van, staring up at me. The stare was all that was left
of his time in the Liverpool police. I looked away at the ferry.
"That' sEric Dunbar's coffin at the head of the first line."
"Oh yeah, we heard about that, didn' twe, chuck?" His big fingers

drummed on the metal of the door on which he had painted:
'Eddy Smith, Artist' floating among clouds and waves..

I stooped. Di suckled the baby, hiding behind a curtain of hair.
She knew Tessa, my ex- and I was out of favour. How she knew
Eddy I never knew. He was an urban primitive who projected
transparencies of places like Bootle and Fazackerly on board,
then drew round them and painted them in. They were rubbish
and he was so uncreative, he didn't know. Unfortunately he
was also brown/purple colour blind. Di must have seen it,
but he was an impressive man, full of life, and looked the part.
He was always after me for my reactions until I pointed out
his problem. He didn't see that either. "Get stuffed," he'd said.
Now he had painted his sign. I raised a hand, walked away..

A deckhand was booting over ramp plates with bangs which stirred the black cattle to frightened bellowing in their pens.
They were going South to be finished round Aberdeen, then
turned into human turds. Now two men in dark suits and caps
sat in the hearse. Sunlight shone on the chrome and polish.
It was the last chance to say something to you, but I couldn't,
and then it took years. I stood brainless, staring at the ramp.
the kye came up trotting, tails high, bunched and black,
hooves clacking on the strange stones of Scotland, terrified eyes
everywhere, men and dogs running in an animated Breughel.
Steam hoses whooshed and shouting, barking, mooing faded..

The first car off was Sandy Moncrief's Jaguar, Nordoilco's
man on the island and chairman of Eric's governors and
anything else useful for the company's image. It did not
include postponing his holiday for a funeral it seemed.
He came smoothly ashore, trilby tilted forward, string gloves

on the wheel; his wife's headscarf and sunglasses took me in
by the hearse. The advert for a new Rector for the Academy
was already placed and his widow given a month's notice
to quit the rectory, I later learned. I could hear the splash of
Eric's curses in their tracks as they accelerated away South.

2.

When I first met Eric he was doubled up, the red bobble
on his tam-o-shanter shaking, the black ribbons flying,
his face puce and his dog jumping up and down on its front paws
in consternation. I stopped in my tracks in the dunes. A seizure?
A heart attack? Hilarity! I knew who he was. Scotsmen can reach
An age, maybe fifty, when often they are afflicted with excessive
self-respect in public, which by no means fitted with this capering,
this private hopping from foot to foot, and slapping his knees.
It was a sobering sight. When he saw me it made him gasp
and hoot for air, holding his ribs, then he sank on one knee and
grabbed the yapping dog, fell sideways in the sand so his tammy
fell off. There was nothing I could see to cause his laughter:
the dunes, the in-coming tide, the low, sandy cliff of the bay.
"Take a look, R.T. Porter, Mentioned-in-Despatches" he said,
waving me towards the crest where his feet had climbed and
brushing sand off. He had some difficulty standing up, picked up
his walking stick, then his tammy, set it on his baldness,
polished his gold-rimmed spectacles. “Go on, man. Take a look.”

I had a problem with the ‘mentioned-in-dispatches’ bit. Once
I signed paintings 'R.T.Porter'; but not for years. I climbed

topped the crest. It wasn' t that funny. Nobody laughed
years later at a suite of etchings I did. The other side of
the dune formed an amphitheatre open to the sea.
Around it in their Sunday best sat the congregation of some
kirk and on the shore below, on a rampart of sand on which
a union jack was struggling free of pebbles at its corners,
legs apart, hair flying, was a gesticulating minister of the cloth,
red-jowled, full-paunched, robes fluttering and holy words
being snatched by the wind, and drowned by the sea,
his mouth opening and closing in holy dumb show.

Nobody saw me. They seemed mesmerised, had been
for some time, judging by the closeness of the North Atlantic
to the priest. Oblivious redshanks bobbed and stabbed,
ringed plovers made clockwork dashes, oyster catchers
hunched black as the pious congregation puzzling out
the religious semaphoring of the flapping figure below.

"That' s the Reverend Billy McConder, y'ken, hip flask stowed
in his cassock, pissed as a newt. Man, it's laugh or cry.
The fool's hounding me for the turpitude of my students
being adolescent and he is himself consumed by lechery and
the Red Grouse." .We walked away, 'the wife's wee dog'
sending the waders flickering to turn and land behind us.

"He' ll be consumed by the bloody ocean if he doesn't shift...
but what's this 'Mentioned-in-Despatches' routine?"

"You maybe think you are hiding away on this fair isle,
R.T. Porter, M-in-D, but you are a famous man. I was
having a chat with my friend the town librarian when he'd
a call from Los Angeles wanting to know what it meant,

the M-in-D, and how long you were in the S.S". It set him off.
"S.A.S." I corrected.
"Sorry: wrong culture heroes."
"I didn't bloody choose, you know." I did not expect to be indignant about such things.
"You're big enough and ugly enough. Now I was in the R.N. which demanded steadiness under fire and in the wardroom."
He bumped down on an oil drum which was stuck in the sand, held out his hand which I shook He undid his laces, removed his polished brown brogues one at a time and tipped sand out, gasping as he got them on and tied again. He was a burly man of good humour and some learning and a life-enhancer, Eric was.

He led us aboard in his clammy pomp on a long Northern evening when sunset was almost midnight and there was only the brief 'simmer dim' before this day became the next. Grant Wishart, who taught art part-time at the academy, said it had been a staffroom joke that Eric and Deerness, the Director of Education, were having a 'coronary race'. Deerness won. His dusty hearse rolled smoothly up into the dark hull and pulled us along behind in a sort of Danse Macabre, cars and vans, trucks and caravans. I ended up in the next column, a couple of cars back, then it was a matter of chains and chocks squealing and clanging, echoing in that iron space, and passengers getting in each others' way.

I stayed put while the ramp clamoured and the doors slammed, the engines began to thump, the ship's siren informed Scrabster we were off. Everyone had gone except Eric and me. The Volvo's suspension rocked soothingly and I put the seat in recline, but I could still see the coffin to the left. The huge, grey empty space was like the nave of a cathedral, but more appropriate for an ex-naval officer with little faith. I pushed my hat over my eyes.

3.

That first walk would have been like any other - we followed
‘the wife's wee dog' among the Neolithic humps and tumps,
Eric rabbiting about archaeology until I took off on ornithology.
He was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland;
I worked for The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
(part-time, unpaid). We did not bore each other very much.
The treeless island's stone had built to-last, from before
the pyramids; the nights were a dream of steadfast stars
which megaliths anchored at their rising; birds migrated
like the Vikings along the European littoral from the Steppes
and Greenland to the South and back. We were both lonely,
our women alienated. His was the loneliness of office, but
he was forced to play the panjandrum in that community;
I was in retreat from the world and hardly spoke to anyone..
I suppose we both looked the part we played: Eric a Rembrandt
of a public man with that heavy-lidded look and ageing bulk;
I was a gaunt El Greco in some kind of eye-rolling anguish.

Later, when it came to the unfinished portrait which I gave
to the Academy, he showed me photographs from which a
bushy, red-bearded Lieutenant confidently grinned on a
black and white leave from North Atlantic convoy escort, medals
on his chest. In the shoebox there were photographs of his dead
son smiling and his wife in a bikini when 'Chickadee'
had not been a misnomer. The portrait was left unfinished.
It was beyond Sandy Moncrief' sunderstanding that I should

knock back an offer to bring it to a glossy conclusion.
It certainly made him uneasy when I made a gift of it, unframed
with the hands in blue outline. He offset this with a vulgar frame.
Poor Eric he will sit up there like a bird in a gilded cage until
the uranium market determines the islanders can live elsewhere;
then he will hang in the offices of the bureaucrats who manage
relicts until the price is right again. The painting will last,
and so will Eric, because I am a good craftsman, and never
skimped on my materials. *Ars longa, vita brevis.*

We had soon found that we had no need to impress, compete,
or even to conceal much, except about our relationships:
his marriage, my partnership with Tessa. Perhaps we both felt
guilt, and for a while, it kept us reticent. Generally Eric would
ramble on about plantains that grow best where hooves or feet
have impacted the soil and the dating of their pollens revealing
the earliest occupation: or nettles where people have pissed
against demolished lee walls, while I would watch the strut and
flicker of shore birds for the unusual to lift my binoculars,
lend them to him for a look. To the locals it was typical that
'sooth-moothers' should find commonplace things remarkable.
I was under suspicion for storming around at full moon;
he was a ‘ferry-jumper’, the sharp end of authority with a fey wifey,
who had stopped, no doubt, some favourite son from being Rector.

If we met in the narrow streets of the town he grasped my sleeve
as if he drowned in boredom. He liked best to hear of decay
and violence in London; cardboard box dossers; the littered
streets and filthy air; the discarded tabloids blowing against
copulating couples in the parks of Thatcher's capital;
the police with megaphones ("Hey you! Yes you," was his joke too.)
He was an Historian by trade and an Historicist by conviction,

and pleased he said, not to live in some blank-paged golden age.

I remember a winter walk and steaming our socks by my stove,
the brief, still day waning, the sea pewter-calm, dark cloud building,
tired after our long walk, hot glasses in our hands. The dog asleep
on its back, paws folded foolishly, the kettle singing and seeing
a few white goose feathers balance past the sash windows
on either side of the chimney: It was Christmas Day one year.
It was not a celebration: the island ignored it, preferred pagan
Hogmanay, when the first week of the New Year was spent going
from house to house with a bottle, dragging cars from burns
or icy ditches, re-hanging gates, putting walls and fences in order.

I did not celebrate that either, locking my door and sitting in the dark
with earphones on watching the sky above the bay as one year
suddenly was the next. That Christmas evening Eric sat back and
stared above me at my drawing of Tessa in the failing light.
He had not asked who she was; I had not told. I had used ink
to draw her nude, one leg straight as she lay, the other bent, foot
on calf, the arms reversing the pattern, her hair spread in its
luxury, her face set with boredom. It was a good drawing,
foolishly bold with love's confidence, as I later understood,
but it was dusty with fine peat ash and the sticky
tape had discoloured and twisted. When it fell at last I should
heap it with the rest on the stone floor by my drawing table,
burn it eventually when there was a calm day.

“You know," he said out of the silence, "I wish to God that
I had made love to more women!" I poured compensatory
scotch; he was always greedy for it as if rationed at home.

Once we were standing in the tumble of a Bronze Age broch,
a high and windowless tower which littered the Highlands
and Islands like modern fall-out shelters, he struck a pose in
his deerstalker, two warplanes stitching clouds together above,
and declaimed in the cracked voice of some long-dead dominie:
"Eh, y'ken it was your Bronze Age warriors who legitimised
power over the folk by making warfare perpetual instead of
rare calamity. Fear sells weapons and proliferates generals
until there's ruin from war, to prove them tight, or collapse
from the costs of always preparing for it!" My claps echoed.

There had been an equinoctial gale, storm force at times,
the seas boiling green and white and spray clearing the top
of the three-hundred foot headland and blowing inland, birds
wheeling and screeching, seals ducking and rolling in joy
whilst I feared for the corrugated end of my peat store and
neighbours' hens took off for Norway…
Then sparkling calm
the sea innocent and the white sand immaculate, lapwings
tumbling, curlews planing with their bubbling cry above chicks
on a morning of brimming life. I had managed to stop Eric
being helpful by ignoring what he pointed out along the tide,
the point being to replicate the count with one pair of eyes,
so that he fossicked amongst the flotsam, jetsam and detritus,
a few metres behind me. He collected plastic examples of
foreign languages and shells which he fancied, talking
in a desultory way as I paused, noted, stopped and drew
and sometimes photographed. The he told me that there
had been another ‘phone call from California. I did not reply.
It made no difference. Eric's secretary, the hunchbacked poet,
Michael Mossbank Macnab, shared a flat with the librarian
and his twin brother, who kept the bookshop, so Eric heard

about calls from the persistent lady who was full of curiosity,
as they were, as to why I had 'tossed away my career',
as she told them. They were very impressed by the cost
of these calls and the gratitude for any trivial information.
Eric couldn't see it: it was a blind spot with him. He enjoyed
doing good by stealth. He did not complain when he couldn't
get a line because Michael Mossbank Macnab was teasing out
some nuance from the island network for his delectation,
some scandalous snippet about the Director of Education,
some clue about a student's family, some hint about how
best to screw a new gymnasium out of Nordoilco. I thought
they all needed something to do, and said so; but Eric was a
'fixer', a 'do-gooder'; Michael Mossbank Macnab and the twins
had gone South to Edinburgh University together, had lived
together ever since. In their forties they shared a flat and a
covert school boyish sense of humour, drank soberly in pubs
and ate gloomy lunches behind copies of 'The Scotsman'
in the harbour cafe. Eric told them, and all four enjoyed such
mischief, that I had been 'Mentioned-in-Despatches' for some
gross military misbehaviour. I had to pretend not to care as
he outlined the kind of nonsense they were considering giving
the earnest American woman. In fact, as I suspected I knew
the source of her questions about my circumstances, and I
let them all get on with it. It might have been better if I had not,
Eric seemed quite shocked by my nonchalance: fascinated, he
kept on prodding me with even more incredible, often obscene,
suggestions as to my enormity, frightening away the birds
with his laughter. It stopped. His stick flicked something from
the weed. From the corner of my eye I took it to be a starfish
until it fell and became an infant's hand. He heeled sand
over it like a dog and said nothing.

4.

The lights in the car deck were dim and high. The motion
had become regular out to sea, the car rocking soothingly,
as Di had rocked her baby. It suddenly occurred to me
that she had been weeping behind her glossy black hair
When I spoke to Eddy. I had met Eddy at Grant Wishart's
due to Eric's incorrigible social engineering. I could never
convince him that art was not a minor branch
of the entertainment industry, another route to fame
and fortune. He liked to play the impresario with me
and never understood my impatience, seemed distressed
by my refusals. I gave up trying to explain I came there
for space, not to spend time with aspirants who thought
I had some secret information they needed to be
as successful. All I had to say to them was that if you had
any talent, given that life was about as meaningful as
musical chairs, if there was a seat and the music stopped
at the right time, you were in; if not, not. I asked if artists like
Cezanne and Van Goch were failures, and people got cross,
as if I was holding out on them, saying I could afford
to strike such a pose. I did not argue. I knew not much good
comes from talking about painting, people, especially
the most ignorant about it, being sure their opinions were
absolutely right. ('Our Frieda could have painted that!')
The most disturbing were the well-to-do women who,
on finding their children absent at boarding school,
decided that they had neglected talent and flocked
from one course to the next, at home and abroad, until

they were experts at ‘art-chat’, although what they produced,
no matter what they spent for the best paint, canvases
and frames, was deadly and deeply uncreative. I suppose
I thought of Tessa and Di as junior variants,
daddies’ daughters for whom art colleges were a kind of
outre finishing school in those grim and grey old days when
I was first in Cork Street being told by my gallery that I must
continue painting my romantic landscapes because they sold
and my latest paintings had no commercial value at all.
When I copped out, refused, nobody believed that my motives
were anything but financial: there were no other motives.
Nobody believed I painted for love of it. Such an idea,
like 'truth', could only be a joke and I must be crazy.
I had never given up my part-time work at Goldsmiths'
but hardly spoke in my drawing classes: I drew, demonstrated,
encouraged, pinned up good stuff, discouraged chatter, arrived
and left on the dot.

Sometimes somebody would set an ‘art critic’
on me, ex-Oxbridge usually, and on to the fact that you could
do quite nicely cruising the shows and writing arrant balls.
Art was all hot air and conspicuous consumption, an area
of such political irrelevance that Marxist views were tolerated.
At last I had added my tuppenceworth. I did what I could.

Eric would never understood all this. He was a teacher,
a born explainer, arranger, connector, and thought knowledge
was virtue, which meant social obligations. I admired this
even if it was an ideal from a century before Thatcher
helped commodify the world in US dollars. I certainly knew Art
value could not be so accounted for and was ashamed by
what my pleasure earned me, which was the source of
my sense of awkward obligation, such as it was.

I had stood, one bleak Sunday morning, watching
archaeologists burrowing in a Viking cemetery, the crouched
skeletons ochre in the sandstone cysts a thousand years old,
the only grave goods round pebbles to restrain shrouds
in the tugging wind which still blew. I had been drawing boat
nousts abandoned near the shore, stone nests for boats
against the crazy winds, in which spines and ribs of boats
rotted of those whose crofts had tumbled and whose names
were spread round what had been the Empire. Driving back
Eric directed me up a side-track. "Ah, "he said, lines prepared,
" it's fellow does some teaching for me. I've a book to return."
He patted his duffel coat pocket.

It was a plot, of course and I
cursed as we swayed through pot-holes. "Be good now,"
he slapped my knee, "for they are nice young folk."
The stone walls had collapsed by the track. The land was going
back to bracken, thistle and dock except for some freshly soil
across which white hens fled around the corner of the low croft,
a but-and-ben with a sway-backed, slabbed roof, lime-kiln
at one end, a byre in which cattle would have been walled in
for winter once, at the other and one-room wide living quarters.
A straggle of fuschia scratching gold lichened walls. Sunlight
flashed as I turned and stopped in the muddy yard. A goat
stuck its forelegs over the half-door of an old van, set its
diabolical eyes on us so the dog capered and raved by the door,
White down floated and spun on puddles and a black cat
did welcoming yoga on the sacking mat. We scuffed our feet
while the dog wagged and whined, pushed into a lobby where
all manner of coats were hung and gum boots were strewn..

A girl with a turquoise headband and blonde hair looked round

an inner door which squealed on its hinges: "Oh hello, hello!
It's the Rector and you must be Mister Porter. I'm Elspeth."
It seemed almost necessary to bow to such a greetings
from a twenty-year old. Her smooth face shone with pleasure.
She had blue eyes to match her headband into which I looked
longer than I should have. We followed her slender girlhood
through the blanketed door and into a low-ceilinged room
with numdah rugs on coconut matting, battered furniture,
an open fire, bookshelves made of planks with concrete blocks,
rank paintings, teazles in a large pot making exquisite shadows
on the white wall in splashing light. It seemed full. Grant Wishart
was twice the girl's age and shorter even in his high-heeled boots.
He managed a hard-eyed smile and a hard handshake. Eddy,
who rose like a leviathan from the sofa and made me wince,
had a gap between his front teeth and a good deal of whisker
and dark hair pulled into a pony tail. I didn't remember Di's name
but knew her black, nervous glance and hair, her shy smile as she
nursed the purring cat. She said that she had been at Goldsmith's
and I lied and said: "Of course."
And there was another couple: he had a moustache like an
inverted horseshoe and an island accent; she was tall and
strong-faced with androgynous short-back-and-sides white hair
and many even whiter teeth to go with her Californian accent.
I knew what she was before Elspeth introduced us: Kay Kingsford
and Peter Whalsay. She was taller than he was. Her bangles
rattled as she shook my hand enthusiastically. "So pleased
to meet you at last, Roy." Eric jumped in and I backed out,
accepted a mug of black coffee with what Elspeth called
some 'medicine' in it. I stepped on the hearthrug next to Grant
and put it to cool on the mantle, feeling the warmth of the fire.
Grant had a stratum of cigar smoke into which I had to bend
to listen to his story against Kay Kingsford's attempt to

embrace the room. His after-shave was as plangent as
Sibelius's Violin concerto which also pervaded the room.
We had already established that we didn't take to each other
But discussed the weather. He was a peppery little Scot
and I had no sooner wondered how he came by Elspeth
than he explained that she had been his student and he
had left his wife and kids in Glasgow to run away with her.
He screwed up his beard-fringed face as he said it;
made a smile like a bite on a lemon. Kay was questioning
Eric as to why he thought Stone Age people could build
such huge monuments with such astronomical accuracy
without extra-terrestrial help. Grant said, "I've been trying
to paint that fucking goat out there. There's a fucking alien
if ever there was one." As he spoke Kay shot glances in
hope of quelling him. I asked him if he had seen Holman Hunt's
'The Scapegoat' in the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester
and he had not but knew it from prints. I told him it was small,
as small as the Mona Lisa, which everyone thought huge,
and remembered a painting by John Nash, 'The Cornfield'
which had been on the wall of my village primary school,
the first painting I had really seen, daily lit by the morning sun,
and how disappointed I had been as a student to find it so
relatively small in the Tate.

Eric was boring the hell out of them. I tasted the whisky
in my coffee and thought how strange it was to have such
conversations in a room which for centuries had been home
to such different people. Apart from Whalsay, all of us where
fugitives. Kay Kingsford didn't count. When she looked away,
he looked at her. She was wearing black ski pants and
fur-lined suede ankle boots, her polo-necked sweater was
white and heavy, the sleeves pulled up so bangles on each

wrist and rattled in her enthusiasm at this ethnic experience,
the wild landscape and noble poverty of the artists and'
he guessed, her pleasure at running him to earth. She asked to
see the painting on the easel which was concealed by a page
from a Sunday paper, which we got on Tuesdays, but Grant,
with an upward eye-roll and snort which made Elspeth smile
around the room, ignored the request. Kay's smile became
strained. I went across to listen to Peter Whalsay, potter,
who was explaining, holding up with his mug, how the potters
had developed the island handle because of the limited market:
it broke off after a while. It set Eric off. He slapped his ribs and
that made Eddy laugh loudly too.

Kay came across smiling still,
a sun-tanned, confident woman, used to a better response
from the likes of diminutive Grant, who gave her his place on
the home-made rug. As the laughter ended, Kay asked me
what part I thought market forces played in shaping style.
It was a topic on which I had made some notorious remarks
and confirmed what I suspected. I obliged: "Only posthumous
assessments matter." I told her. "The rest is vomit." I felt
some sorrow for her. She was out of her depth and she
did not know it.

I looked at Eric, but he was in charge of
the cat which was lashing its tail in ecstasy. Suddenly
he flipped it off his lap and sucked blood from his hand.
Grant toed it doorwards and the cat fled to a chorus
of complaint which made Grant jerk open the door
and try a side-foot but the cat was too swift.

Eric was
chatting noisily to Di, holding out his paw so she might be
sympathetic. Eddy pulled his pony-tail and took another
covert look at Kay. I could feel her at my elbow waiting

for me to say something to her. Most men, unlike most women, find those who fancy them less attractive for it and I sensed she had me in her carnal sights. Eric still prattled to Di and Elspeth and I could not catch his eye. I escaped to the low window, began a learned conversation about the weather with Peter: a sou'westerly gale had finished the day before, a northerly was promised. We enjoyed what was called 'between withers': soft, grey clouds with occasional searchlights of sun sweeping the land.

The cat was rubbing its back on the glass. At the lochans below the croft I had seen some geese and I had to endure Grant's story of how he had got within range twice only to have his old rifle misfire. It was a story he had told before but not, he realised, to an ornithologist. When he did, it seemed to add relish to an account of how he had potted a swan for their Christmas dinner. Grant was one of those little men who have to take on guys my size and I was controlling a rising impatience with his pugnacity when it became apparent nobody else was talking and some question had been asked of me. "Jesus!" Grant said. "Roy, we were just saying, here we are all struggling up the hill, one false summit after the next, and there you are choosing to descend. Hey, what's wrong with the view?"

"There's no answer to that," Grant said.

"Let Roy answer for himself," She would not give up.

I bit my lip as Elspeth's wide eyes, looked away. She was like Tessa when we were first married, so keen on her wifely duties; but the rest seemed determined on some kind of joust.

"What twaddle!"

"Pardon me?"

"Steady on, old chap," Whalsay said, island Biggles.

"You best explain to your friend the nature of impertinence."
"Impertinence?" Her mouth gaped in culture shock. Eddy laughed
but Elspeth blushed, was crestfallen.
"Sorry," I said to her, " but I refuse to be public property like this".
Peter Whalsay came off the wall shouting, hard voiced,
having no truck with the bigsy English.
"How can that be, boy, when your stuff' shanging in galleries
round the bloody world?" His fists were bunched.
"Just cool off," Eric, Rector of the Academy. He pointed a finger.
"You ken that he chose to give up that way of life."
"He couldn't hack it," Kay said.
"That' scorrect," I said, in control, ignoring her sneer.
It was Grant who got angry: "You satisfied now?
That was what you wanted to hear?" Kay laughed, less upset
than anyone except Eddy, who sprawled with his arm round Di.
"What is this?" Arms raised, bangles jangling, her smile
all over the room. "I just asked a simple question, right?"
She had a self-image which suddenly embarrassed us all:
the reporter as tribune of the people.
Grant let the cat in
through the window with a blast of cold air. Elspeth proffered
biscuits. " The trouble with your culture," I found myself saying,
"is it only understands products, processes come nowhere."
She used it later, word for word. "I'm freaking out of this, "
I told Eric. "You coming?" I did not wait. "Thanks," I said.
The cat came out in sympathy, as did Grant. He lit his cigar
again. “What a cow,” he said companionably. Blew smoke,
coughed. " They think they own the bloody world.” A kirk bell
came wind-distorted down the valley. “ I took a hundred of
these with me and I'm down to the last five of the fuckers."
He spat impressively. He was becoming moth-eaten,
hair receding, face creasing, but he was in love with her

and both of them shared some dream about the artist' slife.
“But I admired the way you put that bitch in her place.”
He shook my hand. I had my coat on, opened the door
and the dog yapped off after the cat. “Eric the Rectum
shoulda ken better.” He turned away. "Take it easy." I said.
He seemed to suppose innuendo and grinned proudly.

I slipped into the car, switched on, revved, bapped the horn,
expecting Eric but Kay appeared with a flourish of a red
woollen poncho and a matching woollen hat. "You want to
give us a ride?" She turned, calling Peter through the door
she held open as I said, " No. I bloodywell do not!"
Grant laughed. He stamped the cigar but in the mud.
"Where's Eric, for god' ssake?" I said to him.
" The silly old bugger. I'll not get rid of him for a while yet.
He doesne let his plans spoiled by humans, that man,
I can say that for him."
"He' s not popular at the school?"
"He' sthe bloody boss, y' ken?" He not appear but Kay did
at the trot. Whalsay behind. She got in the front.
I raised a finger to Grant and eased the car out and down to
the road. A heron trailed its legs, flopped along the lochside.
"You really screwed up for that poor kid" she meant Elspeth,
"and your friend is so furious he won't come with you."
"Belt up" I said. "The buckle is an IQ test." It clicked in place.
"We have to make it right with her. There wasn’t any need
to be nasty, like that, okay?"
"Not okay." I began Mozart's
horn concertos to stop her. Whalsay crouched in the back,
trying to hear. I drove too fast in a temper until a wedge
of greylag geese came over the hill, broke and angled
towards the water, feet down. I raced cloud shadows.

A harrier balanced on the wind, wings a flat vee.
In the mirror Peter sat back, dark eyes and skin the legacy
of some Armada survivor. He was one of the few,
who having escaped South, had returned. He rented a
disused school, bashed out earthenware, slipped bus drivers
a quid to bring him tourists, added some local colour
to the holiday experience of those he fancied if he could.
Kay turned the volume down: "Your ex-partner told me you
were as stubborn as a mule." I hit the brakes. The Volvo
shimmmied and Peter's face loomed in the mirror.
"Out," I said to her. "Get out! You're a bloody journalist,
aren't you. Well I don't want to be in your poxy rag. Out!"
"What the hell's going on?" He seemed to think we had hit
something. Her eyes flickered between mine. She did not move.
"I said get out!" I reached across and yanked the catch, shoved
the door open. The tip of her nose had turned white.
"Go on: out!" I was loosing it. "Bastard! Tessa said you were…"
I gave her a shove and she almost fell out , grabbed the door.
"Let go!" I stamped down. flung gravel, made smoke, was over
the next brae so that she was out of sight. Peter thumped
the back of my seat. "Let us out, boy. Come on, stop the car."
He yelled in my ear. "Did you know she was a journalist?"
"Just stop. You're a queer customer, right enough." I kept
my foot down, topped another hill, scattered gulls from some
road kill. "Stop." I eased off, coasted. She was two miles back.

"She's from a real good art magazine and she's on the TV.
She's going to give us all a right fine write-up too,
with coloured photographs and everything."
"That's all balls.
She's a snooper. Tell you anything. Christ, Eric's a right prick!"
"Boy, boy, you're a bloody madman, Porter, you know that?

You're paranoid. You think the world's only interested in you,
and you' re a back number. Nobody gives a shit anymore for ye."
He was half out. "This was her big break. It was lead up to a
documentary on the art of the Highlands and Islands, y'ken.
She reckoned it would put you back on the map."

"What map?"

" She came a long way just to talk to you, boy." He yelled.
"Well she can piss of back again." His innocence was stupid.
"Do you think a woman like that is capable of writing
anything worth reading? She takes a few shots of your pots
and you roll over. Peter, if she gets a lift she will drive past
you and not even wave if it suits her. A vinegar tits!
Women like that...women in general..." He shoved the door
wide, then slammed it hard. I looked up. He would have hit me
if my window had been open.

In the mirror I watched him turn, begin back like a dog.
It was anguish to think of such a woman being hand-picked
and armed with questions by Ainslie, infuriating that she
could put her finger on me at such a distance and begin
to twist me round it all over again.

5.

Back home I pulled out the telephone plug even though
I had a private number. Next morning I replaced it
and called the school after a poor night's sleep
when the sea seemed to be in my stone room,
my bed frigid. I debated, yet again, if I should buy a

hot water bottle, while waiting. As usual Macnab made
answering into a matter of signal gravity, cranking his handle
and ringing around the Academy for Eric: "Is that you,
Mrs.Culswick? Is the Rector with you just now? I have Mister
Porter on the line for him. Ah, would you be knowing of his
whereabouts? I see, well many thanks...Is that you, Jack?.."
It took time and decorum fitting to the island poet.

He was a gruff, little hunchback and cripple, raised
by his mother and two aunts after his father's early death.
Then, Eric said, two grandmothers had moved in so Michael
was smothered with love and cats and scandal in a house
full of antique furniture, knick-knacks and heavily framed
pictures and hazy photographs of gloomy Victorians.
It was from these ladies he had his precise diction and,
via them his view of his own sex which made him oddly
gruff and direct man-to-man. "Miss Sutherland? Is that you?
Mossbank Macnab here..." At each failure he sighed, clicked
his tongue. I wanted to hang up but not as much as I wanted
a word with bloody Eric and Michael would have been upset.
I thought, he enjoyed ringing around the academy to show
his hectic involvement in its affairs.

"Mister Porter? I think I have him now. They have sent for him."

Eric said that when Michael went South to Edinburgh
with the twins, he had been a sort of drunken mascot,
but now his poems had given him a status on the mainland,
yet the three of them remained serious drinkers,
making homebrew by the plastic dustbinful, whilst the twins,
Murdo and Tarn, were said to have a secret still. Via library
and bookshop, Tarn and Murdo were able to promote Michael’s

work and once a year all three had saved enough to fly away
to some astonishing paradise from which they returned paler
than before.

"Hello, yes?"
"Eric, I wanted to thank you very much for arranging yesterday."
"It's you. Just a moment, I must contact my secretary on an
urgent matter." I could hear children's feet echoing, their clear
voices, even the booming ferry as it left the harbour.
There were concussions as Eric worked the receiver rest
and Michael let him for a moment as if he had gone off the line.
"You are an awkward bugger, Porter," Eric said.

The line went dead, came alive..."so if you'll just show her
my study, Michael." Eric was saying, "I'll be there just now.
Maybe you will keep her company pro. tem.."
"Very good, Rector." It took Michael Mossbank Macnab off,
propelling his chair down the corridor.

"Listen, stuff you, sonny. I am busy with important matters.
You go on being bloody miserable if you want. I arranged
A glamorous interlude for you, but all you can do is carry on
like an damned adolescent, of which I see enough already."
"Don't you try talking to me like one. I'll let you know when
I need help, thanks. You know sod all about Art., so keep
Your sticky fingers…"
"The woman is wanting to organise a bloody film about you,
you silly fool…."
"Rubbish – and if she is, why should I care? It's a come-on."
Och, here's a mother with her Sophie, fourteen and pregnant,
and her husband has been paid off his ship god-knows-where
and not heard of since and she cannot afford books for John,

who should be away to a university with encouragement,
which she cannot give because really she needs his wages,
if he can find any, to support two others younger than himself.
You've too much time for your own navel. I'll give you good day."

Soft among sea pinks on the headland I had built a stone hide
at the edge of the four hundred foot drop with a view across
the cliff face and back over the bay. Fulmars nested highest,
solemn eyed, curious, straight-winged planers, they never tired
of watching me, swooping up on the standing wave of air,
then swinging back and, unpredictably, swooping away
into the North Atlantic wastes, solitaries wave skimming
under the stars hundreds of miles out, now they hung about
and eyed me with my binoculars. Below them libraries of
grey-backed kittiwakes were neatly stacked waiting to
change places with mates to join the skein flying to the loch
or back, there to wash away the result of hours of standing
on the lower shelves, wings whirling them into forward
rolls under water before getting back to work. Beneath them,
like so many centre forwards, razorbills and guillemots
stood with their eggs between their feet, awaiting substitution,
their skittering, wave-hopping flight loud with shrieks. Finally,
near the heaving glut and slop and swells, comic-footed shags
and black cormorants did heraldic wing-drying after headlong
flights on set courses. Sometimes I turned my glasses inland
to the fields under the net of stone walls, the black kye grazing,
the sheep and rabbits nibbling down the links above the shore,
the cluster of houses round the shop and chapel, my own croft
set apart across the bridge and up the hill, but I did not see Eric
call, as he claimed when he finally telephoned.
“Aaaee,” he said as many Scots do when they are stuck for
a word, “How are you?”

“Terrific.”

“Well, you know, I was maybe out-of-order last week-end. She wanted it to be a surprise, y’ken. It is her first overseas assignment and everything. I saw no harm in it and maybe some good. She’s away in a couple of days. Do you no think you could find her half-an hour? I mean, there’s the chance of this film, which may not mean anything to you, but for…”

“Eric, can’t you leave it alone? She’ll say anything...Just take time out, man, from doing good. I’m here to escape. She is here as a spy and, like the rest of them, she thinks she can do and say what she likes. They don’t tell the truth, Eric, if they have a better idea to get their rag’s adverts Into the hands of more punters. The best thing to say is nothing.”

‘Well you may be right, but she’s excited all the arty-farty folk, and they are going to blame you if it doesn’t come off.”

“It’s intolerable, really, isn’t it? Isn’t it astonishing? I came to escape women and the art world, but can I? Where next?”

“Och, don’t upset yourself. I hear, by the way, that Whalsay and her have been experimenting with substances and are intimate friends. He drives her wherever she wants to go.”

‘More fool him.”

“Eric, you know I had a breakdown, don’t you?”

“I had heard something like that.”

“Well I’ll tell you, being a grumpy bastard is a lot better than being locked in deep depression. I’ll tell you all one day.”

“Sometime when we have a few drams taken.”

“No, in secrecy when we are stone cold sober.”

“Aye,” he said mildly, then Here come Michael with my post. I’m glad we have things on an even keel.”

“So am I.” And I was.

6.

Nobody knocked, hammered, on my door at night.
I yanked it wide. Light exploded, blinded I flinched.
No detonation came. She giggled, smelled of drink
and perfume as she pushed past, took another photograph,
then another, a shot of my drawings, Neolithic Venuses
strewn on the floor. Down the hill car wheels spun,
men yelled. Again a flash exploded.
"Wait a minute!"
I grabbed her elbow. She shook free. "Back off!
Anger made me sudden. I got a hold on the camera,
twisting it out of her hands. She slapped me hard
in the eyes and mouth. I hurled the camera hard and.
It bounced off the wall and fell to the stone floor as she
hit out in a screaming whirl of blows. I got her wrists,
shoved, and her muddy boots slid on drawings. She fell
on all fours and I landed stinging slaps on her tight pants.
We were both shouting with anger. “I’ll kick you in the balls
And then you’ll go down.” I expected Whalsay and his friends,
Any second. I wanted her out of the door and it locked.
She was half up, eyes glittering with tears. “You idiot! Get out!”
I booted her camera and it cracked against the wall. Her screams
were deafening. She was upright and kicking. I got her foot
and she sat down with a bump among my drawings, heeled
my hand as I pulled, grabbed for her camera, at drawings.
I put my fist against her face. “You want this in your teeth?
You’ve been popping pills.” She thumped down the door step
Into the rain and I slid her across the track into the ditch before
I dare let go. I was panting hoarsely. She was ten years younger,
still shouting. “You are fucking crazy, Porter! You should still be
inside.” Down the hill the car still revved and slid. I got myself,

rubber-legged, inside and the door locked, still gulping air,
eyes running from her blows, face burning. In the bathroom
I splashed water, got myself together then myself out
and locked the door. I slipped over the track and gate
and went some way downhill. She was shouting at
Whalsay who was puking. Down in the village a tractor
coughed and its lights came on. Whalsay said nothing
sensible. His mate was standing on the back of the tractor,
chains rattled and they pulled the car out. She got in
the back with Whalsay, still chattering, and they reversed
down the hill and left.

7.

I went back in. I was wet. Drawings were all over the floor,
mud and scuffs and heel marks on many, tears in some.
There were some bits of camera which pleased me.
In fact the encounter had woken me up, even if I was
scratched and sore. I had been lucky that Whalsay
and his friend had been pre-occupied (The damage
they had done to the ditch was impressive; so was
the stink.) and Kay Kingsford off her head, I had won.
Before I did anything else I telephoned the police.
I explained who I was and that I had expelled an
American journalist from my croft with minimum force
after she had burst in and begun taking photographs,
then become violent when I prevented her. He was
sympathetic but incredulous and I had to say it again
to the sergeant, who was suspicious. Was she alone?

I explained about the car, Peter Whalsay's vomiting,
how a tractor was needed to pull them out, and how
they were driving back to town. That interested him.
I added that I suspected some drawings might have
been stolen, but declined to make charges.
He said that I might expect a visit in due course,
but that the forecast was bad; and that was that.
He went stiffly to bed, disinfectant stinging his face,
his left hand where she had kicked him.

8.

I stood my window and watched the sea folding on the shore.
Out on the rocks seals sang, the greys slumped, the common
turned up at both ends like bananas. Shelduck had appeared,
red beaked and chestnut breasted, in pairs, winding their necks
up and down in pairs as they considered the rabbit burrows.
In July the shelduck population of Britain flew to Heligoland
to moult together, behaviour imprinted millennia before,
like the migration routes South via the West coast of Ireland
because there was no Irish Sea in Gondwanaland. Now auks
dived beneath oil to escape, when they should have flown.

The telephone had got me from bed: "Porter Strikes Again",
Eric said. "Listen, I've only a second before Assembly,
but Michael has just told me that he just happened to
be in the bar of The Bonny Prince last night when the editor
of the local rag came in with a story that Athol Carson,
his photographer, had been asked upstairs to photograph

the injuries to some young woman, an American and
fellow news hound, who claimed she'd been beaten by
your good self. He was that she had severe bruising to
her buttocks," he relished the word, "in the shape of a
large hand. She had paid handsomely for the negatives.
She's booked out of the hotel this morning and away
to take the flight South. The other thing is Peter Whalsay
has been having some discussions with the police
on related matters, and that rooster Fergus Sinclair
is booked for drunken driving…" He seemed delighted.
"Oh great. Thanks again for introducing me to that bitch."
"Och," he said, "goodbye," but I guessed he saw I was,
thanks to him, back where I started, a violent loony.

I cleaned up. It didn't take much, then I banked up peats
and sat down in an armchair in front of the stove. Gulls
floated white against the black clouds in the West. The kye
turned down wind as it strengthened and began to back.
I didn't move to fetch water for my whisky, answer the calls
of nature. I was a needle stuck in a record, a tape loop,
endlessly replaying, groaning remorse as the world
turned white and silent except for the sea's pulse and
gulls' pessimism. Chemists could calculate my mood
and correct it with a pill or two but that changed nothing
and nothing could be changed. There was no use
in thinking Eric had betrayed me: he was incapable of
not 'acting for the best'. Events just led to the same
conclusion, whatever I did. I had enough money to do
anything reasonable; a house in Positano; studio in Camden,
but after a while I ended up on my own with a bottle or two
of scotch.

9.

He came banging on the door, the next afternoon,
then his red face was at my window, shaping white words,
gesticulating. I stared at this bulky Scot in the snowlight
with his deerstalker and college scarf wrapped twice
round his neck, and he went on tapping and glaring
until I stirred myself. "Great God in Boots, Porter!
It's frigid and no so much warmer in here. You're growing
a beard to go with the black eye, are ye?" He banged
the 'phone on the rest before stamping out again with
the peat-box. He came back with it full, slamming the door,
then he rattled up the stove and dropped in some wood,
then frozen peats, "You pissed?" He unwound his scarf
and took off his black duffel. "You're looking tremendous,
no mistake. It wasne all such one-way traffic as the lady
suggested." He went into the kitchen, still talking, cursing
the frozen pipes which knocked and gasped but piddled
enough for two cups of instant. He was very noisy, dragged
an armchair across the flags and shouted as if I was deaf.

"We hear that Whalsay had a visit from the constabulary.
It's said they found traces of illegal substances." He clapped
his hands together and rubbed them. He had Grant's post,
y'ken, but suffered from kidney disease: y'ken, he 'kidney'
do this and he 'kidney' do that. He had been boasting what
he and his friends were going to do to you for slinging him
and herself out of your car and thus destroying his career
as a maker of shonky mugs, pottery boots and matchbox

holders.” He struggled out of his wet brogues and wiggled
his toes at the stove, which had come to a spitting life.
“And the poor, bloody daffodils are snowed under: you
think that you have problems?" He clattered my knees
with his foot.
“Fuck off!”
"It's the dreaded Black Dog has you, is it? I know it well.
I was in a meeting with my dear friend, the Director,
the other day when I saw a fellow carrying a child on
his shoulders in the street outside and suddenly remembered
how I'd carry my son, Angus, before school each day,
I would trot like a horse and make him laugh. I was back safely
from war service, y' ken, and life was nectar and ambrosia.
I was teaching History in a grammar school in Ban...
Angus would have been a grown man now. He’d have
taken the baton from me." His loud, forced laugh made me
wince. He went to make more coffee, brought it back
and added whisky. “Your eyes are the proverbial peeholes
in the snow." He put on his rectorial voice: "Drink the coffee,
and stop pitying yourself.” I couldn't argue. He was prattling,
anxious, at a loss. "You' ve no eaten since yesterday?
I am a great cook. Boiled eggs, nothing too much trouble.
Have a wash, for you smell, and try your razor. He went to
the kitchen and I stood up, took a stiff step. Eric looked an
old buffer from the back, the crutch of his trousers too low,
like a bull elephant's back legs, his shoulders rounding.
He gave me a bucket: "Get some snow in this," he ordered,
"for the plumbing's solid." Daylight was gone and the cold
clenched me in its fist as I scooped snow, punched it down,
packed the bucket tight, shivering fled back in and parked it
next to the stove. "At least shave yourself," he told me,
looking over his glasses, fish slice above the frying pan.

I went into the bathroom, switched on my razor, and watched
the grizzled man who eyed me, brows growing bushy,
one eye bruised, both bagged, left cheek raked red.
I switched off the razor and there was no water to wash.
Eric's slap on the back stung.
“It’s okay. I’m all right.” Frying bacon knotted my stomach.
I made space on the table for us, leaning dizzily. “It’s like
self-flagellation,” I told him, but the frying made him deaf.
I had to sit down. I should have got the knives and forks.
Eric banged down the loaded plates, cut me a thick chunk
of bread, and we ate. I had hardly swallowed before like
became less grim. I finished well before him, mopping
my plate with bread kept fresh by the cold..
"That' sa lovely Aphrodite," he said, "marvellous drawing.
Is she not the reason that you must keep going back South?"
"No. " I looked at Tessa. At night I had lain behind her but
she always slid from my grasp. She was so slender, so
tender, so well-bred, that she made me feel so gross in
my hairy bulk, that it was always Beauty and the Beast,
and I had always, in a way, expected what had happened.
"It takes a ton of bloody snow for a basin of water," he said.
He got up and took the bucket to the bathroom, poured
Into the basin. "Get yourself washed, you smelly bastard."
"Thanks," I said. “I will in a minute. That was good. Thanks.”
I was still staring at Tessa. I hadn’t for a long time. Her
sister’s husband was a TV producer. When he got hired
for a new arts show via her, she gave up her degree
and became a researcher for the programme. Her part
was mostly to look after him and his needs, which she took
so seriously, to her family’s distress, she lived with him.
His work was flavour of the month, other students of his
were envious, and for his part, to be looked after like that,

to be able to focus on his work and deal smoothly with TV, was wonderful. She loved arranging his diary, looking after his interests, and they had both been very happy.

Eric's chin glistened with fat, his glasses flashed. He was expounding a theory that all Roy's problems were a consequence of sexual deprivation, and that Kay Kingsford…
"For christ's sake, Eric, can't you leave it alone?".
"Man, I feel sorry for you. 'Gather ye rosebuds.' "
"That kind of sex is just a mess; not worth having, dumb and phoney; just another kind of consumerism."
"Take it," he said. "Take it and pay."
"That's Fascist, the solace of the ape"
"You don't mean it!" It was genuine alarm.
"I do."
He shook his head this way, that.
"Oh it's a poor stretch of history we are in, when fellows like yourself who scoff at the story of Adam and Eve's sexual disgrace still think their natural instincts are evil."

The stove burned bright. I got the bottle and glasses, poured mine and pushed it to him. He looked at mine and matched it, swallowed, grimaced. "'The grave's a fine and private place, but none, I think do there embrace.'" He said, holding up his glass to the light as if making at toast. I thought that he must be hard up, but did not say so, being a Puritan of a kind.
"That mother who can't afford books. Can I write a cheque?"
"By God you can! Make it payable to the Academy.
Can you afford a hundred pounds?" I wrote it. "Porter, you're no such a bad chap at times." He folded it neatly, put it in his wallet. "That's right generous of you. Tell me, now we' e a glass between us, what was all the fuss for?

Could you not have been as generous with a few photos?
She claimed you smashed her camera and beat her up.
Have you not thought that might be the story she was after?"
"No, I don't want to talk about it, right?"
"Did you really just, eh, smack her bum?" Eric grinned.
"She stole some drawings. If you've come here, for some
tittle-tattle to share with that bloody dwarf and his mates..."
"You regret it now, do you?"
"Eric, you are naïve? What's matter with you? I wish that I
had broken her stupid bloody nose. Just leave it alone."

He was not pleased, looked stubborn, and for a moment
I thought he would persist, and hoped not because what
came next was the end of our friendship, but he got up,
lifted the stove lid, and poked vigorously before dropping
more peats inside. After a time he began soberly telling me
the story of his life. I listened, sat back, watched the flames.

He was born in August, 1920. His father's war wounds
made him give up managing a picture palace in the city
and turn a large house in a respectable, stone suburb
of Edinburgh into a small hotel. As the only son, nothing
had been spared of his younger sisters' education
to enable him to go to university. He said that his father
had even postponed dying until the entrance results were
published. He had begun History in September, 1938.

It was hard to imagine Eric as a young man,
he was so solidly mature, but he wanted to talk of
the feelings, fumblings, frotterisms of adolescence,
his mouth full of rolled 'ɛ' and spittle, yet there was
reticence, even in our cups, about his wife.

He never spoke of Chickadee and her opinions.
In such a community anything personal got passed
around the peat fires like a mystery object in a quiz
with the first prize going to the most scurrilous conjecture.
If it could be repeated two or three times unchallenged,
it counted as true and then might then be distilled,
generation on generation, like an edda or saga.
So Eric kept quiet, as I did, about his marriage.

His wife was huge and silent, her mute face smooth
as a girl's, hair heaped ornate and silver, grey eyes
sad and distant. She seemed to spend all day
in the gloomy sitting room of the rectory, smoking
and watching TV, talking to the woman who dusted and
polished the massive furniture, or to her wee dog
with its bulging brown eyes. One night the telephone
had woken me and got me driving twenty miles in the rain.
She had fallen backwards and wedged herself between
a blanket chest and the stairs. "How, how, how," she said
wearily, her hair in swathes, her eyes full of resentment
and tears. Eric was jolly, covering shame with facetiousness:
"Ooops-a-daisy" he said as we hauled. She cried out at
our fingers on her soft and bloated wrists. "Oh Doctor,"
she said to me, "I didna look where I was putting ma feet."
The dog yapped behind a door. Eric heaved at her feet
as if she were a doll, bending her legs, then we braced
our feet against hers and leant back. She rose up slowly
and I closed my eyes with effort and against the view of her
thighs, white and larded as pastry. A heavy stand of coats
and the Rector's academic gown fell, scoring the paper,
but we had her upright, hanging on the newel post.
All three of us were gasping for breath, then she suddenly

began forward, turned and hauled herself a stair at a time
without looking back.. Eric watched her speculatively for
a moment, then scooped umbrellas and walking sticks
out of the way, roared with laughter. "Thanks, Roy!"
And I was out in .the rain, then navigating the empty town,
lights suspended over narrow streets swaying in the gusts.
He never mentioned the matter again and nor did I.
I had the idea that the death of their only child had left them
unable to speak to each other, tender emotions cauterised.

We were sitting in silence apart from the wind in the chimney.
"Rosalind, Fair Roz! *Ah, mais ou sont les neiges d'antan*?"
he suddenly declaimed, then: "Such tits she had, sonny!"
About the time I was experiencing the same interest in
my mother's arms, Eric and Rosalind, a doctor's daughter
from Musselborough, had got the use of her father's car
and some black market petrol, and were supposed to be
heading for Glasgow to stay with friends, but were
on the way to Berwick-upon-Tweed, for what he called
'a dirty week-end' over the border. They drove off over
the rolling Lothians in the rain, the road empty, signposts
gone, stopping to kiss with their mouths closed, he said,
when the excitement got too much. He disdained 'Smith'
and wrote 'Brown' in the register, then trembled that they
might be asked to show their identity cards…

In fading afternoon light they had walked above the river
on a cold, bright afternoon, talking enthusiastically about
nothing at all, gone back to an austere high tea, then
pints of beer and cigarettes neither were used to in
the blacked-out bar where it seemed to them the other
customers were waiting for them to ascend to their room

and the cold and starchy sheets, of the creaking bed.

They had scarcely thawed out when the air-raid sirens began
their ghost-train howl and the landlord to tap at their door,
offering shelter in the cellars, but they had preferred to stay
where they were, listening to the unsynchronised throbbing
of German aero engines and hugging each other in the dark.
Then he had lain on her and accomplished their ambitions
in a matter of seconds, anxious that his spasm of desire
might have burst his only french letter, then that he might
have somehow not got it right, it had all been so simple, and
never the 'stiff test' he had prepared for all his youth.

They never heard the 'all-clear', he said, and next morning,
bell-less Sunday, they drove back into Scotland, worrying
she was pregnant, stopped by Local Defence Volunteers
on the look out for spies. He recalled clearly, he said, how
they cried out with pleasure, worried someone had heard,
but not when they last saw each other, or lost contact.

Soon after he was in the Navy. He wouldn't talk about it:
"Read ' The Cruel Sea' or something," he said, “then mix in
two hundred boring, blank pages. I suppose she’s a fat
old body like me now, if she’s still alive, unlikely to remember
because I don’t really think that she was a virgin, as I was.”

“My information is Kay has her story with photographs
sold in London. I'll be in the papers tomorrow and, if
the airport’s clear, a planeload of press will arrive

to try you for attempted rape or some such. Roy,
you need to be away on the morning boat. The road
South may no be so bad."

"The bloody media!"

"When I first saw you, you were a big part of it. I used
to envy you: Venice, New York, Paris, and always
that lovely Ainslie Archer to hold your hand and stroke
your fevered brow. Man, what a life, I thought: a wee
Scots dominie teaching Bannockburn in a tattered gown,
And there you were, Roy Porter, the artistic tearaway!"
"It was a sweaty, headlong, fretful fit to hit deadlines
and to keep the ratings up. We hardly said 'good morning',
we hit the ground running so hard each day. There was
no glamour attached to it, Eric, just a kind of hysteria."
"Och, come on. Surely there were occasions?"
There was just one, with Ainslie, in Tokyo, that mattered."
Eric beamed. "I knew it."

"Not much to it, except it was
the beginning of the end of my relationship with Tessa
and the whole TV thing."

"What happened, man?"

"It was the usual long day. The whole crew were dog tired.
When we had eaten a bunch of us got in the lift and Ainslie
and me were the last to get out together. There were a bunch
of happy people to get on, polite as usual, but I put my hand
on the small of her back. Electric. The doors closed,
the corridor was empty, and before I knew, I had bent down
and kissed her. And she kissed me. I don't think we spoke
until about four, when I was asking her why she was sobbing,
and she wouldn't tell me. She said 'Please, you must go now.
That wasn't meant to happen.' She only looked at me once
at breakfast and I knew my life would never be the same.

It hasn’t been.”

“Aye,” he said, “gratified.

10.

The thump on my car roof seemed to hit my solar plexus.
Eddy grinned down with gap-toothed beery pleasure.
"Hey, what you doing down here then? A bloody vigil, is it?"
With the window down the engines boomed and the ship
seemed to roll further. Eddy had baby blankets in one hand,
steadied himself with the other. "Sick?" I shook my head.
"Plenty are. I bet that poor old sod's shaking his head a bit
in his box too."
"Probably. He always seemed so full of life that I don't think
he would have expected to be leaving it."
Eddy considered the idea. "Yeh, but he had a fair innings.”
He thumped the roof again. “Aren’t you making too much of it?
Come on up and have a bevvy with us."

“No thanks.” I said,

and rolled the window up. I was ashamed of the distaste I felt.
’A good innings’! Bloody gabble! But that was all humanity
briefly was. Eric would have laughed at me himself, and he
would have been up there telling dirty jokes at the bar too.
In fact, when I told him that I often took a cabin for some peace,
He said that we all got plenty of that in due course.

He had

a theory that in a Protestant culture, you always ended up
doing what you were second-best at because it involved
greater effort, and work was virtue in exploitative cultures,

which consequently slid into mediocrity and conservatism.
When I looked back, Eric's story seemed an explanation of
why he had ended up, not at the centre of things, but as far
away as it was possible to be, despite all his best efforts
as a political candidate for the Labour Party. (His politics
had been forged in the fires they found coming back safe
after a convoy patrol to find the port area still burning,
the homes of dockers and some sailors blown away.)
He would have been a good politician, a ‘people-person’,
As they say, with a fine sense of moral outrage: not that
he wasn’t a good teacher in his time, and an energetic
rector. Of course, he lost ambition when his boy was killed.
They would have been driving to Oban, where it happened,
when he died too. Grant told me that the rectorship because
two local candidates had, by various means, cancelled
each other out, and they and their supporters had never
forgiven him.

There was something awkward about him at times,
a focus elsewhere as if he picked up signals on another
wavelength; a sort of psychic petit mal. "You' ve gone out
again, Dunbar," I would tell him and he laugh. “I’m fey,
y’ken.” It was something I tried for in his portrait but
could not find. I remember clearly the first time I noticed
him standing rock still amongst walls laid four thousand
years. ago. There was a frost on the shore and the sun setting
in a clear sky against which hundreds of curlews flocked.
"Eric, what are you listening to?"
“The silence where people have been"' he said. "Hood."
Laughed against the dismal criesof the curlews which were
floating, undulating light as chiffon scarves in the dying light.

I had drunk myself sober. He started to laugh as I loaded
the stove. "There was this port, Lowestoft, was it? We were
there for the first time and it was difficult: big tide and river
in spate, cross winds, that kind of thing. We had been running
round after E-boats and it was early morning and I was on
on the bridge, officer-of-the-watch, and there was this fellow
taking his dog for a walk on the mole. You had to reverse
engines at a certain point but I didn't know that then,
I just saw this fellow, I had the glasses on him, suddenly
freeze, then start legging it. I realised we'd got it wrong.
I pointed him out to the Skipper and we stayed afloat but
there was a very expensive noise. That guy, taking his dog
a walk, suddenly understanding that he had a bloody great
destroyer after him ..."

Then, out of a silence, he talked of post-war hope for
socialism from the comradeship of war and dislike
of the officer-class, and how it had been swilled away
by credit into the consumerist trough, with a succession
of bland Tory prime ministers leaning above like pig farmers,
saying things like “You’ve never had it so good.. And now,”
on hot nights in the town, he said, when windows were open,
you could hear people laughing at the same joke about British
Railways and swallowing the same junk and know it echoed
to Land's End and back. “It's a loosing fight we are in
as teachers: they don't want people able to think critically:
1968 cured them of that. They just need us to read the ads.”

Eric was such a sane and sound man, from an academic
culture of the same qualities, and whilst he was a gadfly,
I suppose that in those days I needed one.

11.

At some point I cut my finger on a tin of ham I opened
for sandwiches, whilst he knocked his glass over and
worried about "the wee doggy's paws", although the dog
was not with him. I told him about my father's joy when
I was made an officer, during national service in,
the regiment in which he had been a lance corporal.
The First World War had become like Troy for him
and his British Legion friends and on holidays
he spent much time at war memorials, looking for
ex-comrades, believing that cynical cull 'glorious'.
He cried with pride at my Passing Out parade,
because I won the sword-of-honour. I was stuffed full
of arrogance and shame, got them in a taxi before
they got wind of the sherry party, said when asked that
my parents were 'abroad'.
I had never told anyone of
these despicable and desperate English dissemblings
and it cost me, but Eric made no comment, as I explained
how, having been gazetted to my dad's regiment,
I got home to find a letter, which had been written before
I was commissioned, ordering me to report to Marines,
in Topsham, Devon, cutting my leave to a week.
I had bought the regiment's uniform, or mum and dad had,

I did as I was told and was attached to a squad of
commando recruits, wore a parachute smock and ran
over assault courses and swarmed up and down cliffs,

dangled from helicopters and paddled collapsible boats,
fired weapons that the infantry never saw. For a month
we were confined to barracks. The Adjutant sent for me.
He told me I had been picked for the army rugger trial
but it had been out of the question. "I'm m not clear
what the hell you were supposed to be doing here,"
he said, "but now you can go and do it somewhere else."
I seemed to offend his sense of order. He handed me
the movement order and a rail warrant to London and got
back to his in-tray.

Goodge Street Deep Shelter, was used
to house troops in transit and was a government bolt-hole
in the event of nuclear war. All there was above ground
was a nissen hut behind office blocks used as a mess by
the ancient field officers who ran the place. Below ground
there were the continual reverberations of tube trains and
the clatter of boots of anonymous bodies of troops who
arrived in the small hours and struggled up and down
the spiral iron steps with their kitbags, arriving and leaving
for what was left of the old Empire. In this confusion I was
permanent Orderly Officer, counting heads, light bulbs,
mattresses; checking for damage with pasty-faced NCOs
who lurked in cubby-holes like drab khaki fish in a gloomy reef.
The one job I was given on the surface was to inspect books
in the officers' mess library with an Education Corps sergeant
who called me ' Sl theatrically because he was in his late
twenties with a doctorate in Philosophy and upper-class voice.
Together we cast imaginary books on an imaginary heap
as being beyond repair when, in fact, they had been nicked
by officers and gentlemen in transit. It was problematical,
philosophically, whether the books ever existed. With that
he struck an imaginary match and we stood back shielding

our faces from the flames. I had conducted a Court of Inquiry,
it seemed, and I signed as he indicated. He had filled in
my unit 'S.A.S.', enjoyed my surprise: “Special Air Service!
"Don't worry, Sah. It's a good life if you don' tweaken,"
he said, laughing ridiculously, snapping up an odd salute
and marching back into the bowels of the Earth. I’d no idea
about the S.A.S., guessing it was to do with gliders
because the only member of it I had seen had got glider
pilot's wings. I was flattered to be selected, singled-out.
One evening after dinner I was told to pack and accompany
a draft from The Border Regiment, which had arrived
from Berlin via the Hook-of-Holland and Harwich, been fed
and were to catch the overnight train North from Euston.
They were tired and wanting to get home, settled to sleep
or play cards, smoke. I was to get off before them, at Penrith,
and decided not to sleep for fear of missing the stop.
In the corridor in the small hours, I remember I watched
the country in which I had been born sway and rattle past
in moonlitght. I looked out at the sleeping villages I knew
through flying steam, saw a road which led to where
my parents slept and felt triumphant, my reflection
in the dark glass in uniform like hero of an exciting film.

“Bloody pathetic,” I told Eric, who opened an eye.
“Put on some coffee," he said, "for I' ve to drive home yet."
“I was like putty in their hands.”
“Excellent.”
It needed more snow. Stars sparked. To the North was
the swirl of the Merry Dancers. Far out a boat winked.
Eric came out to pee, went in and farted loudly. I filled
my chest and breathed out steam, scooped snow which
had turned to powder in the frost. I did as he asked.

We sat palming mugs by the stove. "It was like tonight,
full of stars, when I got off the train."
"Christ, this must be
about week three! You can skip the stars, sonny,
if we have to get through two years." He stuck out his lips
and exerted suction towards his coffee. "I was in when
they were needing 'em, not feeding 'em." He shoved his
glasses up and knuckled his eyes, the lines of his face
beginning to sag, his flesh red. Had he told his wife that
he would not be home until late? Was she used to it,
or did she not register such things? I never knew.
I suspected Eric had a secret life few knew about.
He swallowed the last of his coffee and settled.
"I might as well draw you." He folded glasses neatly
in his hand, pinched his nose, glanced at me, and I saw
that he had been hoping it might happen. The drawing
is not bad, considering I was pissed, although that can
help burst past the world's dumb expectations. It hangs
in my studio as I write: a broad face, bald pate, grooved
top lip which was too mobile to let him be as boringly
respectable as being a rector required. Without glasses
he seemed unmasked. I recall the surprise I had to see
the bright intelligent eyes glint as he opened them briefly.
"What d'ye see? Silly old bugger?"
"Scots git having a kip."
"Aberdeen's the place for kippers. Let's hear the rest."
I don' think that the Scots conceal their feelings like
the English can with their cheerful cynicism. Eric had a
tendency to candour, acted from the best motives and
thought others did the same. It made him an easy target
for Kay Kingsford and the likes of Sandy Moncrief.
I think that he knew it but disdained to change his ways.

He said, eyes closed, “Just before you start and I
collapse into drunken slumber, my information is she
has her story with photographs sold in London. It will be
in the papers tomorrow and, if he airport’s clear,
a planeload of press will arrive to try you for attempted rape,
or some such. You need to be away on the morning boat.
The road South may not be so bad."

“What a bugger!”

He was quick to dodge: “Och, you’ll have at least fine hours
sleep, man. That’s no hardship for a butcher’s dog like you!”
“Hah! Me, ‘a butcher’s dog’? You can count the women I’ve
screwed on one hand, but you can stay out late, no bother.”
“No bother,” he sounded dismal, as if his wife did not even
register such things. Marriages are opaque. I imagined them
alone together and supposed a distant courtesy. “It’s these
many years since we slept in the same bed, y’ken. She’ll not
talk about it, to me or anyone else, I guess.” It wasn’t like that
with Tessa. She had complained, often to Ainslie, about my
bad temper. As the need to paint and the demands of the show
conflicted, I had become routinely abusive, cursing her until
she had hysterics. Now I rarely stopped cursing himself.

“That’s enough drawing for one night,” Eric said, “let’s be
getting on with your story of brave pongoes in the desert.
I’ve a home to go to.”

“ In a second.”…’Bu tcher’s dog’!

The islanders believed La Dolce vita began at Inverness;
Eric was sure London was a zone of sensual abandonment
for all, and artists and actors especially and forever prompted
me to confirm it. I was planning to get him down to Camden
so he could meet my neighbours in the studios. We had

mostly moved in when they were built by the borough, and
now were growing middle-aged and respectable together.
They would have been suitably disillusioning for him,
even if he might well have lived up to their expectations.
In deep sleep Eric's features were melting from his skull,
mouth full of dentistry, personality diminished.

I turned the page and woke him. He got up, stamped his feet.
"A bloody death mask!" but I could see that he was pleased.
He slammed sliced bread round ham and spoke round it.
"So, sonny, there you were in Cypress and your parents
receiving pre-written post-cards from Germany at intervals.
Was it for that you got Mentioned-in-Dispatches?"
"We had done six practice jumps. On the seventh
an S.A.S. Major we had not seen before, appeared
from the cockpit and told us that we were selected
from several similar teams for a special task behind
'enemy' lines. Colonel Nasser of Egypt was 'the enemy'.
I knew nothing about him or Egypt, nor did the others.
"Your next jump", he told us, "is not a practice."
He split us into five reconnaissance groups, briefed us
to carry out surveillance by night of the Suez Canal
and its defences, which included looking for mines
on various structures, and movements of troops, artillery
and tanks. These things were given the names of fruits
and vegetables, so our radio messages were 'shopping
lists' and the operation was 'Covent Garden'. Even then,
callow as I was, I sensed the jolly old public school jape
about planning it all. Not that the Major treated it lightly.
He was very solemn and formal, a pink-faced, short man
with a sports master's glow of rude health. "What you don't
do," he said, looking round each face as we huddled round,

“is get bloody caught. Right? No heroics. Okay? You hide
out in the desert and you use your vehicle only at night
and then on no sealed roads. We don’t want anybody
motoring about because they got bored: okay? You should.
Now have a look at your maps and memorise what’s marked
on the flimsy, which you will leave behind. Same with code.
Those will be collected from you. Right? Finally, keep your
equipment sand-free at all times, especially weapons and
the tape-recorder, which you will use to record and speed up
all signals. I don’t want you to fire a shot in anger, but I do
want you to be able to if it comes to it. Now, each patrol,
in a couple of minutes I will ask for any questions. Mr Porter.”
He beckoned “Now your team has a special task, okay?
The big boys want some subversives bumped off.” We stood
some distance apart. He looked up at me intently. “I’ve
actually been watching your progress and I’m impressed, right?
Now it’s nothing hard. A quick in and out job. The code word
Is 'Ascot' is, then a time/date number backwards. Got it?
Your flimsy shows the target. Okay? Jolly good." I saluted
and he said ”We tend not to do this on active service. Snipers.”
He answered a couple of questions crisply, said “Good luck”,
went back where he came from and I never saw him again.

I asked if there were any further questions, like a fool,
and immediately revealed how little I knew about Nasser,
although it turned out that nobody did at that point in time.
The change of note of the engines and descent to low level
over the sea then occupied us. We whistled over an empty
coast, which someone recognised as Israel, and another
noticed the shadow of an identical aircraft behind us as we
flashed across the dunes of what must have been the Sinai.
Then it went dark. The invasion was still five weeks away,

although we had no idea of all that. At the time, all that I
was worried about was a soft, unapposed landing,
then a successful supply drop. Nothing went wrong.

By dawn we were camouflaged, champ tracks erased,
within eyesight of the canal in a scrubby wilderness.
All day we sweated and scratched bites, the four of us
watching a quadrant of nothing each, none of us talkative.
It would have been the same for the other groups dropped.
I never saw any of them again, nor heard them on the radio.
We watched canal and road movements by day; at night
blacked up and checked bridges and culverts on our own,
covering our sector of ten miles, but not systematically,
so if we were seen, we did not provoke curiosity in a place
or near it. It was a weird time in my life, crawling and creeping
in the small hours whilst big ships towered with lights and
pulsed, glittered like mobile fairs. We moved our base nightly,
digging in and covering our tracks, dozing and suffering from
sunburn when shadows shifted. One of the men, snub-faced
Roberts from Wales, forever had an eye on the bird life and I
had to caution him because of his over-use of sun-catching
binoculars. His enthusiasm caught me in that tedious routine.
I too was cautioned by my corporal, a taciturn fisherman from
Penzance who I subsequently saw in a newspaper photograph
as a parish priest baptising a baby. I never knew where Clarke
came from: "Ascot, Mister Porter," he said too loudly
with the earphones on. "Ascot tomorrow at twenty hundred."

I had done a recce. The address was a mud brick dump,
with at least three generations living in it, at the end of
a road which became a track into the scrubby hills.
It suited us well. Three old cars were parked. Inside there

was argument and some kind of meeting. It was simple.
Roberts covered us and Corporal Harroway and I jumped
like basket ball players, had a grenade through every window
and in the back yard before the first exploded. I was laughing.
It seemed exhilarating, like a drill expertly accomplished
until the screaming began: a child, a couple of women.
I hurled phosphorus to start a fire and make smoke,
then someone ran out and two of us fired at the same time
as Roberts We ran forward and emptied our stens
through doorways. Roberts hit the cars. It took two minutes.

I found myself kneeling by the man we had shot.
His jaw had gone. His tongue jerked in a bloody pulp
and gurgle but his eyes stared amazed at me.
He was my age. I killed him. One shot. It smashed
the back of his head off and whined away off the ground
A car exploded. In the flames I saw ants already busy
with his blood. His rifle was a pathetic,home-made affair.
We sprinted from the screams and shouts, the flames,
scampered as if we had been scrumping apples.

We were well up the track when a shot was fired,
then a couple more. Clarke had the engine running
and we took off. I had the stink of the man on me:
raw meat; shit, codite. His astonished dark eyes
on the barrel of the gun as I pulled the trigger…
his top teeth rotten and long red tongue jerking.
I spewed, hung out as we batted along. I've still got
The scars on my cheek from the thorn bushes.
The others ignored me.
"Loss of face?" Eric suggested.
We looked at each other for a long moment. His sarcasm

was the least that I deserved. I emptied the bottle but he hardly touched his, I discovered in the cold morning.

"Then the whole bloody invasion, ‘the biggest cock-up since Mons’, as the army probably still says: the tanks took the wrong turn and pissed off into the desert instead of grabbing the whole canal before the U.N. deadline."
I got up and put my forehead on the window. Snowflakes drifted through the light. “So there you are, Eric, I was ‘Mentioned-in despatches for the pointless execution of about twenty or more innocent men, women and children. When the front live arrived we were at the side of the main road, they were all pink-kneed and we were bronzed heroes. We swaggered into Division HQ to general approval and I was posted to the Trucial Oman Scouts up the Persian Gulf, and spent my time bird-watching as a captain, to dad’s joy, and I never saw any of my chaps again. Another year and I was out, a drunken art student having screaming nightmares.”

"Och, I can recall Eden pewling on TV and all the time the Russians were ripping the guts out of Hungary and Communism too. We'd walk for miles, pushing Angus, worrying away about nuclear war.” He sat in silence, spoke as if compelled. "If there' ssomething to be done, do it, man. Get it done. Don’t hesitate, put it off, do it. You’ve a rare gift and damn you if you waste it. “
He stared earnestly through his spectacles. “Same With that Ainsley Archer.”

"What about her?"

"There will be few on the island who do not know about you and her."

“And they’d be misinformed.

I do my best, Eric, to keep her out of my head.
If I don't..." I threw my hands away.
"You're pining for her.
That's it, is it? Not for Tessa."
"Ainslie was an obsession.
When she was around, I lost myself, if I didn't turn my back."
"Was?"
"Is."
"Anima," Eric said. "She's your White Goddess,
your muse, your Belle Dame sans Merci, all that romantic
agony! Christ, I thought your lot had it all under control...
I thought that it was rumpty-tumpty in 'Swinging London',
and no bother, but here you are, for fuck's sake, 'alone
and palely loitering.'"
"I wasn't alone, I was with Tessa,
and she ran to Ainslie for sympathy and I lashed out
that guy and got the sack and pissed off and she moved
in with Ainslie and then the story was they were at it…
I went round the twist. There were photographs of them
holding hands, my ex and the woman I loved."
"Aye,"
he said. "Not funny. I canna get hy head round it all.
Were they in a lesbian relationship?"
"That question
got me into the funny farm with my head connected
to the mains. When I got out, I found they were living
in the Positano house. This is as far as you can go
in the opposite direction. Do you see why I was furious
when that woman turned up? There's no escape."
"Well there is if you catch that bloody boat!'

At the door he shook my hand. "So you won't fuck

and you can't paint, Roy Porter, Mentioned-in-
Patches. What are we going to do about that?"
He turned away laughing, the snow clean in the light.

I was in bed before I heard his car start down by the shop,
drive away cautiously inland. He had woken them as he
floundered and dug snow with his shovel from the wheels..
They told me, after he was dead, his cursing made them
laugh, but they always embroidered. He had driven himself
the twenty miles on treacherous roads to the hospital
because of chest pains from a myocardial infarction.

12.

I got out of the car and went stiff-legged, palming the roofs,
to the gents. On the way back I looked through a porthole
at the North Atlantic behaving itself and the sky going from
the lightest ultramarine at the horizon to a near violet zenith.
I did a few 'knees-bends' when I got back, touched my toes.

The forecast, the morning after drinking with Eric, had been
'Fair Isle, Forties': Southwest seven to eight, gusting nine;
visibility four hundred yards; falling.' Waiting to cast off,
Watching gulls careering down into still air from tumult
beyond the hill over the town, I listened to the radio
blasting hysterical reels, under the weather to start with,
staring grimly at the town, the Academy above it,
the rectory next door where Eric would, I thought,
be lying warm. In wet, slabbed, narrow streets, signs

swung and squealed, then slowly the town began to move.

I had discovered that I loathed the mindless, murderous,
cosmological waste of the sea, the first time I went to a concert.
Tessa insisted. I viewed concerts like golf clubs or fox hunting,
gatherings for neither music nor sport. It was on the prom.
at Exmouth: Beethoven's First, the Bournemouth Symphony.
It overwhelmed me. At the interval I burst out, eyes streaming,
crossed the road and two fingered the sea on behalf of humanity.
Tessa, seeing my tears, thought I was sick. I let her. I hung on
the railing whilst she patted my back. As I was almost forty
and she was twenty-five, I tended to accept her sympathy only
when I did not need it.

The ferry was smashing into waves.
The island 'news' boomed. I got the last headline: 'Articles in
yesterday's London papers claim island resident, Roy Porter,
the artist, brutally beat up an American reporter at his croft.
Photographs reveal heavy bruising to the lady. Mister Porter
could not be contacted this morning and is thought to have left
for the South, whilst Sergeant Black says the police have heard
nothing about the matter. The American journalist is leaving
on this morning's flight.' I stayed where I was as we seesawed
out to sea. At least the police had no interest in matters.

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It was four hours driving to Inverness, dusk when I arrived.
There was Kay's beautiful bottom with handprints defined.
It made my heart beat. There was the story of my life,
or versions of it. All agreed that it had collapsed in ruins
when Tessa left me for Ainslie; that I was finished as an artist
and, after treatment for depression, was a bitter recluse
living on a remote island.

Next morning at Crewe I backed

off the train into balmy Spring, which advances, botanists say,
at four miles an hour from the Alpine passes, and had reached
Cheshire, where I was born. I was eating a bacon butty,
and reading I had disappeared, Kay had returned to California,
and 'A personal friend of Porter said it was not true that he
had jumped of a cliff, but was en route for Italy'; that 'Artmart '
claimed to have no knowledge of Kay's movements: 'she was
freelance anyway'; and 'Porter's ex-partner, contacted at his
house in Italy, said she certainly was not expecting him.
Two papers said she was pregnant. Nobody had been able
to contact Ainslie Archer in L.A. where she was producing
'The Lives of the Artists,' a new TV series. The broadsheets
had nothing and another Tory M.P. had been found trouserless,
which was likely to require earnest consideration…but there
were the old photographs of Ainslie and Tessa again. I got out
and started driving before I could seize up with consternation
yet again…and the idea of Tessa pregnant was strange relief:
somebody else's baby - that was something that Ainslie
had not been able to do for her...If it was true.

The morning was bright and I knew the quiet roads,
enjoyed the hawthorn hedges coming green and dwarf oaks
around fields as flat and green as snooker tables,
the old brick farm buildings with their hooped iron fences.
Learning something about my affairs, escaping the press,
being in Cheshire again on a Spring morning, made me feel
friskier than I had been for a while. I telephoned my Mum:
"It's all a pack of lies, made up by this slut to cover the fact
that she stole some drawings of mine." She breathed heavily.
"I can't abide that sort of filth."

"They would make a scandal out
of the Last Supper."

"It's devil's work."

"Oh, that's it, Mummy." She would never openly speak of what had happened,
she had no language for it, but her ability to allude to enormity via religious metaphor was considerable.

"The truth will out."
"Not via the gutter- press, it won't. That's not it's job. It's job
is to get an audience for its horrible adverts, and keep people
salivating on the right lines politically." I wanted to change
the subject. She had read the same tabloid everyday forever
and knew that the fuss was really about Tessa and Ainslie's
'relationship'. She could cope no better than me with that.
"As soon as something else crops up, it will all blow away."
I could hear the family clock wind striking in the hall.

"When are we going to see you?" She asked in the plural
although my dad had been years dead. "In an about an hour."
"The bed's not aired." She would not easily display pleasure. She had spent up on hip surgery but still needed a walking frame. I had expected bitter complaint against the surgeon
and its absence made me realise that she had enjoyed herself
in hospital, where she was fussed over and had all kinds of
people to talk to. I had tried to set her up in a retirement
village where she would not be lonely, but she would not hear
of it as she could not take her cat. "The bed's damp, you know." "You don't want to see me then, Mum?"

"Get off with your bother.
I'll put a hot water bottle in and open the window. Bring a loaf."

The bed was always ready. It was a sway-bellied, 1930s mesh
affair with the patina showing signs of too much elbow grease,
like much of the furniture she was so proud of and which ended

dumped for want of a bid. It was a year since I had slept there.
We always found something to argue about in lieu of my failed
‘marriage’, the real contention. ‘They should both roast in hell’
she would hiss, if I gave her the chance to show her love.

Dad and myself got on well without saying much to each other.
Once retired he was happier than he had ever been,
contemplating his goldfish or on the trail of slugs and snails;
or ‘just sitting like a garden gnome’, as she hissed to me.
His garden resembled a trim, municipal park: all right angles.
As a child I thought I lived in the country, and there certainly
had been rabbits, which my dad, proud of his Home Guard
‘marksman’ badge, air-gunned if they got in his garden.
There were fields with cows we raided at dusk with a bucket
for manure. At dawn patrol in Autumn we went after mushrooms
and it was then, when the roads were quiet; dew made diamond
webs; foxes left rabbits’ intestines neat as ammonites,
that the myth was easily believed. As I grew the fields shrank,
urban noise never ceased, and Manchester overtook us.
Flying at night above it, glittering lights spread from Oldham
to Wilmslow, yet it was still a shock to stop for bread,
and what Mum called ‘fancies’, and realise I stood where once
I lain and twiddled a worm at sticklebacks in green depths
left by the last Ice Age. In our road bushes had become trees;
front gardens were paved to park cars, and wooden garages
had turned brick with bedrooms above. Not our house!
The grand gates which my father had made as I pushed them
were buckling under their own weight, and paint bubbled.
I drove in. She had the door open as I was closing them again.
“Close ‘em tight,” she called for the benefit of the neighbours,
“Or dogs get in. You can’t trust a soul around here nowadays.”

I was her boast. Dad had helped build the houses and so he
bought one cheaper than the clerks, salesmen, draughtsmen;
now it was managers, engineers, and teachers who triggered
her curtain twitching. I put my finger to my lips. “Sod ‘em,”
she said, kissing and hugging me theatrically on the doorstep.

I parked on the drive. The garage was still bunged full of jumble.
My dad’s bicycle still had cycle clips hooked on the handlebars,
and his tools were on the bench under which I played with off-
cuts in the scented shavings and sawdust while his plane chirred or his saw ripped
and he whistled through his teeth.
The rest was boxes with old curtains, rolls of carpet, tins of screws and nails, old paint
cans and brushes, rusting tools.

It started to rain. I unpacked and Mum was still on the doorstep,
chewing at nothing, looking this way and that. I had to wait with
my bags getting wet whilst she manoeuvred her frame. Her lips were cold meat and
she smelt of B.O. and talcum, her fingers were pork sausages on her chromium frame.
Until Dad died
she was all bustle and management, now I slow-marched down
the hall behind her, feeling the spring in the floorboards, looking
at the familiar with my usual turmoil and sense of distance.
“Well Mum”, I told her as she waded along in front of me,
“you are looking well” She stopped for a breather. “Get off with you.”
” No, really.” She was heading for the scullery where steam billowed. Whenever I
went back I wondered why memory always expanded on truth. The past ballooned.
The house was minute. Was there a way of deflating it? Death, I thought,
watching her fumbling with the kettle. Her huge, marmalade cat waited by the door
and she engaged it in conversation. The place reeked of cat piss. I opened the back
door and it left.

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The sitting room armchair bore her imprint like an astronaut’s

contour couch. On the small table by it was a photograph
of Dad and me, when I was six or so, flying a kite, both of us
looking up, happy as larks. On the wall opposite the hearth
was a photograph of me as a Captain in the Trucial Oman
Scouts, 'wearing a tea-towel', as she said. My heart brimmed.
"Come on," she called, "You can carry this." On a tray were
mugs of milky tea. "You've not lost your touch, our Mum."
I took it through and put hers on her table, sat down with mine.
Above the mantle was a painting of mine from student days,
what she called 'a local scene, storm brewing' which had gone
under the avenues, drives, banjoes, crescents of progress.
There was polish on the canvas. I told her she would polish
the cat if it would just hold still and I would have put my foot
through the canvas if I could. She said that she had willed it
to her sister to stop that. Praying brass hands held letters
and her football coupon on the wall by her armchair next to a
twee calendar of her favourite flowers 'ollyocks'. The hatch
burst open. There was a plate of fig biscuits which, as a boy,
I pigged out on if I could. "Great," I said, biting one.
"Three." She instructed, knuckled from table to draining board,
caught her breath, then began her journey to the sitting room.
I switched on the huge TV I had bought and its colours bloomed
hideously. I knelt to moderate them. "And you can leave that
alone too, Last time you came it took me weeks to get it right."
She slow motioned in, turned on the hearthrug and backed
like the ferry into her armchair. She was over eighty and
determined that no one would make a 'battery hen' out of her.
She got her way, did not wake one morning a year later,
although nobody knew for almost a week. "There y'are.
A nice manly cup: mouse trotters, just as you always liked it."
She pressed crumbs into her finger from the plate, licked,
chomped, regarding me through horn-rimmed spectacles

which she had worn forever. Conversation was a ritual.
'I had lost weight. She hadn't. Mrs Ball, Meals-on-Wheels,
whose Richard I had gone to grammar school with and now
had a very, very good job in insurance, and three children,
although one was a bit queer, had booked for Italy in summer.
(Had I sold my house there yet? What a waste of money.
If Tessa was carrying someone's child, she should get out.);
the neighbours' obscene children were driving her mad;
(Didn't I wish I had some?); her sister's daughter had three
by two 'husbands' and was years younger than me; were there
any daffodils out in Scotland?'

Outside Marmaduke sat on a rustic seat under a rustic arch my father had made and stared at me with yellow malevolence. The climbing roses looped and trailed, dripped in light rain; the trellis collapsed, rusting nails and golden fungi in the wood the only colour, apart from the orange cat, in the bolted garden. "And your job, your teaching job, how are you doing with that?" Her question took me by as much surprise as my answer: "I'm giving it up."

"You're not."

"Yes I am." She stared at me like Marmaduke.
To her the teaching was all that made sense of my life.
The Headmaster had told them to keep me at school,
when they could have done with my wages, then I refused
to go to university when I got out of the army, and for her,
for them both, Art was a con trick not work; painting was
something kids did: not serious. She had always expected
my career to collapse in ruins. It could still make me mad.
That wasn't why, without any thought, I decided to give up
teaching. I could read her face with accuracy. I said:
"It's nothing to do with all this. I've been drifting too long.
It's time to make decisions, and that's the first." It pleased her.
I was being sensible at last. She smiled and nodded

"You've plenty of money, me laddo, so I should like to see you settled down', she meant married, "and doing something more regular. I can't see how you can go on like you do." Her hair, which she still wore in a bun on her nape, had gone grey, but her blue eyes were as sharp as ever. She had a button face but I was a horse, like Dad. "Give us your mug." The tea was Indian Red and bitter. "Do you take sugar nowadays?" I shook my head. "You used to take three spoons when you was a lad." "I used to chew gum and ride a bicycle." She liked me to be cheeky and it gave her the excuse to reached under the cloth on her table and pull out the newspaper open at a half-page photograph of Kay's bottom. "This is your handiwork, is it?" "I suppose so."

"And it's lost you your job."

'No, it hasn't, Mum. I'll resign. I'm just making a routine where I don't need one." "Look, lad, do as you think fit, I'm past worrying. I'm not past worrying about *this* kind of thing though. You're not going kinky are you?"

"I'm not! Christ, what am I supposed to do? She forced her way in and started taking pictures...Drunk, she was, or on drugs or both. I wasn't having any. You don't have to, you know. If she had been a male, I'd have bashed her bloody face in!" Mum chewed and nodded, liked me being fierce. "Nowadays you're supposed to stand there whilst women beat you up. Well I'm not having that crap. And she had a couple of blokes with her, except they were so pissed they crashed in the ditch." "Don't get so upset, love. Gloria says you're a woman-hater. She loves all this stuff." She tapped the paper: "Once the darling of galleries and TV who became a long-haired recluse after a mental breakdown when his career and marriage collapsed and lived as a hermit…"

"Stop it, Mum." Her delivery seemed to confirm what Eric called 'tabloid totalitarianism'. She held it in front of her face, stumbled on to shame me, then lowered it. "That true? Lady Muck in the family way?" I snatched the paper, read for myself again. "Your hair's not long," she said. "I've seen it longer." Tessa had found her mutually alien.

"Tessa's probably not pregnant. Yesterday it was implied I might have jumped off a cliff."

"Never saw that. I'd have worried."

"That's why I came to see you."

"You fibber! You wanted a bolt hole, didn't you?"

"Bit of both, Mum." She laughed, head back.

"I don't know, you can't believe a soul."

"You can believe me, Mummy."

"Can I? Well just what happened…" she picked up the paper and waved it, "she arrived in this state?"

"I didn't take her knickers off."

"Everybody will think that you did."

"It's all bloody rubbish to conceal that she nicked some drawings of mine."

"Did you tell the police?"

"Hopeless…Any way, I didn't realise until next day."

"What are they worth?"

"Two, three hundred, I suppose." I felt ashamed; she saw it. It made her more eager to know it all.

"The lot?"

"Each."

"Each! How many?"

"She ruined several more with her bloody great feet."

"Roy."

"What?"

"How many?"

"Half-a-dozen maybe."

"And you've not informed the police?"

"No. It's waste of time."

"Eighteen hundred quid a waste of time?"

Here, turn the telly on Three. It's 'The Old and the Bold'".

We had both been glancing at the screen at tactical moments. Now we stared at a cartoon of violent animals. "You want your head read," she suddenly said. "You've more money than sense. Get on that telephone." She stared ahead, chewing hard and rummaging around the cushion of her chair, face red.

"And what were they drawings of exactly? Our Gloria says they were fruity."

"She should know. Quite a lot were Neolithic Venuses."

"What are they when they're at home?"

"Pear shaped."

"You're not going *funny* again?" It was like a slap, stunning. "She's not worth it; never was, silly little madam. Don't let yourself be put upon. That was your father's trouble. He was

like a big girl's blouse at times, and you take after him.

Secretive. Won't talk. You let 'em walk all over you. Speak up!"

I said nothing. "Look how you let that Tessa stay in that house,

rent-free, and it's worth thousands. What if she is pregnant?

Can't you have done with her now? You owe her nothing.

She chased you, not the other way round. Then off she goes

with that other vile slut!"

"Leave it alone, Mum."

"No, I won't.

I can't stand by and see you suffer. You was always a sucker

so far as women were concerned and you're still at it. Forty!"

And then: "What's it got to do with Gloria, that's what I want

to know? You would be better off keeping her out of it."

"Yes,
I was trying to in a way. Gloria was the cause of my first sense
of sexual humiliation."

"What are you telling me?"

"Oh, don't worry. You were there too."

"I say, you're balmy, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not. I walked in here one day and found her feeding
Jean. What was I? Four, five? I had never seen a woman's breast before and hers
was huge. I didn't know babies sucked
milk from them. I stood on the rug there with my face burning
and you both kept me there, asking daft questions. I hated it!"

"What a wicked thing to say. It was just a bit of a joke, that's all.
I can remember you blushing, but you ran out very quick. It's…
It's ridiculous…'Neo lithic Venus'? 'Sexual humiliation'? Roy,
love, you were always the most sensitive little lad underneath."

I got up and walked to the bay window. Hello adolescence!
Rain fell from clouds as big as continents, high tops shining.
I wanted to yell at her; but I clamped my teeth tight and when.
I turned she was engrossed. The American actors stood in
a line, twiddled their fingers by their sides and talked slowly
to show they were in California or that they were short of script.
I turned back to the garden. The cat had gone. The sound cut.

"Always been your downfall. You can't leave them alone:
short skirts, flashing her legs, and flattering chatter, that Tessa."
She had the volume back up, stabbing the remote control.
I stepped and turned the set off but she still stared at it.

"Do you want me to give you eighteen hundred? Is that it?"

" I don't. Get out of the road, I'm missing it. I don't want your money. What good is it to
me, lad? Stuck here, day after day."

"Well what's this fuss?"

"I get sick of you maungering around.
You're in your forties and you're still messing about. What's up?
What's a matter with you? Isn't it time you settled down like
everyone else, got a proper job?"

"I'm an artist!"

"Oh yes? And
what's that when it's at home? A miserable man hanging about
fancying himself; paintings no one can make head nor tail of."
"Well I don't do it any more. It sold well. It was what they wanted.
I could have stuck doing that. It isn't just about making money.
If you've a talent then..."

"That Tessa agreed with me, didn't she?
Soon scooted, she did." She stretched for my arm but I moved.
"Let's leave her out of it, shall we? Why do you always start this? You'd see more of me if..."

"Because you're my only child and I sit and try to understand the way you carry on and I can't. What are you after? You've plenty of money; you was famous once; but now all you seem to do is hang about the back streets of London or count dead birds up in what's-its-name, miserable as sin. When it said you might have killed yourself, it's an awful thing for a mother to say, but I realised I had been half-expecting it. I was. And I thought, 'well he's out of his misery'. She shook her soft jowls sadly at me. "You'll end up in that stone hut in the Artic, a hermit surrounded the stinking corpses of birds."

"I don't collect them, I just count them, and I have friends there, the best friend I have. Eric Dunbar is Rector of
the Academy." I could see that she like that. "He often comes bird-counting and we meet once or twice a week. The only thing is that he is nearing retirement and he'll be off South, I expect."
"Yes, well he's got his head screwed on the right way then.
Turn that telly back on and get off with you and your bother.
All that money and you're as miserable as sin."

She once worked out that I earned more than my dad's life earnings from one New York show and it galled her Puritan spirit; and mine. "Put it back on, I shall miss the finish."

Next door somebody coughed. The house was semi-detached; our voices had been raised. Soon her face was reflecting the dull passions on the screen. She wasn't a fool, my mother. She'd managed our lives well on what little my Dad earned.
I had never been without school uniform, books and sports kit.
I was good at games but not aggressive enough to excel.
They never watched me play, out-of-place at the grammar.
And I was an enigma, a big cuckoo. My Dad would sit in the greenhouse and smoke his pipe 'against aphids' when Mum
and me got going. He loathed embarrassments. I only went home with Tessa a few times but I noticed that the greenfly copped it. With Mum it was up front, no messing. She wouldn't let Tessa call her 'Mum': "You make me sound like Her Majesty the Queen." It made me laugh but then calling her 'Mrs Porter' kept Tessa on the outside. Mum had the English class business sussed. When I came back from the army talking 'la-di-dah',
as she might have, but did not, put it, I knew she was as aware as I was of how out-of-place that clipped military speech, with its infantilisms, seemed in our estate. She grinned at my pork-pie hat and white riding mac. I was wearing them one day when I was an officer-cadet, talking to another member of the rugger club, when I met my Dad in the street in his old mac and trilby with a jay's feather in the band. He had been to collect the dole. We both stopped short, speechless. I introduced him; we all three spoke at once. Dad offered us a minto from a dusty tube he dug from his pocket. I refused but my friend accepted.
Dad was ashamed of himself and so was I. Sometimes I remember such gems from English provincial life as I am falling asleep and groan myself awake. Tessa would laugh. Her grandfather had built some office blocks in London at the turn
of the century and that was that: home counties smug and Betjamanesque forever, I said, attack being the better part of defence. In those days, when playing 'prolier than thou' was still acceptable amongst some, she didn't demur.

I stared at the coal fire in which, like the rest of humanity before television, I saw visions. On Saturday nights we sat in firelight and listened to plays on the wireless. Sometimes I was allowed to arrange papers on the old mantle so ships and castles flickered on the ceiling. Burbank had saved us all such efforts. Two hundred people, including Ainslie Archer, homogenised attitudes and values, modelled emotions, and universalised American 'normality' for the whole cocacolonised world.

Mum had fallen asleep, head hanging, breath loud, and a new cast stood in line, the women's hair stiff as helmets, the men clean shaven in a definitive way, and all of them possessed
of more teeth, of bigger teeth and whiter teeth, than anyone might previously have thought possible. I still could not believe that Ainslie could sustain herself in that adolescent culture for long, no matter what they paid her. There would come a time when her amusement at all that awful earnestness and immoderate lack of irony would flip into distaste, and then
watch out! She was a tough Aussie from Tassy, with First Class Honours, an astonishing memory, spoke German, French, Spanish and Italian, could read a page as quickly as she could turn it. Sometimes she was just another bossy bitch proving she was twice as good, then wham! She was serene as any goddess, elegant as she fronted the camera or an audience;
or me. Her eyes would charm ducks off ponds, Mum might have said, or, perhaps, turned men to stone. From the start
had I tried not to look at her. One night in Cannes we worked past midnight and she offered me a lift back to the hotel.
When we got there I put my fingers to her cheek in thanks
but she caught them and kissed my hand. I stood astonished
and watched her lights disappear.

Next day it was as if nothing
had happened. Only later did I wonder why she was staying
elsewhere and whose car she had borrowed. Her secret life
chilled me. It was self-preservation which kept me away.

I had not consciously thought of that spellbound time for years,
except as one of my involuntary groans, dropping off to sleep.

13.

I woke, legs stretched out on the hearthrug, content.
Mum slept, head back, mouth a cavern. I wish I had drawn her:
rings embedded in her swollen fingers, copper wristband tight.
I had loved the routines of my childhood with her, watching
her at the dolly tub, bashing the posser, steam billowing,
smelling like boiled potatoes or L.M.S. engines under the bridge.
Tuesday was ironing unless it was raining, when clothes draped
on horses before the fire. Wednesday morning was cleaning;
The Women's Co-op Guild in the afternoon. On Thursday
we walked to the village: 2470 was her Co-op number.
Fridays were best: Stockport market, where we met her sister,
Gloria, and a cousin or two, bought our oatcakes for the week
in the covered market where pheasants, rabbits, partridges hung
and dripped, all brought in that morning early from
the Derbyshire moors or moss green Cheshire fields to
butchers whose knives were as worn as their wooden blocks.
I would get an ice cream cornet and a Dandy to read on the bus,
one or the other or both making me 'bilious', as Mum said if
somebody expected me to stand up so they might sit down.

Bus again in the afternoon to Wilmslow, walking over fields
holding her hand where now houses stood, streets ran.
Grandma lived in the kitchen behind the family wallpaper
and paint shop. There was a parlour upstairs we never went to.

Mum unpacked her basket with the gossip on the big table
and Grandma nodded, frowned, tut-tutted. At me she smiled,
her white hair always full of sunshine, and gave me sweets.
She's in the churchyard down the hill with her husband,
the inscription like the rest back to the Seventeenth Century:
'plumber and glazier of this parish and his wife...'
They had not approved of my dad, I didn't know why.
He never went, except for funerals, weddings, christenings.
His week was simple: work. At six I heard his bicycle ticking
from the garage, snow, rain or shine, cap at an angle,
carpenter's bast hung across the handlebars making him
cycle wide-kneed. He would be glad for overtime, cycle miles,
take me on his lap after tea. In his waistcoat pockets were
cigarette stubs which reeked, stubs of flat carpenters' pencils
I tried to steal unsuccessfully, I already like to draw
and in his best waistcoat, the gold hunter he had from his
grandfather, via his father, with a gold chain which looped to
strained buttons. It came to me when he died, though it too
had given up the ghost.

Dad played bowls at The Legion
on Saturday afternoons but rushed home to check his coupon
against the soccer results in flustered silence. He never won.
Mum let him swear, under his beery breath, only then. After tea
it was 'Saturday Night Playhouse', then holy singing that he loved
from some empty cathedral up and down the land. Sundays
were 'the Sabbath' when nothing happened except Sunday School,
when Mum and Dad had a siesta, and a family walk later.
It was hard to believe that it was the same room, same house,
same country even. I couldn't remember grieving for my Dad.
He always said he was 'on borrowed time' after the Somme.
I kept at the painting, worked harder, and some saw a new
carelessness in it which they took to be careless.

Mother's hand on my shoulder woke me. "Wake up.
The fire's out. Pull the curtains. Valerie's left Ken.
I'll just feed Marmaduke. You didn't get much sleep
on that train, but I've no excuse. We missed lunch"
'The News' came on. "Turn that rubbish off," she said
as she waded out. I got up, made some scornful-eyed
minister swallow his words. I shook up the embers and
put lumps of coal on from the scuttle, pulled the curtains.
The lights were on across back gardens at what had been
Jeans's, Balls's, Walsh's, Cooper's. Rain still fell, clouds lower.

Outside the city growled. I always remembered silence,
maybe cows lowing at night or an express rattling past like
that on which I had travelled to join the S.A.S. I went and leant,
watched her tin-opening for the cat which purred and arched.
I felt perfectly still, pacific, content, yawning there. She forked
the glutinous cat food, gave me the dish. I put it down for her.

"What about fish and chips? I'm not supposed to, y'know.
Haven't had them for years. We always had 'em on Guild trips,
Mrs. Jackson, Mrs. Hines and me: straight off the chara into
'The Lobster Pot' for a good feed, then three deck chairs
on the pier for a couple of hours, then a good sing-song
on the way back." She shook her head. "Those were the days!
I'm the only one left now. Do you want some money?"

I borrowed an umbrella and walked in the dusk self-consciously,
as if the ghosts of my youth watched me from the windows
of houses which had housed several other families since they
had left, retired to Colwyn Bay, or to the cemetery. I had known
everybody in the adjacent roads and known all about them too,

via Mum. The place was anonymous: I peopled it with ghosts.

She ate from the newspaper and laughed as if it was a treat,
lips glistening, grabbing up chips. Flames flourished as we
sat with the instant coffee that I made, the initial skirmish over;
we were friends. "There's a bottle of brandy in the sideboard.
I'm not supposed to have that either, but I like a drop in my coffee of a night
sometimes." It made her smack her lips.
"It's a real treat, this is, even if I do have heart-burn all night."
"You must get lonely."
"At times, but you get good at sitting
and thinking things over. You don't want to start feeling sorry, you just get on with life
while you can."

The cat leaped from nowhere onto her lap. She shrilled as if it
was deaf: "Keep Mummy warm, don't you, darling?" It purred
hysterically as it made itself comfortable. She never had a cat
until my Dad died. She never thought of calling Dad 'Darling'.
"I should like to see you settled before I go. I didn't like Tessa
all that much but now you've got nobody you'll just go all morbid
or get into more of this silly work." She jabbed the newspaper.
"Our Gloria is revelling in it. What *did* you do it for?" Her tone
entreated, she looked at me tenderly. "You are a funny lad.
I don't know where you get it from. this 'artistic temperament':
not my lot and your Dad's could hardly draw their wages.
As I say, you're like him in one respect: you need someone
to look after you: those trousers is all stained, and you should
sling those old brothel-creepers away for a start. Nobody would
think you had two ha'pennies to rub together. A 'Hermit',
they called you in the paper. You need a nice sensible woman
to keep you up to the mark. All Tessa did was wind you up
until the spring broke; that's all some women are capable of,

and good riddance, I say." She burped, chin down. "Oops."

"No, 'highly-strung, not like us', you father would say.
He was so proud of you, you know. 'See my lad last night'?
Upset on one job when they wouldn't believe him. He was
hoping that you would come home so that you could give him
a lift to work and do them in the eye." She looked at me.
"He never said anything to me. He was a lovely man, Dad.
I am ashamed of myself."

"That was Lady Muck's fault."

"Leave her out of it."

"I used to wipe your bum. I'm your mother!"

I went out into the scullery, took a cloth to the draining board
Dad had made out of wood which had turned soft with damp.
The oval mirror above the sink was his shaving mirror.
I pulled aside the lace curtain in the small window and saw
his razor was still there in its worn box with a brush on top,
the ivory handle turned yellow.

He never shaved in the bathroom.

He always lit his first cigarette before he started and they
curled smoke from the shelf's edge. There were several burns
in the paintwork which he had painted over. He painted
everything in reach when he got going: the frame of the mirror
had been white, then yellow, apple green, then mushroom
from mixing together all the unused paint he had in his shed.
In his last years he had been unable to leave paint in a tin,
hammered nails bent, a dozen or more, to hold a horseshoe
over the door. He was always doing odd jobs as a 'surprise'
whilst she was out, but really because she wasn't there.
He was bored. He always wanted to please her and seemed
to have no idea that what he did was codged, tatty, unwelcome.

The garden was full of rustic trellis rotting and collapsing under
the roses and honeysuckle which grew furiously for him.
He used daft voice to whisper to horses and cattle, was part of
farming lore in his county further to the South. He had taken me
once to meet an uncle at the Whitchurch cattle ring. He joked
that he was 'keeping him warm' in hope of his farm but all we got was a new lawn
mower and a bicycle for Mum. All I recalled was my uncle's red face, white brow where
his trilby fitted,
smile and polished brown leather leggings. For centuries we
had been in that landscape, hedging, ditching, harvesting,
hammering and knowing every flower and bird. I had a cousin
who had a milk round when I was very young, came round
with a float, the churns rattling with pint and quart measures,
the horse moving from one customer to the next at a click
of Frank's tongue. Frank's farm grows bricks and asphalt.
'The world has left the earth behind', as Berger says: that's
where our malaise begins, the old relationships broken.
The kettle boiled and I filled hot-water bottles. She had a divan where the piano had
stood in the parlour, a commode with arms, a telephone by the bed, otherwise the
furniture was as I recalled: a set of Charles Dickens in imitation leather with
unreadable print and several Dornford Yates and the Home Doctor in the rhombic
bookcase Dad had put together, the velveteen suite in on which she hung her clothes.
I wanted to open a window but the curtains were permanently drawn. There dead flies
in the ceiling light dish and Marmaduke's hair was on a chair in which I had hardly
been allowed to sit; over the mantle was an oil I had done in my first year, a couple of
boats tied up on a wet day at Maryport. I set it straight. She liked it. She never liked
my colour fields. Nor did I now; not that I would confess it to her. Sometimes I think of
my Mum lying there as they found her...not as I did next morning, her teeth in a glass,
her hair flying, tea-maker steaming. "Now Roy, what about a drive out?" I had the
feeling that she had been waiting to ask me for hours "Give Gloria a shock. She's
always cracking on to folk about you, you know."
"Perhaps she'll lay off with all this kerfuffle."

“Not her! She says ‘They are all at it now, my girl’,” Mum mimicked Gloria’s version of a posh voice. “‘It’s all a bit of this and a bit of the other, not like when we was girls.”’ She cackled, sucked tea. “I’ll give her a ring in a minute. Still in bed, she’ll be, our Gloria.”

“Well you are.”

“Only because you keep hanging about. A woman needs her privacy.” She was in high good humour. As I left she said: “Gloria reckons it you’re not married and over forty, you must be a nancy-boy.”

“I’ll make some toast.” She called after me, “Gloria’s lost count of her grandchildren.
It will soon be great-grandchildren. I haven’t got any, have I?”

While she struggled into her clothes. I boiled eggs. The sun came and went. The newspaper dropped on the doormat. Luckily some vicar had been at it with the Ladies’ Knitting Circle in darkest Oxfordshire. They had a picture of him on the front page holding up his skirts and sprinting through the graveyard. “I’m off the hook,” I called. “A vicar is being monsterised. “
“Is he a spanker too?”

“Groper. Kept measuring ‘em for jumpers. Says he was just ‘Lending them a hand.’ I don’t know why you read the gutter press.” I yelled. She was In the room.
“’Gutter press’?”

“That’s what it’s called.”

“Who by?”

“Those who don’t read it.”

“And who are they? Snobs, that’s who.” She was always fiery first thing. I buttered toast. “Come out of that,”
she told me. “Take the eggs out now.” I looked at my watch but
I did as she told me.
“These tabloids are written people with a reading age of twelve.”
She sighed deeply.

“Oh dear! You was always the same first thing.”

"I get it from you."

"No you don't!"

"All right, I don't."

"You're trying to tell me I'm working class, again, aren't you?"
Fighting talk. "You're a bad-tempered bugger, you are, our Roy.
I own this house, I do. I'm of independent means."

"Go on, Mum!
That doesn't mean the old age pension."

"It's all rubbish, all that
working class, lower-middle class, middle-for-diddle carry-on
the Socialists peddle. Maggie's shown 'em."

"Absolutely."

"Well you're some Socialist, you are. You should give your
money to the poor to start with. Your dad could never work you out. 'A commissioned officer', he said, 'and yet he
wouldn't even walk down to see the Queen's train go through.'
You're enough to make the cat laugh, Roy." It didn't seem right
to put up with her nonsense, she wasn't a child or a fool, but I got so mad with her and she knew it.

"What's so galling
is that people are so easily sucked in by the vicious swine who exploit them. That's what I can't abide. What with those papers you read and TV, you've not got a bloody hope."

Don't you use language to me, Roy.
I'm your mother. I can tell you because
I am your mother."

"You've been 'telling me' all my life, and Dad. He cleared off into the greenhouse to smoke his pipe to get away."

"Greenfly! He said it stopped greenfly!"

"Stopped you."

"You wicked thing That's a nasty thing to say. All those years
and never a cross word between us. I wish you hadn't said that.

You've quite upset me now." I had. She leant and sniffed,
chewed on nothing.

"I'm sorry."

"He was a fanatic about that garden and we adored each other, you know."

"Yes."

"Adored each other." It was a crazy word. "Now it's as if he never was." It wasn't her usual melodrama. "But there is you,
isn't there?"

"There is, Mum." She looked quickly at me. "It's like
last week that he said: 'Do you want me to carry you over
the threshold'? We had been married years." I ate toast, knowing every word. "He got me in a fireman's lift and banged
my elbow and I cursed and he said: 'Well, that's a good start!'

Then we came in here and there was a rat as big as a cat
running by the wall. He went as white as a sheet because of rats eating his pals' corpses in the war." I heard about the chase
with a shovel, the trap which took the paw of a neighbour's cat,
vet's bill which put them on short commons for weeks, the thirty years for which the neighbour didn't forgive them and put it about that we 'had rats'.

By the time she had finished she had
put on lipstick and a felt hat. As I lowered her into the car,
she made a loud body-noise, blushed deep red and didn't speak for a time. Her embarrassment made me ashamed that such a thing should cheer me. She had always stirred me up, said I was 'heavy weather' And that, as soon as I left home, I turned glum; then when I went to art college, I started to take myself too seriously; to 'fancy myself', as she said. I had been 'good at art' at school and had always been able to draw far better than anyone else, 'Good at art' was an after-thought on my grammar school reports: it didn't count. It was in the Trucial-Oman Scouts that I learned to draw, as well as bird-watch. Stuck out to guard an oasis for months where strange migratory birds would suddenly fill the trees, carpet the ground, and deafen

with their calls, my Arabs could make nothing of the lines I drew and; considered me crazy in a respectful kind of way.

I was a solitary and had come to understand that I had been selected, used, and discarded before I was twenty, having killed people as a kind of prank. I did not want to forget it. I could not.

Art is a means of telling the truth, but our culture is so decadent that you have to distort to gain attention, to de-familiarise,
to end the spirit's sleep and re-acquaint people with the world.
From my background ('What will the neighbours think?') you needed some arrogance, but it was never as easy as the confidence of those with bourgeois certainty and expectations, who did not need to know what empathy was and called me 'chippy' behind my back, but fiddling about with paints seemed
a stunt to my relatives. Laughing at each other's pretensions was a family pastime; part of their self-policing timidity. I grew
a beard as a student. At Christmas they clapped their hands
to their mouths and hooted, 'Try standing closer to the razor'!
I was indignant; an ex-officer, no longer so easily disciplined, and their amusement turned sour. When I got rich despite their derision, they boasted about me, and when I got on the telly, they were proud, until I ruined everything by rough behaviour.

I drove slowly so Mum could look at the houses, exclaiming
at the rash of prominent burglar alarms, bestowing her queenly back-handers on startled half-acquaintances.
I stopped so she could observe the
village street, bought some wine, newspapers and a box of chocolates. Mum gave me a cold kiss for the gift. I found only a report in a broadsheet that I had been sighted at a Fishguard hotel, was presumed to have caught the Irish ferry; that 'the police claimed they had no interest in his whereabouts'. I took the bundle of newsprint and stuffed it with exuberance in a litterbin. We drove off amongst the belt of soggy fields where starling flocks floated light as chiffon scarves against the clouds, and tractors

excited gulls and crows.

She got stuck into the box of chocolates. I meant them for our visit, but it was clear Mum intended her sister should never see them. She talked about Sunday School Treats at Whitsun, when they clopped down the lanes on the coalman's whitewashed dray singing hymns, then ran races and jumped for prizes of books of missionary tales. It impossible that such a world was only one life away as we drove under motorways with jumbos from God-knows where hanging against the overcast. It was only then that I realised Church Road Church of England Primary School had not been there. What had replaced its high blue slates, buttressed brick walls, and ecclesiastically arched windows? Where were
the horsechestnut trees which shaded the yard and provided conkers for our Autumn tournaments? The spiked railings
which had been too vital to be taken away for the war effort?
What stood where our marbles had rolled and dreams flown?

Nothing except cars parked next to the shopping precinct.

14.

Gloria and John lived at Ramsford where the Bollin wandered and a branch left the London line. My uncle was booking-clerk and ticket collector in the days when stations competed for best kept in the shire. His garden had a similar look: daffodils
and tulips dressed by the right along brushed paths with whitewashed stones, hanging baskets, an on old gas lamp
he had acquired from the station. I expected to find red fire buckets lined up somewhere. Now trains rattled through.

"Eee," said my Mum, "our Gloria!" She was a small version of Mum, but top-heavy and so myopic that her eyes were huge

as a moth's behind her fashionable, tinted spectacles from which a gold cord looped. Uncle John was as big as the King
of Tonga. "How's tricks?" His handshake was massive, breakfast between his smiling false teeth, belly straining buttons on his cardigan. My Aunt's hands were on me, patting, stroking.
A neighbour's face bobbed over the hedge to observe our arrival. I helped my Mum out of the car, then positioned her walking-frame. A tractor spinning mud down the road stopped the talk as Uncle John held the gate in the hawthorn hedge. "Nice car that." He was unaware of Mum's problem in rounding
him and ignored her "Ay up, John!" He held a match to his pipe.
"All right as long as they keep going, cars." We followed Mum.
His garden had bolted. puffballs on the lawn, bean-sticks
blown down, weeds everywhere. "Aren't we all," I bit my tongue.
He wheezed along behind me, his pipe crackling, stopped
to cough, then he took a deep breath, lifting his chins, eyeing
the wreck of his lawn and flowerbeds, turned away, spat.

Nothing had changed in the house, it seemed to me,
the kitchen's red tiles still uneven, the wall cream painted tongue-and-groove with flowery wallpaper above, a bright fire
in the grate. Jean was there, busy with the table, a daughter who lived nearby, a solo parent with children at school,
she hardly paused to say hello as she got between and around, setting cutlery. She had the Venus of Willandorf figure of her mother and was all vibration and mobility, swaying and swinging, so I had to keep my eyes to myself. Her hair was in
a loose ponytail and she wore silver rings on all her fingers
and a long, heavy skirt. She was so exactly what I had been obsessively drawing that I was glad when she left in a hurry
via the back garden as the church clock struck noon and freed the school children's noise. We sat down a table full of plates
of sliced and buttered bread, ham, salad, potatoes, and jars of pickled onions and chutney. It was an occasion. "Roy, you'll have a lager?" We all would. The sisters

were glad to see each other, leaning together and laughing. Uncle John poured from big brown bottles, then raised his glass, little finger crooked: “Good health! Bottoms up!” “Mud in your eye,” said Mum
“Down the hatch!” yelled Gloria. “Cheers.” was all I could say. The lager fizzed and tasted of straw. It would not sort well with chocolate and pickles. “No,” said Uncle John, “the Saltmarshes have a Volvo; and the Rolls, of course.” Apart from the main and branch line stations, and the village pubs, my uncle’s geography was based on the big houses where half of Ramsford had once worked as servants and gardeners. A vast, mild-mannered, old man, hair standing straight up
above his placid face, ears huge in age, he chomped ruminatively. “Whoops! Pardon me for being rude,” his wife said,” it was not me, it was my food.” Her eyes afloat in the steam of her potatoes. They slapped at each other and my uncle gasped in delight. “Here,” he said, “come on, you two. You’re like a couple of spadgers when you get going.”

I bent to my plate, folding bread, hardly listening to the coded reminiscences which kept them laughing. A wall was given up
to snaps of the babies and children of several generations.
I paraded prophetically in the garden with a wooden rifle.
The coal burned invisibly in sunlight. There came a lull during
which cutlery clinked and scraped, then came the inevitable:
“Roy, you’ve been at it again in the newspapers we see.”
“At what?” She went red with laughter but Mum frowned.
“Look at him, trying to look innocent!” Gloria spluttered.
She let me know, with a nod and a wink, that so far as she
was concerned, I was still a fat kid with a dirty mind who
danced on the hearthrug with embarrassment at the sight
of her Brobdingnagian breasts.

“I am innocent,” I told them.

“I’ll bet you are!”

“He is,” Mum’s face had an Easter Island look.

Uncle John slapped the table into a rattle, guffawed at our drollery. Gloria’s head

shook with her version of tolerant amusement as she grinned. I had no idea of what nonsense
my mother had told her as the cause of my disappearance
into an Italian mental hospital, nor the breakdown of my relationship with Tessa, but Gloria was content that I was
some sort of sexual deviant. “That was one of your impressionist works, was it, the photo?” Gloria enquired.
John shook and rubbed tears from his eyes with his tongue out.
“Leave the lad alone,” Mum said sharply. “It was a put up job.”
He slapped the table again. “No,” she said, “stop it, John.
Some people will do owt for a bit of publicity. This woman
barged in and started taking pictures and wouldn’t stop it.
Roy slapped her arse, cheeky madam.”
“Cheeky!” John didn’t stop to see if anyone else laughed.
“Our Roy doesn’t need any publicity,” Mum said proudly.
“Will you sue, love?” I shook my head.
“Hah!” Gloria said with
a forensic flourish.
“You should take ‘em to the cleaners!” Mum said fiercely.
“I’ve more to do.”
“Bird watching? Bird watching! What sort?” He laughed, was unaware of the change of plot. “I thought was
up there, so you could rest and recuperate.”
“It said you was doing obscene drawings.” Gloria couldn’t resist, her lepidopterous eyes glowing.
“She stole five thousand quids’ worth,” Mum rapped out.” Gloria looked away. So did I. These
women, Jean and her mother, with their huge, hot water bottle
breasts, were beautiful for hundreds of thousands of years
and had surfaced on my drawing board and recalled that day
when I first saw a naked breast, blue-veined, brown nippled
and prodigiously swollen and watched Jean’s greedying mouth.

I felt as if I was blushing with consternation yet again…Mum
was saying, “Any road, they *would* say that, wouldn’t they,
our Gloria?” They leant belligerently, bosoms on the table, glaring at each other. The
game had stopped.

“Would you be
so kind as to put on the kettle, John dear.” My mother looked pleased at her win. I beat
John to it. Tap water filled the silence.

They had seen me sit on my pot, known the snotty brat,
the fat schoolboy, the arrogant temporary gentleman, fashionable artist, glib telly-
talker...and now what? The hermit and middle-aged misogynist, an altogether queer
fellow.
“Well it’s not easy for you, Roy, nowadays” my uncle said.
“Look at our Jean. Half the kids in the school haven’t got
two parents and, it says in the paper, for every white baby
born in the country, there’s six black.”

“Outbreed us,” Mum said.
“Don’t you start on that pipe. There’s rhubarb and custard yet.”
“Is there?” he said. “It gives you a good run for your money,
that does.” The Russian convoys in the war had convinced him
life was comic. The top joint of the little finger of his left hand
had been ‘bitten off by Jack Frost’, he told me when I was a boy.
They had to hack ice off the ship’s superstructure or capsize.
Manchester United was the only topic which stretched his range
of emotions. Rooks croaked around the church tower with twigs.
The kettle started to sing. I was still not able to turn round.
I lifted the kettle and poured some in the teapot as instructed,
Then poured it out before spooning in four and one for the pot.

Gloria only saw a spoiled only child in me. She thought that if
any of hers had been given my chances, they too would
have ‘been in the papers.’ For years she had told me her sons

had both been offered commissions but refused them to stay
with their chums in the ranks. Both were phlegmatic, large,
and dumb blokes who worked on assembly lines. Some hopes!

The two sisters were discussing my uncle's 'waterworks'.
He poked in the bowl of his pipe philosophically.
London friends never stopped talking about money, prices and bargains, but my family was obsessed by their bowels,
by pains, operations, ailments, herbal cures, doctors, deaths and hospitals. They did not look up as I put down the teapot.
"I'll just have a walk round." I told them.

15.

There were new shops next to the general store, which had
the usual newspaper headlines under wire screens:
'Vicar goes for Bust', read one. Women thought men's lust
for tits were weird, especially when they bared one in public
to feed a baby and were objects of derision or disgust.
Women *were* cows if men were bulls…There was a Diana
Of Ephesus, or of the Ephesians, in Rome with dozens of tits.
It was odd, a fault line in the culture, a discontinuity. Women had implants at some risk to be more attractive, but when it happened naturally with milk, they were sent into a corner
with their baby, unlike the Virgin Mary among the cows...

It had not been frustrated lust in so small a boy as I had been
that caused such traumatic embarrassment, but ignorance.
I knew nothing about breasts, and nothing sensible about

the rest of female anatomy until Lower Fourth Form Biology, when the master, Mr Underwood, had droned through it
and blushed. By the Upper Fifth I had a girl, Audrey,
with whom I had smooched and fiddled, lain naked and
thrust at this way and that in teenage ecstasy to no result.

I hated the Victorians for their religious thought-control which
blighted happiness with 'sin' and made my dad confide once
that 'all men are filthy bloody pigs' as his sole contribution.
It wasn't like that now. The pill had dispensed with ignorant fear

"Hi!" Muddy palm up as she wristed back long hair,
the woman in the garden surprised me. It was Jean,
who had emigrated to Australia until, Mum said primly,
'Her husband did the dirty on her.'
"You've had enough
of the wrinklies for a while, have you?"
"On about their bowels."
Well it keeps them entertained." She smiled, pronged her trowel in the earth expertly.
"I was looking for the telephone kiosk."
"What for? Use mine. There's a tin next to it. I'm pissed off with gardening anyway."
"Thanks," I said, kneed the gate open and followed her.

It was not much of a place: an old timbered cottage with brick
in place of wattle, a crack in the front wall big enough for a child to have stuck a plastic propeller in; a collie capering on a chain down the side and a hutch with a ruby-eyed, white rabbit.
There were tricycles and bicycles abandoned and toy cars
in a muddy puddle. "Bloody dump," she said. "Dad rented it
for us from the Bullfinch Estate. They won't do a thing and he won't ask." I wondered if she felt the weight of my eyes on her as she walked, scraped my feet, wiped them on an old doormat.

There was a lobby with cat food in a saucer, a bathroom off
with clothes heaped on a washing machine, then the kitchen where crockery waited
from lunch, and a sitting room with
a faded chintz suite littered with picture books and plastic toys. Children's paintings
were stuck around the white walls and,
on the kitchen door, a hymn to Shiva. "How do you like coffee? Sit down." There was
something of Gloria about the set of her mouth, the look in her brown eye. How do
women know?
She gave a little self-conscious jerk of her head as she spoke, looked away. "Shan't
be a moment." I had not seen Jean since she was an over-weight schoolgirl wearing
pigtails and glasses. I had an idea that she had done Sixth Form, gone into nursing.
I could imagine what Gloria thought of the homely untidiness.
On the window sill in the thick wall were books on meditation
and astrology which went with the smell of joss sticks.

She had changed into black slacks and a thick red sweater,
let down her ash-blonde hair. She smiled at me as she
gave me a mug with Leo printed white on yellow,
sat in an armchair by the fire, discovered a rolled packet
of tobacco under her hip:

"Mary Jane. Want some?" I shook
my head. She rolled a thin tube which was quickly gone, breathing in the smoke,
blowing away in a stream across
the sunlight. "You don't use it, Roy?"

"Whisky."

"Is that what
makes you clout women?"

"I do that sober if I have to." She considered it. Nearby a
rooster crowed. She said nothing, shaped smoke. "She was off her face, wouldn't
stop, and
I knew she had been set on by somebody wanting to get

their own back."

"Who? Look, we are all experts on your life, you know."

"I'd rather not say."

"Don't be bloody coy, Roy! Gloria was grinning like a rat with a gold tooth when she had some more cuttings for her scrap book."

"How long were you in Australia?"

"About ten years."

"Miss it?"

"It's a state of mind."

"How do you mean?"

"Mum gets out of her sick bed to tidy up before the doctor comes. Dad stands to attention to talk to the General. The vicar's wife walks to the front of the queue... in the store, all that crap. I bloody tell her who's next!"

"What happens?"

"Ah, they try to serve her all the same...Well they did. I might have cured the bastards." She made me laugh. Proud necked, eyes bright, she grinned. "Dad calls me 'The Boxing Kangaroo'."

"What about Gloria?" She threw a handful of ash on the fire.

"We have our differences, mainly because she's always telling me how to bring up my kids...She'll be told I had a visitor. They'll be on the blower, the sticky-beaks. Nah, it's all right. I'm comfortable here. My bloke shot through interstate and I didn't mind coming away: too bloody hot and I didn't like mossies and cockies and cane toads either…Or the R.S.L."

"The what?"

"Returned Servicemen's' League. Shane was always down there getting pissed."

"Was he in the services?"

"Five minutes, ay?.

He whacked his knee with a wet towel before every medical
and limped, so they chucked him out of National Service, but then, when we got to Oz,
he found out you could get a cheap mortgage if you were a member, so he
resurrected his service number and joined, the crafty bastard." She was rolling another
thin smoke, fingers and tongue adept. "Trouble was, they're always banging the drum,
pretending to celebrate these battles nobody remembers, and Shane couldn't march
for toffee and they ripped the piss out of him. I told him, 'don't go then, it's just a White
Australia demo', I mean, they call soccer 'wogball' there, you know. But no, off he'd
go, the silly sod, marching right arm and leg together...Fuck-wit!" Her anger was
comic-serious.
I tried not to smile, then we both burst into laughter together. "Oh yes, they reckon
they're the best bloody troops in the world and there's bloody Shane stumbling along
in a bush he got from somewhere, and leaning on the bar telling them how he
bayoneted Commies in Malaya. I mean, really, that guy
was a dickhead." Then she wept a little, stopped my smiles.

"The directory is under the table," she said. She came
and squatted down, struggled to extract it. I didn't need it,
nor did l intend to put my hand on her arm. She froze.
She did not look at me before she landed on my lap.

t was a long time since I had kissed anyone seriously.
I felt awkward, but she said, "You old tup," in a comic voice.
"You danced with me at Gilbert's wedding when I was twelve."
Her hand went down. "I've fancied you ever since."
"Take this off!
Take it off, please!" She pulled the sweater over her head,
knelt out of sight of the windows, arms crossed. I was breathless.
She bent over me. "Hey! Hey!" She shouted with excitement
as I touched her. Outside the dog barked.
"Somebody here?"
"No, he's just jealous. The door's locked. Don't worry about it."

She must have locked it whilst she made the coffee; that soon. She pulled me upright. We thumped up the wooden stairs, pulling off clothes. The bed was unmade, a patchwork quilt spilling, one lonely pillow. She sat across me, bounced, mouth open, eyes closed, breasts flying, pure joy breaking in her smile. I grabbed her breasts together and she galloped harder until, even under her weight, my back arched.

Then she fell forward. "Oh, I needed that," she said in my ear. Then she kissed it and lay next to me, a leg on my stomach
Flowery curtains blew in sunlight. Everything had become easy.
After a while she rolled another joint and blew smoke at the low ceiling. "They'll be wondering where you are."

"Let them wonder."

"It's all right for you." I looked at her, her breasts collapsed, white stretch marks on her stomach, studied her stylish exhalations. "Don't look", she said, yanked the sheet to her
chin like an actress. She eyed me. "What do you do the rest of the time, jerk off? You've not had it for yonks, have you? " She amazed me.

"I shan't tell you."

"You're shy, aren't you, Roy?

"What do you think about? Who do you think about? Tell me your fantasies."

"I can't talk about that kind of thing."

"Poor old Roy. They did a job on you didn't they?" The cock crowed hoarsely, the dog barked, a diesel train went rattling though. Now she lay on an elbow and stroked the hair of my chest. "Don't be coy, Roy." she said in her cartoon voice, which irritated me; then I was sorry. We were comrades-in-arms.

"Okay, I'm a mess. My mind's a bitter dungeon. My thoughts scare me at times."

"*Tell* me about it. Who gets it? your ex?"

"No. I'm indifferent.
No, that's not the word, I wish her well. She took her chance."
"Who's in the dungeon?" She demanded in her crazy voice.
"Not the lovely Ainslie Archer? It can't be that superwoman!"
I looked away. "Oh God, Roy", she said in a normal voice,
"Get in the queue. She's never out of the women's magazines
with some rich stud chatting her up. You didn't fall for that lezzo
crap, did you? She said it was the least she could do, look after
old Tessa in Positano. Me, I'd look after *King Kong* in Positano."
She elbowed me. "Don't you fall asleep. You can't stay long
or our old ladies will be yelling brimstone, fire and incest."

"Nah," she said, "she's cruising California at present, making films on art, and you
reckon she's got time to be bothered
to give you a stir? What for? You're crazy!"
"The magazine
this woman writes for has a piece of the films Ainslie's making.
She likes to have people on a string, likes to give it a tweak,
I know her."
"And so what are you doing to stop it? Run away?"
"What else can I do? I'm going to see if my place in Camden
is clear. Two nights is about as much as I can stand at home,
although never say I said so. I'm ashamed to say it."
"Why do
you think we shot through? They did their best for us, yes,
but Mum's no idea about my world…Stay here if you like."
She meant it. "I'll set the dog on if they come snooping. He really enjoys biting people.
I get prowlers sometimes."
"I can't."
"No, you can't. I'm crazy. You'll be right now, ay? Fresh cunt, fresh courage."
"Australia has made you very outspoken, Jean."
"It wouldn't do you any harm; undo a few of your knots. They have a few of their own

though."

"Do I seem screwed up?"

"Tight. There's a powerful force at work, I can sense that."

She covered us both up. "Why don't you go and see her?"

"I'm scared." It surprised us both.

"What the fuck of? She's just

a silvertail who gets what she wants because she expects to.

I bet that's why she's still hanging around you – you don't run after her, you bloody run off."

Then: "Half your luck! I'm bored

out of my head, stuck here where I started, chatting to Beverley Jones, just like I did on the school bus, looking after kids, keeping an eye on mum and dad. I wish I'd a mad affair like you have, instead of a ..." She stopped herself. I nuzzled. "Make your calls. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, hairy arse." she said as I stooped and looked for my clothes. I tried for a last grab

but she slipped past me. "And you wash. Don't you dare go back to Gloria's with cunty fingers."

"It's you, y'monster! The Marquis de Sade! Where, oh where can you be?"

"Ireland."

"Don't be silly. That's almost as bad as

Brighton. Thanks to your gross ways, it's been dreadful here,

I had to go and stay with my sister in Brighton and we hate

each other. Heathcliff, it won't do, you know."

"Sorry Jerry"

"You don't sound in the least sorry; in fact, for someone in disgrace, you sound quite uncharacteristically frisky. Are you enjoying having these people pursuing you, or what? Ireland? Why Ireland?"

"Haven't they given up by now?"

"The mob has deserted our garden,

having stamped on every Spring flower they could find, but each post brings what I trust is a heap of hate-mail and your telephone never stops: ringringringing

all hours!"

"It's a private number."

"Was. It's *all* your fault, Heathcliff." Jerome de Nony was my neighbour in Camden. There were six studios in a line; careers were not. I taught

with Jerome but he had to have full-time work and it rankled. Jerome was a print-maker and while the graphic and fine art departments kept to separate orbits but we had been neighbours for years in good and bad times for both of us.

"Sorry, Jerome. Apologise to the others for me. I will stay here in Cork until the start of term."

"I shall go and tell the good news to any stragglers I can find. There could be some left in

the shrubbery." He would go out, waving his arms and shouting

that I was in Cork and telling anyone interested to go forth and multiply. We depended on Jerome for such dramatic diversions, set him on religious nuts that came knocking. He would ask if they believed in love, then embrace them. I looked forward to him meeting Eric. They would never have been able to stop laughing at each other.

I got Michael Mossbank Nacnab: Eric was in hospital with a heart attack. He had been since shortly after I last saw him. Michael's answers made me want to smash down the telephone at the frailty of our insignificant lives.

"What's up?"

"Friend I got pissed with had a heart attack after."

"Oh shit," she said. "That's tough. Roy, it's been great and you'll be all right, if you'll give yourself the chance, but the school will be out in five minutes and…" She got on tiptoe to kiss me, said "Beaut," and closed the door behind me.

Nobody in the family, except Jean, understood why I flew back. I explained Eric had driven miles in foul weather to cheer me up but had got in trouble himself as a result. Mum was not pleased. “Not seen you for months, and now you’re off again.”

They were still at the table among the pots. I made more tea and carried the pots out as they talked about holidays they enjoyed with Dad at the caravan near Grange-over-Sands,
the four of them in a row in one snap after the next,
watching sunset over the sea, glass in hand, then going inside to play rummy until bedtime. They were dead within a year
of each other. Mother first; then John dropped on the way home from the pub and rolled into a ditch where he lay all night and was found white, as if that gay little sprite had bided his time; Gloria had a mastectomy too late by years. I watched their coffins roll down the last production line towards the Garden
of Rest behind the crematorium, paced off on my own to my car, stood in the corner at their Wakes, had a word with sad Jean and her kids and got away from death..

Now I was staring at Eric’s coffin. I got out and stepped over chains, climbed up
the stairs again. We pitched like a slow rocking horse in the long, golden twilight. I leant at the salty porthole and heard thumping music from above, screwed my eyes but could not
see any of the birds I knew were out there, sleepless wave-skimmers, lonely wanderers across the ocean’s face in sunlight or starlight. Art was all I could do about death. It wasn’t fashion and success, it was a way of rebutting death, outlasting it. That was what counted.

Eddy slapped a constabular hand on my shoulder so I staggered, splashed. He was big-eyed with boozy solicitude, took his stance next to me. “ You’ll bloody freeze to death out here, Roy. Bert reckons Ricky Demarco’s going to give him a show in Edinburgh. Fame, that, isn’t it? Daft git!
It’s beers all round. You coming? People are asking after you.”

I zipped up.“ I don’t feel very cheerful.” Left him emptying.
I was glad to escape back to my car, although I wondered
at my stinginess in not keeping a car on the island and flying.

Mum got up early to boil me an egg and give me good advice.
I took a taxi to the Ringway, which seemed exciting to Mum,
and also to me as I waved to her, wide awake as a child,
shivering on the cold leather as if Jean had rewired my circuitry,
made me almost blithe.
We took off on a mild morning, lifted
Into clear skies, had coffee, then floated down into Glasgow where sunlight was a
fleeting glare and cumulus waited on
the Lennox Hills to throw us about as we climbed.
Inverness
was dark with rain on a gusty wind, but it was when we cleared Sutherland, where in a
cloud gap white seas smashed, that
the strength of the wind became clear. Seat belts were buckled as we fell, staggered,
shook, while below the ocean was wind-streaked, blindingly silvered and then pitch
black. Chatter had
gone. We bored into the storm. Stiff-necked, I sat back, waited
for the tilt and bank, view of the island coast. As we over-flew
the airport a small aircraft soared steep against the wind’s face,
then whisked away like a leaf, but we slid, sloped, sank down
towards the sea’s smoking crests, then raced over the coast.
There was a bump, another, the engines roared in reverse.
We rocked and rolled and some cheered, others applauded.
In the flexing windows of the terminal the aircraft distorted as
we stopped. On the steps the wind assaulted us. Hats bowled, women shrieked, and
most ran, leaning, pushed the doors, against the bovine herd who gaped, said good-
byes, stolidly in our way as we gasped for breath and dried our eyes. “Roy!”
She caught my arm, hung on. People bumped us with their bags. I looked down in her
eyes amazed. We were bundled aside by those still shoving in. “Roy, how are you?”

She held
my wrist. I was aware of a young man with a ginger moustache, a fur hat, trying to stay in touch with her against the mob.
“I’m fine, thanks.” There were fine lines around her shining eyes. She wore a woollen island hat pulled low on her brow,
a fragrance that I knew. I sensed people staring at us.
“It’s so good to see you again, Roy.” She looked away.
“Lucien, Roy Porter, the painter.”
“Oh yes. I’m Lucien Hislop.”
I could not take his hand because she held mine.
‘Lucien.
I can’t hack this”, she told him. “Go and see if there are flights tomorrow.” He eased away among the overcoats and luggage.. “Ha, this wind. It terrifies me.”
“You never used to let a little thing like a tempest stop you,” I said. Lucien was at the desk.
‘I hate it. I hate flying, you know that.” The steward spoke on the P.A.:
“Brish Arwas annunce the depature o’ their flight Sooth.” I felt as
if I had caught her out and that she felt it too. “What was that?”
“They’re calling your flight.”
“We’ve so much to talk about, Roy. Don’t you want me to stay?” I had to look elsewhere.
“I came back because my friend has had a heart attack.”
“I guessed. Eric will be all right.” She squeezed my hand. “Make up your mind.”
“Problems,” Lucien announced. He was lying. She let go of me.
“Roy, look at me!” She kissed me on the cheek, then she was out and into the wild air, head down. Lucien strode after her with her case.

Heart thumping, I just caught the bus, studied the tail of
the aircraft above the roof of the terminal. I could not believe
it would go. It did. I stared at the drenched fields but Ainslie’s eyes were everywhere.
Her hand still grasped mine. In town

I almost missed my stop for the hotel.

17.

The Harbour Hotel was granite solidity above a jostle of yachts lit by a wild red sunset. Wave crests came over the harbour wall and salt spray stung, so the gloomy, curtained and carpeted foyer was a warm sanctuary. I booked in, then went down to the dining room, which was damask tablecloths, napkins starched and fanned in wineglasses. I had a couple of glasses of Medoc before the thick, hot broth arrived, and another with a steak. I ate and drank in a kind of daze.

I was changing wet socks when the telephone rang: Murdo:
"Maybe you would like to come down and have a drink?"
I was tempted to decline, felt their invitation was not idle,
then the lights went off and the television died. The twins
stood as I came to their table by a fire leaping in the chimney's throat, making brasses and glasses glint and radiating heat in the long candle-lit room. I bowed across the table to shake Michael's hand. All was formality and without smiles.
There was a stiff tot waiting for me, a cut-glass water-jug next
to the bottle of Red Grouse already half empty. We had been plunged back a century by the power cut and talk was subdued along the bar where half-a-dozen businessmen leaned.

Michael was a dwarf and needed a thick cushion to be able
to reach his glass, which he did in manly style, arms muscular with heaving himself about. As night fell, so the wind screamed and whined louder down the chimney and shadows swayed. We had to raise our voices. They were serious men who wasted neither words nor drinking time, but spent minutes staring at
the flames or in the glass before them. I did the same.

“Did you have a good trip on the aeroplane?” Tam asked.

It was a joke. The twins were both ruddy-faced, balding men, prone to spillage as their ties and sweaters displayed; both smoked and their thick fingers were stained. They wore grey trousers, Harris tweed jackets, suede shoes and their university ties as they had in youth, and would into old age. Michael was prematurely grey, hair always parted exactly, clothes neat.

“If you hurried back to see Ainslie Archer, you just missed her.” Murdo smiled at Tam’s quip. Michael’s pale eyes seemed amused behind his thick spectacles in the candle light between the four of us.

“I came back to see Eric. How is he?”

“As well as might be expected.”

Michael smiled, or the creases round his eyes deepened. A kind of tension had held them, now all three moved, drank, chomped nuts.

“Will he be all right?”

“So they say,” Murdo glanced at Tam. “But it’s a good thing you came here tonight and did not go straight home,” he said. “There’s been a bit of bother there.”

“Peter Whalsay’s a fantasist, y’ken,” said Michael. “He and one or two others put stones through your windows and did damage to your peat store. Grant Wishart

and friends...”

“The Artists’ Rifles”, said Tam in a growl of dismissal.

“went up there and made the place tight next morning,

but then Peter went back.”

“Bloody moron,” said Murdo.

“Grant and co. went around to his place and put a stone or two...”

“Oh for God’s sake! Has it finished now?” It seemed achingly

tedious and stupid and nothing to do with me.

“Some fool told

the TV from Aberdeen so your neighbours cleaned up and

the police got involved. Mainland folk just love that kind of scandal from here."

"As you ken well", said Tam, and sniffed.

Michael said: "I had the TV people put on me by the Director in a mixter-maxter, telling me to talk but say nothing"

"Which he did quite easily as you may well understand," Tam interjected.

Michael blinked, went on: "but now he is after Grant Wishart for his part in it. He was Dunbar's appointment and has stood on a few toes." He flicked his brows. "You dinna seem so upset."

The lights came on. We all sat back, suddenly revealed by our expressions. Michael looked sly: Tam grim. Murdo hot.

He licked finger and thumb and snuffed the candle. "You met Ainslie."

"As you seem to have heard." They liked that, tilting their glasses to conceal satisfaction.

"She's charming lady," said Murdo, "and she was as surprised as anyone by the whole episode with Doctor Kingsford."

"Doctor?"

"Aye, so it seems."

"She shot up here to mend fences, did she?" No reply.

"I don't want to talk about any of this," I told them. "Balls to it. I came to see Eric."

"In the morning is the best. In the afternoons the Deputy Principal, Mrs.Tarbert, or the odd staff member, goes; in the evenings Mrs. Dunbar."

"If she's upright, said Murdo.

He tilted the last of the bottle into my glass. "What concerns us', Roy, is that she wants to make a film for the TV about Michael, You, and Hamish Fetlar, a fine composer who was at the academy and it's a great opportunity."

"You are no to fuck it up!"

Tam's vehemence on behalf of Michael stopped talk at the bar.

"Fine, I'll keep right out of it."

"Aye, she thought that's what you would say." Michael's face was pale, his brow beaded with sweat. "The theft of your drawings put her on the phone to the States straight away."

"She gave someone a row," Tam said.

"She surely did," Murdo agreed. I emptied my glass.

What was to have been said had been. The bottle was empty.

The room had filled. I sensed curiosity but I did not care.

That was the difference: I didn't give a stuff about island opinion or any other. It disarmed the drunken trio around me.

We talked of Eric. "A man of mag...namimity," Michael said magnaninimity." He stared at us slit-eyed. "of Magnaninity."

He concluded desperately, then: "Has he no said when he will retire?" I shook my head and said nothing. The twins were standing, nodding to their friends. "Dinnae fash yersel",

Michael advised me with a rodent grin. I almost expected him to lift his dram between two paws, but he tilted his head, straight arm palm down on the table, tossed it down like a clan chief. He slid a book from his pocket and pushed it over the table. 'Island Harvest', signed with a flourish. They took him by the elbows, his tadpole legs dangling. "Hold it," Michael ordered, twisting towards me. "We are agreed between us?" "We've talked it over."

"No said no!" Murdo.

"No said yes!" said Tam. They picked Michael up and whisked him out.

Eric looked normal, pink face shining, smiling as I walked down the ward. He wore boyish blue-striped pyjamas, jacket undone, so one saw there were electrodes wired to patches shaved on his chest and a screen flickered the trace of his heart number changed as he moved. I had expected that he would be in a private ward, despite his politics, but I walked past half-a-dozen beds to reach him under high windows full of swift, grey cloud. "Hello! I heard you had arrived, you lunatic. We only just got rid of you." I sat on the tubular chair, shook his hand and digits zoomed. "Pay no attention to that. How are you?" "How are *you*?"

"Och, I'm okay, y'ken. I'm like old Kenny over there who says he's so old that he has to start his heart every morning
with a hand crank." His deep laugh turned faces and his numbers accelerated.

" Eric, take it easy or *I* will be having a heart attack as well" He did it again. Now the nurse beyond
the office glass looked up, frowned.

"How were things Sooth?"

I told him most of what had happened and that spring flowers were in bloom. "Is that right?" He had not really listened; something else was exciting him and I guessed what. "Now, Roy, I had this amazing visit from Ainslie Archer." He dropped his jaw, expecting me to do the same, but I smiled instead at
his ingenuous gaze. He was a delightful man. The memory of his glee made me sob. "She's a transcendent woman," he said. "I see your problem. These buggers came back from death's door to take a look. She kissed my cheek when she left, y'ken! He blushed. "We'd spoken on the telephone. Did Michael not say?"

"He is the soul of discretion, Eric, unlike some."

"Now, Roy,
be good. I'm not a well man." He looked away with a grin.
He was incorrigible, but in no way did I want him meddling
between Ainslie and myself, yet I found myself asking: "What did she have to say about me?"

"About you, Porter? It was me she came to see! All she said about you was that you would blame her for what had happened; as you always

did. I agreed. You're a queer fish, right enough."

I was not going to interrogate him and he was off about his luck that his ambitious rival was off on a course and unable to make trouble at the academy. He was surprised by some unexpected visitors and puzzled by some who had stayed away.

"Ye shouldne have come flying back, man. I'm all right, y'ken.
I'll be out in a few days and they say I can work mornings next term, so I'll be away on a long holiday and then I'll be right enough. I canna retire, like they say, because property prices Sooth have left our savings behind."

"Do you fancy retiring to Italy? I've a house there. I may need someone to look after it.
It's in Positano, near Sorrento."

"Sorren-hento, where I must..."
he boomed. Whoops!"

"My ex-partner is there. She's likely to be moving on, she's expecting; her parents will want her out of it."
"Is this serious?" His eyes read mine. "I'm at a serious time of life, y'ken."

"You can't leave property lying vacant there and I can't go back until the dust has settled, if you know what I mean."

"Aye, but there's no doubt you're wrong about her."
"Think about it."

"Roy, are we no talking about this canard of yours about Ainslie?"

"That's nothing to do with you, right? You meet her once and…"
Eric glared, the tip of his nose went pale with anger. The bleep began warning as we stared at each other. There was a silence, then rapid feet.

"A miserable sod, you are, Porter!" He was white as the pillows he sank into.
He held his sides and gasped, eyes closed, such a pink and bulky man.

"Eric, for god's sake!" The curtains swished round us.

“Come out of that, Mr. Porter,” the ward sister ordered.

I looked straight ahead as I walked down the ward under scrutiny and through the swing doors. There were chairs where a mother with two children waited. I sat and put my face in my hands. “Is he greetin’ too?” a small voice asked. I smiled to prove I wasn’t, but the little girl did not respond. Her mother’s face was wet, her eyes puffed. She said: “Awful”. I nodded. “Just awful.”

The Sister was small and sharp with me, frowning up under stylish brows: “You must not get him excited. They are prone to tantrums, so I must ask you to take care what you say if you are to come again.”
“Sorry”, I shrugged and she smiled a little.
“That’s all right. Don’t worry, he’ll probably be okay.”

19.

I crossed the bridge, walked past a rusting petrol pump, rattling tin adverts decades old, and pushed into the shop. Bobby’s shop was a front parlour once and ancient wallpaper faded behind shelving bending under tins, bottles, packets, above drawers with gold labels which rarely described what they contained. The scarred counter had a display case with pottery boots and matchbox holders and other trinkets. Bobby and his wife sold most things, but a main function of the shop was as a clearinghouse for news and gossip. After closing on Saturdays, older men gathered to talk the week over, and have a dram, just as their fathers had when the shop had the only wireless set in the parish.

There was a council and a committee to do with the kirk,
Over which the minister ruled. but the shop was where things
got sorted and decided. Bobby was keeper of dark secrets
from this cabal, a tall, spare man with bagged eyes.
which seemed on the point of mirth, a basin fringe of grey hair,
and a nose which weather and whisky kept bright he surely
read postcards and knew who got what from where and why.

He added under his breath, whipped the pencil from his ear,
made calculations on the edge of wrapping-paper, winked.
“How like are you today, Roy? I have some mail and a big tube
from California come special delivery.” He lent me the pencil.

He was quick-witted and affable, had an excellent memory
and might have been anything but was content, he claimed
‘flogging a worm across the loch’, and supporting Rangers.
Morag, his wife, moved at half his speed, preserved a girlish
complexion and figure in her fifties, and blinked owl-eyes
behind spectacles that missed little. They knew the tastes,
habits, hobbies, routines, business of everyone except me.
I was an unpredictable element in the system, having no
obligations imposed on me by farm or fish, spouse or child.

Good luck made them enthusiastic to be helpful to me.
The afternoon of the local show saw the parish deserted.
I had walked into the shop to find Morag desperate to free
her frock from Bobby’s zip. They shuffled about in despair.
I had turned, marched out, said nothing; but then I might.

“And how was London? Daffodils out?” he asked. “They are.”
“Mercy, just fancy.” Morag filled a box with my order; Bobby
folded the Sunday papers, tucked and mail, down the side.

“They didna find you, the newspaper folk?” I shook my head.
I guessed he had been given a sum to telephone my arrival.
“It was a long way to come just to get your bum smacked,”
Morag smiled. Bobby tore off the account and gave it me,
lit a small cheroot. “She was in a mess, right enough,” he said.
“We were all laughing at Peter, he was legless and the hire car
in the ditch. She came crying doon the brae.”
“With my drawings
she had stolen.”
“And what drawings they were too! Boy, boy!”
she said. “I never saw such...”
“You all had a look then?” Bobby took my money,
counted change. “It was a theft, you know..”
“She was right keen to get away, right enough” Bobby conceded. “Peter was calling
Ralph and Hughie but she shoved him in and was away.”
“Popping pills,” I told them, “ and coming back to throw stones
like a kid. I’ll put up shutters and dead-locked the doors.”
“Awful fools, but we could’ne stop them.”
Through the window my place was clear on the skyline.
“I’m only glad that they didn’t come and torch the place.
In Wales that’s what they do to the houses of in-corners.”
“Och, not here! We are right proud to have you,” Morag said
She smiled. I smiled too, pleased with myself.
“We even had that television lady here looking for you too.”
“It was Jock telephoned Wishart,” Bobby added as I backed out.

I carried the box to the bridge, put it on the parapet over the burn. Ainslie had been there. The water purled over smooth stones; peat smoke mixed aromatically with tangle from the shore; everything was shifting in focus, was nearer, clearer, because she had seen it. At home I found a postcard amongst the mail. I knew her hand:
‘Cured of flying if nothing else. A.’
What joy and despair at such times! I sank to my knees,

read it this way and that, tore it to bits with my teeth, crouched amongst the litter rocking and priapic. I burned all my Aunt Glorias that calm afternoon, including those returned,
watching cartridge paper curl and flake, float off like black snow, like a burnt offering among the sheep. That was done with.

I stretched some big root five canvases, then I had to wait
for the image, ideal, or obsession to replace that bloated muse.
Next morning kittiwakes panicking up from the shore woke me, shutters rattling, sunlight standing in pillars under the roof-lights, nose numb with cold. I stayed where I was until I had to make
a break for the lavatory over cold flags. I liked the stillness
within the stone and echoes of waves, sheep, bird calls in
the space whether I was there or not. In London I remembered my croft, like a neolithic cairn brimming with the ancient silence of deep time on that raw coast, and enduring beyond our universal defeat. The damage Whalsay had done was insignificant in comparison with the smell of putty which
keenly redolent of my father. Such wisdom there had been
in his simplicity. He had the knack, Like Marmaduke, of being able to sit on his bench, enjoy the sun. I lived in my head.
I never stopped working, watching, seeing, recording, but
it is true that my being and doing were one thing, his were separate. He hated his work, which was a drudgery of clock-watching tedium, time sheets, wage-rates, operative-hours. When I worked time was meaningless, my being and doing were one; I was free of market determinations. He never was.

I looked down over the links: sheep drifted, eyebright flowered, rabbits sat above warrens or had quick frisks about or chewed. The bay was brown and cream water in confusion. An orange ship on the horizon did not move. Sometimes a cruise ship appeared in the bay from Germany or Scandinavia, white
and sleek and as amazing as a time machine. Passengers
with binoculars would line the rail and snatches of amplified commentary upon us

would come garbled ashore. Aeroplanes took you outside shading your eyes. Now and again a yacht might shelter and the voices of the well-to-do would boom as they strode about, looking down their noses at us or smirked in Bobby's shop, letting us wait while they discussed what to buy..

I made coffee, had a look through the glasses at kittiwakes streaming in from the cliffs, dipping low over the dunes where rain was washing Viking burials clear, heading for the loch where they collected weed and bathed before they joined the commuter rush back. I looked along the tide at oystercatchers stumping along: they scooted, flew; panicked off-duty kittiwakes into screaming crowds. A peregrine falcon, a flying anchor, flashed through, soared away. I knew where it took its kill,
and meant to discover its nest one day. Top of the food chain, pesticides thinned its eggshells so it could hardly breed.
I put on my woollen hat and cagoul, walked down
and sat between two rocks above an in-coming tide, glasses
on a seal's equal curiosity. It was not so cold out of the wind.
Eider drakes said "oh!" and ducked through waves, waiting
for mates to arrive from the Artic. Soon there would be flotillas
of black fluff along the shore amongst weed, about ten or more,
ending as two or three hurrying for dear life after the duck,
the others have become a gulp for a black back gull or skua.
The seal was twenty metres away, riding the waves, head turning with expectant interest so that I waved, called 'Good Morning!' and didn't hear Jock Black. He didn't see me until he was on top of me, startled red face under a greasy flat cap, khaki scarf around his neck twice, then into the top of his overalls. We did not speak. He followed the shore, looking for driftwood, hauling it above high water so it became private. When he had enough in heaps, he came down with his tractor and trailer. His woodpile was higher than the stone wall round his croft. I watched him hunch to light a cigarette against
the wind, trudge out of sight round a bluff beneath the headland. He was more than seventy, a widower for years, a son in
Canada whilst he had never been to the mainland. Jock cut

my peats for a pittance with the ancient tools; dried fish on his washing line, shaped the beehive stacks of oats or barley, rebuilt stone walls, scythed expertly and, for some reason, lit
the bonfire on November the Fifth, sending sparks whirling across the stubble as if to recall saga thatch burnings, not Guy Fawkes. Now waders flickered from his progress, settled again behind him. Like me he lived alone but our lives were mutual enigma. He found me crouching, talking to a seal and peering
at birds as unremarkable to him as Mum's cat to me. I set off
in the other direction, climbed up the cliff into the wind's strength and huddled in my hide. The sea was silvered far out.

When Michael telephoned and asked if he could tell her
my number, I refused. He heard bloody-mindedness.
It was a terror of bewitchment, fear that I would once again
lose myself because of her. A woman like her was impossible.
Men were always round her. You could never hope to keep her.
Sometimes in the silence of a drawing, I sensed her; at night
I had felt an astral dialogue, waking with her deep voice
saying my name, and I woke with my self-image collapsed.

20.

The Sister shook her cautionary finger at me, eyes half-closed. Down the ward Eric grinned and waved. "No telling me that
I can retire to Italy, " he said. "My heart can't handle it, ken."
The next bed had a different occupant, an old man propped up whose chest rattled; outside a woman mowed grass; inside a TV cackled. "Sorry," I shook his hand.
"I've had Grant in to see me. In view of his

meritorious defence of your property, he and his comrades of The Artists' Rifles hope you will attend their life class and give them the benefit of your genius before you go south."

"Okay." It made him grin. "I'll go."

"And while I'm at it,

you have to give that wee mannie a hand. Michael has spent his life at his poems and it's only just now he has any success.

The literary establishment likes to have its provinces manned,

and Michael is their man, so he is to write the script for this film.

It's great for him and Hamish and need do you no harm, Roy.

Ainslie tells me you need have no fear that it will do you harm.

She said you both were in a mixter-maxter about each other

and always had been. That was why she came to talk to me.

Man, I could deny such a woman nothing."

" Eric, I wish you

would keep out of it. It's not your business."

"Well now, it cost her to tell me, and now it's said, and I know you'll do the right thing by us."

" If I can, I will. I know something about the business.

I need to get clear about who is financing this and what it entails – if we all have to swig some bloody fizz drink on camera or have some product on a shelf... I will tell Michael the same."

Eric was not pleased. "Look, Eric, you are getting rolled

by this glamour of being 'on the telly' crap. About a hundred

will not turn to another channel when they work out there's

no sex or violence and only relatives will be awake at the end

and they will be taking the piss or talking about something else.

TV is about getting an audience for advertisements, right?

Art is lost on the box: my paintings will be smeared with

classical guitar played badly; Hamish's music will be a hunt

around the orchestra for the best pair of tits, and Michael's poems will be stuffed by some airhead and crosscut with shots of the pie-eating contest. Nothing's sacred;

everything's grist.
Not another word or that Sister will put me out." He nodded.
When are they going to let you go so that we can argue in peace?"

"A couple of days. When I thought that I might be going to die it seemed so natural and easy, and the pain was such a bugger, I thought 'Amen'." He stared at his toes down the white bed. "Och, I've done what I could but it's all downhill nowadays, y'ken, for all I've believed in. Mediocrity promotes mediocrity, Roy"

"Now you're talking," I said. He sucked in his lips, shook his head, sighed, glanced at me." I enjoy it here. These are good folk who do their best for the sick with never a complaint except for the way hospitals are being let go to cut taxes for the rich.
I never thought, in 1945, I should see that again. We all thought that war was won."
There seemed no way I could console him. "A fellow down there had a rare blood group, y'ken, and within an hour of it being requested on the radio, three people had donated their blood. You canna do more than that: is that not true?" He looked at me with brimming blue eyes above his half-moon reading spectacles, blew his nose and woke the man in the next bed so he snapped his mouth shut and his eyes open.
"What an old ham you are, Eric. I tell you what, I'll telephone Michael and talk to him about the price of fame, OK?"

I met Michael in 'The Islander' which looked over the ferry berth.
He and the twins ate sandwiches there for lunch. It was all steamy glass, plastic, stainless steel, the colours emetic and bland as the posters of exotic ice creams. The tables were occupied by swaddled, hearty women In from the crofts eating pie and chips, scoffing cream cakes and yelling over the roar of an espresso machine. I shuffled round and collected black coffee and a couple of ham sandwiches. "There's a table reserved," said the cashier, pointing with a cigarette between two fingers at the steamy window with the view beyond it.

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Michael seemed more diminutive among the bulky women,
thin nose in a poetry book. I elbowed the window clear.
Michael was making me wait until he finished the poem.
He was a scrap of a man, twisted like something the sea

had shaped, but he wanted respect as an artist like any other.
"And how was the Rector this morning? You didna upset him?"
"He seem fine, especially when I said I would call you."

It did not take him long to get to his script. He had drafted it, wanted me to read my part. I wouldn't. I said he could say what he wished, I trusted him, but it would be edited, adapted, chopped and changed: and that was where problems started. He did not know what pressures sponsors and advertisers exerted on anything that did not sell their product or image, and stared at me doubtfully, his enthusiasm diminished.
"Do you no think that you're a bit cynical?"
"No, experienced."
There was a chop in the harbour, the smaller boats rattling and bumping. "Now I want to get this clear, Michael. The film is one thing, Ainslie is another. I've thought about it all and I want to clear that what I'm telling you is nothing to do with my feelings about her. Right? I don't want you to get too high on this and be too upset when some illiterate goon…"
"Och, I can take care of myself."
"All right. I've one request, as one artist to another, and that is that you resist any crap to the effect that I am 'burned out' or 'washed up' because I copped out of showbiz; or words to that effect. Right?
True enough, I stopped doing what I was doing, but that was my decision. The only virtue most of what I had been doing was to earn enough to give them the two-fingers and piss off. The women problem was something else again. All right?"
"If you say so. I've never heard you talk so much, Roy, but why do you suppose that I haven't considered these things?"
"I don't know you very well, I suppose."
"I have few distractions,

some pain now and then, from working too long at my poems.
The twins are bookish men and we talk seriously much of the time. We talked about this. I decided to do the script because I wanted it as right as I could get it." He looked straight at me, almost angrily. "It's no game for me. I'm not posturing. I'm from here, y'ken, and I am obliged to do my best for these islands.
I don't enjoy it at all. I want to get on with my work whilst I may. So should you, Roy. You are a good painter, so paint. The rest is dramatics, hot air."

"Well, not quite."

. "Ainslie? Ah yes, there's a powerful distraction, right enough, but I'll tell you that celibacy is no better." I laughed, he smiled. "Have you read my book? 'Humanity is frail and finite. We must sing, shout, assert our kind.' I have five years left myself, they tell me." He coughed, shook his head, frowned at his cup. "Do you know that thing
of Leonidas to the Spartans at Thermopylai? Apocryphal maybe. 'Halt! Breakfast here, supper in Hades. Fallout.' "

We sipped and munched. He looked at his wristwatch.
"They will be along for me for I must ring the bell, y'ken,
but I'll just tell you this, Roy, in privacy. We had a mother found
drowned trying to row from a little off-lying island. She had a
daughter in our hostel. Nobody understood why the woman
should try to get across on a poor night. Her man heard the ring,
they have an outside bell, but when he went in, she'd gone.
Now the girl said she hadne phoned but she was fourteen.
The Rector asked her once if she had telephoned. No reply.
He turned to me and said: 'Another of these mischievous calls.'
'Maybe', he said to her, 'they told your mother that you were ill'.
He was on to the police straight away; 'Nobody at the school'
he said. They closed their books. Your friend is a great man."

"Have you found someone who hasne heard the 'hostel' story!'"
Tam said." Come on, the whole town's waiting for your bell."

I walked down the quay. The air was fresh, the sun's angle
said 'spring' and the gulls milled and yelled as the catch was unloaded. The pier head was full of lorries, benched worthies yelling advice and fishermen with their skips and creel's. To
the South the date might have been anything. My head was full of Michael's words. I remember the surprise of realising I was the centre of attention. Two fishermen on the back a lorry were shouting at me. I looked up. One stuck his arse out and slapped himself; the other pistoned a fist; both yelled in the vernacular. There were smiles all round, some cheers, the young men danced with glee at the sight of my amazement, boots thumping, arms raised as they went by. One of the town's 'characters', did point duty with arms whirling as drivers ignored him. He wore a long, black overcoat and a cap pulled up
at the front Gestapo-style. He had a whistle. He blew it, pointing at me like a referee as he marched across, gaunt face mad, eyes raw. The pierhead crowd roared, yelled encouragement, echoed his whistle, a ring of red faces forming like a playground fight. I stopped. He came on, spittle on his chin, whistle shrilling.
"*AWAY WITH YE!"* Grant Wishart shouted at my elbow. "*AWAY, DAN!"* Like a soldier Dan changed direction, stalked through applause. "That's bloody 'Desperate Dan'. He's a fucking nutter. Let's go." Grant swaggered, high-heeled boots clicking on the cobbles, leather cowboy hat low on his brow. A way cleared.
"Can you give us a lift, Roy? My car has conked."
"Sure.
That was a nasty moment." He squinted up.
"No, they're a bunch
of fucking peasants, man. Take no notice." I liked the hard Scots
of him. We got in the Renault van I hired, gear shift like an umbrella handle, crawled up the street, one-and-a-half cars wide, with sudden views of the sea. Grant rubbed his hands,
trapped them between his knees. "Life is sweet, man!"
he said in a poor Jamaican. "I don't work till two tomorrow,
so Elspeth and I can spend nearly twenty-four hours in bed!"

He laughed. “Not only that,” he slapped at his briefcase,
“I’ve a new loaf and four mackerel to cook in oatmeal for tea.
Y’canna ask for more than that!” Cloud rolled on brown hills.
“Do you know they use mackerel for bait and eat tinned tuna?
What a bunch!” He sighed. “But I don’t miss the smog and stink
and part-time is great. I clear off and leave the rest of the buggers hard at it. Do you know Simpson, teaches Latin? They piled desks to stop him getting in the room today. He has the shakes. I’d kick arses! But I’m free of it!” It was a shout of joy.
“How did you know where to find me?”

“I asked the kids.
They saw you with Michael. Does he chuck his weight about
with the old Rectum away!”

“I saw Eric this morning. What’s this
about a life class?”

“Jesus! He’s near dead but he won’t lie doon!
He canna stop it, can he, fixing things? Bloody MI5, I call them.
To hell with the lot of them! I’m free!” He laughed, stretched,
scrubbed at his face.

“You’re an escapist.” I told him.

“Aye,
and my wife and kids think so too, nae doot!”

“You seem happy.”

“Wouldn’t you be? What a girl she is! From the moment she
came to the school, I kinda knew. Do you believe in fate, Roy?”
He wanted my envy.

“Is there a choice?”

“It’s worth it to be with her.”

“Chaos, I believe in. Since the Big Bang everything’s been flying, and cannoning through space and time. We are weird as things they pull from the deeps which explode. They fall in love too.”

“Piss off you! You could have that TV tart if you weren’t such a miserable sod. I don’t know how you cope without nooky”

"I don't cope. I don't want to 'cope'. You 'cope' for me, Grant."
"If I had done half as much as you..."
"I've done nothing, Grant..
Each time I start a painting it's like starting for the first time.
You bring some skills, know what's been done, but now there's
no basis, no certainty: it's chaos too, flying apart since Mons.
Who wants a mock-window frame on the wall when they have
a television in the corner? If they do, it's not for insight, vision,
visual delight, it's as conspicuous investment, psychic income.
Nobody gives a stuff about art. Critics write to display their
brilliance at your expense, then you find people have a part
of you and, one way or another, you are screwed."
'Fuck you,
you don't have to come to the Art Club. We believe in Art!"

We bowled along empty roads. He told me how once he had
got together his best work, sufficient confidence and cash to
drive a van South from Scotland overnight, park early behind
the Burlington Arcade, and spend the day the day in Cork Street
finding that no gallery owner would come and have a look
at his work or let him take paintings in their gallery. They wanted transparences of
paintings a minute's walk away, sent by mail,
showed him the door: "Fuckin' poofs!" His fists were balled and
his eyes glared.
"Say they had taken you on, you have to paint what they sell, not what you want to
paint. You have to supply the goods at
the rate to get the best prices: you can't have over supply.
And if you get even luckier, they get you in training for big shows - the John Moore's,
Venice Biennale. Getting you selected involves more than painting. They get to your
woman and you find yourself accepting invitations, making the arty-farty scene with no
time to sit around studying your work, or even get much of it done. You enjoy what
you've got while you have it."

As we drove between the stone walls where Spring flowers
were beginning to show, I recalled for him taking my ease in
a cubicle at a private view of a friend's show and hearing
my dealer laughing with his mates at the trendy crap they sold.
I sat still, did not burst out and thump them, but understood
what I had become. Grant was quiet. He was typical of those
with some talent who go ga-ga at art school, go on to teach
and get slicker and emptier as term piles on term. "Grant,
this dream you have of the artist's life with that lovely girl:
don't change a thing. You've got it as good as it gets."

His goat propped on the half-door, the dog barked, Elspeth
came smiling and smoke curled up from his chimney.
He slammed the door too hard and jogged across the yard
and hugged her. She got an arm free to wave to me.

21.

There is an atavism about life drawing classes, a ritual,
the model in the pose; students intent devotees; silence alive. The teacher whispers,
moves from one to the other. Professional models are nude; novitiates bare. Their
vibrations fill the room. Eddy's Di was pregnant, not able to hold a pose
for long, proud in herself, glossy hair black on swollen breasts
and her mouth half open, nostrils flared and Semitic.

I said nothing at first, drew with the rest until her backache
broke the spell, turned us into a shuffling, joking, chatter.
I gave my drawing to Di. It was as good as I had done.

Grant leased an old building from the farmer who owned
an airfield where now only the squadrons of sheep drifted.
If it had been built to withstand bomb blast it admitted wind
which moaned under doors and whistled at windows.
We hung curtains, applied tape to silence it. Most of those
who came had only battered furniture at home. When two
or three older women began to come, there was carpet
for the concrete floor and chairs which did not wobble.

It was fun. Where once men waited to attack German
battleships in Norwegian fjords with biplanes so slow
that the naval guns could hardly track them, we gathered,
their long-haired, scruffy beneficiaries, to draw nudes.
Their 'pin-up girls', those long-legged, stream-lined tits
and huge grins which sustained their fantasies, were
replaced by our goose-bumped volunteers. I paid the rent
and Di and Eddy, Elspeth and Grant, used subs for heating
and light. Fifteen started, several made good progress,
and Elspeth drew fluently. She also posed beautifully.
On Thursday nights, as days lengthened, we worked hard.

I made clear that I was not available outside class and,
to my relief, I found I was left alone. I began to dream of
painting a huge canvas, my brush like Prospero's wand
magically producing the world, like those books of childhood
in which coloured pictures burst from blank pages as water
was brushed on. I had my easel on the headland, painting
black cliffs with white fulmars planing, acid green seas smashing
a thousand feet below; sunlight in columns against black cloud.
When I woke I lay warm for a while with my eyes closed,
containing the dream before I opened them on a dripping world

and an acceptance that without Prospero's control of gales
any canvas I took up there would sail away amongst the birds.

On the headland it was spring, the sun warm and bees a-buzz,
off-duty guillemots rafted below on the tilting sea or suddenly
danced, ran on the surface, dodged and dived, glided or soared
over or under the sea for the joy of life. All howling winter they
were far out and alone. Now they were back where they started,
content to be under the cliff where I stood, busy with pen and wash, happy in solitude,
trying to recapture the dream before it faded.

22.

I was washing up after lunch and Di was drying the pots.
They were of assorted designs, cracked and chipped.
Di did not use detergent and the water from the geyser
was lukewarm. I scrubbed and tried not to spray water
on her. She was not a conversationalist. She mentioned
ex-students now and again was shocked when I did not
remember them, displeased when I told her that I had
resigned from the job. I suspected that she had been
in my drawing class when my relationship with Tessa
collapsed and took a moralising feminist line as did many.

She had accepted my drawing of her, which Eddy had framed,
with a kind of flourish which suggested that having known me
longer than anyone else, she claimed some kind of insight -
and there was another connection: " My sister was at school
with someone who knows Tessa and she says she's remarried.

Did you know?"

"It was in the newspapers when I was south. They said she was pregnant too."

"Is she?"

"It's what they say if they can't think of anything else to say about a woman."

"Thanks very much!"

"I didn't mean..."

"You never do, do you? You used to destroy students just as casually."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes you did." She had the haughty, peremptory tone of the middle class which had me biting my tongue, hands in the suds. "There were always a few daddies' daughters who seemed to be doing a course in giggling; some boys who were put on the wrong subject list and couldn't be bothered to change or something, as you know. I wasn't there to waste time. I couldn't stand dossers."

"Some were like that because you made them nervous."

"Can't you put yourself in my position? Do you think I came for money?"

"I've no idea."

"Think about it."

"Yes, well don't be too hard on Eddy, that's all. He's chopping wood because he's working himself round to showing you his stuff. He knows he's colour blind and I know you can be harsh." I gave her the last spoon and pulled the plug. She hid behind her hair. "Lots of painters have colour problems."

"So what do I do?"

"I don't know."

"I can get out of looking. I'm practised at that, but he's got to face it, okay?" We hadn't moved, looked out at at the wet hills. "Etching? What about sculpture or..."

"No way. Not Eddy. He has set his heart on being a painter. It's his thing." I shook my head. "It bloody isn't. How did you meet Eddy?"

"Never mind about that. He'll be in shortly."

"I can't pretend, Di"

"Damn you," she said reverting to Home Counties matron. "I knew that this is how you would behave." She was so young, her life stills a dream. " Her dark eye pierced me and I saw why she was pregnant.

"Wait a moment! I'm not going to buy into this"

"Oh tell him then! Tell him!."

"This is all too crucial." but she had gone, leaving the door open to the sitting room where Bruce Springton was singing, as he did over and over that year, "I'm on Fire.' I walked out.

"I've put my foot in it with Di."

"She's so bloody touchy", Eddy said. " I keep out of the way. I didn't want this kid, y'know." He sniffed, woollen hat awry, brow beaded. "We were hard up as it was. She used to make a bob or two with her knitting but she can't manage the machine now." He dug the axe in a salty trunk and left it even though fine rain fell.

"Maybe her parents will divvy up, Eddy."

"No way, Joes. They're as serious about moolah as you are about art - Hatton Garden diamond merchants – and this kid will be all my fault, y'know." Eddy was a big guy but not stupid with it. He hauled the axe out and whacked the trunk with

impressive violence. I tried telling him to start carving it rather
than burning it but he gave me a tired smile, raised his brows.
"All right, Roy, I know what you two have been on about.
It's a bugger, isn't it, but what do I do? Get a job?
She'll not wear that for long. I'm her noble-fucking-savage, I am."
We walked to my van. She didn't appear before I left.

23.

I had telephoned Eric at home as soon as he returned.
Eric laughed when I told him about my problems with Di.
"Och, it's a dreadful thing, being a teacher, right enough!
Some folk never forgive you for it. I've had some remarks
passed by students I could'ne recall saying a dickybird to
and I remember getting a letter from a man in his eighties
who had taught me. I thought him a vain, violent psychopath,
but his letter was clearly from a gentleman and a scholar.
What was it that Mark Twain said? 'When I was fourteen
I was shocked by my father's ignorance. When I was twenty-
four I was amazed by what he'd learned in ten years'.
His laughter echoed in his study in the rectory." Aye, that's it."

"I couldn't avoid having to tell Eddy that he was colour blind
in the end either. She wanted it! I think she's got an opera
running in her head. The baby is part of it. It ties him to her,
she calls him her 'noble savage' and her wealthy parents…"
"Oh, don't talk tosh! Porter, you are a sad case, right enough!
It's love! I had thought you were doing good in that hanger,
even if some poor sod gets the short straw each week and

catches the 'flu."

"Don't be so facetious, Eric. It's no joke."

"Meantime she blames you? But there are sensible women coming to your soirees, aren't there? The sort who could offer the lassie good advice?"

"I doubt she would pay attention to their opinions. She'll probably looks down her nose…"

"Huish! Away with you! You're not in England now."

"She'll think she is."

"See if you can't get her alongside one of those ladies."

"That's your routine, Eric, not mine, and they are a funny lot: the first week there was one, wearing a shirt of her husband's. She brought a tin of instant and a box of sandwiches; the next four came; last week, seven. They just multiply. The rest are…"

"You are fulfilling an educational need. I knew it! That's why I pushed it with Grant Wishart. I said for years that our..."

"They are taking over. Those women got their man, their kids, cars, washing machine, telly, all that, then their kids grow up and they are off after lost youth, undiscovered talent..."

"And what's wrong with that, Roy Porter, if you please?"

"None of them have any."

"This isn't London. What else is there for competent, determined women with dreams and ambitions?" He dropped his voice as if Chickadee might overhear. "Is there one called Margaret there? There's a fine woman. Does she strip to her pelt too?"

"Can't stop her. " I tried to think which she was, "but you are right: the 'culture and cock' syndrome has arrived."

"Roy, is that your version of Feminism?"

24.

I did the bird count after the next full moon on my own.
I had not grasped before I began it, season by season
the shore changed in a way: in winter some beaches
became bare rock. Stones big enough to be grasped by
weed were washed up the shore; smaller stones stayed
lower down. In summer white sand returned to cover all
of some beaches. I walked along that spring on smooth
sand with curious seals in attendance, pausing to draw
and always counting, now and then picking up plastic
for Eric's foreign language collection. At such times I also
hoped to find myself as well, believing others were awake,
aware, alive, whereas my days printed time unremarkably,
as my feet until the next tide washed my tracks away.

25.

Eric sat in his study amongst his books, slippered feet
on a footstool and a blue towelling bathrobe tied loosely
over his woollen shirt and slacks. He seemed himself again
in his padded swivel chair behind a large desk. A fire burned
in the wrought iron grate between sap green tiles and above
the polished mantle hung a Victorian photograph of Edinburgh
castle in a copper frame. Bookshelves filled the alcoves an
each side of the chimneybreast and a glass fronted bookcase
stood opposite. The desk had a view down to the harbour
and across to the low and rounded hills where shadows chased.

He was very glad to be home and leant back with his fingers
clasped behind his head, pink face shining with pleasure.
I think that he had come to accept that his teaching career
was over, some caution had deserted him and left him relaxed
about things which previously had him red faced and cursing.
McConder was one. "How Billy got tip off I'll never know but
I was hardly behind my desk in my office when he is at the door
with the lecher, Lachlan Lennox. Lachlan is a bandy-legged old
rooster with no forehead and his eyes painted on his spectacles.
He was a sanitary inspector till he retired and took up dabbling in this ordure instead.
Are you sure that you don't know him?
He eats like a dog. He can drink tea from five paces. He defines, in a negative kind of way, the essential criteria of man. Billy has him trained to sit next to him and repeat his last words and nod. He nods away while Billy says that 'Committee has instructed him', by which he means he has decided, to inform me that C.O.M.E, as he calls it, deplores my relationship with the notorious artist and libertine, Roy Porter, whose sinful ways,
as reported in the press, cause deep concern to the parents of
young island girls. 'YOUNG ISLAND GURLSSS', says Lachlan,
and his false teeth fairly rattle. 'Furthermore', Billy says,
'yon Godless man', and he meant you, Porter, 'has procured
a hutment for the purpose of pursuance of lewd group practices
involving both men and women in the nude.' ('MEN AND WOMEN IN THE NUDE!')
Lachlan had to mop the spittle off his waistcoat."

"Pull the other."

"As God is my witness, sonny! I told them to sling their hooks...Have you seen a bairn filling its nappy? It goes puce. If it has teeth, it grinds them. It groans.
Its eyes start out of its skull. Man, that was Billy! A most dreadful concentration of bodily forces, an explosion! *'O Lord God of Israel! O Lord God of Hosts! Send doon the Fire!...'SEND DOON THE FIRE'!* I lifted the phone and told Michael to call the ambulance to take Billy home. That's the way they get him out of it when he's

paralytic, y'ken. Up he jumps and out the door with Lachlan scuttling at his heels and echoing the Reverend's curses. Man, I laughed so much that the ambulance took *me* home." He knuckled his eyes, half-moon glasses on his brow. . "I love that man, love him! He reminds me of my purpose here."

He patted the sides of his chest. "I am an educationalist. My job is to increase rationality, sensibility, tolerance in society, and a drunken maniac like Billy is a Godsend." He rubbed his hands.

Sun lit the hills. The harbour was glazed with cloud reflections through which a trawler made a herringbone wake. Eric sat in silence, his eyes on nothing. There was a photograph of his son on the desk, a volume of Gibbon open, gulls scurled.

Eric's mood had collapsed. "You've done well. There will be many generations grateful for what you have done for them."

"Done nothing much." He sighed, was not consoled. "Futile: 'a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing." Then he looked up and grinned. "We have had some damn good school concerts though." A bell rang in the house to mark the end of school.

He picked up a telephone: "Michael, did John Kyle hand you his budget yet? That's good. Here's Roy Porter: will I ask if he has made some decision on your film?" He put his hand on the mouthpiece, lifted an eyebrow.

"I need more information about sponsorship before I commit myself."

'Needs to know who is sponsoring it...Yes" He smiled. "May he give the producer your telephone number?" He did not wait. "You just do that. They are awkward characters, artistic chaps, right enough. Cheerio for now." He smiled at me, winked.

'Eric, for god's sake get your crummy hands out of my life!"

"A-A-Ah!" He held up a hand. "I must remind you I am not well and not to he excited."

"I came to get away from all that crap. Ainslie will do anything to get what she wants and right now she wants to make a film about the tragic decline of my artistic career!"

"Steady, Porter. The popular opinion is that when you met at the airport you stood speechless staring into each others eyes like teenagers."

I didn't want to upset him. His lopsided grin embarrassed me.

"Painting's what I want to do, you know, not this nonsense. When, for some reason, I am not painting, I feel out-of-sorts."

"Huish, sonny! Don't get upset now. What I know is that I am still your age, you see, and tomorrow, you'll be mine, and feel no different, and it will be all over bar the shouting. In any case, you've given everything up for nothing: you do no painting. I have seen, Roy: a few beautiful drawings but no painting...

"And you're losing weight, you're dishevelled, and I fear you will end up as I found you not so long ago, a drunken derelict."

He blew out his lips and shook his head. "Roy, you need companionship. Chickadee and myself...We cuddle in the dark with the wind cracking around the house up here. I have my job and she has the bottle, but all we really have is each other. We do our best for each other. Folk may think it's a mess but we're all right. What am I telling you? You're the artist, but there has to be life before their can be art. All you will bring forth from this bitter stoicism will be..."

"Wait," I told him, "Just wait and see." It was daft bravado but seemed to impress him.

I took him for a drive. We walked on the shore he chose

but he was soon out of breath, sat on his shooting stick,
tilted back his deer-stalker, stared at the waves rolling in,
his Edinburgh University scarf wound round his neck.
“A woman died here,” he said: “wife of one of the distillers;
ladylike little thing, she walked her dogs here each day.
I used to meet her at the Society of Antiquaries and we’d talk
of Edinburgh and the university, where she had read French
during the war. They found her dogs yapping here in winter.
‘A freak wave’ they said. ‘Hypothermia.’ She was lonely,
children married and away, husband off on business, maybe
one day it seemed pointless, maybe.” We started slowly back.
“Often think of her here. There’s some you just click with.
She’d smile to see me. She was a bonny wee woman.”

As dusk fell the wind became offshore. As we reached
the top of the low cliff I put my hand on his arm to stop him.
Three large hares sat facing each other not a stone’s throw away, long ears
semaphoring. Suddenly two were on their hind legs dancing and capering. The third
twiddled its ears, then all three were off in a dizzy figure-of-eight, leaping over each
other,
back legs flying. Then it was another pause. “It’s eerie,” said Eric.” In a blink the grass
was empty as if nothing had occurred.

We drove along the coast, parked, listened to cheerful chatter from the island radio,
staring out at where sun lit clouds high above the horizon. “Do you know you pick your
nose, Roy? That’s the trouble of being too much by yourself:”

A Great Skua came angling along the tops and suddenly
there were no birds in sight. Eric noticed nothing. The sun sank.
I started the engine. “If I may say so, you can’t go on the way
you are. You need to eat properly and get your clothes washed
more often.”

"Are you trying to tell me that I smell?"

'I'm not *trying*,

laddie, I'm telling you. It's bad enough being a self-centred,
taciturn sod but smelliness is something else again." I disliked
this, but took it as he laughed with his bass boom, then switched
the radio on. A contralto was singing. "I heard her sing that with Bruno Walter," he
said, "at the first Edinburgh Festival. She
cracked on the final word .'farewell', because she was in tears because she wouldn't
sing it again because she had the cancer.
She apologised to Bruno for being so unprofessional. He said.
'If we were all such an artist as you, we also would weep.'"

As I drove I sensed him brushing tears from his own eyes.

26.

You walked straight into my living room. On the right is
the studio, on the left a corridor. Off it opens my kitchen
and the bathroom. Opposite is my bedroom. All the walls
are stone. The floors are flagged. The roof is also flagged
with wooden beams showing, except in the bedroom, where
I have a ceiling with insulation in so I can be warm in bed.
I like to be Spartan. I like Puritan simplicity. I bought myself
new clothes after Eric told me that I smelled. In the studio
I have a bigger, North-facing skylight. Around the walls I had
stacked canvases and my big easel was on a hatch cover
I found on the shore. On the easel was the start of my cliff top
painting: some washes, some drawing: the huge clouds,
vertiginous depths, and a figure, a female figure, a naked

female figure it would seem, would occupy space on the left.
I scratched with charcoal on the clean and taut canvas and,
on Wednesdays at the life class, when I arranged the models
as I pleased, imagined the gleam of flesh against black basalt
the thus the tones, the warms and colds I had to find in blues
and greens, swam in my head.
When the 'phone rang out in
that silence, my heart leapt like the hare: Was it her? Was it
that beautiful, intelligent, capable woman, that bewitcher?
She would get her way, make her film, then disappear again.
Sometimes I did not lift the receiver.

27.

The Renault I had hired began to misbehave so that Grant
gave me a lift and complained all the way that Elspeth refused
to come because of a slight she overheard by one of the ladies whilst she was posing.
"How the hell do we get without them?"
He asked as we rattled along between verges of spring flowers,
burgeoning for all they were worth in that brief northern season.

They had voted for a weekly subscription they thought minimal
but had seen off most of the originals, the ex-hippies who lived
'on pot and luck', as they said. I kept aloof, was glad to draw, content to do a bit of
teaching in order to do so. I also liked the admiration of people mature enough to
grasp the unique chance
I gave them: I was not there, they seemed to sense, for long. Islanders don't waste
such opportunities and several, like Jock dragging wood ashore, tried to claim me,
asking me to dinner

or to parties in the town. I was not rude but I did not accept.

The Margaret, whom Eric had mentioned a time or two,
I discovered I had been calling Margo. She was my age,
dyed her hair ash blonde, used a sun-lamp and painted
her nails, lips, eyes, and brows. At a distance she was fifteen,
but close up you saw wrinkles, caught the perfume, hazarded
how many cigarettes it had taken to make her alluring voice.
I had heard about her from Eric. She was the banished,
credit card spendthrift wife of a Glasgow stockbroker who
flew up for the weekend now and then but really preferred
to sit in front of a gilt mirror in solitude, dressed as a W.R.E.N.
or air hostess, watching himself drink and listening to Kurt Weil. Eric was very taken by
such candid decadence, feeling it
illustrated his general thesis on the trajectory of the bourgeoisie.

When Grant left early, disappearing without a word, she offered
a lift. Driving the moonlit road she said that she supposed,
as Eric had told her about me, he had also told me about her.
She took my silence for assent just as she assumed that I
expected to go home with her, and explaining that her husband sometimes telephoned
late at night so she could read bits of pornography to him, and that I should not be
embarrassed
if this should occur. It was said in her croak of a voice in so
casual a way, I wondered if my ears deceived me, but her
candour continued: there had been a previous marriage,
when she was young and romantic, but the second was
a more sensible arrangement, she implied. I was assumed,
it seemed, to have reached an age of similar moral laxity.
Perhaps Di talked to Elspeth about Tessa, then Elspeth,
or Grant, gossiped to Eric, who encountered Margo as
a parent of a son from her first marriage who lived in

the hostel and played the saxophone in the school concert.
By the same route I heard, via Elspeth's contacts South,
that Margo had been dispatched North, having taken up
kleptomania when dispossessed of her credit cards
for profligacy, excepted exile in some kind of out-of-court
settlement amongst Glaswegian Freemasons. It was plain
that I was wrong to suppose privacy was possible:
there was far more to be had in London. She drove fast
and soon I found myself in a garden which by the loch
which reflected sudden splashes of moonlight. "Stay here,"
she said, "while I just get rid of the baby-sitter." Soon after
I saw a torch bobbing as a teenager ran down the drive.

We crept in for fear of waking her young daughters.
The place was well-appointed, the carpets thick, and
Margo poured a large Scotch and put me in the kitchen
at a gate-legged table with a space-age percolator
sobbing operatically. The kitchen was designed in glossy
woods and tiles and was full of Scandinavian gadgetry.
Bright pans hung by size in the cooking alcove where
there was even a neat TV at eye height. The ovens had a
console after NASA, on the walls were some Chaplin
aquatints of Kent landscape flashily framed in silver,
whilst the fridge displayed a collection of infant watercolours.

I emptied the chunky glass of smooth malt before I smelt
cigarette, then she swished past in a purple housecoat,
turned on music, a watery clarinet swing solo fading and
blooming out of the silence, placed a tantalus in front of me
and a glass for herself, pointed at the malt. "Do you like mushrooms?" I was
enchanted by her style in that raw land.
Fish pate appeared from a fridge, butter, toast came hot.

“Make me one,” she ordered. The cutlery was heavy silver,
the plates were black earthenware,. She twiddled the radio,
found French cafe concertinas jaunty in the European night.
It faded, hid behind rock thumping, came back charmingly back.

Somewhere nearby on the loch shore standing stones were
trained on first degree stars, comprehended the moon’s perturbation by Venus, and I
was sitting warm and a bit drunk,
watching a woman cooking. If I had a voice like Eric, I should
have burst into song. She delivered an omelette full of chives,
pine seeds and other pleasant things, then came and ate,
stabbing like a thrush, and wanted to talk about her drawing.
She wasn’t bad, had made pregnant Di an animal, wounded
and swollen, legs skinny as a gazelles, her dark eyes scared.
Elspeth also copped it: her nose made coarse; pelvic bones
Like handles; her sex splayed and shadowed. Maxwell, a dreamy, longhaired lad,
turned victim under her charcoal.
She said she had not seen Schiele’s or Klimt’s drawing, wrote the names down like an
awkward child with wrinkled hands,
Most people draw outlines and do not vary their line; but she
drew structures and did not draw what she could not see:
so highlights were left white, the lines broken, and elsewhere
the charcoal splintered under the pressure. She said she had
no training and looked quickly, suspiciously, at me as I praised
her drawings. I explained that I found it best not to evaluate
work in class. “You’d lose some of those social misfits if you did.
It’s all they’ve got, the poor dots,” she said.
“You have a gift.”
I wondered if gratitude for her hospitality had made me too glib,
decided not. “You should do something with it if you can.”
It surprised her.
“I see they have started to drift away.”

"Who?"

"All the weirdoes, the social misfits."

"I'm a social misfit: aren't you?" "I'm not!"

"It's hard not to be in times like these."

'Like these?" She lit a cigarette, poured whisky.

"This government."

"Are you not better off? That American was telling everyone what you earned.

You must be delighted by the last budget. She also said that you came in your pants when you beat her." She laughed to see my face, put a hand on mine. "Who cares? Nobody believed her

About that anyway." The percolator harrumphed in the silence. "She was also full of crap about your marriage, you claiming your wife was a lesbian and having it off with this Archer woman when you were having an affair with her yourself!" She giggled. "Oh, spare me your injured innocence, Roy, and have another."

My plates went and were replaced by coffee and a full glass. She blew smoke above my head and midnight cuckooed past.

"This place has no walls. You don't fool anyone here for long."

"I don't have any intention of trying." She blew smoke as an answer. "Your hobby is shocking people, is it?" She smiled.

"When people say that I tell them I'm a realist."

'Fantasist."

She laughed, throat exposed, a low grating sound. The 'phone matched the blood red tiles exactly and it had begun to pulse.

She collected it and put in on the surface near me.

'It's you.

Where are you?..." I've company. He's a big fellow, not fat, but tall and broad..."How tall are you?"

"Six-two," I hissed.

"Six foot two...Yes, a full head of hair. *Hair*... He's no fo ol,

he's shy. Do you want to talk to him?" I shook my head,
got up. "He doesn't want to talk to you… What? I don't know.
An interesting bulge. Come here," she crooked a finger.
I walked away. "Oooh!," she said. "It's a whopper and he's
full of it, full of it. Take it easy, big boy." She laughed silently
at me, then put her knuckle in her mouth. I went to the window, stared at the loch and half a moon while Margo made some
sucking and slurping sounds, then spluttered. "Groan!"
she ordered, hand over the mouthpiece.

"Stop it," I ordered.

"Yummy," she said. "He can't take any more," and replaced
the 'phone, shaking and coughing with pleasure. "Great!.
That will give the bastard something to be going on with!"
Then she pointed at my trousers, laughed and coughed again.
The phone pulsed and she took off the receiver, ignored it.

"I was brought up to associate passionate sex with madness:
'They must be a bit touched' my dad would say if neighbours
ran off with someone else." The cuckoo announced twelve-thirty, one, or half-past-one." I was being drunk. "I never liked losing control, getting legless with drink, drugs. Without our rationality, we are just puny apes." She sat, smoked, considered me. I felt objectified. It rankled. "I never really liked screwing."

"Oh Christ," she said. The music from Paris wobbled and faded
from a thousand miles South, another world of soft night air and
boulevards. Outside the standing stones continued to calculate. "You've never had good sex maybe." She lit yet another cigarette. She was a witch. I could not see her beyond the light which bounced off the table between us. "Maybe you think that you can get it from me?"

"Probably not" The words seemed to ricochet like a stone off a tank. She leaned into the light to stare me down.

"I must take a pee," I said.

"So the lovely Ainslie Archer had you, then she had your young wife! And she comes on so demure on TV, but you can't tell from appearances, can you?"

"I do my best." I got up and began down the hall. The night-light burning in the girls' room deceived me. I stared down at their angelic sleep among velvet and gilt, their gold curls flying, mouths agape as if they drowned in dreams. A hand gripped my arm tight just above the elbow. "Come out of this," she hissed, hauling me. My anorak and cap were on a chair. She swept them up into my hands and opened the front door wide.

"I'll phone for a taxi."

"Not from here at this hour you won't." I stepped out expecting her to follow. "You wanker!" The door shut, the key turned, bolts were shot. I laughed with relief, hoping she would hear. A gnome stood in the flowerbed.

I aimed at it and it slowly toppled, then began the nine or ten miles along the coast road in good spirits. She would have turned me into a pig as she had probably done to many men.

I could imagine her giving instructions in the darkness.

My suede shoes slapped as I climbed and descended hills,
wet with dew. I was pleased with myself. If women wanted equality, they could have it.
Then I wondered if I was short
of sex-drive. 'All men are rapists.' 'The standing cock has
no conscience.'

Balls.

28.

It was so silent that I heard the throb of a ship's diesels out

on the Atlantic, thump of rabbit alarms, saw satellites wobble,
shooting stars etch across my retinas eyes now and then.
After an hour or so my feet were sore and I became weary
and less satisfied: not with refusing to perform to order,
but in allowing the situation to develop at all. The idea of her disgusted me as I
trudged. After a while clouds distilled over
the hills to the East, and I could see waves zipping white
along the shore below the road. The full absurdity of where
I was and what I was doing grew on me as I slapped along,
but there was no alternative. An aircraft thundered high
on the polar route to America, a dog barked far off.

At last I came to the links near home where I scattered
rabbits in the dew and gulls, zigzagged off indignantly,
keeping an eye on me. The bull sat in the steamy breath
of his wives and rumbled to make me pick up my pace.
I closed the door on the dawn, pulled off ruined shoes
and drenched clothes as the bath ran, lowered myself
footsore and exhausted into the water's balm and solace.

I dreamed that the 'phone rang, woke and found that it did.
Naked, I crossed the stone on tiptoe. It stopped. I turned back
in relief, anticipating the fury the spurned woman. It rang again.
I girded my loins (clasped my privates) balanced with one foot
on the other: "So it is the right number! Roy, how are you?"
"Nude and cold, Ainslie."

"Oh .What time is it there?"

'No idea."

She considered this. "I'll be brief. I wanted to say how glad
I was to hear that you accepted the script. I think it's great
and very good about you. I'd no idea you were a war hero...
And I was surprised at what you had said about your family.
I found it explanatory: I mean, I could relate it to your work,
those strong, raw qualities."

"It wasn't a war. I wasn't a 'hero'.
Jesus Christ! I slaughtered some poor civilians. I was a daft
lad they stuffed full of crap. When I had obeyed their orders
they buried me in the desert incommunicado. What else have they said about me?"

"You haven't read it? I got the idea that you…"
"Not a word. You are not playing games, are you, Ainslie?
No, dinkum! It's focus is your work and its background in your
family. I was especially interested, of course, in you attitude
to women." She sounded uncertain, her voice faltering.

'Relax.
You can be bloody sure I will read it. You know that my Mum's
still alive; and my Aunt Gloria. What is it I am supposed to say?"
"About the need to placate women."

"That's bloody Eric!"
The distance between us hissed. "I'll get to the point:
can I talk to your agent about which of your works..."

"No.

"Not until I read the bloody script!"

"Roy, Michael has done

a really good job first off, so please don't upset him, will you?

There's someone here to see me. I'll speak to you soon, Roy." "Hang on", I told her.

She didn't.

I got back in bed shivering

but could not sleep. I rehearsed nasty remarks about treachery

and betrayal to Eric, woke at noon in surprisingly good spirits.

There was a painting of a girl, nude, a primitive pose, against

a background of black storm, lightning, behind white buildings

She suckled a child, did what she must though Heaven split:

Giorgione: 'The Tempest.' That was it! I got up, got dressed.

I opened a tin of sardines and sliced some onion and tomato,

stuffed them between sliced bread and bit as I started to draw.

I knew where to find a copy but did not want it at the front of my mind as I worked,

drawing, redrawing as the sun slanted round

the room. It was setting when she rang again: "Hello! Have you

got some clothes on now?"

"I have."

"And have you had a think

about which paintings...?"

"I will paint something especially for

your film."

"Gee, that's great?"

"I have been working on it all day.

You have to be in the painting." She laughed with joy. "Nude." "Nude?" Incredulous.

"That's right. I've been dreaming about it."

I felt elated. "Ainslie, I am going to immortalise you, baby!"

The line went dead. I listened to its emptiness amazed.

30.

Eric and I were sitting in warm sun in front of The Crazy Creel
with a pot of tea and scones. There was a clutch of Aylesbury ducks on a pond
boating about but continually cocking eyes
at the sky, so I did the same, hoping to see an eagle. Something
was up there. The silence between us confirmed that Ainslie
had made other calls. After a while I began to draw Eric and
the idea of his portrait began. “Summer term next week.”
“I am to start work on Monday, but mornings only this term.
I’ve enjoyed my sabbatical but I need to have my hand on
the tiller again,” he said awkwardly. He was being careful.
Of course, he had not encountered me in a creative fit.
“Give it up. Go to Positano.”
“It’s too much for an old dominie.
I must do another year to get my full pension entitlement.”
“When do I see this script?”
“It’s being modified after your chat
with Ainslie. Maybe we were too intrusive, Roy. I’m sorry.”
I grinned at him. “It’s okay.” He stared down the hill and I felt
that there was more complications than I knew. “Now I’m busy,
things like that take more of a back seat.”
“I’m really glad to hear it.”
It was solemn mood he was in. We sat in a more comfortable
silence, but he seemed without his usual joi de vivre, seemed old.

"Were you serious the other day, about this painting?"
"I'm a serious painter. The way cultures paint the nude is
their essence, as you know. I will make you as famous as
the Duchess of Alba." We listened to each others breath.
"You want me in your pictures and I want you in mine.
Mine will last much longer than thirty minutes."
"You're crazy."
"I'm as serious as I know how to be..."Think of the ratings!"
It made her excited and she giggled. "I'll be a laughing stock." "Thirty million men will
sigh. Thirty million will be jealous!"
"You are a swine, Roy Porter. Do you know that?"
"You are a sophisticated, modern woman: a role model,
and people will be delighted to see you as I shall paint you.
Do you need me to tell you that you are beautiful? You are! "
"Are you saying that if I won't be in your picture, you won't be
in mine?"
"Yes." It hadn't occurred to me. She considered it,
then got angry with herself and tough with me.
"Tessa wants
to buy the house when the lease runs out."
"No. I want it next
year. I have done my duty so far as she is concerned."
"Perhaps so."
"Perhaps? Nearly four years at a minute rent
and a dollop of cash? You know how much?"
"No, I don't."
"I'm surprised. Who is the happy man?"
"Well, at least, this time
you didn't say 'woman'." I had no answer to that. "He seems
a good bloke, she's known him years."

"Not Ralph Hoppen, is it?"

Mummy and Daddy will be pleased."

"She's not nasty about you." "Ainslie? "

"What?"

"I want you in my painting."

"But naked?"

"Bare even."

"How do you know what I look like? "

"I know."

"That was years ago."

"You haven't changed."

"I'm fat."

"Nah."

"You should have seen me when I was a surfie chick."

"'I like you just the way you are!'" I sang.

"It's a good thing

you don't try to make a living by singing."

"I have started on

the background. It is a big canvas. I'll get it air freighted South." "Just hold your horses."

"Just think," I said, "you might end up

in the Tate for ever."

"Stone the crows! What a hellish thought!"

"'She wouldn't say yes, she wouldn't say no'," I sang to her.

"Stop it. 'm catching the Paris train in an hour or so.

I have to see Per Elange, set up an interview, get some stills

shot of his latest zoo animal pieces. Have you seen them?"

"Never heard of him."

32.

In bed I thought of Giorgione's 'The Tempest', as I fell asleep:
the wild light, the Venus's legs splayed, full breast, baby's head; and then she was on the left, a mirror image; no shepherd, no baby, and her thighs creamy on the black basalt. I slid my arm between them, picked her up easily, her breast to my mouth, stepped off the cliff and we swooned into deep sleep…

Telephone. Again the cold flags; her voice: "Roy, do you really
think I should look all right? I won't see thirty again, you know."
"Do you want an undress rehearsal or something?"
"Were you in bed? What are you doing in bed at this hour?" "Dreaming about painting you, of course."
"You are serious,
aren't you?"
"I am."
"I'm going to Tassy tomorrow, my father's ill,
so I'll be in Launceston for a few days, then back to L.A."
"Giorgione: 'The Tempest', know it?"
"I will have a look again.
Go back to bed now… She always tried to hang up first.

I did. I scooped her up and we fell yet again, down, down
towards the salty dark, her sweet milk in my mouth.

33.

I had spent a week painting clouds and was ready to knife on chunks of ivory black, my palette glistening, when the 'phone began: "Hi, I had a look at the Giorgione."

"What did you think?" "That you are trying to have a lend of me…trying to have me on."

"No!"

"You have found a way to..."

"To what?"

"Mess up my film."

"No! Why this sudden change of heart?"

"I was flattered until I saw that fat woman with enormous feet. It just made clear that you have never seen me as I am. You have always stuck labels and images on me. You don't seem able to see me, Ainslie Archer, but just some fantasy figure, some fiction."

"Well I don't think you like at all like her – and I don't want you in that pose. It's just the tension between the terrible storm and the woman and child."

"I haven't got a child and I'm too old for this nonsense. I'm over thirty."

"You are truly beautiful and you bloody know it, Ainslie, and the tension in my painting will come, if I can manage it, between that, and your fame, and the tempest."

"I just don't see myself in the way you see me. It's a myth."

"I could say the same about this version of me you want to film."

"This isn't going to work, Roy."

"I've started, Ainslie. I can't stop; you can't stop. We made a deal. I get famous for a few minutes; but you will never be forgotten. Trust me."

"I really wish I could." "Yes, it isn't easy. I think that you could destroy me. You scare me."

"Roy, that is crazy talk."

"You are my anti-matter Juliet."

"What crap! That's incredible! I've got a programme to make, that's all. I can make it with, or without you, you know."

I knew her tantrums, had seen her operate.
“Then do it and good riddance!” I was surprised at my sudden vehemence, but not sorry. Her composure was awesome.

I banged back to the canvas and scooped up black pigment,
flung it on. As soon as it started to slide I turned the canvas
on its side and watched its progress, then on impulse, thinned
a tint of ultramarine, scooped it in a spoon and flirted it half way,
turned the canvas right way up again, dobbed on flake white.

I had planned it all meticulously; now I let fly and that was
the provenance of the ‘brilliant violence of my chiaroscuro,’
as someone wrote. Later I scumbled a few glazes about,
but by that time I laid the canvas flat and closed the door on it.

I wrote to my lawyer and told him to terminate the lease
of the Positano house as soon as possible. I changed my
telephone number and decided to keep to myself, cry off the class, get back into my ornithological work, clear off South.

34.

The best way to study bird colonies on cliff faces, as peering through binoculars can be so fatally vertiginous, is to take transparencies at intervals, project them, sit in an armchair
and look through the glasses safely. I explained that I was
counting razorbills but Elspeth thought it hilarious, fighting
the giggles until Grant snapped at her. He looked like a lost dog,

seemed distracted, drew back the curtain although I had not suggested it, and the slide was still lit on the sheet I had hung.

He spun round and began as if to bowl a googly: "Yon women didne come because you did not. To tell you the truth, it was a relief. We had good time, sang a song or two..."

"And, you know, there's a couple have a summer school planned for a month in the Academy art rooms. Did you not know that?" I shook my head. She nodded, big eyed, to confirm her claim. "They have asked Sasha Bellhouse to come. Do you not know her?"

"She's another of 'em, y'ken. Has nobody mentioned it at all?"

"Another leisured lady, he means," Elspeth said. "Margo, maybe?" I had my suspicions about the way I had been dumped on Margo for a lift and said nothing.

"Aye, a well-heeled hobbyist. I'm very surprised Dunbar has you in the dark. He's an old gossip usually."

"Not seen him recently."

"You're learning, are you? He tries to run the island, not just the school. He needs to keep his nose out of what doesn't concern him. He can be silly old git at times."

"'A foolish fond old man'", Elspeth said. "What Grantie's coming round to is to suggest that you give up our life class."

"Huish, woman. I'll manage."

"No sooner said than done."

"Are you sure?" they both asked.

"Absolutely. I've started painting. I need to concentrate. I have an image to be dealt with, somehow."

"Oh, can we see?"

"Afraid not," I told her.

"Never show anyone anything unless it's as finished as you can make it. I've only just started. It's still in my head for the most part."

"We've learned such a lot from you," she said. "We're sorry."
"Don't think we're not grateful," he added. "It's just that those
bossy bitches are taking over. That Margo Chisholm thinks
she's God's gift since you told her she could draw well.
She's organising an exhibition to raise funds and she'll be after
you to show something. There's no end to her pushiness.
She has Dunbar hopping about. There's some nonsense about
another son she had at Strathtroonie coming to the Academy. There's opposition to it.
I'm not clear why, but Sandy Moncrief
is said to have stirred that bloody madman McConder."
"Eric really needed all this just now."
"It's said that he and Margo Chisholm are" she
crossed her fingers, "like this." I did not reply, slipped my transparency from its slide. "If
they are, it's fair do's because the whisper is that they had to leave the last school
because Mrs Rector was having it off with a member of the staff."
"It is so hard to imagine," she said.
"She as was slim and almost as beautiful as
you once. I've seen photographic evidence."
"I should like to see photographic evidence of her
and old Eric at it now. They would be like hippopotamuses!" Grant sat on the arm of
Elspeth's chair and patted her shoulder.
"It's wrong to laugh, the poor old things," she sniffed. Then,
"Do you think they still do it?" She delighted Grant.

"Did you know that Eric kicked C.O.M.E. out when Billy and his familiar came to
complain that I was a corrupting influence on
him and you? As a matter of fact, they got after the landlord too
for allowing lewd assemblies to occur but, I think, one of the ladies squared him with a
few quid."
"Dunbar is a sound man at heart, but he gets
himself in a raffle, a mixter-maxter with folk, trying to play both ends against the
middle." Grant blew out his cheeks, brushed up his moustaches.

"What's this 'C.O.M.E' you talk of? " Elspeth asked me.

"Committee on Moral Education.".

He made that up with Michael and those twins, you know," Grant explained. He's an old joker." He took out one of his cheroots, snapped his lighter, talked with it his mouth, thumbs in his ornate belt, smoke in his moustaches.

"You never think of the Rector saying things like that," Elspeth said. "I mean, come is come, isn't it?" She giggled.

"He's really looking forward to this TV show. The big moment in his life: 'My good friend Roy Porter'; 'My secretary, the famous poet'; the composer whose arse I brayed in the good old days when I had a leather tawse'! Och man, we'll have it every speech day till the old sod retires!"

I knew that I should offer then a cup of tea but I wanted them to go so I might get on with my bird count. Grant flicked ash in my peats. Seeing my glance, Elspeth hoped I did not mind the smell of cheroot. Grant laughed: "Better than decaying birds, linseed and oil pigments any day. What have you got in there?" He wanted to get in my studio, see the canvas, and stepped off for the door with a swagger. I got in his way, stared him down. Just for a moment I thought that he might be daft enough to give me a push, saw what I thought and turned away, puffing smoke, boots clicking on the floor, a small Scottish bandit..

"Is there a smell?" I asked Elspeth. "It's a collection of wings. I have them nailed up. I measure the span, keep records. Birds are growing bigger as it gets colder. You remember that if you double the size of a cylinder, you cube its volume?" "Yes," Elspeth said, " so are you saying their body heat goes up in ratio?"

"I expect that I am." She sat with her knees together, the rapt student, eyes smiling.

"You can forget all that when this telly film comes out," he said. That will do the trick, you see. You'll be flavour of the month again and old Michael will make his name. He's off the bottle and working like a dog. Hamish has set some poems of his, he has the script finished. There's just the problem of whether Roy Porter is in or out. I think that he has provided for both eventualities."

"I don't mind if I am in or out either." He expression was a sneer of disbelief. "Think what you like. I don't give a sod for their 'Whatever happened Roy Porter': that's what she was planning, whatever Michael has written."
"Oh surely not!" Elspeth cried. "We were all impressed by her admiration for you and your work. When somebody referred to you as 'knackered', she got right furious. She said that you were one of the most important painters in the country, perhaps Europe!"

"Tomorrow, the world!" said Grant in a Goon voice.
"And Michael is such an honest, straightforward man. Have you not read his poems? We did him for Leaving Certificate and he's wonderful!" Her enthusiasm melted me into a smile. "He is! Roy, don't patronise me." She said.

" I wasn't." She surprised me.
"Oh yes, you were too!" I had learned that the only reply was silence, picked up a transparency and held it against the light. "Michael's great. He's a great wee man. At the same time as he was working on all this, he was running the school: I mean, Dunbar's deputies are geese, Grantie says. I reckon that you should swallow your pride and let him take his chance."

Grant said: You should have done the same for Eddy too, Roy. You have broken him, y'ken. He's a changed man since you socked it to him and smashed his dream.".

"Fuck you, Wishart! What has art to do with kindness? If that's what you want,

go elsewhere, don't bother me! Eddy's a good bloke but he won't add up to a row of beans as a painter with his problem and that's all there is to it. It's like trying to be a tone-deaf
musician. I mean, it doesn't matter what he wants to do, he can't paint. He's got a pregnant woman to look after. Do I kid him?
It's bloody mad, this 'If you want to be something badly enough,
You can be.' You want to be President of the U.S.? Sure. Have you got fifty million dollars? You haven't? Forget it. You want to be a professional painter but you're colour blind? Forget it.'
" Elspeth blushed with dismay. "But, Roy, what are they going to do?" She embarrassed me.

"Try to deal with reality."

'What's that?" Grant asked. He had changed down a couple of gears. "3-D" I said.

"Oh really," Elspeth was disdainful.

'He means sculpture. But how will he learn those skills?" Grant demanded. "They' re skint. They talk about her parents who are Yids with a diamond business and a bloody mansion in Dorking, but they've no expectations."

"They are hoping the bairn will change things but Di hates her mother and her father can't stand Eddy, " Elspeth added.

"There are some hopeless folk out there, right enough. That guy Selkirk, the guy with the cough, he has half his floorboards up and burned and he churns out that crazy stuff!"

"Unsaleable," she went on, "and he drops acid too."
"Some of their kids come to school on a chocolate bar when they should have a belly full of porridge in this climate, y'ken."
"What we were wondering was if you would be interested in running a kind of rival summer school? We thought we might make some money and set up a fund for..."

'I'm sorry," I told her,

” but that’s not my scene. As a matter of fact, I may be off soon.” She could not disguise disappointment but it was anger she turned on Grant who having inflated, had deflated. “I told you!”

“I know it seems selfish but my business is being a painter. I’m not a teacher or a moneymaker. I can’t allow myself to get too wrapped up in anything else. I came to escape all the crap but
it has followed me here. Do you understand?” I was shouting.
“You’re crazy?” Grant pulled Elspeth upright. “Off,” he said. “I’ve heard enough of this.”
“Good luck,” I said and closed the door.

It was hopeless to try to remember where I had got to with my count. I walked out into the mild summer evening, skirting
kye with their bull on a knoll munching and eyeing me blankly, marching up the headland turning anger and anguish into effort. The last songs of larks fell around me and everywhere wild flowers were closing. Whole fields were yellow with buttercups, others were white with moon daisies. Bracken smelt good, crackled in the sun. Soon I was sitting on a warm stone
on the cliff’s lip. Sometimes you crawled for fear of the wind streaking from out of thousands of miles of Atlantic so that
you could lean crucified upon it; but rarely was it so still,
so easy. Inching, staring down into shifting power of swells hundreds of feet below was thrilling pleasure. The seabirds screamed, the sun glittered, and I was released, drawing again
in the space where Ainslie would have posed. It took an hour
or more and then I ripped it out, made a ball, hurled it as far as I could, imagined its fall past libraries of birds on their shelves.

"The Academy. Michael Mossbank Macnab speaking." "Porter,
I'm after the Rector but I'm glad to get a word with you. Are you well?"

"I'm very well, Roy. I was wanting to speak to you too.
The television people are pressing me for some determinations." "Michael, they pay people to press: it's their job, is pressing.
You can't trust them to play the game, you know. I can tell you
from the other side that there's nothing nicer than to produce
a smack in the gob in the middle of a nice cosy chat and watch some poor bastard's face fall off. Expect the worst, Michael."
Roy, maybe we should not talk of these matters on the telephone." "Christ, that's just what I mean! There's a tyranny, Michael,
of admass opinion controlled for the ruling classes by these
people. Any individual who stands up to them is made to look
a fool or proved to be a pervert of some kind. Don't you agree?"
"I hear you," he said grimly.
"You must see that one has to be careful."

"I heard you were concerned that my script contains facts about your life which
were not in public knowledge but absolutely everyone agreed
that the result is very good for your work."

"Ainslie seemed to think that I was an SAS hero. What I did was murder innocent men
and their wives and children for no good reason. They were
left-wing union officials likely to organise strikes against our
invasion and occupation, had it worked. I put a gun to one poor bastard's head and blew it off. Make sure you get that in, okay?"
"Ah well," he said," maybe you have a point there, right enough,
but what I thought was that you might speak to camera rather
than being interviewed. That way you can be sure you..."
"Michael, they can edit what I say into …"

"We're all trying our best for you." "Once bitten, twice shy." "Who bit you?" Exasperated. "Ainslie is leaning over backwards to accommodate you, if you take my meaning." I snorted. "She has the highest opinion of you
and your work, I can see that."

"I thought so too, once, to my cost." "Well I'm no expert on affairs of the heart but it's a long time ago. This is a professional thing; that's how she sees it, I'm sure."
"Have you spoken to her lately?"

"She 'phoned me on Sunday morning from Athens." Impressed. "She asked after you."
"Yes, well...How's Eric?"

"He's no so well this morning. Like me,
and Ainslie, he hasn't got your new number."

"I'll speak to him."

36.

"Eric, what's this I hear. Are you ill?"

" No. Sometimes I mistake
too much breakfast for angina pains and, maybe, vice versa.
And how are you?"

"I'm painting. I want to paint your portrait.
When can I start? What's the light like in your study on a summer afternoon? I need a strong light to reveal your handsome features."

"I don't think we have it that strong, but you're welcome to come and look. You're sounding frisky."
"I am, I'm good."

"Pleased to hear it. I've no need to worry about you?"

"Not at all."

"But you are the patient, not me."

"Your heart has its problems. What have you done to cure them?"

"I am painting. I have started a large canvas and I want to paint your ugly mush." There was sufficient pause to make me feel I had chosen my words badly. He seemed out of patience with me, but I wasn't going to fit in with his ideas of proper behaviour with Ainslie. On the contrary, I felt he was grossly intrusive. It was civilised and distant and I left matters until a brighter day.

"It's a portrait day: is Eric well enough, Mrs Dunbar?"

"Oh yes," her voice was light, far away. "He's reading his book in this excellent sunshine we are having."

"You like the sunshine?"

"Oh, I cannot get enough of it. Somedays I could scream at the weather we have. It blows a gale from one direction for five days, then it blows from another. I've seen Tumnus, our puss, bowled by the wind here...Put him outside and Whoo! He's gone, poor thing, but he must go out, so Eric tells me."

"Shall I speak to him?"

"Just come around," she said. "I'm sure we are always happy to see you, Mr Porter, and we both think the picture will be really grand."

As I drove I thought about the last time that we had been free with each other, had talked with no defensive care, had been our last beach walk, a cold morning. Eric was dressed as if it was colder, red balaclava under the hood of his duffel and the Academy's red striped football socks in his gumboots. His pink face and round, padded appearance, made him

one of Brughel's peasants. The 'wife's wee dog' clockworked
round the graveyard, nose down. Every now and again the sea spilled bones and I remembered wishing he would call the dog to heel, wondering if his friend Jenny was buried there. "I got here early. Now I have to ask you to take it easy for I'm not so good on my feet as I once was." We set off along the stone wall to the low cliff, curlews bubbling in the gusty air. "Och, these graves! All these poor swine rotting underground and these
stones falling over. Y'ken, when I saw the serious look in their
eyes as they bent over me, big eyes those night-nurses have,
I realised that I was on the spot and that it wasne so important
or unnatural to let go, pass on, bugger off. I'm a wee bit tired
of everything and, while I think death is the end, I might be
wrong and I might just see wee Angus again, and that in itself
is enough to make me think 'okay'. Anyway, I've always fancied
saying 'What the hell was all that about?' and then, chop!"
I listened as we side-footed down. There were several themes he worried at often enough, but as we began over the icy rocks where the flood had left its offerings, he began a new one: "I was at the bus stop outside Angus's school one day when he came out with his class in a crocodile. He pretended not to see me but he swung his arms like a soldier to show me how hard he tried." Eric's voice caught. He lurched away, head tilted against the wind, scarf flapping. I went back to him, put my arm round him. He sobbed, his thick body shaking, fists bunched in his red gloves, snotty nosed, the tears whisking off his old face in the wind. He shrugged me off, delving for a handkerchief; handed me his spectacles. "I tell you, it had all better make some sense or else." A small aircraft came balancing over the sea. The full moon wore away beyond towers of cumulus. Fulmars drifted by, eyeing us sombrely. "Aye," he said, snorking and spitting, "I should have died first, not wee Angus,
so you see how it is with me...but what about you? You need somebody. You need a warm bum against you on a winter's night." He clapped his hands together, blew on them. "That's how we are. Simple as that it a cold climate. Ask those buggers in the graves."

"It's just a question of painting the best I can,

that's all, but it's a Zen process: you need to get yourself right first; and I don't mean in a state of bliss; I seem to work best with a touch of angst, myself."

"You should be a bloody genius.

I've never met a man who was so free and so bloody glum."

"I'm not glum."

"Man, you're a miserable, cantankerous sod!

You English! One minute you talk like some priggish private schoolboy, the other you come on like a soccer hooligan!

I never know which direction you are coming from next.

Why can't you be bloody minded, dirty-minded, simple-minded

like a decent Scot?" His bass laugh fended any reply.

I was drawing the bones of a Red-necked diver. "Life's fucking ferocious, and that's that." He stood and stared, added quietly,

"but there's some who waft through life and float like thistledown into their graves..."

"You threw a fit when I mentioned my house

at Positano last time..."He grabbed my elbow.

"Is this to be fact

or fantasy? If the latter, say no more until it's the former or I shall get too excited again.

I'm sick of it here, to tell the truth.

I've done all I wanted to do. I need something else, a last fling before I hand in my dinner pail, y'ken."

The hour or so that summer afternoon became less awkward

as I limned in the pose in a thin blue on the canvas I set up.

He was angry with me for my stubbornness and, I guessed,

for spoiling other people's chances, and I was waiting for him

to start to coax me round to compromise, but that didn't stop

our talk because we were good friends if unlike each other.

He told me Eddy and Grant, Di and Elspeth, had forgiven me

And I told him my new telephone number. The canvas was

satisfactory and I left it on the easel, although he did complain about the smell of turpentine and linseed I also left behind

37.

This time I did not recognise her voice until she was into
a businesslike explanation of the contract's complication
by some U.S. law in consequence of joint production.
Whilst the programme was sub-contracted so far as facilities
were concerned to Cairngorm, I was on a personal contract
to Tower TV as she was. No one else among the subjects
of the film was similarly contracted, she gave me to understand,
but I recognised this was for her benefit, not mine, in case
I proved a problem to production and was chopped.

I let her run on till she stopped. "Roy, this is a very important contract for my small production company. If I make a good job
it should mean all kinds of other work, so please be a good."
"Send it to my solicitor."
"I already have. I want to make sure you
go through with it."
"You expect me to sign a contract with penalty conditions? Forget it. I'll do it of my own free will or not at all, and you know my conditions."
"Geez, you must be joking! I'm an old lady. No one wants to see me without clothes."
"Half the population fantasise about you whilst masturbating."
"Oh God," she said, the colours of her deep voice at last less like a newsreader's. I loved her. "I get letters from nuts like that."
"You're more potent a symbol of femininity than Pallas Athene.

I have to celebrate your beauty."

"How bloody persuasive, you are" she said. "You could talk the leg off an iron pot! When are you coming south? Haven't you got a car down here?"

"I left it at my Mum's."

"How is she? I liked your mother. She's nobody's fool."

"When did you meet her?"

"Don't you remember? Ah, I forgot."

"Well that makes two of us." I had no recollection of such a meeting. Perhaps they had met at the hospital? Hadn't I refused to see Tessa or Ainslie? Did anyone take any notice?

"I'm sorry, really I am. That was dumb of me. Roy, forgive me."

"I have already forgotten it." It made her laugh. "Right," I said,

"I'll call you when I'm in Camden, then we can talk."

I sat and watched the full moon lift from a pewter sea.
When they strengthened the stone foundations of my croft
on its knoll they found the wall of a Viking long house,
older walls under that. Faces had turned on that spot
at that season of the moon and stared, as I stared,
hearts banging in the silence as it rose in the white night.
The seals suddenly set up a wail like kids playing at ghosts
and I burst into laughter at the bathos of my hopes.

38.

Saturday night is the time for parties. I had bathed, shaved,
put on clean clothes, and chosen to walk on a mild summer evening to Di and Eddy's
farewell party. Jock leant on his long-handled spade and watched me go, cigarette
stuck on his lip; black-headed gulls fluttered after the insects pollinating flowers
in the verges under stone walls; a massive black container ship
slid round the island from the North. Summer always seemed timeless there under the
high artic blues and summer galleons
billowing on winds soft from the Southmost, the sea lapping
and the peat smoke going straight up to where the larks sang.

Sometimes the dialectic of heart and mind issues in the insight
that beauty and joy are brief, cannot be postponed, saved up, foregone, except in self-
hatred. I see this dream of life in
the paintings from that time: the white owl perched, looking back against a broken croft
and barley fields, with Jock hunching past beyond a broken wall. He would have
known which family lived there, which colony they had left for short generations before.
The owl was always in the landscape, though you rarely saw it, floating white and
silent as a ghost, as it had time out of mind.

I was working hard, painting well, hardly pausing as if I knew, somehow, that an end
was on the way, a sea-change building.
Eric's portrait was progressing and I knew that I was at the top
of my bent. It was in my step as I strode past black-eyed kye.
When the painting was right, the rest could not be far wrong.
I raised a hand to the car humming up behind me,
half-greeting, half to show that I was content to walk,
then instinct made me flinch. Gravel at the road's edge
crunched and I was on my hands and knees in ditch.
The grass was wet with dew and my knee had found
a stone. A blue Fiat swerved back and left its foul stink,

accelerated up the brae, was gone as I got to my feet.
The tyres had crushed the grass where I had walked.
No one in sight, no witness. There had been faces,
a hand gesture with a stiff finger. After I left the army
I played rugby until I tore a knee ligament, as I recalled,
limping along, hands stung by nettles. My mum had
her right hip replaced, then her left, in her fifties, and
so did I, but then, shocked and amazed, I walked on.
It would have been funny, having had my thoughts on
life's frailty so confirmed, if I did feel so chilled by what
seemed pointless brutality. Young men got drunk, cruised
looking for girls or a fight or any loutish mischief and old
values were going. Soon doors would be locked at night
and it would be blamed on in-comers, the 'social misfits'
as Margo and her like called them, on the run from Thatcher's
class war. My happiness had gone. There was no escape.
Even in town a gay pharmacist had taken something to cure
his condition, symptoms of which had been bruises and
black eyes. The paper had a short paragraph on the suicide.

Eric thought that North Sea oil had had skewed island life,
so that trades such as cobbling were without apprentices
who earned far more as even kitchen hands in the oil depot
and a great deal more on the rigs out in the wild North Sea.
Smaller islands were emptying, some abandoned when
there were no longer four men to carry a stretcher, but for
all the anger generated by rapid change in those years
and since, sympathy was not much good when I was on
the receiving end of it personally. Dog eat dog. I decided
the best response was a donation to Scargill's miners.

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I turned into the farm track which led to Eddy and Di's

matching my pace to the rock music thump across
the evening fields, eyed the cars parked on the grass:
none was Fiat. I recognised Peter Whalsay from a distance.
He was standing outside with one of the twins, bellies out
and tins of beer in their hands, a young woman with them,
watching me ascend the slope. Good sense told me to avoid
them but I found myself marching straight up to Peter Whalsay. “How did you get here?”

“I was invited, of course.”

“No, which car?” “He came in mine,”
said the girl at my elbow. “Who do you think
you are, demanding answers?”

“Yes, what’s it to you, Bigsy?”
“Because somebody tried to run me down, that’s why.”
“Are you accusing me?”

“Christ!” said Eddy, hand on my shoulder, “Are you buggers at it already?” Murdo edged the girl back but she shrugged him away. Whalsay and myself were shirt-fronting each other until Eddy decided otherwise, then we couldn’t see the other..

“He comes in here accusing.” she said “Huish now,” said Murdo. “Somebody tried a hit-and-run on you, you say?”

“Yes, they did.”

“So as you see Peter next, you decide it must be him! Jesus! Come on, let’s go and have a bloody drink,
then we can act really daft.” Eddy ushered us towards the croft.
“Well I’m not surprised if this is how you go on. I heard that you
had sabotaged the film that Peter was going to be in,” she said
bitterly behind me. I did not know who she was. At first I thought
she was a student, but now I understood she was not so young.

The windows were full of faces but as we went through the door

all seemed normal. Peter Whalsay turned on his heel. I had a half of Scotch in my pocket, offered it to Eddy but he had a pint
of home brew by the door “Is that right, Roy?” .I nodded.

‘What
do you do about that, Constable?”

‘Up here? Keep quiet or they
will all be having a go. They are funny buggers, the lot of ‘em.” Something had his attention elsewhere and he patted my back
and loomed off, two metres tall in his half clogs. I found a gap against a wall. Basil Selkirk was singing folk songs, voice zig-zagging and stubby fingers twanging on his guitar, beak-nosed
and gape full of dentistry. Eddy had invited Peter Whalsay and
his craft-worker mates, potters, jewellers, leather-workers,
mostly islanders, who drank together, and another group, females from both, stood round the sofa where Di held her baby, its hands raised in horror at the noise, face brick red and creased under a blue knitted bonnet, the air full of various kinds of smoke, singing and amplified guitar. I took a plastic cup, half filled it from my bottle. ‘Flower of Scotland’ began, swept nearly everyone up, and I saw that the baby was howling. Di found a path clearing for her. A plastic cup nudged my arm. I retrieved the bottle and poured Grant a drink. He raised it to me, winked. his Spanish style, black leather hat went with a panatella, his Zapata moustache, high-heeled boots, denim suit with the sleeves rolled back on his forearms.

Selkirk continued to delight everyone. His claim to fame was that his fellowship exhibition had been cancelled cheques for living expenses, groceries, drink, car repairs, everything which his grant had paid for, each cheque meticulously mounted and framed in a display which had not amused the Scottish Arts Council. Basil had been given to believe that, notwithstanding the high cost of the framing as evidenced, he need expect no further succour. He sat on a bean bag bare-footed, toe nails painted black, grimacing at notes.

I thought that he was probably off his head. In the noise and cram I suddenly felt crestfallen, stepped over legs to the door and out. I had never really liked parties and smoke.

The air was cold. The long twilight was grey calm on the hills. Ravens trailed, complaining to each other as I leaned on the windowless wall looking at the burning star round which the planet rolled, its light reddening amongst the vapours and gasses which were condensing on leaves, beading and shining, catching its sparks.

What did they say, seeing me walking that long, straight road?

Did they cheer when I went down? Were they disappointed to miss me? What was it that made me slide to the edge of things, feel old and stiff and exhausted, when Grant, also in his forties, dressed like a stage gaucho and had no self-doubt at all?

Love, I thought. The girl, lovely, naive Elspeth, loved him.

He acted his part on the stage of her admiration. 'Fresh cunt, fresh courage? ' as Jean, my cousin, had said. Screw!

She was a laugh, but maybe she was right. The kye swished in unison, shook horns at the flies, stared beetle-eyed at me. Eat, shit, fuck!

"Roy! What are you doing lurking out here, you miserable sod? Aren't we good enough for you?" He unzipped, turned away, splashed against the wall. "Can't get near the bloody bog," he explained over his shoulder. Eddy made water like a horse.

His long hair was tied back in a pigtail which reached his waist against the bright colours of the Scandinavian sweater which Di had knitted. He came and leant next to me. "I will miss this ."

"I had enough of Selkirk's singing."

"Yeh, he goes on a bit, Bas.

I'll shut him up in a jiffy. Hey, what's this I hear about your friend, the Rector, having a birra snicker with dat tart, Margo?" He thickened his accent when he was uncertain of himself.

"The word was that you were in there too, Roy."

"No way."

"Ay, they will be disappointed! We had the three of you in a

big randy knot."

"Well you had better untangle us, constable."

"But your mate?" He made a piston and whistled through his teeth. "Not at all likely. He's just recovered from one heart attack, hasn't he?"

"What a way to go", said Eddy in a Goon voice, laughed. "No, it was Elspeth telling Di. Somebody on the school staff saw them somewhere."

"It's rubbish, Eddy. Tell them to lay off. He's enough on his plate just now."

"Yeh.," he said and clipped off in his clogs. I began after him, found Murdo and his friend just round the corner. He had his brogues neatly together, legs straight, back against the wall, hands stuffed deep in the pockets of his gingery-brown tweed jacket, staring at the ground. The girl's thick-soled boots looked almost surgical but matched the heavy black frames of her glasses. There seemed to be no conversation between them. I stopped. Murdo coughed and straightened: "Fiona, this is Roy Porter. Roy, can I..."

"We've met," she said. She had a formidable chin but beautiful green eyes behind her thick lenses. She didn't offer her hand.

"I couldn't stand the noise in there," I said, hoping to sound jolly.

I didn't. It sounded like a complaint. I leant next to the girl, offered my bottle. Murdo held out his glass, effusive in thanks. The girl had a tin. Close to I realised she was hardly a girl, although dressed like a student somehow, as if jeans and a sweater was her normal garb, or a form of camouflage.

We stared down the slope at the line of a loch shining with alto-cirrus, ice crystals in streaming brush strokes like gigantic mares' tails. "Fiona has come to work with us in the library," Murdo blurted from the silence. He was smitten and trying to be suave. I nodded, she said nothing. "My brother has that magazine just come in."

"Which magazine?"

"That American one. It has a so-so piece on you."

"Wow."

"You don't mind?" Fiona.

"I couldn't care less."

"And some pictures." Her voice was lilting Highland-Scot. She dipped her chin, raised careful brows at me.

"'The Hand of the Master' it says", he said. She snorted with derision.

"And drawings?"

"No," said Murdo. "A couple of paintings that I had seen before."

"Drawings were stolen from me. I'm glad that they got the message or I should have had to sue"

"I heard that they were so obscene you did not dare to report it."

"In case the cops shouted at me?" She wished to show that she, at least, found me unimpressive. I could see Murdo's anxiety beyond her.

"If I worried about the concept of good taste held by popular press hacks, which I assure you I don't, I should be without any constraint at all." I left them. I should have gone home if I had a car. My knee made me limp. "Huh," she said.

At least Basil's amplifier had been disconnected so talk was possible although occasionally he tried to make himself heard above it. Whalsay watched me side-stepping the crush. Murdo had followed me. He opened his jacket like a postcard salesman, revealed a half of Bells. I swallowed what I had and he poured a careful tot for me, then himself, and slid the bottle out of sight. "Here is your health." We were older, odd men out. "She is religious," he shouted in my ear. I nodded. "A friend of Di's," he went on "She tells me they are off South to show the baby to her parents. They hope for financial help

now Rebecca has been born." All the time he talked his eyes were across the room, looking for Fiona. "Are you sure that you dinnae mind the article? We once had a cinema manager put his wife in a magazine nude competition and she came second. Boy, he was runnin' round trying to buy them up and they kept ordering and she couldne walk through the Pier Head for the boys shoutin'! They went south not long after."

"Can you give me a lift back? Take five minutes." He screwed up an eye and lifted an eyebrow and I understood his plans. Fiona had re-appeared, glasses gone and hair undone. She looked less tough, smiled. I thought that her religious leanings unlikely to handicap him.
Some sort of decision had been made. I patted his shoulder.
As if she felt our gaze she turned, then looked away, dipping into the crisps. She looked at him and jerked her head. "Christ,
I could do with a smoke," he said, then set off as he was bid.
Murdo had the standard-issue island face, flat and blunt-nosed, blue eyes and thin mousy hair almost gone from his crown,
veins broken by the weather and the bottle in his cheeks.
He was a catch with his librarianship, but I wondered what
Tam and Michael said of his courtship after so many years.

"Look at him, bloody old stoat," said Grant. "He's in a sweat
about it, isn't he just?"

"Same age as you and me!" I said.
It set him laughing and coughing, tongue out, face red.
Murdo turned and looked at Grant with eye as bleak as
a gull's.
"Do you they might take turns with her? She'd not know it!"
His hat fell off, dangled on its cord as he coughed. "What a twat! What's so funny?"

"Ah she's Christmas cake."

"She's what?"

"After the twenty-fifth, nobody wants it."

"Isn't that a bit sexist?" "Who's talking?" He was so proud of his conquest of Elspeth.

Eddy loomed about with his jug of home brew. The hi-fi was playing gentler, Californian stuff and bearded men, long-haired men, women with bare feet in long skirts, bangles and danglers, swayed together in the stratum of pot smoke: the moment etched. Grant sang along out-of-key, bending at the knees.

"Has that bastard told you about my wife telephoning?"

"Which bastard?" I was sick of the horse teeth snarling under his moustache. I thought he was a little runt.

"Dunbar…Or that crookback bugger in the office. Jesus! It's marvellous what people say behind your back! Christ, if you only knew how I miss my kids!" His head hung. He shook it from side to side. Elspeth had an arm round him and he buried his face in her white neck as if he might cry. They edged away as if they were dancing. I threw back my whisky and thought about walking home. Eddy drained his jug, back-handed his mouth, belched. Selkirk began strumming along too loudly, lank hair hanging. Within a year he dead in a cardboard box by Waterloo station, a casualty of the Economic Miracle. Eddy spoke in my ear. "Have you a minute, Chief? Have a look at some of my work." There was no way but to follow him, heart sinking. People will insist on candour and never forgive it, and prevarication humiliates everybody. Eddy took his clogs off to lead the way down the hall. I should have walked home.

The cot was in the room, away from the noise, but in the smells of oil paint, turps, linseed and the rest of it. A window was open, lace curtains swelled. The child slept in disturbing stillness, fists up, hair black as her Diana's. I wondered who she would be.

I saw immediately Eddy had one of the best easels available on which a rectangle of board, big enough to flex at the lightest touch, was covered by

newspaper. On his painting table pigments were set out in ranks, brushes and knives were clean and arranged in pots, and a sheet of brilliant cartridge under plate glass made his palette. Even his painting rags were in
a neat shoebox. The precision carried through to the painting
on the easel which he revealed, and those which he had leaned against the walls. They were really coloured drawings of streets, buildings, roads, cars, with not a soul in sight. He had said the lack of people was part of his 'statement' about life in cities but, in an age of press and television photography, to put people into high-register, hyper-real paintings, was to return to Hopper and add nothing. Even Lowry, at the misty, romantic opposite end of the spectrum, had chosen to paint match-stick people. After Auswitz people were dead meat to Freud, Uglow, Bacon, even Bert Spencer, and I wanted to make them anew as capable of beauty and love, not dehumanised freaks or animated robots.
Hopper and Chirico had awful, empty spaces unfilled, but Eddy
had nothing going for him. His paintings of boredom were boring

I knew, even then, it wasn't going to work, but that I had to try,

Well, what do you think? Any good?" The pathetic question asked, he half-laughed, I looked at the confusion of browns
and purples, some seeming to float above the surface they
were so adrift from reality, so out of key. Perhaps some gallery owners might see that as part of his 'statement' from the back streets: 'a blemished vision', artless pretension', I could hear them whispering at some fat shoulder if he got lucky for fifteen minutes.

"Etching's your answer."

"Oh Christ, not again! It's like you're telling me I've got a tumour."

"I can point it out, if you want, the browns and purples which are out of kilter, but you won't see it because you are colour blind." I pointed, he stared.

"You don't mess around. You don't pull your punches." He was angry. The baby whimpered.

"You prefer me to lie? Egg you on?" He shook his head. I felt fierce: "Art's the truth or it's shit.

You better understand you're into something very serious, right? You need some talent. After that, it's nothing but tenacity.

You make your luck." The heavy shoulders slumped and his head hung as he stared at the painting. "And you have to work within your limitations. Etching is black and white, Eddy, and you can do well. You make editions of a hundred and you put them round galleries and folk can afford them. Do you hear me?"

"What would you know about fucking limitations?" I wanted to go, get out, escape his anguish. "It's all right for you, innit?"

"You insisted on having my opinion." We eyeballed each other.

"I've loved a woman for years but I know she would flood my life with crap, and I can't have that." It surprised him. "I tried it once, you know. I nearly sent myself crazy."

"That's not how Di tells it."

"Perhaps not. It's how it was on the inside." I couldn't tell him what I thought of Di's opinions and those of her friends. Look, if I'm working, I'm happy. If I'm not, I'm not. The rest doesn't concern me. I am financially secure, so..."

"That's it then, isn't it?"

"No. I always kept my hand in at teaching just in case. That was my real security. Do you get what I' saying?" I had said enough.

"You are 'married to your art'? " He wanted to sneer.

"Eddy, what do you know about etching?"

"Know about etching?" He sniffed and looked away. "Not much."

"There have been famous print-makers who began like you. It's a skill. You can learn it. Have you got your 'A' levels, Eddy?"

"College? Not me. Any road, Di wouldn't..." He stopped short, regarded me, my recent words. "I got what I needed to get into the Liverpool Police Force, that's all."

"I got five good 'A Levels. The Headmaster thought I ought to do Economics at university, then I could have joined the Thought Police." It was an error.

"Yeah, I heard that you were a Trot," he said. "Bloody twits, they are. I've punched a few of their heads round the docks. The trade unions are destroying Liverpool!" He put his hand over his mouth, nodded at the cot.
I whispered, :"Nothing to do with containers needing a quarter of the labour force or the end of the empire or joining the E.E.C? Come on! You've just lapped up Tory vomit!"

He didn't like it.

"Keep your bloody voice down," he whispered.
"What I was trying to say was you get side-tracked into anything *but* art. There's no money in Art so do Economics."

"Huh, not according to Kay Kingsford. She reckons you made more bread than..."

" Forget money."

"Yeh, okay, Roy." Sarcasm. "You're daft, you are." Maybe it did him good to get his own back. He hadn't heard anything that I had said except the opinion he had already heard. The baby had begun to cry. Somehow in the noise Di had heard it. She opened the door. "Come out of this," she said.

In the hall I said: "I didn't mean to get into politics, Eddy, nor my personal life either. I'd be glad if you would forget what I said.
I wanted you to understood that I am not bull-shitting you. My neighbour in Camden is a famous etcher."

"Yeh, ta, Roy," he said dismissively, but he led me into their bedroom across the hall. "It could be arranged, for example, for you to stay in my studio next door and get a look at how he goes about it.

He's pretty gay. He's a laugh."

"Can't stand those buggers either!"

The sash window was open. The evening was ebbing at last. The North was turning orange and its light lit the wall. Someone coughed outside. Eddy stuck his head out, pulled it back and
looked at me in amazement. I looked out. Just to the left and below us Elspeth was leaning on the wall, bent at the waist, head on her arms. Grant was behind her in a steady rhythm, holding her hips, cheroot glowing under the brim of his stupid hat. I couldn't look at Eddy, followed him away, then I shoved through the dancers, and started stiff-legged home in the twilit midnight. It was down hill most of the way. The sea was opalescent and the seals were making ghost noises.

I should have wished them both luck and said goodbye properly.
The truth was that I was damned glad to see the back of them.

39.

He sat in his Master of Arts gown and hood, his Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve tie and dark suit, against the window above
the harbour, where roofs were glazed with drizzle. " Poor man,"
he said of Murdo. "It's a terrible thing infatuation, right enough."
He sat stiffly, a bald, bespectacled worthy, pink faced, blue eyes alive, top lip grooved and ready to laugh at the whole business
of the portrait. On afternoons from two until five as convenient,
he chatted and I worked on a 75cm by 100cm canvas which had
been improved in its draughtsmanship, sadly, by the tension
between us, not only because of his secret negotiations about g
the film, but also because, I suspected, Margo poured poison in
his ear about me for my fastidious ways, and I suspected she

had him in her hand. These thoughts and silences between us made my drawings vibrant, and led to a good basis for the work.

I felt the force of it in my arm and fingers as I knifed pigments on
building the structures of the head and thick neck with colour and tone, the angles and the planes of flesh against the rain clouds above green fields, white crofts; and the harbour grey, smooth as slate. There was no strong sun available in that room at that season and time. I just had to get the angle of that egg-head, blue eyes behind gold glasses, weighty jaw given to pronouncements at Assemblies, meetings, committees, but also a mouth which showed the man who liked a 'œouthy joke', top lip grooved and ready to laugh in common humanity.

He never spoke of Margo although, over that period of a few summer weeks when he was supposed to be taking things easily, he was battling on behalf of a son by her first marriage, expelled from a Scottish public school which Sandy Moncrief's sons attended for some indiscretion. This caused the Director to state that the boy would not be given a place at the Academy, but he was under sixteen, the age when compulsory education ended, and Eric admitted him in accord with the law. It took some courage. People, could not imagine that a man so near retirement would stick out his neck for justice. After all, sex, money and vengeance, were what motivated folk, so rumour became rife about Eric and Margo, as Grant demonstrated,
but he never mentioned it, except obliquely in his sympathy for
Murdo, if I read him right, but then I was focused on the portrait
of that sweet man. I saw, and maybe captured my surprise,
the way he had diminished since I first met him laughing his head of at Billy McConder down on the shore: the pouched
eyes, the quiver of his lip and jowl, the stoop of his neck.
Now I see such things in myself in my morning shaving mirror.

I remember the energy with which I worked then, the impatience when he wanted to rest. Maybe I sensed I had to get on with it,
that what I had begun would never be finished. The canvas shows my charcoal

drawing, some under-painting of warmth under the cold sky, but the face stares out, pink and bald as a baby's, the eyes twinkle and: BAP! Eric. Sometimes you get it first time. The trick is to know when to stop. When I see most of my work again I feel it was more abandoned than finished. In the case of Eric's portrait, its unfinished state, bare patches of canvas and some of the initial drawing, say more of my grief at the shock of his death than anything completed and varnished.

The whisky appeared each time and we never touched it.
I guessed it was a gambit between Eric and Chickadee,
but exactly what, I never discovered. She would sail slowly in
with a decanter and two glasses on a tray, smile and sail out.

Sometimes, after a long silence, Eric would say something odd:
"When that boy was killed I walked the streets looking for him.
I'd a notion that I would see him; in a crowd there would be his smile! She said she wished he had never been born, such was her anguish, and I could not bear that idea, so I got out and walked. I walked for miles around the town. She took up with Spiritualism. It made me angry, the nonsense of it. She's over that." He nodded at the decanter. "That's the spirit that interests her nowadays." Then in a flat voice, "Once I when I was away at a conference in Edinburgh, I had nothing to do one night and I came across this Spiritualist church lit up. I thought I would find out what she was up to, so I went in. I sat at the back of this draughty, 'wee frees' kind of hall, dim and quarter full of old folk. Now I had hardly sat down when this woman, a trim body with a no-nonsense look, comes down to me and tells me that I have a wee bairn with me. She says that there's a boy standing just behind me. She smiles, she nods, she says to me: 'You're not to grieve any more, Daddy. I'm okay.'" Eric sniffed. "We'll take a rest." He got up, swished his gown around him, stood at the window. "I just got up and legged it! I ran down Dundas Street looking for him. I just knew he was there. I ran after him to Princes Street gardens where we had been often enough whilst she did her shopping."

"You mean, you saw him?"

"Och, everything but that," he said. "I

was there for an hour or so, with a cold setting in and those lost souls you get there wandering about." He pinched his nose, slapped at his legs, turned with his top lip protruding, eyes wide. "It was all fucking nonsense, wasn't it?"
I remember being irritated because it was a fiddle get to his gown to hang as it had before.

"So what are you telling me?"

"God knows." Then: "You know that perspective you lay on nature is not there, don't you? What passes for 'common sense' is a construction." Absorbed, I did not reply, and he sighed.
"But she's a sad woman. I think she went batty too for a time."
I evinced no interest, recalling what Grant had said about her
Having an affair. "Aye, the light went oot for us, right enough."
I didn't want to hear. The light had gone. I stopped, cleaned up.

Below in a few sycamores straggling in the wind shadow of
The Harbour View Hotel, rooks whirled around. He had a look.
I never invited his reactions; he offered none. The last time.
he walked me to the gate. "Cheerio for now," he said.

40.

Mum telephoned. She sounded very old and batty: my car was
a nuisance to Meals-on-Wheels, the coalman, the dustbin man, Marmaduke was walking all over it, birds were using it for target practice. It was the excuse I needed for departure next day.

For the first time I did not mind locking my door. I had explained
to Michael, and guessed that the news would arrive in London before I did, that I was off South to collect my car and to sign the contract. Eric, he said, was in a meeting. I

sent him my regards.

"You again? You're up and down like a yo-yo. Come on in.
I will have to air the bed. You should have given me some notice. I've nothing to eat.
Mind that cat. Fancy you arriving
like this, the place is in a right mess."
"Well I thought that it was an
emergency, the way you spoke, so I came straight away."

I stayed the night with Mum, sleeping in the sagging bed I slept
in from childhood, for some of the night. I lay in than boxroom
and tried to remember myself there all those years before.
It wasn't possible, but it wasn't silly to try. At first light, at least,
I remembered the thrush, or one of its descendants, singing in the oak tree half way
down the garden. It was a happy sound.

I set off in good spirits, the engine starting straight away, Mum
waving. She had enjoyed cooking me bacon and eggs and
watching the television with me in the firelight, chewing away
on nothing, fingers rubbing, expressions reflecting the actors'.

At Watford Gap I stopped, munched and the watched hurtling vehicles hissing through
drizzle under slate sky. People came
and left with blank faces and eyes, queuing for fast food, trays sliding, money paid,
plastic tables occupied, cleared, trooping
out to the car parks. Kids were a nuisance, running about, clamouring and
complaining, eyes and fingers everywhere.

I made some 'phone calls:my neighbour, in case he was using
my car port, but he was out. Her London office: 'In California',
said the young man I had met at the airport. My spirits fell.
Why should she sit about waiting for me? Oh why not?

Back on the Ml I floated towards the city, wipers beating,
The traffic North solid as afternoon became evening,
slid into my space in Camden, then had to push against mail piled up on the mat. I made as little noise as possible, wanting no visitors from either side. The bed felt damp, the air musty.

Aircraft thunder woke me. Above London thousands passed
in discontinuous pipelines through the atmosphere, arriving and departing, gathering and dispersing, coughing and scratching.
The gutters dripped and trickled. I knew the Artic route to LA,
the polar cap and purple sky, emptiness; flying near the speed
of Earth's rotation so the sun could not set, afternoon lasting, stewards insisting on blinds closed against reality, an idiot film on four screens, while outside faint but miraculous straight lines
in the snowy waste, then lakes and bogs of tundra, revealed humanity: A preternatural light burning: 'Uranium City, Alberta,' the Captain announces with no trace of irony. the Rockies arch like vertebrae round Earth's curvature. Dusk begins with descent: BETHLEHEM STEEL on a roof reads like a war cry. California is tacky houses, six-lane roads and heavy rain.

A car door slammed, then a front door, tyres hissed past.

That was the way she had gone, business class, looking like
an advert, ignoring admiration, reading European newspapers,
a novel, deft mind quick as a fish in the depths of things
In the face of her beauty and acuity I played the barbarian artist,
all macho intuition, creative action. With her it had been self-preservation, a strategem so as not to fall for her, but I had.

On the static-free Concert Programme Charles Ives savaged Browning. The morning had brightened. I stretched, warm,

wiggled my toes, savoured my erection, watched sun splash
a Kershaw still-life that he gave me when we were students.
He would disown it now, I thought. Telephone: "Heathcliff!
It is you? Good. She was certain it was a wretched burglar.
She's always getting me hopping about in my night-shirt.
Have a good trip? Jolly good. Call in, will you? Coffee? *Excellent*."

He was on the other side of the wall, in bed with 'The Times',
cat purring beside him, wife gone off to work. He had developed
his role of 'English Shocker' and eccentric fantasist on the stage
of her early admiration; now he was type-cast and could not play any other. The trouble was, it fascinated me and I had to stop myself from copying his social daring, tight-rope tricks above gulfs of bad taste, frequent ruthlessness. It seemed 'free' even when clearly born of class arrogance, or the assumption of it. Somehow you never really found out too many facts. James was of the stuff of which spies are made. Olive stood apart and laughed, for the most part, at his shocking ways. When he sublet my studio to some cronies, whilst Tessa and I were in Italy, she pretended to have heard James suggest that a friend might stay the night now and then. Tessa had hated them for condescension she detected and could rouse me to indignation. Usually I gave them the flick with the best of British indifference: cowardice, Mum would say. I let them make a doormat of me, Tessa believed, and Jerome, neighbour on the other side, looked straight through them both but furnished James and Olive with a good deal of pleasure with his camp performances.

Jerome was out of patience with me because of Tessa.
We were getting old. When I first met Jerome he always wore sandals because he was proud of his feet, for some reason,
and painted his nails pink to match his hair. One peevish night some Guardsman chucked a dish of etching acid at him for a laugh. The National Health eyepatch he wore had been pink and that ended his pink period. Jerome was no longer exquisite and nearly as boring as the other occupants of the eight studios who had been sucked into advertising or teaching after so-called bright starts. His print-making was always

innovative
and his name was well known. I often wondered if it was real.

Fat James's opening gambit had been brilliant. He had arrived
from Provence talking of Pablo, and got himself onto every guest list in the London Art business by sending out large, gilt, deckle-edged invitations to a party at the Grosvenor, which he had not, of course, booked because, at the last minute, he sent telegrams cancelling, claiming he had caught 'measles'. Since then he spent at least two nights each week talking stylish crap a glass in hand; hours on the 'phone using first names with the rich and influential. He wasn't a bad painter, had a flair for the flesh tones of the well-fed, the gloss of their possessions, and eventually it brought him an R.A. and a K. In summer I went to his Sunday morning parties on the terrace because their noise infuriated me if I was not part of it. Willynilly I met whoever seemed to James worth knowing at that time and season
and kept in touch with what I most disliked. He tried to lead me about like a tame bear: "Meet Heathcliff. May I introduce Heathcliff? This is Heathcliff," he would say, which exonerated me from their elaborate civilities and sold quite a number of my own works earlier on. Usually I drank too much and slept after..

Tessa had tried to subvert James's game and made certain people understood who I was, and complained if I was not polite enough to somebody, and took photographs. She would try to corral people in our place if she thought that they might be of use. I genuinely disliked the Sunday morning 'nibbles and
drinkies' and spent hours half-cut listening to twitterings and
cacklings. It was all a great waste of time; the art talk and self-promotion, was vanity and vomit. To them I was a curio from another planet. To me these upper class asses were a drag.

I got myself out of bed. There was nothing in the mail: hand-outs and hands-out; bills, magazines. I saw myself squatting in one of the large mirrors Tessa had installed because she was beautiful. I wasn't. I looked like a Durer Christ with my rib cage, long legs, haggard eyes. I had lost weight. Both knees hurt as I stood up. I was beginning

upon my family inheritance: arthritis.

I showered. There were two tins of sardines and a teabag.
I liked going from place to place, seeing afresh what became
quickly familiar once more. Mum called me a ‘wriggly-bum’.
I speared sardines, drank some horrible black tea. The back
of the lavatory door has a photograph of me as a student
at Tibidabo above Barcelona. I sit on a low step, hands hanging between my knees,
head down, glaring at whoever sits down.
No one mentions it and I don’t know why. Tessa put it there.
For me it’s a kind of datum. I was on a miserable acid-trip.

It looks as if I too am in the fundamental position, staring
at the future with youth’s histrionic dismay. (Was I wrong?)
I remember the circumstances. There was a cafe in the fairground attached to the
cathedral and I was sitting next to
a crowded table on which there was a camera which someone picked up and fired. It
was Harriet, red haired and big jawed, for ever blowing smoke like a novice when she
actually chain-smoked. She was there for the stained-glass, had clerical connections,
gave me the clap, is now married to a bishop.
I remember the warmth of her tears on my belly in a drunken hotel bedroom in France
on her way back to her fiance,
to whom she no doubt showed her beautiful sketches of ecclesiastical windows, and
an even greater devotion to her ‘virginity’ until she was cured of the clap.

The telephone rang. I struggled to reach it. “Heathcliff?
What are you up to? Come on round. We want to hear
about your new career as a sex maniac. Do hurry.”

If Tessa had turned my place into a VIP airport departure lounge, as James remarked, theirs was like the foyer of
the better sort of pre-war cinema: gilt and red carpets, regency striped walls, flowers and peacock feathers on tiny antique tables, but the paintings hung about were excellent examples
of the work of famous names. They made me take James seriously whereas what he did for a living seemed parasitical.

“Come in, dear boy! Absolutely ages since we saw you,
Olive and I have been really pleased with the way you have
kept us all busy with the media, spanking lady reporters and what-not, so that they beat on our doors with excitement.”

He was in his chair, bandaged foot on a stool, genuinely pleased to see me. Gout, ennui, florid speech, white mutton-chop whiskers and a quick grasp on the self images of the rich,
that was James, only son of a fashionable pre-war painter.
The large vases which held the flower arrangements had belonged, like various pewter mugs and dishes, among
the props in his father’s studio, along with appropriate sabres and swords, helmets, gauntlets and uniforms which were sometimes on display. His dad had, so James claimed,
done a good trade in paintings entitled ‘Before the Skirmish’, where Cavaliers quaffed and laughed while beyond leaded- lights, galloping Ironsides hove into view. James said that
he kept the same poses for a Battle of Britain painting:
‘cavaliers turned public school types’; Ironsides were Hunnish vapour trails; for ‘Skirmish’ read ‘Scramble.’ They had, James said, both been sold in Boots the Chemist in sufficient quantity for the family to live in Provence where, whilst his ‘Governor’ had not cared for Pablo’s work, James was an intimate friend and

confidante of the great man, privy to his erotic secrets, which, of course, he was not at liberty to reveal, except on dull afternoons to the credulous who sat for him. Such things were James' stock-in-trade. I had clenched jaws at times as his stories changed dramatically to suit some punter's interests
and I was bound accessory by embarrassment. I found solace in admiring the way Olive steered him by his fantasies and kept him fairly honest. He admired my stuff, so it hard to dislike him.

Every morning at seven Olive went for a swim. She was slim,
quick, had children grown up from a previous marriage,
worked for a publisher as editor of art books James despised.
Olive did not dye her white hair, had it cut short with a fringe,
and having one blue eye slightly higher than the other, always
held her head in a charming, enquiring tilt. "Darling, let me show him the Admiral."

"Certainly not." She rolled her blue, asymmetric eyes behind him. "Can't get the eyebrows. Bloody bushy. It's the salt air. Admirals are all the same."

"Dennis Healey isn't an admiral."

"I wish you hadn't mentioned that chap. Isn't he that Leftist who used to put taxes on gin and things? How very nice to have you back among us. Is the coffee done, Hag-bag? Heathcliff looks as if he's pining away once more. Perhaps you might offer him a biscuit too. He likes those fig ones. He ate them all last time we had some and asked him to come round."

"Lovely to see you, Roy," she said over her shoulder.
"Look forward to hearing about the Eskimos and polar bears
and things."

"What about this article then?" He had it by his chair. "Actionable, I should say. Hit 'em for thousands. Chap coming tomorrow; clever lawyer; introduce you. He would handle it."

"No, thank you."

"No thank you? No thank you! You wun t'pools, lad?" He often tried a Northern accent on me because once it would have got beneath my skin. "It's clearly

over the top.

You can't fail." He picked it up. "Listen…"

"No I won't. Piss off, Jim. I do not care a monkey's fuck what…"

"Are you two shouting at each other again so soon?" I sat on

the sofa and glared back at his red face. Olive wheeled a trolley between us. "You've got the best coffee pot as it's so long since

we saw you." It was Georgian silver. A matching jug of milk steamed. She poured, smiled, handed me a delicate cup and saucer. "And how many birds have you shot on this trip, Roy?"

"Christ! He counts them; he doesn't shoot them. He's not that kind of chap." We always had a brisk rally or two to start with. Olive lowered an eyelid, offered the biscuits. I was hungry.

"See sense, for God's sake. You can't let the scum say these things and not challenge them. They have to be knocked back." It upset him, the chance to make money from his social inferiors going begging. He drummed on the arm of his chair irritably.

"Is it Saturday then?"

"Of course it is," she said. "How wonderful not to know."

"He's as mad as they say he is!" James slammed the magazine on the carpet. She offered me another biscuit.

"You make great coffee, Olive."

"Another cup?" I handed it over.

"It's not expensive. Turkish place near the tube grinds it for me."

"Look, just shut up, Hag-bag. I've been thinking about this for days. I've collected all the cuttings. I could handle it all for you easily. I mean, they say you are a miserly swine, a recluse, vindictive towards Thingy. "

"That will do, James." She meant it, turning so that I could not see her face. He pinched the bridge of his nose, sucked his teeth noisily.

"I'm not up to this. I'm really not up to it. As if this wretched toe was not enough, to have you both shouting at me..." He looked at her apprehensively and I supposed some signal must have passed. I drained my cup. James crunched and drummed. "I had to miss The Glorious First, y'know," he said mildly as if to detain me. "Blast and bugger it!" It was a sudden shout, biscuit crumbs

flying,
which made us both start. “It’s three bloody weeks since we were at the cottage and I bet that nobody has bothered to
feed the ferret, the swine!”

“James, you are not the first artist
to go into the country to find not tranquillity but only suspicion, envy and hostility,” Olive relied. “I spoke to Margery and hired Tom to look after it.” She walked off, began talking in a silly falsetto. “Who is bootifull? Bootiful boy!” The black cat lay slit-eyed in sunshine on its back in the studio area, paws folded. It had a white bib and black dot at the base of its neck so that it looked as if it wore a dinner jacket. It gave a savage yawn. I once bought it a collar and bell in hope of reducing its over-fed and executions – after torment -- of feathered innocents, but Olive never put them on. Like most Tories she believed in natural selection or ‘breeding’ as she would have called it.
“ I have asked Ainslie Archer tomorrow,” she said as she bent and rubbed the cat’s throat. “She’s in California.”

“No, she’s
put it off to come. Her affairs need careful management just now, if you take my meaning.”

“What are you whispering about?” The cat saw to a paw. “Show him the portrait. The eyebrows are as yet insufficiently grotesque. It’s the salty winds, as I say.”
“It’s smooth work, James, but he looks like those thugs who give Captain Kirk a bad time in ‘Star Trek’.”

“In what?”

“‘Star Trek’-
on the telly.”

“Never seen it. His family is from Cornwall. Most admirals are Cornishmen. Darling, come and put the eleven-thirty from Doncaster on.”

“Oh God,” she said. “Here we go.”
I looked at the Admiral glaring at James. He stared at the racing, yelled and whacked the side of his chair with a rolled newspaper. He played out his role more and more convincingly as time passed. There was a time when, in the pub, he would

level, but since he grew the mutton-chops, he was always in character. The advantage was you never took him seriously.

The sunshine was warm, the temperature ten degrees more
than I had enjoyed so far that summer. I let the cloth fall over
the Admiral's scornful gaze and looked at James's palette.

The studios were all the same: a glass wall facing North for even light, French doors leading from the studio area onto the paved terrace; sycamore trees beyond a lawn that the council cut. The studios had been built after the war in that last wave of idealism before the boss class got back in the saddle with stick and carrot, hawing and hectoring the rest of us, and
the work area was separated from the living area by a railing with a gate, the whole called variously 'altar', 'pissoir', 'playpen', 'stall', 'sty', and so on, depending upon the occupant's view of art or self-image. There was a gallery above the living area with two bedrooms and bathroom. On either side of the front door and hall were a cloakroom with lavatory and a kitchen.

Four were still in the hands of original tenants, all teachers grown grey with the care of families now dispersed, tending
to like jazz, beer and dirty jokes, use wartime slang. "Off for a flip round Kent," they would explain. Some had been taught
by men who had been taught that perspective was God-given, thought Gauguin and Van Goch, and those who followed them, could not really paint or draw and that Picasso was a trickster.

Jerome, my neighbour on the other side, had amongst
his tendencies, a Stalinist sense of the decline of the West
which the fragmentation of styles revealed. James thought
such talk was valueless. I never stopped considering Wilde's 'Nature is always imitating art' and telling myself that you
could not choose the art you made. Among all this I was happy

much of the time, fleeing North, or South, when I was not.

The litany of the race was nearing ecstasy. James and Olive were arguing about how to improve reception. She suddenly grabbed his ear. “Mad bitch! That hurt! Christ, I’ll miss it. Get out of the way.” She wouldn’t. I felt out of place. I let the cat and myself out and walked along the flagged terrace to my place.
I was always relieved to escape the burden of careful diction
required to avoid James’s George Formby impersonations, gormless, obsequious and vicious. I recalled one drunken swing
which missed by miles but steadied him down a great deal.

42.

I liked the smell of London after rain, pigeons round puddles, gutters cleaner. The same car lay abandoned down the road and gable end graffiti had gained vivid layers, some of serendipitous beauty. Multi-racial teams behind the railings of a school yard were playing a fierce game of soccer, the boys full of professional skills and tricks, darting and shouting, clapping their hands. It was exactly at that moment that I conceived my ‘Life of the People’ suite, seeing these beautiful youths balance and leap and dance, express themselves with such mutual grace, making their shrill yells, applauding, cursing each other, laughing, threatening: blacks, browns, yellows, pinks. My dad would have been horrified... No, amazed at how well they could play football. I bought food and a couple of bottles of Nuit St. George, walked home elated, ate and drank in the noon sunshine. Next door the horse racing droned on.

There were twenty-four hours to fill before I saw her.
I seemed to tingle with expectation no matter what.
I went out and spent time walking the galleries with
the tourist push, seeing paintings so familiar I often

smiled to myself with pleasure, glimpsing my face
in the glazing of that gilded company of the undead,
incredulous that I hung in my century nearby. Me,
Roy Porter, who frowned up, vainly refusing an eye-test,
aware I was studied by some that nudged and nodded,
peered as if I was a monster. Kay Kingsford, Ph.d., demonstrated it for the masses,
argued it in her article:
'An Island Caliban' she called me to flatter herself as
an innocent Miranda. I never get used to the gap between
how life is for me as a painter, and what people assume
or even insist it should be. If you had a talent you should
use it, even if it was not work, though it seemed so at times.
If you got rich, or famous, you did not retire from your art.

43.

I woke early. Sunshine. Far off beyond SW26, the artillery of
a thunderstorm shook still air. “You want a woman to be as you imagine her to be,”
she once said. “I will just try and be me,
thank you very much, Roy.” It made me groan and get up.

Sunday morning parties in summer excited James and Olive.
She made him tidy up, he telephoned the weather bureau,
changed the drinks order I always collected and tried to fiddle
their share of the bill. People arrived after eleven, shunted about
by James hobbling and signalling, effecting introductions,
whilst Olive flicked oven switches and made a waiter of me
with what she called ‘bits of this and that.’ I didn’t mind as it kept involvement down
and when I got fed up, I dumped the plates,
sat on the balustrade and studied the week’s prospects James
had collected, all polite till about One when the gin bit smiles.

We set out a couple of trestles with white damask cloths and
Olive’s flowers, nuts, and what they called ‘game chips’ and I
insisted on calling crisps, just as I called ‘water biscuits’ cream
crackers and ‘pate’ potted meat. Actually nobody cared less,
but I always sank two or three glasses of wine before anybody
arrived, as did James and Olive inside. I circulated, offered plates and small trays of
‘bits of this and that’ to guests who
always seemed to know somebody there, then sat and watched.

I stood up when Ainslie came. She saw me and looked away.
She was with an actor, part of that TV rep you see in everything. Olive cruised in and
collected him, took him to a film director:
“Hi Sweetie,” I heard him say. All I could see of Ainslie was
James’s back. The woman sitting next to me pulled at my sleeve. “Who’s arrived that

is so interesting?" I shrugged and stepped away. Ainslie reduced me to adolescence again.

She was talking in French to some academic whose coxcomb hair wagged on his crown: "Est-ce-que vous avez lu Derrida?"
I brushed by her, inhaled the perfume in her hair, picked up a plate of vol-au-vents to proffer, but found James was in the way. "Heathcliff! I say, those look good. Come and meet a fellow thespian." He was shorter than he seemed on the box;
the shoulders of his striped blazer were padded; his suntan
was superb. "How do you do, sir," a Californian courtesy.
He shook his head at the plate, seemed mild when his parts were tough and rough, all glaring teeth and eyes. "I like your work," he said. "Naturally Ainslie has collected a few".
His accent spoke cockney with no hint of the braying tenor. Olive grimaced sympathy at me, glared at James's ploy.
"We were just talking about your article," James prattled. "Critics!" the actor said, looked at me and I saw that he knew,
he knew. ""I was just saying that if they connect a chap's balls
to the mains, it's torture, but if they connect his head, it's therapeutic."
"Oh fuck off James!" It made him laugh louder,
then cough on flaky pastry so he had to turn away. I thumped his back, budged him a step or two. "Jesus, Heathcliff!" It cured
him. He wheezed, red-faced. We turned from him. The actor said: "How did you feel about that garbage they wrote? You could probably sue."
"There you are!" Mopping his eyes, James pushed my arm so I nearly dropped the plate. "I told the monster that he should." He had regained aplomb. "You have to keep that scum in its place."
"Ainslie has thought of taking advice about them printing that you accused her of having a lesbian affair with your partner." The lines were delivered with a bite of malice and guileless smile. I studied the large, straight nose cameras adore. He was about my age but worn, ready for a comfy cardigan, armchair. "Frankly, it's gross to have called her a dyke."

"When they dumped me at the hospital and I was surrounded by Italians with straight-jackets, my last clear memory was of Ainslie and Tessa of hugging in the car-park. That stuck in my head." He grasped why I was telling him; James was amazed.

"It hasn't made the slightest difference to you, Heathcliff. So far as I can tell, you are as batty now as you were before. He was a captain in the S.A.S., you know, dashing about in the dark killing people and things, weren't you?"

"No, fuck off."

"Ah, Official Secrets Act. Now look" he said to the actor," I only know you as D.C.Smith."

"Charles Powell."

"Come on, Charles Powell, you're insufficiently drunk." He took our glasses from us. It was a way of escaping useless talk and Charles Powell and I had said enough. He tugged his cravat. James brought our drinks and, I suspected, on Olive's orders, towed him off towards a bunch of ladies whose fingers, ears and throats glittered in hectic sunlight from under dark clouds.

Thunder cracked right overhead. There were about twenty odd on the terrace. Olive urged them inside past the half-finished admiral. Ainslie and the excited academic from the Courtauld still argued. "I just think all those glittering Gallic insights melt like frost fronds on the window pane when translated," Ainslie said, turned.

I took her arm at the back of the crush as huge drops splashed. A downpour flashed. She hesitated but I led her, let her in, swished long curtains closed, turned the key, then wrapped my arms about her, tried to kiss her. Her mouth was as hungry as mine. The storm cracked, reverberated, boomed. A gust wrapped the long curtains round us. A gutter overflowed, cascading on the glass, we clung together, hardly heard the 'phone ringing. She caught my hands at her dress, kissed them. I nuzzled in her fragrant hair. "No words, no words." She eased me back, eyes shining with happiness. Someone banged at the front door. "It's Charles, Oh dear!"

"You know, don't you, it's going to happen, no matter what, and always has been?" She looked down, nodded. "It isn't easy," she told me.

Thunder broke further away.

"I can wait." "That's been both our trouble," she said. The knocking was persistent, constabular. "We are free. Let's just go."

"I can't." Patting her hair, she turned. I lifted her breasts, kissed her nape, fell on my knees, buried my face in her. She laughed, got free.

The room was flooded with light as she slipped past the curtain, unlocked and stepped out, was gone.

Outside the world flashed with crystal drops, bright glasses, cutlery. Olive's cat, Rover, sheltered under a drenched table, flicking paws with distaste. The banging at the door continued. I thought of opening it, then of the sabres and swords in James's umbrella stand and actors' penchant for such things. The knocking stopped.

"What have you done now, Captain Heathcliffe?" James asked not long after, hanging on my door. He grinned drunkenly. "Constable Smith has taken her off in protective custody."

The cat struggled under his arm. He went back to the hubbub.

I lay on my bed, trying to remember every moment of her.

44.

In mid-week I called her office and discovered her voice

on the answering machine saying that she was in the States, inviting messages, promising answers, regretting there was

no definite return date. I dialled it several times but it did not change until the week after, when Lucien's voice added a Californian number which proved to be an answering service.

I said my number and hung up.

Days took on a pattern.

I drew, drank gin-and-tonic before lunch with James,
walked after lunch, stared at paintings and prints or people,
ate somewhere, avoided neighbours.

One day James threw
me a folded tabloid with a picture of Ainslie and the Detective Constable, who had
landed a part in a film. Ainslie smiled.
He had an arm around her. It said that they planned to marry soon and work in
Hollywood. “Olive picked it up on the tube,”
he said, watching my response. “Bloody Rubbish as usual.”

It became an anguish of waiting. In the end I made it bearable
by deciding that if I had nothing from her by my birthday,
I should clear off, put an end to it, and never see her again.
It meant I could stop wasting time, get down to some work.
I began drawing the kids playing soccer in the schoolyard.

I was perched on the abandoned car drawing and enjoying pigeons canoodling
around my feet, when a police car parked behind me. ‘What did I think I was doing?’ I
showed them my drawings. They moved me on. “You’ve a bit of a reputation.
Got yourself in the newspapers for naughties, right?”
“Believe them and you’ll believe anything,” I told him but his mind was on more
important matters. “Move it!” he said.

I called Eric to get it off my chest. He laughed. “I canna
understand how a great hairy fellow like you turns into
a desperate Sixth Former when a good-looking woman
is around!” I suppose that I must have told him my plans.

I don't know how long I slept before Di rapped on the window. "Look," she said, getting in, "This is getting silly. When are you coming up?" Her peremptory manner annoyed me. She stared ahead at Eric's hearse and I recalled the reality of it there, his Cold head rolling from side to side.

"I'm not. Why should I?"

She turned and studied me with astonishment. "Hasn't Eddy let the cat out of the bag?"

"What cat?"

"Somebody is waiting to see you upstairs. The Rector arranged it as a surprise. Didn't Eddy say?"

"No. Listen, I have a studio in Camden next to Ambrose de Nony, the print-maker. If I spoke nicely to him, he would teach him to etch and engrave…"

"You are awfully kind," she said, "considering."

"Considering what?"

"He's a peevish child at times. He didn't tell you Ainslie is upstairs in cabin seven waiting for you? She's looking after Rebecca for me. "

"Ainslie? Ainslie is on board?"

"Yes! Yes! Cabin ten. She's been sitting there waiting, being pestered for autographs and listening to Eddy and his friends' silly stories until she got fed up and went to lie down…
I don't know what to do with Eddy. He was a disaster at home, hopeless! Now come on! I'll get some nappies and then I shan't go back up without you."

46.

Ainslie was holding the laughing baby
at arms' length above her. Di pushed by me
and took the child. I went down on my knees,
gathered Ainslie up in a hug and wept.