

HOPE – by Jethro Perkins

II - OCTOBER 1998

1.

As Amrita exits the barrier she realizes it is raining. Huge drops spill from the entranceway, the tiles muddied with footprints, “Careful floor is WET” scrawled on the whiteboard. People hang round the entranceway, talking into mobile phones and staring out anxiously at the sprawl of dark cloud above. Beyond the tube entrance rain sweeps down like thick dust, obliterating everything. Light dances and shimmers in puddles. She stands by the entrance with everybody else, not sure what to do, listening to the drone of rain, watching water slither towards the kerbside and pool by drains that are already full.

She waits for five minutes, watching the clock in the ticket office slowly edge round, catching half-conversations as people squawk into phones: regimented sequences of statements, the where they are, where they should be, how to get there. Language reduced back to a series of transactional markers. The world rushes about her, cars on the road outside sloshing through the puddles, wipers grating, exhausts spitting as engines choke, stuck in a jam, staring at the girls, bass booming out. Hearing the rhythm of the rain, faster, louder, as it swallows the city.

Five minutes, and no sign of let-up. She's growing desperate for a fag, and doesn't want to stand here for forty days and forty nights, watching the world fill with water. If I get wet, I get wet, she thinks, and shrugs, pulling up her hood and walking out into the rain. It doesn't matter.

She hurries, arms wrapped about herself, head down. The rain batters into the fabric of her top, catches like jewels in her hair, water sliding in through the cracks in her trainers. Lets Chalk Farm slide past her; the bookshops and little brasseries, antiques shops, upmarket convenience stores. The Mediterranean colours, carefully attended greenery, shop signs creaking in the wind, all drowned out by the hiss of rain. Café patrons stare out, eyebrows raised over a paper, an interruption in a telephone conversation - goodness, how will we get home.

Priya had invited her round for dinner. "Mike's cooking. We thought it'd be nice to ask you along, as you don't ever seem to have got in the habit of just dropping round." She wondered who had originated the idea: Priya or Mike. She flattered herself that it was Mike, but she new in truth it was more likely to have been Priya.

Nearly there, turning off into a quiet little road of town houses, kerb littered with expensive German cars and American jeeps, hop up the steps by the polite little potted tree and hit the top buzzer.

"Yeah?" Priya.

"It's me."

"Oh." The voice laughs in a burst of static. "We've just been watching the rain."

Lock pulls back and Amrita enters, dripping all over the well-tiled hall. Music thumping out from the flat at the back, raised voices. She climbs the stairs, listening to her echoes, the sounds of her breathing, footsteps cutting across the music below. Priya's waiting at the top, door of the flat open, figure fantastic in a pair of leather jeans and a body-hugging top, perfectly made-up, hair drawn back in a little pony tail. Amrita pulls

back her hood and runs a hand through the mess of her hair, all wet at the ends where it stuck out, painfully self aware, as if flying above and watching this meeting.

“Ug,” says Priya, moving aside. They exchange kisses on the threshold. “I’ll get you some dry clothes.”

Priya's flat is pathologically neat. Amrita moves through the hallway, at odds with its effortless style and impressive good taste, art prints on the wall, spartan bookshelves. Priya guides her straight into the bedroom, which is slightly less a catalogue showroom, posters over the walls and a slew of books and CDs on the floor, sheets of sketch-paper, scrawled pages in Priya's loose, easy handwriting, mobile left upon rumpled sheets of the bed, a calmly waiting lover.

“Is this the famous project?” Amrita asks as Priya starts delving into her cupboards.

“Parts of it. Yes.”

“Do you mind if I drip all over it?”

“No, feel free.”

Amrita pulls her hair back, then squats down to examine it. Spidery sketches of she doesn't know what, scrawled writing, impressions, numbers pointing to other sheets.

Priya throws over a black t-shirt and a pair of very expensive urban-wear trousers. “Try these.”

“Oh.” She feels heavy and broad shouldered, undressing in front of Priya. Hates the way that Priya always stays in the room, chattering, slender form perched elegantly on the desk. Hastily pulls on the t-shirt, looks down at herself and wishes she'd remembered to shave her legs this morning.

“Priya, those trousers ain't ever gonna fit.”

“Yes they are. Unisex urban-wear. Just have confidence.”

“I haven't got legs that go on for miles. I'd be flopping around treading all over the hems. Haven't you got, like, tracksuit bottoms?”

Priya giggles. “It's the legendary East London style coming out in you.”

Amrita laughs, despite herself. “It's great if you want to, you know, just break out into a spontaneous jog somewhere.”

“You mean just after you've nicked the car stereo.”

“We get a bad press.”

“Well I haven't got any, you'll be sorry to know. I just lack that sartorial flair. How about a skirt? I've never seen you in a skirt.”

“That'll be because I don't own one.”

“Then a skirt it is! You can display your more mysterious, feminine side to Michael. You never know, he may just propose.”

“Priya!”

“Okay, okay. Joke. Leather mini?”

“That's hardly the mysterious feminine side.”

“Okay, long then.” Giggle. “Here we go.” She throws out a purple length of maxi-skirt at Amrita.

Amrita unfolds it and then starts giggling too. “The hippy student phase.”

“Yup, at college. I had the whole kit. Doc martins, Kensington Market jewellery, tie-die t-shirts. It was sort of de rigeur for Art students. My parents were horrified.”

“I’m sure,” Amrita climbs into it, trying to remember the last time she'd worn a skirt. Stands in front of Priya's mirror, unable to help comparing herself with Priya. She holds her hair up and throws a mock pose.

I must have been at school, she thinks. Fifteen.

“Not bad,” Priya tells her approvingly.

“It's been a long time.” She turns away, not liking Priya's eyes dwelling, unreadable, over her body.

“Don't you ever feel like dressing up? You know, put on a skirt, trowel yourself with make-up, all that?”

“No,” she says, still looking down at her body.

“Oh. Well. Anyway, while we're through here, I wanted to ask you a favour. I was glad to have the excuse to drag you through. “

“Yeah?” Amrita stares, curious, unsure.

“I was wondering if I could borrow your friend Jay.”

“Jay? Why?”

“It's my project. I want to, you know, do something virtual, just hosted on a computer. But I don't have a clue how.”

Amrita frowns. “Why not ask Mike?”

“Because he's got enough on his plate with his own finals. And anyway, I don't want him involved. He's too close. I'd just feel too embarrassed all the time.”

“Mandeep?”

Priya just laughs, hands pushing Amrita's hair back and then resting warmly on the skin of her face. “Don't worry. I'm not going to steal Jay away from you.”

Amrita stares seriously into Priya's eyes. "Better not."

"Is that an admission of some proprietary feelings?"

"No. If that's your game."

Priya pulls back. "It's not, really. I honestly need someone to help me, and I'd rather Jay than Mike or Mandeep. Will you ask him? Please?"

"Okay. But I'm hardly gonna sell it."

"You won't need to. Thanks." Priya steals in for another kiss, and then they head to the lounge, Amrita feeling that she's waddling in the skirt.

Rain still lashes against the window, glass smeared with water, the world outside painted into meaningless patterns. In the half darkness the TV plays out, splashing garish colour over the impeccably tasteful décor. Amrita sinks gratefully into the sofa. Priya bangs on the other door. "Mike!"

The door opens, veil of steam leaking out. Mike leans out, beaming a pleased smile at Amrita. "Hello. I'm glad the rain didn't put you off."

"It wasn't raining down at the Elephant."

Priya laughs. "So much for dedication. Would you have come anyway?"

"Well, if I'd known I'd end up wearing this skirt, maybe not."

"What do you think, Mike?"

Hanging before Amrita like a challenge. Rather than flirting she puts her hands together and bows her head. Namaste.

"It's very, er, nineteen-ninety."

"Can't you do better than that? It's the first time she's worn a skirt in years."

"Well she's doing better than me," Mike says, grinning.

“When's food?”

“Not yet. It's taking longer than expected.”

“Oh God.” Priya collapses back onto the sofa. “But I'm so hungry.”

“That's okay, babe. All the better when it arrives.”

“Right. And doesn't that smell like something's burning? Are you attempting to destroy my kitchen?”

“It's nothing.” Mike waves his hand airily. “Everything's under control. Do you want some wine, Amrita?”

“Uh.”

“Michael chose it so don't expect quality.”

“Well, it was cheap and the label looked nice.”

Priya giggles. “So much for that brief burst of romance on holiday. Now he's trying to wow the women in his life with cheap wine.”

“Hey, if you don't drink it all, I'm sure it's just great on work surfaces and toilets. Kills all known germs dead.”

“I'm sure.” Amrita stares sidelong at Mike, wondering how much of all this is slipping under his skin. He looks happy, she thinks, standing half in and half out of the kitchen, food burning somewhere behind him. But then Mike always looks happy.

“You're trying to kill off Priya to get hold of her parents' money, aren't you?”

“I'd have to marry her first, and look at the hash I made of that one. All is not going according to plan. I'll have to marry you for your overdraft instead.”

“Yeah. What a dowry.” Amrita stretches out along the sofa, mocking her own body. “I'm sure it's every bloke's dream.”

“Bitch.” Priya prods her in the side. “Don't tempt my man.”

“Er, Mike, I'm not sure that all that stuff is steam.”

“Fuck!” He disappears, door slamming shut behind him, the steam shakti rolling voluptuously across the ceiling.

Amrita sniffs the air. “What's he meant to be cooking anyway?”

“Cannelloni.” Priya grins deliciously. “He said he couldn't make it as a surprise, because we'd never recognise it when it was finished anyway.”

“He's too modest.”

“I suppose compared to your opening a tin of Ravioli, yes.”

“Cheek. I can cook. It's not just Hindu mothers who get their daughters stirring the mung beans. I had to cook all the time after Asha was born. I'd come in from school and then have to start on a meal. You're the one who doesn't know one end of a pan from the other.”

Priya just laughs, not even insulted. “Okay, so you out-domesticate me. But why do you think I keep Mike around?”

“Priya.” And Amrita searches heart-shaped face as it smiles crookedly at her.

Priya flaps her hands. “Don't start doing that look. It's the visual equivalent of dropping worms down my top. I'm off to get the wine.”

Amrita feels a brief constellation of pain as she watches the confidence and animal grace with which Priya moves. She took it all with such aristocratic ease, such casual abandon. Almost as if she could do anything, because nothing at all mattered.

Almost.

Amrita finds it difficult to do anything but admire Priya, watching her stalk silkily back into the room, bottle in one hand, wine glasses in the other. She kneels to pour out the wine, this strange reversal of the Brahmin woman serving, reaching up with a blood red bulb, a sacrifice offered, a single red tear.

“Here.” Their hands slide across each other as the glass is passed. Priya's eyes shine with a deep unreadable luminescence. Then she perches back on the sofa, takes a sip and bursts out laughing. “Ug. It's foul. I'm sure he only buys this sort of rubbish to annoy me.”

Amrita gulps some back. “It's not that bad.”

“You've just got no quality control.”

Amrita doesn't immediately answer, staring at the pictures on the TV, seeing nothing. She waits for Priya to settle against the back of the sofa, sipping at her wine with a rare, pensive set to her face.

“Are you sure it's okay for me to be here tonight? I mean, don't ever feel you're obliged to invite me round. If you'd rather spend the night alone with Mike then that's fine.”

“It looks like Mike's decided to spend the night alone with the cooker.” Priya smiles and stretches. “No, of course we don't mind. It's not like we haven't had enough nights alone together. To be honest it all gets to be a bit samey after a while. You know, the TV on, the bottle of wine, you begin playing a role, sort of following actions to the same script. I sometimes think that it all starts losing its meaning.”

Amrita gulps back some more wine. “Think about how much it would affect you if it wasn't there.”

“I don't know. Sometimes all I can think about is escape.”

Amrita looks across at Priya, but Priya won't meet her eyes. “Are you saying you want to break up with Mike?”

Priya bites her lip and shakes her head. “No. Not that.”

“Then what?”

Amrita feels Priya watching as she pulls a fag from the packet, lights it.

“I don't think you understand how difficult a relationship this can be. It looks so nice on the surface, I know that. But there's always these things underneath pulling you this way and that.”

“But when isn't there?”

“See, I knew you'd say that. You're just a stoic, and I'm not sure that's at all healthy. You'd marry the first right guy that came along and suffer the consequences. I mean you would, wouldn't you? You've always just wanted to get married and have kids.”

“Perhaps,” Amrita says darkly, heart like a hole.

“And, you see, I don't know. Sometimes I regret that this relationship hasn't happened later in my life.”

“You just don't know when you're lucky.”

“Maybe.”

They both trail off into silence. Amrita plays with her wine, head down, smoke from her cigarette stretching elegantly upwards. Priya toys with the remote controller, flicking through channels, the hundreds of flavours of digital cable shit, cheap graphics, pop videos nobody wants to see, real-life car chase action, cardboard drama on shakier sets, subscriber only porn grunting away behind a blue screen, the fragments of a

thousand narratives as acid-blonde presenters speak, endless avatars of Jill Dando cooing vicariously over a tragedy, selling twenty thousand varieties of cheap garbage on a shopping channel. Watching the cigarette burn down, insatiable slow greed of fire.

“Football!” Amrita brightens.

“Oh, God, Amrita, no. Please don't make me watch this. It's so boring, and Mike'll only see that it's on and then the Cannelloni will never get done.”

“Say please.”

“Please.” Priya pulls a pleading face, all big brown eyes and trembling lip, and Amrita has to laugh, has to relent.

“Okay. Though mainly for the sake of my stomach.”

“You martyr.” The football is punched out of existence, Priya roaming through the terrestrial channels for anything decent. She comes to rest on an image of waterways, low dense forest reaching in from either side, a flock of birds suddenly rippling out, scrawling a loose pattern across the sky.

“Channel 5 must have run out of seventies re-runs.”

“Hang on.” Priya has raised her hand, and is frowning uncertainly at the screen. In the violent glare of sunshine, a white temple sinks low against the horizon. Squatting men by the river shore watch the camera curiously, the eye of God, eyes held through time in a deep gaze with Amrita's, meeting, unrecognised.

“India?”

“Yeah, but which bit?” Priya is clicking her fingers, mouth working silently, eyes distant with unseen images. “Kerala! I reckon.”

Amrita shifts awkwardly, tucking her legs underneath her. A bird yowls, splitting the room, the dank rain-washed evening beyond, a crack across the roar of traffic spilling northwards over London roads. Amrita watches it tracked as it takes wing, a thousand unseen images wheeling in the background to the camera's gaze, huddled villages and scattered lotus buds upon the water, rotten paintings mouldering in abandoned temples. Sucks the hot smoke into her lungs.

“Have you ever been?”

“What, to Kerala? Priya, I've never set foot outside this country.”

“No, sorry, I forget.” Priya pauses, running a hand through her hair. “Do you ever get the urge? You know, to go to India?”

“My parents always said they were going to take me and Sita, and then Asha arrived, so it never happened.” She smiles carefully. “It's not on the agenda right now.”

“But aren't you curious?”

Amrita shrugs and sucks on her fag. Remembering her parents, the curious gravity India always held for them, its tides working within their veins. They never really left, she thought. The odd habits, the fond smiles as they talked over Calcutta, or her dad told stories about the Punjab, the intense and quiet arguments they would hold in Bengali sometimes when their daughters left the room.

Such distant clay, she thinks, staring down at the brown skin of her hand. I've travelled so far without moving.

“I dunno. I guess I've always thought that in the end I will. Part of me thinks I should learn some more of the language first.”

They watch the pictures. Beautiful as they are, Amrita finds them utterly unreal; any Hollywood studio could conjure something better, heart-achingly romantic but believable. Amrita sinks the last of her wine, the South American darkness sinking into the rivers of her body. Undreamt images, an infinity of places caught by the camera's eye: zig-zagging insect patterns, the ripple of grass, the knotted tangled mess of Banyan roots, clouds sweeping across sun-dappled water, trees flinging gnarled hands at an endless sky. A blank palm waiting to be creased, the world growing smaller with each passing second, paths cut through wilderness, boundaries created, beliefs formed. A picture she once saw, Krishna playing his flute to the gopis, a fecund stylised Indian forest curving womblike about them, Radha gazing up into his eyes to cancel out the danger of all those unformed wishes.

“Dinner!”

Mike emerges from the kitchen, a plate balanced on each hand. Drags the little table across with his foot to where the Amrita and Priya are sitting and settles the food on top of it.

Priya arches an eyebrow. “Is there no end to your talents?”

“Nope.” Mike disappears again, to return with his own food. He draws a chair up opposite Priya, fills his glass with wine. “Well, cheers everybody, and here's to our final year.”

Amrita lets her breath sigh out, rich with cigarette smoke, ghosts tumbling out from her body. She stubs out the remainder of her cigarette, refills her glass and raises it with the other two. “Cheers.”

Another mouthful of wine, eyes watching one another, orbs of gristle holding the world out. Amrita turns her attention to the food.

“It's nice,” she gets in before Priya has a chance to criticize it. “It doesn't taste like the kitchen nearly burned down in the making of it.”

“Thanks.”

“So what are you planning to do after you finish?”

“What? My course? Hmm.” Mike chews on his food thoughtfully. “It's looking like Java programming or database admin. Both of which are boring but they pay.” He shrugs. “I haven't really thought about it much. Anything that'll throw money at me, I guess.”

“Priya?”

Priya smiles. “Take a holiday, first. Then I don't know. But I didn't do art just to work as a receptionist somewhere. I think I'm serious about it. Maybe something in the media, we'll see. Yourself?”

“I've gotta work out what I'm doing for my project first.”

“Still no ideas, huh?”

“No.”

“I'm surprised that friend of yours, the It girl, hasn't told you what to do. She's that sort.”

“You're being unfair on Nat. She's not an It girl.”

“Really? Well, she carries on like one. And the lecturers all drool over her. The usual middle-aged hots for a cute bit of white ass. She's the sort of girl Michael slathers over in those pathetic boys mags of his. I'm always amazed you can stand her.”

“You make her out to be bad, but she’s not. Besides, we see a lot of each other. She only lives just down the hall from me.”

“Who's this?” Mike asks casually, through a mouthful of Cannelloni.

Priya glares at him sharply. “Natasha. An It girl. Bimbo. A friend of Amrita's.”

“She's in the same tutorial class as me.”

Priya waves her fork dismissively. “That's the worst reason I can think of to actually talk to someone. Might as well just like somebody because they're blonde and good looking, eh, don't you think so, Mike?”

Mike shrugs. “I don't know the girl.”

“Well don't bother trying.”

Mike laughs. “That just means you see her as a threat.”

Priya ignores him. “What do you two talk about?”

“Whatever.”

“Typical Amrita answer. Whatever. What does that mean?”

“I don't know. Nothing personal. I don't really know anything about her.”

“Now I'm intrigued.”

Amrita shrugs. “I'm not really sure I'd even call her a friend. I -” remembering. Something hungry in the girl that Amrita could never quite work out.

Wondering what Natasha wanted from her.

“I guess it's just the coincidence of having to work together. And living so close. It makes it easy. I mean, when we first met each other,” gesturing to Priya, “all we had in common was skin.”

“Maybe.” Priya looks seriously at Amrita, then shakes her head and laughs. “Well, never mind. Has she come up with any ideas for you? It’d be so like her to try to tell you what to do.”

“She's not been to classes yet this term.”

“She doesn’t need to. The lecturers love her stuff anyway.”

“You sound,” says Mike, “like you're jealous.”

“I have absolutely nothing to be jealous about,” Priya tells him acidly. “I might as well be jealous of a blow-up doll.”

Amrita finishes her Cannelloni and leans back onto the sofa, watching the two of them. Priya all elegance and off-the-shelf fashion, expensive hairdo, careful make-up, lithe body hung in knowing poses. The classically refined profile Mike presents to her, his proud Punjabi features, thick hair cropped in a tousled mess, muscles hard against his skin. You couldn't look more perfect, she thinks, the two of you here, frozen in time, tastefully chic flat thrown behind as canvas.

When Mike and Priya return to view this picture, Amrita thinks, I wonder what they will see.

“Well I like her, whatever,” Amrita says, pulling another cigarette from the packet and lighting it. She watches Priya through the naked, dancing forms of the smoke. “She's always been good to me.”

“Well, then, give her my love when you next see her,” and Priya laughs.

2.

Natasha is Priya reversed. Long blonde hair where Priya's is black and bobbed, sumptuous full body where Priya is long and lithe. Eyes two holes in the sky. She claimed a Russian aristocrat heritage, and sat with a haughty composure to match. Amrita imagined wastes of snow, Natasha swathed in furs, the wicked queen of Narnia.

Everything that, as a child, Amrita had wanted to be. Trying to see the world through blue eyes and white skin.

“I think Priya's idea is no good anyway. People have been trying virtual art for years and the result is always pap. The whole point of art is the physicality of it, the presence that it gives. Staring at a little box is nothing. Remember that exhibition we went to see at Aldgate?”

Amrita did, Natasha sweeping frostily though, dismissing the whole gallery as a showcase for gimmicks, half-baked ideas, the refuge of the talentless.

“Maybe computer art just needs to find its guru. Like Warhol with mass consumerism.”

“Possibly. I don't think it'll be Priya, though.”

“I think you're being too harsh. You never know, she might just be the one with the big idea.”

“Maybe.”

“And anyway, I'm not sure that I want to talk about it. At least not until I've got some ideas of my own.”

Natasha smiles, lupine and charming, leans across the table closer to Amrita.

“You're all washed out.”

“I know.”

“Working in that little bar night after night, serving the same drinks to the same customers. Going home to the same face in the mirror, the same clothes on the floor, the same unwashed dishes. How are you going to find something new?”

Amrita shrugs.

“It's not even like you try. You just run over the same ground and think of the same problems. It's no good.”

“So what do I do? Quit my job?”

“There are plenty of other ways to make a living, yes.” Natasha tells her significantly. “But maybe you should quit art. Or at least redefine what you mean by it.”

“What are you getting at?”

“I don't know. Maybe you need to do what you're doing in a completely different way. Think about the way that sculpture changed, for example. From pretty figures to Henry Moore, or Anish Kapoor, or Rachael Whiteread. Things that are just things, the silence of our failure to find any sort of convincing explanation for being only leaving... the being.”

“Like that girl who films her room with a webcam, continuously, whether she's there or not.” God as just an eye, staring, powerless to change anything, to make any judgement. Staring over gathering dust, the striptease of a nightly ritual, the fumbling attempts to make love, just the same. Nothing matters, nothing means anything, even voyeurism reduced to simple hunger. “Maybe that's why I feel like a sham. Because I can't make art out of myself.”

“Like I said, maybe you need a change of scene.”

“Is there really that little to say?” Amrita wonders, half to herself.

“You know it yourself. You just don't know how to act on it. Because you can't just sit there and think it through, you've got to go out, become it. Otherwise nothing will ever change.”

“Which maybe is what I really want,” Amrita says with a bitter smile. “A husband, kids, a house, garden. Priya asked me and I had to admit it.”

“And she's so different?” Natasha asks, laughing.

“I don't know. Maybe none of us are.” Clinging to the same dream over and over, a relentless re-incarnation of desire, fulfilment spilling out in TV pictures, in the forms of others caught on cameras, unreadable faces and soft eyes. Dying constantly because we cannot change. All the old words spilling out in meaningless gushes to cover our silence.

Natasha smiles wickedly, posing for Amrita. “I would say otherwise.”

She drags all the life from her cigarette and crushes it into the ashtray.

3.

Cars howl as they rush past, slipping up a gear as they head into the long stretch towards Mile End station, the dense mass of the city looming like a clot on the horizon. Amrita keeps a tight hold on Asha's hand, feeling her strain impatiently, bored with just having to stand and watch traffic. Accelerators hit the floor, the impatience to get anywhere, the fixed glare like rigor mortis that drivers gain on a wide-open road, Amrita's hair whipped across her face as a van slams by. She tugs it back, watches the drivers, hand clenched over Asha's, half expecting the kid to leap into any hole in the traffic. Asha has no sense of danger, Amrita is tempted to believe she has no sense at all, only ever seeming to see the world as a game. It gives Asha an aura of impermanence, fairy or imp,

something unsustainable. Amrita expects one day to wake up and find her gone, taken back to whatever world she escaped from.

Sita has the football, but Amrita doesn't know how long before she'll get lumbered with that too. From the corner of her eye she can see Sita pulling herself into one of her poses, doe eyed, pouting and mysterious, as some guy she's spotted across the road stares at her. The football resting against her hip is fast going to become a liability. Amrita stares the other way, embarrassed, pulling at her hair.

“Why're there never any trains on the bridge?” Amrita bends down to hear what Asha is saying over the roar of the traffic, staring where the kid's finger points.

The ghost line, bricked up station hidden behind a car yard, plants sprouting at its blackened lip, shattered glass spine following stairs up to a dead platform, the old mirrors for the drivers still in place, signals hanging dead, black lines of power cables soughing overhead. Fossil bones rising through the dirty Bow squalor, old dreams of people on the platforms, trains heaving themselves out of the past.

“It's a dead line. Nobody uses it anymore. Just ghosts.”

“Ghosts?”

“Yeah. Sometimes at night you see the signals glow, and if the traffic stops, you can hear a sound like trains. It's the ghosts of the all the people who used to use it. Men who went down to the docks every day to unload goods from all over the world.”

Amrita runs her eyes across the heavy iron span of the bridge, slender trees pushing themselves out from beneath the gravel on the track, wood against the iron of the tracks, branches flung out into the path of imagined goods trains, dock workers streaming

out from the bricked-up entrance. Air heavy with the odours of the past, as if she could reach out, mould them back into being.

“Why aren't there any more?”

Amrita shrugs. “That's the way things go.”

“I want them back.”

“Yeah, well, don't hold your breath.”

Asha stares curiously at the bridge.

“C'mon kiddo, the lights are changing. Sita, stop goggling.”

“Just worry about Asha.”

Sita lets her hair fall across her face, and she looks down, smiling a carmine smile as the guy she's been staring at swaggers over, slicing through her body space, shoulders making the barest of contacts. Sita too sure of herself to give even the slightest backwards glance. There'll be more as we head through the market, Amrita thinks. There always is, the way men seem to have a trigger that Sita can press, reacting like automatons, giving her the same response, the things she wants of them.

It's all she knows about men. The same face endlessly turned towards her.

As they cross the central island Sita clutches hold of Amrita's arms and giggles.

“He was terrible. Did you see his eyes? He thought he was a total stud.”

“And you were proving his point. You're so embarrassing to be with.”

“Shut up.” She gives Amrita a gentle push. “It's fun.”

“Oh right, for you. As long as they don't do anything about it.”

“Sour old cow.”

Sometimes, perhaps. Amrita's often jealous of the way Sita seems to drift so easily though everything - school, work, men, none of it seems to leave its mark. Even her parents left Sita alone, in a way they never had with Amrita.

They turn past the police station, poster-board of the missing and the murdered, endless appeals for witnesses and lay visitors, CCTV staring down from the entrance. Amrita could never be sure, but didn't believe the amount of dog shit on the pavements outside was simply coincidental. A little rebellion, a sign that the old community hadn't quite died. This alien past, read about in books and watched in old films, suddenly wrapping her, chilling her flesh.

Up parallel with the ghost line, Asha still staring with a vacant fascination at the old brick station. Into the low rise estates, bass from a flat overhead shivering the mortar, parked cars with fat tyres and spoilers pulled into regimented lines, teenage kids hanging out on balconies. The train line from Liverpool Street into Essex carves the neighbourhood apart, diced like ripe meat into blocks. Below it, on the cement in front of Tom Thumb's arch, words painted in foot-high letters, unspoilt over all these years: "Daddy I am sorry for you not loving me." A yawning door into a world Amrita never wants to consider, but the phrase hangs like a cloud, haunting. She closes her eyes briefly and catches the smear of unknown lives playing a cruel vignette.

Sita's heels echo harshly under the tiny span of Tom Thumb's arch as Amrita and Asha slip quietly behind her, shadows fleet and intangible as the trains on the abandoned stretch of track. In Asha's games, and those of Sita and Amrita before her, Tom Thumb's Arch was the magic gateway, beyond which, if ever she wished hard enough, she would emerge a princess into a fairy world. Amrita steals a look at Asha and sees her eyes

moving under squeezed-shut lids, lips muttering. She remembers holding her mother's hand, eyes shut and willing her wings to grow, back itching in the anticipation of them, desperately hoping to open her eyes to see towerblocks twisted into cornices and battlements, Mostyn Grove a procession path lined with fountains and flowers...

...heart sinking every time she opened her eyes, grey walls looming up around her cutting the sky to a ribbon, brutal realism and harsh right angles, stains spilled down grit-rippled slabs, trash bins upended and the flapping limbs of rubbish spread in a nauseous foam across the road. She stares now, letting the muscular squalor sink against her bones, her dreams of escape, laying next to Geoff and telling him she loves him, like Tom Thumb's arch really opens onto a different world, where he carries her through off into some sunset.

No Asha, she thinks. No Sita. No happy ending. She tries to tell herself that this is forever, and that it's okay. Trying to leave Geoff and his promises out of her heart. Gripping on to Asha's hand like she's drowning, grey concrete like flesh, up past the chip shop and the launderette where the same women have done the same washing year after year.

Across Tredegar Road and into the little pool of new developments, luxury town houses and exclusive apartments sticking out like a festering sore in the neighbourhood. Bridge of apartments in a Venetian mockery, all a statement of expense and glib imagination, mid-price Rovers and cheap BMWs sit outside the doors, all bad city jobs and eighties rock music inside, thirtysomething burn-out. Amrita always feels the hate blistering piggy little blue eyes as she passes, the little-town prejudice isolated amidst the rot. She swaggers, towerblock arrogance, letting her hips roll, back held straight and hair

pushed back, amused to see Sita at it too, bouncing the ball and chewing imaginary gum, becoming what these people wanted to see from behind their twitching curtains.

Soon forgotten, her eyes ahead, trying to slip round the sides of the vans blocking the road, remembering the surge of excitement she always felt being taken here as a kid. Starting to hear the noise, the mutter of people, the bassline beat of cheap stereos, hawkers calling out, tight line of awnings face to face across the road, the steam of hot food, polystyrene cups filled with tea. Asha is straining, wanting to run, face already lit up with delight, watching girls walk away with bags and hangers, shoeboxes, cartons of fast food. They break into the swell of people, close talk held in by the awnings, grotto of cheap ware, traders like pimps watching over the customers, conversations leaking in from either side. Amrita watches a fashion parade of teenage girls, all dolled up for the day and scouting for admiration, checking the competition with cool but greedy eyes. Older women drag reluctant men or impish kids, muttering over this or that, watching everything with critical eyes. She grabs Asha by both shoulders, not wanting her to wriggle free into a world that's got the kid pie-eyed, staring about her like she's just landed on earth: teatowels, toy guns, women's shoes, overcoats or lighters, everything seems to hold the same fascination for her as she beams in wonderment at the bark of a trader, staring round herself like an owl at daybreak.

Sita finally hands the football to Amrita and then slips off through a gaggle of people muttering something about boots; Amrita relegates the ball to Asha and tries to steer the kid through the crowd in Sita's wake. There she is, flirting with a trader, coltish legs stretched out as she tries on a new pair of boots with erotic aplomb, shy smile and big eyes, the price plummeting with every passing second. Amrita lurks nearby, watching

with an impassive face, smiling slowly and replying monosyllabically to the attempts of both the trader and Sita to draw her in. This stuff isn't for her, she could never carry it off the way Sita does, would feel a fool even trying. Looks down at herself, hooded top and combat fatigues Sita had bought and then discarded (the only girl she knows who wears her younger sister's cast-offs) and a pair of scuffed white trainers. Smiles, thinking that anyway she's loved. That whatever she wears, Geoff still wants her. Knifed through with longing, bittersweet separation of the infatuated, the afterglow of his touch still burning through her, the emptiness of his absence, wanting to share the most trivial of details, wanting, of all the impossible things, for him to be here.

A need that almost made her choke.

Surrounded by the slow signs of decay: ripples in glass, flaking paint upon shop signs, old telephone codes, the creases and stress marking a new pair of leather boots. Men with haggard and careworn faces, red from too much booze, greying hair and stubble, muscles leaner, more sinewy. Meat laid out on a butchers slab, the hum of freezers, sausages, kidneys, hearts. Leaking gutters, flaked mortar, a crack in the lintel above the door, year on year voices growing more hoarse, wearing out.

“How much time have we got?” Geoff asked her once as, wrapped in his coat, they huddled in the back of his car. “Twenty years at most, then I'll be past it.”

Twenty years. More than she'd lived, so far. She stared down at the skin of her hand and watched the cracks like the dried up rivers of Mars.

Waiting for Sita to flirt the price down to Antarctic levels, listening to the sound of her laugh and her sly innuendo, Asha suspiciously still in her grasp, wondering what Geoff was doing, who he was with, is it anything like this? Peddling dreams, market

wares, buying into fantasy selves, she loves the hum and the chatter, the steaming food and the roar of the pubs. So different from the days when the market never ran, the road then a dreary line of metal shutters and empty fast food joints, puddles sunk against the brick road surface, the occasional car slipping past dragging whirls of litter in its wake, a couple of kids sprawled on the benches by the one-stop shop scabbing fags from passers-by, a street echoing with loss, sunk down to bones, waiting.

They're measuring Sita's waist, her bust, and she slips between arms with fluid grace, briefly bound by the tape measure for a set of stats before flowing away again, laughing as they whistle. Amrita stares down, pushing her hair out of her face, just to catch Asha stuffing a pair of socks in her pocket. "Asha! What the bloody hell are you doing?"

Asha stares up, eyes bulging innocence. "Nothing."

"Then what are those socks doing in your pocket?"

"They must have fallen there."

Despite herself, Amrita begins to giggle, furiously embarrassed because one of the traders has managed to tear himself away from Sita for long enough to stare in her direction. She runs her free hand through her hair and stares at him imploringly, still giggling. "What on earth can I say to that?"

"Nothing." He gives her a broad wink. "When they look like that you can't resist 'em. My daughter's just the same. Go on, let her take the socks if she wants 'em so bad."

"I couldn't possibly -"

"Nah." He flaps a hand, grinning. "Your friend here's fleecing us rotten anyway. A pair of socks won't make no difference."

“But they're far too big for any of us!”

“Use 'em as mittens.”

“I know what I'll do. I'll put one over this one's head and that way I might get some peace.”

“I wouldn't bet on it,” and he returns to close the deal with Sita.

With a sweet smile, Sita registers victory: they give in, but only if she promises to come back. She emerges, eyes flashing darkly, with another pair of boots and a suede mini. Amrita shakes her head. “Don't let mum see that.”

“I'm not the stupid one.” And Sita gives her a kiss. “I think Asha's intervention won the day. Now shall we head for the park before she tries to steal something really stupid.”

“Fine by me.”

She follows Sita, Asha clutched tight in one hand, football in the crook of the other arm. Intent on keeping Asha's meandering progress in line, dodging round kids with mobile phones, girls staggering under the weigh of boxes like it's Christmas, gangs of boys aggressively smoking and staring round. Looks up to find Sita and is shocked to find her eyes sinking into those of a skinny white kid, gaze burning with intensity. He smiles shyly; she flicks her gaze away and shakes her hair back, uncomfortable, watchers watching everywhere, she thinks, women's eyes lazily drifting during a mobile phone call, waiting to be served at the shop counter, by the door of the Needle Gun calmly letting the world slide by, cameras by the entrance to Safeways sucking in the bodies and bedlam, hysteria of shopping bags, brand names, games played between the boys and the girls watching each other watching. Long lines of hidden stories.

Just catches sight of Sita slipping between thick jackets and fashion bags, wrenches Asha in the right direction until finally they slide out from behind a long line of stalls, music muffled, the chatter dropping away, turn past a glut of vans blocking the junction and up alongside the Ranelagh, glimpses of shadowy bodies inside, hunched over pints and smoking, and then they're out into the redbrick sprawl crouching all around them, Sita's footsteps resonant, a silence in the estate after the noise of Roman Road. They cut across roads up to Gun Wharf, the gutted old warehouse reaching crumbled hands out into the sky, blind windows and collapsed floors, arcs of scrawled graffiti, the faint smell of rot, slow power of the elements reaching inexorable fingers of destruction down through the brickwork towards the foundations. Across the bridge, rubbish-strewn canal shimmering back at the sky, Victoria Park before them, stretching flatly out.

Victoria Park. Families on the long promenade by the lake, courting couples on aimless ambles, hands entwined and eyes locked. Kids in the cricket nets even in winter, joggers, romping dogs, rollerbladers covering the outside circuit. Amrita remembers her dad taking her here on the day they were waiting for Sita to be born; sunny then, the two days overlapping in the blazing blue, the thick bodies of trees, the old ornamental drinking fountain, fenced off, like a forbidden gateway through time; one step through its arches and she could be back, three years old and throwing bread to the ducks, telling her father that she'd like a baby brother. He'd grinned indulgently and told her to wait and see; her mother didn't have a choice. They'd sat under a tree and had a picnic, her father peculiarly tender, a sort of calmness about him, just waiting. She'd come here with Sita when Asha was born as well, sitting by the lake and watching the crows flap in black clouds out of the trees, squabbling about whether it would be better to have a boy or a

girl. In the end they both agreed that, if it inherited the Lakhani football gene, it had better be a boy.

All these memories overlapping, the park refracting into a thousand different instances: the same grass, the same trees, the same sky, people as flickering shapes upon its stillness.

Asha weaves the football crazily through an army of invisible opponents before knocking it back to Amrita. Amrita boots it far upfield. “Go on kiddo, go get.” Asha charges off in pursuit, a wild bundle of energy, explosion of black curly hair bouncing over her tiny reproduction West Ham top.

“Was I ever that mad?”

Amrita frowns, trying to remember. “I don't think so. I don't think I've even ever seen you run properly. You just sort of seemed to materialize wherever the ball was. I never worked out how you did that.”

“Yeah, well, you wouldn't. That sort of thing didn't interest you at all. You know, finesse. I'm always amazed that you only managed to break your nose twice.”

“Yeah.” Amrita rubs her cheek and smiles ruefully. “And then the hospital made it three.”

“But they did a good job on it. You can't smell round corners anymore.”

“Yeah.” The ball comes scudding back. Sita drops her stuff and folds herself elegantly on the grass, then starts to rummage through her bag. “We're stopping here then?”

“Yes, there's a gorgeous bloke just over the way that I want to look at. How do you think Asha will grow up?”

“Not like you, that's for sure.” Amrita returns the ball, yards wide and too high.

Keep the kid running.

“She's got no sense of reality. I don't think she'll have a great adolescence.”

Amrita snorts. “And we have? I can't wait to get mine over with.”

“Oh, mine's great. You've just never worked out how to enjoy yourself.”

Sinews protest as she brings her leg up high enough to intercept the ball. “Shit, the kid's got a wicked right foot.” She looks round at Sita and sees her still rummaging through her bag. “And what the hell are you looking for in there? Your football boots?”

“As if. You should see yourself, hopping about like that, tits bouncing like balloons. It's completely undignified.”

“Fuck dignity.” Amrita flicks the ball up, juggles it between thighs, lobs it high in the air and attempts an overhead volley, age and weight slipping from her, familiar sense of balance, strength, the joy of her body still acting as it should, ball struck cleanly, the one moment hung suspended staring at the shining metal sky as the earth tilts, reaches up for her. She crashes down on her back, bones shuddering, air driven from her lungs.

Sita laughs and claps as Amrita picks herself up, gasping, her frame settling back upon her, heavy and hurt. She runs a hand through her hair. “Shit. That is absolutely the last time.” Then she points at Asha. “That's the sort of crap you should be doing, not me.”

“Okay.” Asha proceeds to repeat the stunt, effortlessly copying every action, to the point of falling over flat on her back at the end. Sita begins giggling helplessly and Amrita, still catching her breath, chokes on her laughter. “You're right, the kid's totally dumb.” She jogs over to where the ball has trickled, feeling bruised flesh pull harshly,

and floats a pass towards Asha who has bounced back to her feet with no apparent damage whatsoever. “And worse than that, she's made out of India rubber.”

“Yeah. Maybe we should drop her out of the towerblock, just to make sure.”

“Sita! If only mum and dad could hear what you're saying about their love-child.”

“The mood they're in right now, they'd probably drop me out of the block just for saying it. I don't know why they can't just go away over Diwali. Somewhere where they won't get reminded.”

“I think they should just give in and celebrate it.”

“Dad would love to but mum wouldn't allow it. She's the religious one. We all know he's only Christian because of her.”

“Yeah, well, not so Christian, either of them, sometimes. I mean, look how cut up they were that none of us - especially me - popped into the world as a boy. Or the fact that, for supposedly Catholic parents, all three of us got Indian names.”

“You're meant to be the devout Catholic. You got Confirmed and all that. It shouldn't bother you.”

“I was a devout Catholic, Sita. Was.”

“So it seems.” Sita stares peculiarly.

Asha's showing off now, attempting all manner of weird tricks she's not quite good enough yet to pull off. Amrita watches her indulgently, remembering the same lightheartedness about herself, the easiness with which her body used to move about the football, sees a younger self staring into the future at the woman she is, battered face, long hair streaked brown and blonde, hands resting on the flare of hips, the heavy line of her bust,

vertigo of this hole in time. An unbearably adult pain, pictures herself with Geoff and feels her love as a terrible loss.

Asha should never have to grow up like this, she thinks.

“So, how's the course going?” Sita's voice is oddly soft, her claws for some reason withdrawn.

“Oh, you know.” Amrita punts the ball far over Asha's head, watching the explosion of limbs as the girl sprints to catch it. “I don't find it easy. But some of it makes sense. Little glimpses here and there.”

“You really haven't got a head for maths, have you?”

“Nope. But I just about got through A-Level and I'll just about get through this.”

“Just to keep mum and dad happy, yeah?”

“I guess I owe them that.”

“So all those nights you come in late, with mum and dad sitting there fretting about you, that's you just staying behind trying to get your head sorted about it all?”

Images twisting inside her skin, words she should say caught in her throat. Unease ripples up her back. “Something like that, yeah.”

“So nothing to do with these then.” Sita holds out a sheet of blistered plastic, pills rattling with the motion, accusing little puncture marks once for every day. The sunlight pools on the plastic surface and shines dazzlingly back.

“What?” Body rigid, she stares at Sita in shock. All about her, life grinds on in the park, odd laughter, the echoing calls of birds, the football thudding inches from her feet. She feels if she moves, this beautiful crystalline surface will shatter forever, revealing a cold and shrivelled corpse beneath. “What the fuck?”

Sita isn't smiling. "You left them in the bathroom this morning. You're lucky mum didn't find them."

"Asha!" Amrita whirls round to where the kid is standing, looking lost and confused that the game has suddenly stopped. "Let's go find you some kids of your own age to play with."

"But I don't want to -"

"Shut up." Amrita grabs a handful of the kid's jersey and drags her across the park, looking for any football match small enough to drop Asha into.

"Oi! You!" To a bunch of white kids, about eight or so she reckons. They back away nervously as Amrita marches forward and start protesting that they never done it. "Got room for another?"

"Erm, well, she's, uh, a girl."

"No matter, she knows what she's doing. "

They argue briefly about who'll have the girl, and eventually the winning team gets Asha as a handicap, both teams looking pissed off at the interruption. Amrita pushes Asha onto the pitch. "Go on. Show 'em how to play." And Asha is left, dazed and stranded, several of the boys staring curiously at her as what they guess must be her mother pauses briefly to watch. Amrita holds herself still as for long moments Asha's world pales and flattens into an unfriendly unknown, lip bitten like she's about to cry, and then with a shrug one of the boys passes to her, she traps the ball, looks up and begins to run, body loosening.

She'll be okay, Amrita thinks, and turns away.

Amrita walks more slowly back towards Sita, feeling her sister's scrutiny, as if her skin holds two different women; the one Sita knew, and this other, a secret life in unknown places, forbidden actions beneath the mask of her so-familiar body. Unaware which she feels she really is.

Sita holds out the little packet of contraceptives. "Here, you'd better have them back. I've been paranoid all day that I'd get caught with them."

"Cheers." Amrita stuffs them in the pocket of her combats and then sits down. The park thunders in stillness. The children flit like pale ghosts, couples wandering the paths fade towards non-existence, Amrita imagines the cells within her body splitting and dying, DNA unravelling, chemical messages racing against the wide flat patience of the park: so many winters seen, the sun rising red and malevolent through a weeping mist, trees wracked in still spasms, grass rimed with frost, every day an incomparable work of art, an endless weight of them, reducing her moments down towards a meaningless single frame of film.

"Cigarette?" Sita extends the fag packet.

"Oh. Thanks." Taking one and perching it between her lips. Lets Sita light it.

They sit and watch the park in silence, Amrita not even sure what to say. She waits for Sita, who takes her time, face utterly unreadable, perfectly moulded, staring at the world around her.

Everything, Amrita thinks, goes on as before. And yet nothing does.

"So," Sita says at last, blowing out smoke. "How long have you been seeing this guy? It is just one guy, yeah? Not just, you know, checking things out, having fun."

"It's just one guy," Amrita admits, not able to meet Sita's eyes.

“And how long have you two been seeing each other?”

“A while.”

“You only started term eight weeks ago!”

“I know.”

“So who is he? I mean, he's obviously from university. Is he from your course?”

“Kind of.” Amrita pushes her hand through her hair. It feels unreal having to confess this to Sita, and she's shaking, hunched around the cigarette. She looks up, eyes like black holes. “He's my tutor.”

“Oh shit.”

“He's married and he's got a child.”

“So what the fuck are you playing at?”

Amrita shrugs, watching the smoke dance out from the end of her cigarette. “I didn't plan it. It's not the sort of thing I wanted to happen. But -”

“Don't tell me. You're in love.”

She swallows and nods.

“It's only been a matter of weeks, for Christ's sake.”

“It wouldn't matter if it had been six days. That's just the way it is.” She wipes a tear away before it can fall. “It sounds stupid, doesn't it?”

“Yup.”

“Listen, Sita, I didn't go out looking for this. It was just, you know, bang, there it was. And now I don't know what to do.”

“How old is this guy? Thirty-odd?”

“Early forties.” Feeling shame, the slow humiliation of each admission, laying bare dreams that she hadn't wanted Sita ever to see.

“Early forties. You don't think that maybe you're just the latest in a line. That, you know, maybe he's in there just for the young fanny he can get hold of. I mean, we all know about lecturers. And you know that when you get to be a bore, or the wife gets suspicious, he'll just drop you like a stone.”

Thinking back, the look of the condemned man in Geoff's eyes as they sat huddled in his office, staring at the destruction they'd both caused.

“No. I don't think so. I don't think it was easy for him to do this.”

“But he did it anyway?”

“Yes.”

“You are actually sleeping together, right? You're not just on the pill because you're hoping?”

“No.” Amrita laughs shortly. “We're sleeping together. It's doing my head in because I can't think about anything else.” She sucks back on the cigarette. “I've never wanted anybody like this. It's like I'm suffocating or something.”

“And what does he feel about you? Do you know? Has he promised to leave his wife? I mean, where is this going?”

“I don't know.” She can't stop the tears now, feeling them slip quietly out, one by one by one. “I don't dare ask. I don't even dare think about it.”

“Well would you want him to?”

“Yes. Yes I would.” Amrita sighs and stares bleakly at Sita. “I knew he had a wife and kid before I slept with him. It didn't stop me. It just made me more determined to have him.”

“Well I hope he's worth it.”

Amrita doesn't answer. Listens to the crows in the park, children shouting, the distant hiss of the motorway. Crying, breath clotted, betrayed by tears. Trying desperately to hold on to Sita.

“If mum finds out she'll kick you out. And you can't keep it hidden forever.”

“I know.”

“So what will you do?”

“I don't know. Right now, just about anything I can think of feels wrong.”

They sit in silence, side by side, smoking and watching the children play. Amrita stares out, trying to remember it all, as if it is already dissolving around her. Losing everything, hand open and hopeless in air. She looks at Sita and realizes for the first time that her sister, too, is crying.

4.

Another wasted day.

A fantastic litter of shapes and objects surrounds her. Relentless experiments with shape and form, sketches, surfaces. Anything tried and nothing found. Amrita leans back in her chair and frowns. Maybe Natasha is right and art is nothing. Maybe, Amrita thinks, I need to get out of it altogether.

Remembering that it is hidden within everything, waiting to be watched, the animating shakti spirit.

That rough spark of desire. A first and painful physical want, staring at a picture of Bernini's sculpture of St Teresa before the Angel, her exquisite blind eyes staring upwards, mouth hanging open in a gasp of agonized longing. Awe of God melding into sexual desire, unknown ecstatic fires running secretly through her veins.

She had never felt anything like it before. Fourteen, and suddenly consumed. It became her expression for everything secret, forbidden. Her silent rebellion against God, against her parents, against her own face every time she stared in the mirror.

Natasha's words hang before her like an obscene promise. Throw it all in, fight to rediscover the shock of first staring at that face, blood on fire. A sourceless want stretched through the cradle of her nerves.

She clears her desk, some sketches put back in her pad, others thrown away. Scrawled handwriting of ideas that would never come to fruition, lists of references, book titles, place names. Moves her collection of found objects back to her locker, looking round to watch other students hard at it: polyform chaos of so many ideas and dreams, a new world taking shape under their touch. Amrita throws her coat on, slips her pad back into her bag and leaves.

She'd finally got to have a proper look at Priya's project. They'd both been the worse for a night down the pub and Priya, trashed on several halves of lager, had found the Dutch courage to show Amrita everything that she'd done so far. There had been photographs everywhere, and of everything, running the whole gamut of styles and techniques from clear and ugly amateur innocence through to blown up repaintings

daubed in distended light, negatives, blurred unfocussed mistakes, drawn impressions of what photographs would have looked like, stacked cassettes of videotape footage; random objects captured, sucked through her eyes and then altered on the paper in front of her.

“And all this will stop existing,” she told Amrita. “I want to destroy the physical evidence. If I put it on a computer then it all just becomes light.” She would photograph the destruction of the evidence and post that too in electronic form, the ghost of a crime.

Amrita herself on film, anybody's fantasy of the real, propped up on a stool in the Shopping Centre eating rice and peas from a fast food stall, or stumbling back drunk through the entrance to Draper House, unable to make a straight line and slumping helplessly against the wall, hours of footage of her motionless body, the mundanity of eating or reading a newspaper, the strange liminal moments of just passing through. Anybody's property.

Art dominates. The story is dead, nobody needs to know glossy lies or glum truths anymore, the easy morals or the happy endings, the obvious and glib propaganda. A homogenisation of products, mass markets and mass production, function become a meaningless set of marketed images because anything can be sold and selling means art. A good smile, a nifty slogan, well designed and income-bracket targeted. Art is everything, she thinks, queuing to get to the cashpoint, watching an endless tide of slogans and logos, HongKong Shanghai Banking Corporation sign blaring down in electric importance, white photon burn across her skin, sports bags, trainers, mobile phones bleating out hits from the eighties, the cashpoint screen when she's up against it offering her insurance, home loans, free foreign currency exchange, BNP sticker slapped on the metal, half peeled off and overlaid with a SWP one, both white with red and black

writing. Cash spat out, the Queen's head created from whorls of fine lines, a likeness her subjects could now compare on an almost daily basis to the figure seen on television, Charles Dickens on the back, a little scene from the cricket match between Dingley Dell and All Muggleton in *Pickwick Papers*, a book that she's never read but the image is too familiar: the fantasy England of John Major's hallucination, the past for a spluttering Daily Mail choking over its breakfast every morning, an image like a bullet hole, an exit wound, unrecoverable damage.

And I can't do a thing, she thinks, folding the money away, trying not to look at the awful figures printed on the receipt.

Heads towards the station, winding out from behind the university's service roads, hum of air conditioning and the skitter of rubbish giving way to the fury of the evening traffic, gunned engines, horns blaring, exhaust spilling silkily out. Headlights blistering across windows, throwing odd shadows in the amber night-light. One cigarette lasting the length of the walk to the station, drifting through knots of commuters waiting for buses, trying to get herself into the right mood for meeting Jay.

It's been three months, her working in the Charlie Chaplin every hour that God sends over the summer break, trying to make enough money to last her until Christmas. Jay only works across the river, and says every summer that they should get together more often, but they never do. It's just one of those things, she thinks. We should never have met, he should never have chatted me up, our worlds don't even touch. They held such a delicate line of human contact, a fragile double helix, watching each other from the same fixed distance however much they turn.

There have been moments, she thinks. But then there are moments with everybody.

Jay wasn't going to move far tonight. When she'd talked to him earlier on the phone he was sounding pretty pissed off, telling her that he was embroiled in some sort of PC disaster and would be late, so he was damned if he was coming all the way down to the Elephant to sit in "some shitty hole or another." So it was up to her to come across the river and meet him in a pub on the Strand.

She takes the Tube, the grotty brown decay of the station, elevator like a steel coffin bearing her down to some dismal underworld of intestinal passageways and cramped platforms, slow dripping rot, the distant rumble of trains passing rumours of deep level shelters beneath. Forgotten sewers somewhere overhead, signs of Roman occupation buried deep in the surrounding earth, foundations reaching fingers all around. Along the Northern Line platform and down to the Bakerloo, train waiting, eerily empty, the odd person climbing aboard, introverted, not looking.

She folds her arms, staring out across her ghost trapped in the glass as the train begins to move, always not quite the woman she thinks she will see reflected back, the image slashed by the tunnel ribs, dust-blackened lines of cable, chalk and paint scratched on the walls in alien languages, hints about labyrinths buried in the clay, rusting stores, abandoned stations, secret lines through disused tunnels.

Names recited by a dissected voice: Lambeth North then Waterloo, the usual mob stumbling on, breaking her silence. Imagines the river shuddering overhead as they draw close to Embankment, the harsh white light of the station blocking out her image on the glass. Rhythm of the train slowing towards its final jolt, doors sliding open, Amrita

sinking back into herself as she joins the press to get off, the disconnected voice still chanting distant dreams of Baker Street, Paddington and beyond.

Wading up the tunnels through the usual awful mess of clueless tourists and aggressive commuters, backpacks and briefcases, the mindbending lower level to the station where all the exits join together and then bend back towards the tube lines; escalator up to the ticket hall to be confronted with the same chaos again; tickets that don't work, people standing lost and staring with stubborn dumbness at the Underground map. Amrita follows the well worn passage through the barriers and out into Villiers Street, road sweeping upwards towards the line of the old promenade at the Strand, a canyon of windowed walls, the cramped and crowded eating places, pubs and wine bars, the Big Issue sellers trying their luck with alternate flows of the crowd, stress casualties dropped out and arguing into mobile phones by the entrance to the gardens, basket cases rooting through the bins for anything edible, the shock of West End bustle, suits and dinner jackets and platoons of tourists, light suddenly gilding her skin as a taxi pulls up behind, she moves to one side, stops by the corner of Victoria Gardens by the old river gate to light a cigarette, looking back at Embankment station. She remembers going to see a Brian Catling exhibition at the Economist building down by Piccadilly, his poetry full of the click of keyboards and the lost monitor glare of the city, a video installation of the artist as Cyclops, both humbled and empowered by the disfiguring mirror held across himself to form the single, central eye, ridiculous and terrifying, a monomaniac power of intensity, blinking, shivering, a hideous effluvia spilling constantly from the distorted mouth. Here, the station has become the Cyclops, to the sounds of a million footsteps and the thick-throated roar of taxis, the single red eye of the Underground sign burning into

the night air, ugly square mouth constantly open vomiting passengers out onto the harsh concrete streets, cataract-eyed and somnambulant, city roaring and shrieking around them, the sound of a promise, a spell. She turns back and finds a place within the huge pattern of movement, pulled slowly upwards to the fuming filth and noise of the Strand, the metal stream of buses and taxis, the devil's eyes of the traffic lights, a conduit to nowhere, Trafalgar Square bathed in pigeon shit behind her, heading up towards Aldwych and the big hotels, passing groups of homeless kids bedded down by McDonalds and asking for change, the same old shops like any High Street anywhere, the coffee bars and the camera shops, fast food and pharmacy, theatres running four week sold out specials for the luvvies, Broadway imports and the same old reruns for the rest, the same old flickering neon and hammy posters, an austerity down-at-heel look to it all. Brain dulled by lead, lungs blackened and tarred, she plunges gratefully into the Lyceum Tavern, the end of the road, workers hunched over the first beer of the night, tourists flapping hopelessly with maps of Westminster, theatre-goers teasing copious bellies in preparation for another heavy night on the West End.

Jay is upstairs, sunk in a heavy leather chair and staring moodily into his bitter. Hair shorter than she remembers, and he's bought some new clothes, but the same frame underneath, slim and wiry. He doesn't look up as she enters, so she heads straight for the bar, buying herself a pint and him another.

He grins at her as she returns. "Cheers babe."

"No worries." She drops her bag and settles opposite. "You've cut your hair."

"And you haven't."

She smiles and shrugs. "I think the last time I had it cut was ten years ago."

“Don't fancy a skinhead then?”

“No. My head would just look like a big brown potato. Not good.”

“I can't imagine it.”

“Don't even try.” She rummages through her bag for the cigarette packet. “Fag?”

“Cheers.”

He leans across, the smell of beer on his breath, faint sweaty musk about his body. She lights his fag and then leans back, lighting her own, sucking in that first deep drag.

“So,” she says, regarding him across the table, “did you get that PC problem fixed?”

He sighs. “Eventually.”

“You should be pleased.”

“Fucking job. It's really starting to piss me off.”

The same dead end job clamped around his life for two years now. It terrified her, watching him work through the years like a machine. Keeping a roof over his head, getting him the money to go out night after night drinking. “What else can I do?” he once asked her. “I haven't even got the skills to get a better job.” It was a kind of death.

“You wouldn't recommend a career in University IT then?”

“What career? There aren't any prospects -” He stops himself and grins. “Listen to me. I'm like a broken record. You get the same things from me every time.”

She shrugs. “That's okay.”

“So how about you? How are things?”

“Oh. Final year. You know.”

“I sort of remember it.”

“You don't ever regret doing a non-vocational degree?” He had been a Literature student.

“Why, do you?”

“Sometimes.” She swallows her lager and stares at him speculatively. “I'm certainly having my problems with art. I've got nothing to say.”

“Nor have most artists. They just say it in style.”

“Cynic.”

“I wish I was.”

Amrita smiles. “Well it's a very good impression.” She pushes a hand through her hair.

“I gave up on all the profound stuff years ago. So maybe I'm just jealous of you still trying. It gets so easy to just be glib and facile about things, don't you think?”

“Possibly. But maybe that's the only way to get through life. On nights working behind the bar, all I usually think about is going to bed and sleeping. I'd go mad otherwise.”

He nods. “I think I just gave up on finding any answers. It gets so easy to build up a way of dealing with the questions, a sort of system, you know, God or atheism or socialism or whatnot, and you get clever enough to answer anything without really thinking about it. And that's a problem. That's when I knew it was all over for me, because before I read anything I knew what I was going to think about it. So since then I've sort of given up.”

“I don't know what to think about anything anymore. When I was younger, I had all the answers given to me by religion. But then I used to be a very good little Catholic

girl. I went to communion, I ate the bread and drank the wine, I confessed my sins.” She pauses and grins. “Except the bad ones. I prayed before bedtime every night, read bits of the Bible, all that. All of that time taken up, so much routine, like a clockwork toy ticking round. I just didn’t have to think.”

Until St Teresa. God consumed in a pyre of sexual heat, fantasies slipping along the lines of her nerves, all the things that she could never tell the priest.

“I gave up believing in God when I realized that all I wanted from Him was to grant my wishes, which seemed a totally selfish reason to believe in anything. So I stopped.”

“Well I was going to Hell or I was going to Hell, either because I was such a bad girl or because I didn’t believe. So I chose not to believe.” She looks at him, memory whispering about her, ghost hands like cigarette smoke lightly grazing her skin. “It made things easier.”

“I guess. But do you still want to believe in something?”

“I think we all do.”

Jay laughed. “I don’t.”

She stares into his eyes, irises a mess of hazel and grey and green, different in whatever light, primeval hole of the pupils staring back, the space filled with unsaid, unguessed words. She tries to see through his skin, into his hopes and dreams, trying to watch herself painted on his retina. “You can’t really say that you don’t want to believe anything at all.” Half wanting him, half challenging him to say he wanted her.

He smiles and relents, looking away from her. Avoiding being honest. “Maybe not. But I try not to. I don’t think it does any good.”

“But you want things all the same, anyway. It's impossible not to.”

“Unless you're a Buddhist.”

“Yeah but they want not to want. Or they want oblivion, Nirvana.”

“Sophist. So what is it that you want, then?”

She shrugs, smiling coyly. Not able to say, either. “At the moment, another pint is pretty high on the list.”

“That, at least, I can provide.” He drains his, and then gets up to go to the bar.

She follows his progress, bittersweet smile on her lips. Locked into this tango with him, unable to ever really say anything.

If we did, she thinks, it would probably destroy us.

“So if you've got nothing to say anymore,” he asks when he comes back, “what are you intending to do this year?”

“Bad question.” She sips at her new pint. “I haven't got the faintest idea, really. Graffiti art, maybe. Just scrawl things on walls or whatever, seeing what becomes of it. But anyway, I hate graffiti. All the tags that you see scrawled all over the tube, you know, just pompous insular rubbish.”

“Not art enough for you?”

“No. And not political enough, either. More people with nothing to say, just saying it all over buildings and tube trains. At least I keep my lack of imagination to myself.”

“It's got a bit bad at King's recently. Stickers claiming the NUS is run by homosexual racists, people drawing swastikas in the lifts, whole bloody essays in the student toilets.”

“Oh yeah? You go there a lot?”

He grins. “Only when I go for a big long crap - it's more anonymous than the staff ones, so I don't feel like I'm being rushed. The graffiti used to be just the usual queer bashing and my band's better than your band stuff, but recently there's loads of racist comments cropping up. And these kids are getting a university education, I think that's what freaks me out. I dunno, maybe I expect too much of people. But if it's this bad among university kids, what's it like elsewhere?”

“It's a big bad world,” Amrita says darkly, staring down at the soft brown skin of her hand. “It's amazing how it can sit in people and you just don't realize. Then they'll say something.” She shrugs.

“What surprised me is most of this stuff was racism against whites. Usually things like 'All whites are racist cunts' or 'You fucked up our country now we'll fuck up yours - a Paki', stuff like that. Maybe that shouldn't have shocked me as much as it did. I don't know. I guess it just reinforced this sense I get, certainly at King's, that there's a radical divide, a total mistrust between cultures. These people just growing up with a sense of hate.”

Flesh pinched pale where it presses against the glass. Troubled, not really wanting to talk about this. “I don't think you can really expect anything else. We're not Uncle Toms. We've got no obligation to be morally superior to you.” She stares around at the bar: pale faces, patched with the meat that lay beneath their translucent skins, pints in hand and fags lit, student crowd at the back, in the dining area the posh mob in their best black getup poised over huge plates of food. “I mean, how are we meant to react? After years of having the piss taken out of us, racist attacks, Enoch Powell and his rivers of

blood... You fuck up our culture, carve up our lands, so are we just meant to throw up our hands and say it's okay now? I -" Our culture. Our lands. She stops and laughs, pushing her hands through her hair and then staring at herself in the mirror, the schizophrenic divide, a stranger, broken nose and acne scars, hooded top and black jeans, long hair streaked with dye, eyes catching the light and shining blackly. Packet of fags and a pint of lager on the table in front of her. She gives Jay a buckled smile. "I'm using a 'we' that I don't have a right to. I was born in London, and all I know about Indian culture is what my mum told me when I was a kid, or what I've read in British books, or seen on British television. It isn't my culture." She shrugs. "I'm not even sure what my culture is."

"That doesn't mean that your comments aren't right."

"Perhaps. I don't think it's any good starting a war on anybody, though. Whatever the cause. I'm just saying that I understand."

They stare at one another, Amrita upset by the distance she feels she's opened between them. She drinks in silence, watching him, not knowing what to say. The pub roars around them, seeming to Amrita that they're the only ones not talking, as everyone else chatters, has fun.

"I've been talking to Priya. She's got a favour to ask of you."

"Priya?" Jay looks curious.

"Yeah. She wants you to help her with her project. She wants to do the whole thing as a series of web pages but she doesn't know how. I think she wants you to walk her through it."

"Why not ask Mike?"

“She reckons she's too embarrassed. And besides, he's got his finals to think about too.”

“Oh.”

“So what do you think?”

“It's an interesting offer.”

Amrita leans back in her chair, lifting her glass to her lips. She's seen the way Jay stares at Priya. The way most men stare at Priya, she thinks. It made her friendship to Jay feel suddenly fragile. As if at any moment he could walk away, not caring.

She hopes he will say no, but can see from his eyes that he won't.

“I'll tell her yes, then.”

“I think so. It might be fun.”

I shouldn't be jealous, Amrita thinks. Priya's got Mike. Whatever she'd want as well with Jay. Even if he loved her, he couldn't have her. It was the same for me with Mike. Amrita looks across the table at Jay. Wondering what it would take for her to cross the distance to him, act as he'd always wanted her to act.

5.

They stay until closing time. It all seems easy after a few pints, she thinks to herself as he goes off to the toilet one last time. Everything seems to work out fine.

At least until I wake up tomorrow.

She gets up as he comes back, floor reeling, colours rich, watching him. Blood red of his lips, shifting grey-green irises, pale skin shadowed along his jaw line by stubble. She grabs onto his arm and lets him lead her out into the dark amber river of the Strand; a

violence of noise, the air charged, lads hollering and staggering into the road, tourists shouting at one another from opposite kerbs, shrieks rising over the phlegm-clotted acceleration of taxis, couples snogging in doorways. Clattering rush as the shutters come down on restaurants and bars, homeless clustering about the lights of KFC and McDonalds, last call for the Big Issue, the Evening Standard, tomorrow's newspapers already hit the stalls by the tube stations. Skin drenched in amber shadow, staring up at him.

“Which way are you going?” He asks her.

“Waterloo Bridge. I want to walk home. I like the lights.”

“I think you should get a bus.”

“And I think I don't want to. I'm old enough to look after myself, thanks. I'll be fine. You just go get your tube.”

“Amrita.” He is staring down at her, concerned. She meets his eyes, splashed and blinded by the lamplight, lips a lotus bud hiding the emptiness inside, breasts pressing his body, skin remembering want, hands clutched about his arm, gripping the leather of his coat. We're not so very far apart, she thinks. The vaudeville of flesh is performed all about her, madness and illusion, the theatres flung open their doors and the actors rioting out plays on the streets, under the spiders web of false amber stars, her head tilted back and her body melting into the shadows of him, eyes wide and watching.

His eyes sink deep into her.

Almost lets go, a vertiginous thrill of possibility, holding onto him and staring up at his serious face. Catches herself and pulls herself away, laughing. “I'll be fine. I've been living there for ages, so I'm more or less part of the furniture. Go get your tube.”

“Okay.” A grin, a whiplash against his face. “Just you take care, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Her hands to his shoulders, the shock of his radiant warmth, she reaches up, body brushing his, spills her kiss, the touch of her lips against his cheek.

They part, wind whipping in to embrace her, the mockery of empty intimacy, the offer of all she never wanted. Jay becomes another shape within the shifting pools of shadow; Amrita turns, waits beneath the burning haze of the traffic lights, watching the patient red man as the traffic rushes past him.

Lights change, 'go', the green man walking calmly, Amrita obeys, aping his actions as the tethered traffic snarls, blank faces staring indolently out as she is traced in headlights, the ghost world beyond the cabin, music blaring and illuminated dials flicking coltishly, cigarette drawn, seat readjusted. Watch the motions of a walking body, the shift of hips, the profile of an unimagined face, hair caught, traced by the unseen fingers of the wind. She heads into the arrow-straight approach to Waterloo Bridge, cars in front of her speeding into the Strand underpass, buildings to either side crowding the roadside, then dropping off into a sudden absence, a nothing like the edge of the world, a pearl blackness hanging beyond. High onto the span, Somerset House receding behind her, the Embankment dropped below like a roll of film, cars and walkers, the long line of lights verging the parade, Cleopatra's Needle pointing its narrow damaged finger out over the water, slow decay watching empire after empire decline and fade away. Black water slides past, bearing rubbish in the way it had once borne ships, reflections shimmering deep within it, the other fantastic dream city, spires and towers of elongated light; Blake's New Jerusalem, a city of angels, the towerblocks of the city burning like constellations

just above its rim, a new astrology, patterns as yet untold. Watching dreams twisting and sparking beneath her feet.

A bell tolls, caught in the wind and flung to her: an offering. She turns her head to the upraised bones of Westminster Palace, clock hands of St Stephen's tower sunk into each others' shadow: midnight. A shudder rushing through her, the dream city of light almost seeming to rise through the black surface of the water, amber haze cocooning the dark air.

The new day marks Diwali.

The festival of light. Riot of colour and sound, the blossom of fireworks, millions of paper petals, dazzling hues dancing in the breeze, the Gods carried across the city. Cold air, the savage wind, jumbled ranks of London rising on all sides, river a black wound, fluorescent tubes in office buildings, monitors left on overnight, corpselight of Portland Stone shimmering in the dark, office entranceways manned by bored security guards, lights on the seventeenth floor as the cleaners finish their rounds. Amrita stops and stares at the cold alienness of this, her birthright, her city, its promise made to her in glistening false stars, her breath coming painfully, void ripping at her chest, the scent of her plucked by the wind and carried downriver to her mother, father, Sita, Asha, to ancient and incomprehensible gods she has never worshipped, squatting just over the horizon and waiting for her sacrifice. She crouches by the lip of the bridge, rummages through her bag for a box of matches. Tries to light one, clumsily scraping the match head against the box, a brief flare snatched away by the wind. She tries again, huddled against the night, watching the spark die instantly. Once more, she thinks, just once more, lucky three, c'mon, opening her heart to memories of her family, quicksilver pain, longing to

fall back through time, match catching and spluttering into life. She shields it swiftly with her hands, cupping the tiny flame as it gutters, skin garish and bloody with the glow, a tiny unseen star within this city of novae, spent dead wood twisting, arced back towards her fingers, she holds on until she feels the briefest kiss of flame, and then it dies, feebly, taken by the wind.

She remains on her knees, praying to the huge empty night arching over her.
Wondering what she hopes for.