

HOPE – by Jethro Perkins

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1.

As ever, the Jamaican food stall in the Shopping Centre is crowded. A group of ruff boys in huge jackets exchange lively backchat with the staff; parents huddle over spiced ribs, stockaded by Tesco bags and arguing quietly as their kids run amok; lone men struggling with elaborate slabs of burgers, casually eyeing the girls that drift past. Women sit with coffee, mobile phones pressed to ears, magazines spread in front of them, calmly smoking as the world rushes by. Natasha stares with disdain at the list of food, eventually plumping for rice and peas. “We could have gone somewhere far better for these sort of prices,” she tells Amrita as they sit down.

“This is just fine for me. And I’m paying.”

“You’ve simply got no ambition.”

Amrita shrugs, biting into her bean pattie.

Shopping has acted like an amphetamine on Natasha. Her eyes spark, her skin is slightly flushed. Amrita, by contrast, feels exhausted, barely able to move, hours of trailing Natasha round Oxford Street and Covent Garden, wondering what the fuck she was doing, buffeted by crowds, deafened by music, eyes blinded by garish colours and bad designs, need want greed, endless ranges of the same thing, wrong-sized, ill-fitting, queues at changing rooms and checkouts, shellshock setting in. She slumps now, hand closed over coffee cup, smoking the first fag in a long time and watching Natasha sate her rapacious appetite.

“Not hungry?” Natasha asks as Amrita picks at her pattie.

“Just tired.”

“Anybody would have thought you'd done all the hard work.”

“I did,” And Amrita grins. “I had to stand there for all that time while you chose between two identical pairs of jeans.”

“They weren't identical.”

“They were.”

Natasha perches elegantly on her chair. “No. Not at all.”

Amrita shakes her head and then leans back against the column. “We're looking after you all the way!” boasts the placard on the opposite wall, fat and friendly writing above a happily beaming picture of a pink surveillance camera. The real thing, cold and grey, sweeps its eye over the secret nothings of the Shopping Centre's upper floor. “I think you'd get bored living on my income.”

Natasha shrugs. “I'm not rich, if that's what you think. But money isn't really the object.”

“That sounds like the opinion of someone who can get it if she needs it, and run away from all the hard decisions to do with it.”

“Aren't you also a runaway?”

Smoky slips of spirit leaking from her cigarette. Amrita lets herself smile. “True enough.” She closes her eyes, feeling the force of it. An exile, a ghost on the cameras, a trace memory of stall-holders and shop assistants. Feels herself fade against the force of the place, the squabbles over chicken in a basket, the supermarket queues, swingbeat from the nail and haircare centre, northern line shuddering unheard below, back offices

with mouldering posters and scrawled graffiti, unrequited dreams scratched into bench seats, Lynda 4 Wayne.

“How's your hangover?”

“Fine thanks. I don't suppose you fancy standing me a drink or two? That talk of money makes me thirsty.”

“Well, considering what I've spent, I don't see that I can really say no.”

They finish their meals and leave, apparitions silently tracked, black-and-white disturbances of still air crossing fake marble flooring. Down the escalators to the lower concourse, small unit big retailers special offer sales, kids on the 10p rides, same old people with the same old shopping, the endless routine. Outside under a fading sky, the shadow leaking in, circle of towers looming over the amber-splashed roads, car headlights sending streaking shadows, hunter and hunted, the fume-choked air, smoke spilling up from arc-lights as the traders at the market stalls begin to pack up for the night, chewing takeaways and smoking down one final cigarette, getting ready to kill the music and haul the goods back home.

“You should have bought those boots,” Natasha says to Amrita.

“Me?” She stares down at her feet. For one moment she had been tempted, caught up in the rush of possibilities, watching as Natasha reinvented herself with such hungry panache. Thinking that maybe she could, that maybe she'd look good in them. She smiles.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Can you really imagine it? Me?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” Natasha is turning heads. Amrita watches a group of lads giving her the eye; sees stall-holders follow the lilt in her walk. Catches a reflection of herself in a shop window, form sinking into the city grime, almost invisible, almost faded into the concrete flagstones.

“I think you care more about your image than you say.”

They pass into the subway, heading towards Ruby Tuesdays, fake redbrick cheer within the concrete and steel straitjacket of Draper House. Surrounded by grey tiled walls, subway lights stained and dimmed, flickering manically like badly fed film, so dismal the kids haven't even bothered with much graffiti, just the occasional 'Donna' and linked lovers caged in a heart, AFC, MUFC, a whole blank wall where someone has scrawled in bad tippex just the one word - 'empty.' Footsteps echo, the sharp report of Natasha's boots, the scuff of Amrita's trainers, traffic white noise spilling in, Natasha not lowering her voice and the sound echoing, multiplying, speaking tongues, hidden mantras spilling out behind the words.

“I mean, if you really didn't care, you wouldn't keep on dyeing your hair like you do. All the time I've known you.”

They emerge, colour shifts over the canvas of their skins, the sick glare of streetlights. Amrita pushes a hand through her hair, uncomfortable with the question. “I don't dye it, I just streak it. It's meant to be vivid red but it never comes out that way. Call it vandalism.”

“It wasn't one of those things people do to piss of their parents, was it?”

“No. I started doing it after I left home. It wasn't that they would have stopped me, but just more that sort of dumb disappointment on their faces, like, y'know, I'd failed in some way. I just could never bear that.”

Amrita remembers going out with friends, seeing them in inch thick make-up, tiny tight skirts, cleavage pushed out and bra-straps showing. She could never imagine herself playing the role, bringing to the skin her polluted dreams of St Teresa, the long hours at night fantasizing, possessed by desire. The whole part of me I never wanted my parents to see.

But that they had seen in the end anyway.

“Sita never cared about that, though. I always used to think that she did just what she wanted.” They enter Ruby's. “And she always got away with it, too.”

Ruby's is, as usual, pretty quiet: regulars slumped in the corners determinedly drinking another night away; a bunch of brickies round the back, off-shift and settling into the large screen sport; the odd deal going on under tables, the usual arguments, a slight edge to the smoky ambience. Amrita recreates herself, watching herself from a camera angle as she sweeps in wearing high-heeled boots and a tight skirt, skimpy top and trowelled on make-up. These strange desires, she thinks. The fear of bridging the gap between her body and her old fantasies, of playing out a private dream in public.

She orders at the bar, giving the barman a casual smile of recognition and watching as Natasha takes in the low-ceilinged gloom, the dark carpets and varnished pinewood. She guesses Natasha would have been far more happy with one of the wine bars further up in Borough, a glassy front and expensive bottled lager beaming out from the ground floor of a block of blandly reconditioned luxury apartments, the so-far failed

attempt to push the Elephant into yuppie territory, sweep the locals and all their problems out along the Old Kent Road where they can be safely forgotten about, festering in medium-rise hell. Trying to fight the easy prejudice she sees in Natasha's eyes. They take their seats in the dimmest corner.

“Are you still in contact with your family?” Natasha asks, sipping at her drink.

“No.”

“Do you miss them?”

“I...think about them a lot. I miss my little sister.”

“Sita?”

“No. There's one younger - Asha. She's thirteen years younger than I am. She was the love child.” Feeling Natasha conjuring the demons within her, the shapes of pain in her heart. But also the rare pleasure of bringing Asha back, vivid pictures, she feels she could model the girl whole and alive from the air around her. “I even think I know the night she was conceived. Sita disputes that but I think only because she was too young at the time to know what was going on. I was thirteen, which I guess is old enough to see the signs. My parents had been really flirty all evening, something they never were. I don't know why, maybe it'd been a good day at work for Dad, or maybe where Mum had just done us all TV dinners rather than spend ages over the stove. I mean, who knows, but whatever they were absolutely all over each other, and as soon as they'd sent Sita off to bed they announced to me that they were knackered and were off to bed too. So I'm just sitting there alone in front of the telly at about nine o'clock, listening to all these half-stifled noises coming from up the stairs. I was appalled. I couldn't even look them in the eye the next day. And they were all embarrassed and being too nice. It was awful.” She

smiles at herself, pausing to light a cigarette, pulling harsh smoke back to infect herself, less her adolescent self come too close to the surface. Still clear in her memory, sitting clenched and uncomfortable at the sudden strangers in her parents, tales from the adult world drifting past on the TV, feeling suddenly alone. “Nine months later, mum gave birth to Asha.”

“I’m an only child. I always think I rather missed out, not having siblings.”

“You’re the lucky one. I used to fight with Sita constantly, almost right up to the point that I left home. It didn’t help that we had to share a bedroom, first the two of us and then Asha as well. I think Sita always got to me because she was prettier and smarter than I was. I hated her guts for that. All the relatives, everyone, always used to dote on Sita and just ignore me. It drove me wild. And then when Asha was born I was considered old enough do all of the stuff around the household, because Mum needed to work extra hours, you know, another mouth to feed, new baby clothes, all of that. Saturdays and Sundays I’d be looking after Asha, cleaning up all the baby vom and changing nappies, and on weekdays I had to cook for the family because mum had taken on an evening cleaning shift and didn’t get home till seven. I remember mum crying one time because Asha fell over and came running to me rather than to her. She felt everything had somehow turned out wrong.”

“Did you ever get off on the martyrdom thing of it? You know, the sort of Little Dorrit thing, the virgin mother.”

“I hated that book the first time I read it. I hated the capable little girl giving up everything for the sake of her family. I was always aware of not being as good as the role model, all of this bad stuff in me that I wasn’t going to confess to and I wasn’t going to

cure. I loved my family, even Sita at times, but I always felt that because I wasn't honest I was like a disease inside it, just sort of resenting everyone and hiding it away.”

She breaks abruptly, drags at her cigarette, a need for toxins, for cancer rupturing the order of her body, the smoke shakti moving slowly and lethally through her body, animating a destructive chain of chemicals, cripple and warp the blank canvas. Natasha watches her, chin cupped in hand, bruised skin framed by a cascade of blonde hair, eyes coldly intent.

“I couldn't seem to do anything about it. The only way I could prove to myself that I was good was by doing what my parents wanted, and at the same time that made me feel worse, because I knew it was all a sham. I think it's easy for girls, if they've got nothing else, to sort of throw themselves into self-sacrifice. I knew I'd never be beautiful or clever, so I just threw myself into what my parents wanted me to be, like I didn't matter. Like Guinevere becoming a nun at the end of *Le Morte D'Arthur*, or a woman committing sati for the love of her husband, this was my sacrifice. I could feel it wrecking me but I just clung to it, because I didn't know what else to do.”

“The obvious springs to mind.” Natasha says with a smile.

“Not to me it didn't. I was obsessed with staying a virgin. It was all part of the sacrifice. It was like a total strength, a way of proving how committed I was to fighting all these pictures in my head. There were no degrees to it, it was just always having that power of saying no. I didn't touch anyone, not even a kiss or anything. And then of course when it did finally crack, it was just a total capitulation. I didn't have any control at all. I was possessed.”

There is a pause, Natasha watching with bright expectant eyes.

“And?”

“His name was Geoff, my tutor at Guildhall University. I was doing very badly, even in the first few weeks, and I stayed behind to talk to him one night, because I couldn't get my head around the work he'd set for us.” She hoped she looked impassive to Natasha, the Amrita watched by CCTV, alien to herself, absolutely any girl at all. “We ended up going to the pub, he was trying to get me to not worry about it all so much, and there was point when we were talking that he put his hand on my knee. You know, the thing that should make anyone back off, thinking the lecherous old bastard or whatever. I don't know whether it was deliberate or not, we'd drunk a bit, and to this day I'm not sure that he was making a move on me, but -” She pauses, leans back and pushes her hair out of her face, sucking at her cigarette and hearing the tobacco flare and burn. “But whatever, it was just like this switch was flicked in my head and all this want and desire came bursting out. It was like something in me snapped, and suddenly and intensely I wanted this man, I wanted him no matter what, and it completely took me over. All these years of whatever just shattered, like I'd shed a skin. It didn't mean I didn't care anymore, just...”

That kiss, that first kiss, outside in the night-time rain, cars rushing past and tearing through the water, the constant metronomic dripping from the pub sign, drip, drip, laddering the wild surge of her heart, the way they furiously fought through the kiss, trying to devour one another, arms locked tight around bodies and forcing each other closer, trying to melt against skin that sang and burned, never enough of a way in.

“We just kissed. Nothing more. We neither of us had anywhere to go. I was terrified, shaking. When I went home I just went straight to bed, too scared to speak to

anybody. The thought of what I'd done.” She swallows and smiles. “The next day, after tutorial, he sat me down and told me that he had a wife and kid, that he was sorry it had happened and although he liked me it must all end there. I heard all this and I didn't give a fuck, I didn't care about his wife and kid or anything, all I knew was this terrible want. I wanted him and that was it, he'd become everything that I'd ever been after.” She looks across at Natasha's carefully impassive face. “And I got him. So much for all those years of morals, eh? I just had to have him. Nothing else mattered.”

Natasha laughs, sipping at her drink. “They always say to watch out for the quiet ones. I'd never have thought we had so much in common. So what happened to you in the end?”

Amrita shrugs. “It went the same way as most affairs with married men.”

2.

Exit to the night, the plains of heaven obliterated by the sulphur glow of earth. Cold rush of passing cars, exhaust gases coating asphalt and concrete and skin, clogging hearts and lungs. The pink slab of the Shopping Centre becalmed amidst an ocean of activity, people in transit, spilling from the mouths of the Underground, shuttling off and on buses, swallowing miles of roadway in the desperate race to get back home. Plunged into the subway tunnels, the unsteady light, change for the beggar clutching a rotted plastic bag and none for the tin whistle dirge further on, half-recognised faces in a gang of kids mooching past, women with drawn faces and grey teeth, path drawn beside the Peace Garden, sky wheeling overhead, as she drags Natasha under the seething force of the traffic towards London Road and the glowing cuneiform anonymity of the HSBC sign.

Stupidly, the hole in the wall machine gives her money. She cackles. “That's what I love about these machines. You don't have to feel ashamed. You either get the money or you don't. There's no cashier asking questions and giving that look that says they know exactly what you'll spend it on.”

“You really didn't think it would give you money?” Natasha asks, her hair streaming out in the wind, long golden strands whispering against Amrita's face.

“I told you already; I'm not rich.” Obey the green letters. Take your card and wait for your cash. “I get my grant and my student loan. And whatever I can earn working at the pub. That's got to cover my fees, my food and my rent. And I can't run back to mummy and daddy at the end of every term.”

“Do they give you anything?”

“They don't even know where I am. But even if they did, even if they knew what I was doing, they wouldn't give me money for this. Not an art degree. They wouldn't see the point in it. They would say I was making myself unemployable, that it's a degree for rich people.” She shakes her head, hair blowing across her face.

Please take your cash. Two tenners conjured from somewhere behind the wall, spat out and then clamped down by metal fingers. More drink. More poison. She folds the money and puts it away.

“Shall we get back to the pub so I can stop thinking about it?”

“Can't we go somewhere else? Somewhere maybe that I'd like to go?”

“I'd rather celebrate my poverty in Ruby's.”

“Oh come on. Where's your class? Haven't you heard of blowing your money in style?”

“That's precisely what my class don't do.” And Amrita grins.

“What are you so afraid of?”

“I don't know. I'm not.”

“You've been to Ruby's a thousand times before. So why not try something with a bit of style? Make it at least a night to remember?” The glamour of Natasha's look, Amrita thinks. The faery stare, calling her across the summer ocean.

She laughs, pushing her hair back from her face. “Okay. You've got a point. The money, the morning, the hangover, they can all go jump off a cliff right now.”

Natasha gives a charming grin and reaches across to kiss Amrita. “That's more of the spirit I want to see!”

The two join arms, and head up towards Borough.

3.

Natasha finally decides on the bar underneath the huge façade of Borough Market, trains shrieking overhead, the vast flick of electricity lighting up the sky, the huge towers ringing London Bridge momentarily floodlit.

Amrita has already seen several impeccably suited figures leave. “We'll stick out like anything.”

“Just act like you belong. As long as you do that, you'll be fine.”

It is a small bar, timelessly down-at-heel and effortlessly expensive. Suits mingle with the stylishly dressed-down, everyone lounging sophisticatedly, figures pensées stroking their chins and talking seriously, a quiet hubbub rushing up occasionally towards laughter, the usual heavy bellied bigwigs and avuncular uncles, an advert for expensive

Daily Telegraph pullout section waxed jackets, soundbites of exec speak from literate bubbleheads, acne-free faces and expensive hairdos bowed over plates of exquisitely fake Italian food. As Natasha takes her place at the bar Amrita overhears a bunch of well tailored young things the discussing the state of rock, turns to watch and sees an Asian girl in her twenties, neat slim body framed by an elegant suit, carefully bobbed hair, perfect red lipstick. She looks up and sees Amrita watching, then politely turns away.

The flower of my parents' dream, Amrita thinks, the other world just behind the surface of this, a crack in space and she's staring through at the eyes of the other girl, turns back to her red wine, neatly manicured nails slid across the glassy smoothness, wondering why the girl's staring, letting the conversation run around her and waiting for her husband to return from the bar.

Natasha orders in a perfectly modulated Queen's English that Amrita couldn't even hope to ape. A dry white wine for herself and a bottle of expensive Czech lager for Amrita. Money to the monied: Amrita pays, then they take their drinks and find somewhere to sit.

At the next table an attentive honey-haired girl listens as her companion bewails having to write speeches for the Heritage Minister. "Of course it's all toss," he says. "I don't think he's ever really known what he's talking about. I just make it up, he reads it and then things happen."

Natasha stares around herself with pleasure. "See. It's not so hard."

"I'd still rather Ruby's."

"Don't start all of that rubbish about knowing your place, please. This sort of life's yours if you want it."

Amrita frowns, her eyes straying back to the girl at the bar. “My parents wanted it for me.”

“My parents had it. It was offered to me on a plate.” Natasha combs out her hair with her fingers and smiles. “It all could have been so easy. It was mapped out for me. I just had to go through the motions.”

“You never wanted that?”

“Not particularly. What's the point of living out a life that's already been planned for you? Something that somebody else wanted, their little dream? When do you learn to know the things that you want?”

“I used to agree with you but now I'm not so sure. Maybe my parents did know better, maybe I should have stuck to accountancy. I think about all that they had to go through, and there I was at age nineteen, not knowing anything, telling them that they were wrong.”

“I don't think age or experience has much to do with it. Your parents are just wrong, and they've infected you with that. Everything is art. I think you're right to try to deal with that, but at the same time I think you're scared of it, and so have to impose this barrier that makes art just something that goes on behind a screen, or on paper, or boxed in a space where people can watch it and know that it's art. It doesn't have to be like that. You can make yourself into anything, you can do anything. Look at these guys in here. You think they were born like this? It's an act that they choose to put on.”

Amrita lights a cigarette and leans back, looking around her, watching the neat Asian girl drinking by the bar. “And what about those people who fail to see it as art?”

“It's a cruel world. You've read the Maltese Falcon. The best story wins. It's all lies, and the most convincing, the most complete lie wins.”

“That presumes there's a reality with which to compare these lies to, a sense of the truth that these lies have to ape.”

Natasha shrugs. “As long as we can see it makes sense. As long as, in some way or another, it fires our dreams. Everybody wants something. That's what you have to tap into.”

“And what do you want?”

Natasha laughs. “What do you think?”

Amrita stares at her carefully: pale skin, rich red lips and blue eyes, the sweep of blonde hair that she shakes back from her face. “I don't know.”

“I could tell you what I don't want. The same stupid life as my parents, stuck in a relationship, stuck in a job going-nowhere bullshit. Waking up and knowing the same things about yourself day after day. Isn't that why you left?”

“I told you: I was kicked out.”

“But isn't it?”

Eyes urgently trying to bore into Amrita's skull. Amrita sucks back smoke from her cigarette and wonders how to answer. “It wasn't so much that. I was in love, and I guess I thought it transformed everything, every action, the mundane stuff turned into gold, the sordid things becoming an expression of beauty. You know, the way you can watch a face and it's just like watching paint dry, but if you love them then you inscribe each line with all this added meaning.”

“That's just hormones. Sooner or later, they die away. One day you'll wake up and it'll have been the same dull old routine for the last twenty years and you won't have noticed. And suddenly your life is gone.”

“I was willing to risk that.” Watching the tip of her cigarette burn down. “So that's all it's ever been with you? Just hormones?”

“I've had some fantastic lovers. You get this sort of intensity, like everything's too sharp, too sweet. It's like a drug. You ever get that?”

“No. I was going out with a guy in his mid-forties. We didn't even have anywhere to go. It'd have to be in his office during lunch or after hours, or in his car out on one of the industrial estates, seeing other couples in other cars doing the same. Whatever, you were always waiting to be seen, or caught, so nothing ever lasted. So you didn't think that what you had felt was love?”

“No. It just made me realise I could control my own life; it didn't have to endlessly go on in the same way. It was like I suddenly saw freedom, and I could do what I liked and enjoy it, everything at once. I suddenly had this power.”

Power. The stench of money drowning out the alcohol and the laughter. Actors playing roles upon the stage of Natasha's world, hollowness in eyes, puppet strings rising invisibly upwards. A hand like a sucking void reached into Amrita's heart. Wondering if Geoff had thought it all a game, playing it out, saying words that he maybe thought he should feel.

The Asian girl slips an arm around her boyfriend/husband and sinks against his frame, looking up and sharing a joke. They kiss, a private world amidst the chatter of the group around them, little secret signals flashing across eyes. Perfect, Amrita thinks, in

their suits and their neat hair, well modulated smiles, he's tall and she's slim, a picture postcard couple trailing bubbles of dream in their wake, all the unburst hopes of happiness.

All the things my parents wanted for me.

She drags in the carcinogens from her cigarette, fingers of destruction run like cracks under plaster. Turns her gaze back to Natasha, watching the skin and the elegant ease of her motions, realising with an awful shock how beautiful she is, strangely real amongst the fantastic visions of wealth that swim all around her.

4.

“I'm sorry. I wish it could be otherwise, I really do. But it can't.”

For all that she's been prepared for this, it still cuts through her, a sudden emptiness that she feels her body should collapse around.

She's even dressed herself for his inevitable rejection: second-hand hooded top, Sita's old combat trousers, too-big army boots. Like I don't care, she thought, staring at herself that morning in the bathroom mirror. Whatever she did she'd still look a state, wondering what she wouldn't give now for Sita's looks, feeling tears of frustration stinging the corners of her eyes, all the pictures of yesterday shattering in the harsh morning light. A drunken kiss and nothing more, she thought. What else could he want with me? Certainly he wouldn't be sitting in his home, staring at his face and wondering.

Hating herself for giving in, that crack of want within her looking so stupid now. Letting herself go for nothing, a hope coiled tightly within her that she couldn't stop, couldn't ignore. Awake all night with the afterglow burning at her nerve ends, actions

endlessly repeated within her, heart like a coal, briefly slipping into hot lucid dreams where they kissed again, the agony of contact, waking on her own bed, sweat pooled across her, listening to the breath hiss out from Sita and Asha. Five o'clock, hearing her mother get up, quietly washing in the bathroom and then sitting with a cup of tea in the kitchen, the radio softly lulling out World Service tongues. All the little echoes and knocks as she crept about, floorboards protesting, Amrita sharp to every sound: dabbing on her make-up in front of the hallway mirror, the rustle as she wrapped herself in a thick cardigan and a heavy coat, creeping out at a quarter to six to catch the tube in to Liverpool Street. Then it was Amrita's turn to get up, every motion unreal to the rage of feelings burning through her, head tight and vision painful, colours too bright and swimming across her eyes, spellbound with dream and doubt. Stumbling through the routine, a quick bath, hope dissolving as she washes her body, the wide shoulders and heavy breasts, the touch of her face under her fingers, dresses not to hope, to kill the painful threadworm dream, goes back to the bathroom half with the thought of putting make-up on but just stares, lost.

Routine pushing her on, forcing her forward. Get Asha up and send her into the bathroom, lay out her school uniform neatly on the bed. Give Sita the first kick of the day, head downstairs and make everybody tea, pour out the cornflakes for Asha's breakfast, make the kid's packed lunch, listening to Asha leave the bathroom and Dad enter - good everything going smoothly, face of wax she heads back to the bedroom and checks that Asha's got dressed okay, gives Sita her second kick and drags Asha downstairs and makes her eat.

“I'm not hungry.”

“You will be by break time. Now shut up and eat.”

“What are you having?”

“I'm not.”

“Why not?”

“I'm just not, okay. Just shut up and eat.”

Asha turns big and curious eyes to Amrita, sensing something behind the body, a yawning hole in space. Amrita drinks her tea and pretends not to notice Asha looking, staring out instead over the cracked beauty of Bow spread before her.

Time to leave. She's glad that dad isn't out of the bathroom yet: he must be shaving, she thinks, busy making himself late for work. She calls goodbye to him in a voice that she hopes doesn't shake, heads into the bedroom and for once doesn't disturb Sita, couldn't bear the soft chocolate brown of her sister's eyes staring into her, the unwritten lines of all the things they could never hide from one another.

She's just like dad, Amrita thinks. Hopelessly late if you let her be.

“C'mon kiddo, we're off.”

Leaving into a murky October morning, clouds hanging heavy and grey, light leeching slowly overhead. Puddles huddle round the sides of the concrete walkways and the tops of the towers are nearly lost in mist. Asha runs across the grass and gets her trainers all muddy as they follow pathways through the fists and fingers of Bow, down past the old abandoned factories and the council storehouses, watching the kids from the richer part of the estate with their brand new bags and clothes, grabbing Asha's hand tight and feeling the little fingers like bridges back into the real. She's transfixed when she gets to the school gates, terrified of letting Asha go, the kid's straining at her hand but Amrita

kneels down and make the girl give her a kiss. “Be a good girl now. And Mrs Johnson will pick you up at home time. Okay?”

Asha nods, barely listening. Amrita lets her go, watches her rush off into the playground, where there's already a furious game of football going on. Stands and turns, the whole of Bow shifting, shimmering different colours, knowing that she's lost now, that one way or the other there's no way back, nothing left of the place that she came from this morning. It will all change forever.

Heads back through the maze of old terraces, people leaving for work, cars warming up, exhausts spilling out into the sky. Gets the tube from Bow Road station, the same old faces on the platforms and then on the train, the same stories in the same newspapers, life goes on just the same, bodies swaying like corpses in an abattoir, District Line rocking a gentle lullaby as they head into Aldgate East.

Four hours of lectures before she can even think about meeting Geoff. Sat in the theatre with a hundred other students, words drifting straight past her: corporate law, tax loopholes, offshore accounts. Staggering figures projected up on the boards, money washing in and out like blood, Amrita staring, body coiled tightly, wondering why he kissed her, what he wants with her, imagined meetings with him flickering constantly through her mind, not even daring to hope anything good.

One lecture after another and she hasn't remembered a word. Feeling sick, trying not to think about anything, no parents, no Asha, just this, sitting here watching the clock move second after second after second.

At last it's over, light-headed, ill with dread, she's wishing she hadn't worn these clothes, had put some make-up on, anything, staring at all the pretty girls as they leave,

thinking that he could have any one of those so what is it about me? Collecting her stuff together, the meaningless scrawl of her notes, each beat of her heart painfully wrenched out, pushing the hair from her face and leaving without talking to anybody, elevator up to the fifth floor, hum of lights and the hot breath of air conditioning, distant steps of high heels, following the corridors as they snake round, names on doors, messages left for people. Maybe that's all I'll get, she thinks, a scrawled note saying sorry babe but thanks for the ride, a locked door and silence. Blood like poison, heart thudding in her ears, she slows by his door, jumps as it opens and two girls spill out, recognising them and dropping her gaze with embarrassment, smiles awkwardly and then knocks at the door, palms sweating.

“Amrita, hi.” It's a professional smile, meaningless, holding her out. “Come in and shut the door, will you?”

He waits until she's got herself seated, facing him across the gulf of most of the room, bag settled at her feet and the hair pushed out of her eyes. So formal, she thinks. The terrible power of routine to push her out and hold her away. She might as well be anyone.

When she's settled she stares across at him, trying to keep any expectation out of her eyes. Feeling herself harden like metal, almost as if she knows what's coming.

He looks down and toys with a pen as he speaks. Tells her that he's got a wife and a child, that it never should have happened. That he's very sorry.

The pain is unspeakable. She feels that the tiniest motion will shatter her, and yet at the same time is aware of the indifference of everyday life. Steps along the hall, a

knock at the door, Geoff answers it with his professionally warm voice, spins out a little joke or two while she sits in his office, not able to move.

A pain like she's dreamed of. The spear of the archangel passed through her heart.

"I'm sorry about that," he says to her, closing the door on whomever and resuming his seat.

"That's okay." She looks at her hand. The lines. The promises.

They sit in silence, Geoff still toying with his pen. Amrita staring at her hand.

"It's not that I don't like you. Quite frankly I'm flattered by your attention. But I can't go round doing this. I've got a wife and kid. I can't mess them about. I just can't."

"I don't think my parents would be too happy about it either."

"I can understand that. I hope you don't think I was trying to take advantage of you."

"I didn't know what to expect. I came here not knowing."

"Well, then, I guess the truth has let you down."

She looks at him. The comfortable, easy solidity of him. "It wasn't unexpected."

"Maybe not."

They lapse back into silence. So many reasons, Amrita thinks, for me to just get up and leave. Pretend it never happened, a bad dream, walk away and back into the life that this morning I thought I had left forever.

But she stays.

"I can arrange for you to be transferred to another tutor if you want."

Amrita shakes her head.

Geoff laughs. "I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say to you. I feel that I don't even know you."

How much do I want you? She wonders, heart burning at her ribs. Her whole life balanced, a fragile lotus bud about to burst, her parents' promises, their love, cupped like the delicate leaves.

"I don't want you to feel that I've treated you like a piece of meat."

"I'd like to talk," Amrita tells him, staring at him from under her eyelashes. Body shaking, barely controlled, flooded by a sense of desire. "I'd like to get to know you anyway."

"Okay. Start to get to know each other from scratch. Just as friends, pretending that nothing else ever went on."

"That's fine with me." She lies, just knowing that she's got to get close. Watching his grey eyes on her, seeing a hint of possession, of want.

"How about if we went out to dinner some time?"

The bud opens into a blossom of terrible emptiness. The bitter sweetness of this victory. She knows what she is going to do. Knows for sure that he'll give in to hers, she can see it already in his eyes. The whole future laid out upon his retina, herself as his lover, the few brief moments they will ever be able to steal together. Stares at her hands, all the secrets of her life cracked upon her skin, and wonders.

"I'd love to."

Friday night. The Coronet, usually an empty and echoing hulk, with sounds drifting through it like the ghosts of long lost films, is packed close to capacity. A flood of noise resounds from the old cinema hall, chatter and laughter, the ambient hum of voices. Reliving far gone glory days, Amrita thinks, staring through the décor and back to its last years as a cinema, dirty carpets and torn chairs, the empty ranks in front of the screen.

Natasha stares across the crowds with a serene gaze. “We'll never find anyone in here.”

“Yes we will. Even if we can't spot Priya then we'll be able to hear her.”

“I'm still not sure this is a good idea.”

Amrita shrugs. “You didn't have to come.”

The young and stylish have invaded, khaki get-up and clattering laughs, arrayed in photogenic groups, body-conscious, posing into the ether, hands clasped around cigarettes or bottled beer. The regulars have been pushed back almost to the point of oblivion: old men glaring unreadably into the melee, the Irish ex-pats clinging determinedly to their bar-side table, giving big fuck-off glares at anyone stupid enough to come close, continuing life-as-normal, besieged by the honking braying nonsense boiling all around them.

Amrita heads towards the bar.

“I'm curious to see this band. I want to know what sort of music you like. I'm not so curious about meeting Priya and her boyfriend.”

“Whatever.”

Amrita pushes her way to the bar and orders, feeling the sapphire curse of Natasha's eyes on her back. Uncomfortable with the girl being here, all the vehement disdain coiled within Natasha's body, but felt when asked that she couldn't refuse her, had to take her along. Wondered if Natasha would slough another skin, reinvent herself as something entirely new in front of Priya, a hunger for something evident in the way her eyes scoured the crowd, tensely watching for a sign Amrita would never see.

Natasha has dressed up for the occasion; expensively arrogant, lightly but perfectly made up, like a shield flung out at which Amrita peered and saw no-one. Natasha shimmers, lost and found, a cracked reflection obscured by the crowd, seen again like the drowning dreams of men: still, cold, self-contained, a disruption of the smoky air.

I've spent too much time in her company, Amrita thinks, shocked at the alien woman Natasha has become, surrounded by so many others.

Sliding into the crowd is like being taken by an ocean. She rides with the flux and sway, tight knots of people standing gossiping, throwing poses, wide dilated eyes, deep red lips and glittering nails, bodies casually veiled in tight tops and close-cropped hair, effortless expenditure, mark down the right move eye catching clever phrases the balletic finesse played on this stage, this cage, the infinite rituals played again and again, layers of symbols and suggestion. Amrita recalls a picture she has seen, Parvati kneeling to pour bhang into the bowl of dreadlocked and androgynous Shiva, soft erotic curve of his breasts and his woman's belly, the heat of bliss upon his face as dissolute, he reclines, Skanda behind him and Ganesh at his feet, pain in Amrita watching, a world enclosed, perfect and unobtainable. The careful love of her parents seems now to her much the same, preserved for one another by the making of food, the pouring of tea, the watching

of television, shared silences punctuated by glittering nights at Labour social events, the intolerant demand of children. How would it ever be replaced? Surrounded by the giddy dreams of alcohol, pampered mouths forming words, arms slipped around backs and the first kisses playfully touched across lips, Amrita doesn't know.

Priya. A brief reel of film seen through unknown churning forms. Shining black hair neatly bobbed, body leant across the table to whisper something in Jay's ear. Mike sat next to her, familiar lines still a shock, pushing back his hair and taking a deep interest in his pint.

“There they are.”

“Yes.” Natasha gives a peculiar smile. “It's been a long time since I've spoken to Priya.”

Amrita stares at the hard mirror of Natasha's eyes. “Don't start slagging her off, okay?”

“Who's the Asian guy?”

“Mike.”

“Oh. So the other one must be Jay.”

“Yeah.” Like staring at them through the television, commentating on actions strange and alien, soundless rituals. Dissecting their bodies with her eyes, watching, herself as Natasha seeing them for the first time.

“The one you don't want and the one you can't get. I didn't know they were friends.”

“Only through Priya.”

They push their way through, fragments of other conversations washing over them. Tales of politics, office gossip. Harsh laughter. Veils of hair, the brief gaze of other eyes. Priya spots Amrita as she edges towards the table.

Amrita watches Priya rise, the same unconscious grace, carelessly attractive, Mike's eyes following her as she walks over. "Amrita." Her hands placed gently on Amrita's shoulders as they exchange a kiss. "We saved you a seat."

"Thanks. I brought Natasha."

"So I see."

The two stare at each other curiously. Amrita feels herself caught between two shakti, energy surging, each mirroring the absence of the other. Priya, an inch shorter, switches on a charming professional smile. "Good to see you again."

"You too."

"I've never so much as seen Mike before. That's quite a catch you've been hiding. He's gorgeous."

"Thanks." Priya replies a little too carelessly. "Just don't expect too much activity in the brain-pan."

"I find it hard to underestimate that in men anyway."

They both make a show of being amused. Priya, with the same sense of deliberate carelessness, allows Natasha to sit next to Mike, and manoeuvres Amrita between her and Natasha.

"So how are you getting on with Mike anyway? Forgiven him yet?"

"Certainly as much as can be expected. Although he's swimming back into my bad books by paying far too much attention to the It Girl there. What is it with blondes?"

“Leave off Nat. She's okay.”

“You saying that isn't helping me to figure out whether you fancy her or not.”

Priya leans back and smiles crookedly. “But I'm starting to work out someone who does.”

Those movements, so sure and dangerous, as if at every moment Priya remembered balance and poise, constantly moulding herself for a range of possible eyes, a catalogue of future desires. Each movement carefully choreographed, an actor on a stage, heart caged and starving.

She's attracted Mike's attention. Amrita watching the lines in his face, the way they crease as he smiles, recognises. Dark brown irises like glass, mute, he listens as she tells him to go to the bar. Obeys.

“What was he boring you about?” Priya asks Natasha, hands rested on knees, warm smile splitting her face.

“How technology will save the world.”

“Men and their machines. It's almost endearing.”

“Almost. Until you remember the succession of failed gadgets behind it. But he's got a way of saying it. I think he actually means it. It's kind of sweet.”

Amrita thinks she sees tension slightly tighten Priya's skin.

“I don't know what else is going to save the world,” Jay adds from across the table. “Certainly not art.”

Natasha laughs. “That's okay then. We're safe, girls. The boys have brought out their toys to rescue us. Like somehow it wasn't their mess in the first place.”

Jay rolls his eyes, all high theatrics. "As Camille Paglia was fond of saying, if society had been left for women to run we'd all still be living in mud huts. Which I don't think would suit any of you."

Priya smiles, an impeccable falsity. "You wouldn't catch me leaving my mud hut without my make-up on."

"Why?" Natasha asks. "Who does it serve? Certainly not you."

Priya shrugs and laughs. "I enjoy it. I don't think the world's so fucked-up anyway. And besides, if a little bit of make-up helps men do what they're told, like get the drinks, then I'm all for it."

"So we're good for something, then," Mike says, returning from the bar with the drinks.

"Undoubtedly, as long as you're kept well under control."

"That's just asking for me to run wild." Mike stoops to receive a kiss.

"You dare," Priya says, gently touching his lips, her eyes fluttering closed, hand clutching his shoulder. Each pouring into the other, staged for the eyes of everyone, a statement of possession, of proof. Amrita watches Natasha watching, her eyes steely blue and impossible to fathom.

6.

Neither Amrita, Jay or Natasha speak much after leaving Priya and Mike to head up to the gig. Standing on the platform at Holloway Road, waiting for the tube to take them one stop north to Finsbury Park, the afterglow of noise still echoing through Amrita.

She struggles with a slight sense of unease over Natasha's actions, the way she'd looked at and spoken to Mike.

As if everything is planned, carefully evaluated.

She turns her head to look at Natasha. The girl's face is flushed and attractive, head held high, shining eyes abstracted as she stares across the tracks at the posters on the opposite wall: "Shopping at Whiteley's"; Caribbean cruises featuring tight-stomached men and leggy dark-haired girls; ten foot bottles of beer; investment portfolios with performance charts wriggling their way up towards heaven. Desires hung tantalisingly as if made of flesh. What moves you? Amrita wonders, watching the lithe body, long wave of shining blonde hair, the easy predatory grace of the stance. No end of looking, she could track the body endlessly through space, trying to decipher its motions, read the woman into it. Aware of Jay's eyes on her, pondering his own dreams, doubtless having spoken to Priya on the subject of Natasha, so she looks away, down to the litter on the track, stray chips and a thrown-away kebab, loose pages of newspaper sweeping under the rails in the breath of the approaching train, mice scattering from the flung down offerings, little fur pulses fleeing into unseen holes. Crash of the train drawing into the station, a long line of metal slowing to a halt, bodies inside bright with Covent Garden trade-names, clothing bags, shoe boxes, drunken chatter in a hundred different languages, heading back to homes or hotels, flats or houses, settle back for Friday night telly and maybe an early night, the boyfriend downstairs, drunk, watching soft porn on Channel 5. As she piles on, Amrita lets her eyes drift over faces, make-up, rich line of waiting red mouths and glimmering dark-rimmed eyes, regulation jeans and donkey jacket or straight from the office formalism, a couple of gangsta boys playing it hard and cool, staring

directly back, an unknown her reflected in their eyes, imagined dialogue, alien actions. They look away. The tube shudders, traces a path through limbo blackness, a sense that nothing happens, the journey a collective held breath, time waiting to be sprung again by the next station. Her desires frozen, a frame of film she can watch at her leisure, every action an enigma, Natasha next to her a photograph reflected ethereally through glass, a ghost calling in from the smothering darkness.

Finsbury Park station is a microcosm of the whole system, a warren of tunnels and exits, misleading signs, abandoned ticket booths, corridors twisting off in unexpected directions, tantalizing glimpses behind staff doors. Amrita seeks relief from the endless coda of bodies, the stink of perfume, fresh layers of Friday night make-up, expensive clothes, money transformed into art transformed into power, dimensionless tunnels with no sense of motion, light and sound thrown crazily across curved tiled walls, Natasha's high heels echoing heartbeats, shadowing Amrita step after step after step. Following Jay, who moves with a faultless sixth sense for anything on the tube network, emerging finally by Seven Sisters Road, heavy amber darkness overhead, the brutal black cut of the rail bridge, ground scarred with pigeon shit, the roar of cars, spewed filth trailing dancing ghosts over the road.

They are early. The Powerhaus doors haven't opened, and a little knot of people slump against the walls, trying hard to be cool under the unimpressed stare of passers-by. Pierced faces, destruction chic, wrecked clothes in de-rigueur black, fucked-up pale faces in a score of tortured expressions, goths, industrial-heads and other relics frozen in time at the late eighties, clinging desperately on to the rigid rules of their tiny world. They pretend not to notice the stifled giggles of those walking past, it just confirms how

fucking stupid the rest of the world is, that they don't get it, the oxymoronic joke-seriousness, so they practice their scowls at the bricks, or at their identically turned out partners, a mirror of their own conviction. The dreams of whites and Japanese: when she attends these gigs she's usually the only South Asian, sometimes stared at as if she's mad, a cultural transgressor ruining this fantasy dystopia, not pale or tortured enough to deserve to be present. She feels it, leaning here against the wall and watching, skin like paper, dividing them.

Only accepted if she plays to the type they have created for her. Demure, well spoken, passive. She looks down as she pulls a cigarette from the packet, brown skin pinching the white paper. Then she looks across at Natasha and Jay, calmly leaning against the wall and staring about them with muted amusement. The type can go fuck itself, she thinks, shrugging and trying not to care.

There's movement from behind the box office shutter. Making a show of reluctance, the self-willed outcasts file into a ragged sort of line, waiting tersely in the cold night, Amrita, Jay and Natasha folded into the black clad midst.

“I didn't see you as being this type of girl,” Natasha tells Amrita.

“I'm not.”

“So it's all at the bequest of Jay here.”

“Sort of.” She looks at Jay, embarrassed. “But I kind of like the music.”

“What, all that doom, doom, doom stuff?”

“This isn't like that.” Jay says. “It's Japanese. It's more...noise...”

“Maybe I should have stayed in the pub.” There is something subtle in Natasha's smile, making Amrita feel oddly on edge. “We were all getting along quite nicely.”

“There was nothing to stop you.”

“No. I found Mike rather cute, though.”

“Well, just keep your hands off, yeah?”

“What are you, Priya's handmaiden?”

Amrita sucks furiously on her cigarette. “I'm her friend.”

“Oh. And that involves controlling the lives of everyone around her?”

Amrita shrugs.

“You'd do better worrying about your own life. Wouldn't she, Jay?”

Jay looks uncomfortable. “I wouldn't know.”

Natasha laughs. “Very diplomatic. So this is your sort of music?”

“Um, yeah.”

“What do you do to it? I mean, it's hardly the sort of music to wash the dishes to, or dance to.”

“Amrita dances to it. You'd be surprised.”

Natasha stares at Amrita with a strange light in her eyes. Soft smile playing about her face, both tender and predatory. “You never told me this. You said you used to draw to it.”

The smoke boiling upwards from her lips. “Used to. But now of course I don't draw.”

“But dance?”

“Only when it's live. Otherwise my stereo's not loud enough to make it worthwhile.”

“So it's a rhythm thing?”

“I don't know. Maybe it's just the sheer volume of it. Like Brian Wilson said. Good Vibrations.”

“Have you ever thought that you could use it? You could try incorporating it into a project. Something physical. Something that gets you moving rather than sitting there thinking that there's nothing to be drawn. You know, blow away all of those cobwebs.”

“I don't think so. Unless every clubber in the country is a frustrated artist.”

Natasha just smiles. “You might be. But they're not.”

The queue begins to slip inside, toll paid on entrance, the bouncers staring impassively down. “It's not worth you even trying,” Amrita tells Natasha with a twisted grin. “There's no way I would do it. No way.”

Inside, the Powerhaus has the coldness of any empty venue, walls reaching out from around the stage like open arms waiting to receive. Black blank surfaces, abandoned equipment onstage, music from the PA reverberating across a too-open space, atmosphere waiting to thicken into expectation. The same old ritual: the first few in cluster at the bar, buying pints to have something to cradle as they slump back against the walls and watch. Waiting to catch the eye of the girl behind the bar, the music not connecting yet, echoing through the venue with cold indifference. Two pints of lager and an orange juice, moving over to stand by one of the walls, Jay talking animatedly to Natasha, and Natasha coolly listening, nodding, eyes distant but focussed, hand sweeping through the blonde tide of her hair. Amrita lights a cigarette and leans back against the wall, happy to let them speak, staring out into the black pit of the venue.

Dancing. Flesh twisted like a marionette, the roar and screams of the universe driven through her, humming ambience of meat freezers, pipes, the sough of the wind,

turning her form into a thousand half-read shapes. She shakes her head and smiles, sucking in cigarette smoke. No, there's nothing. Not even that.

Floor slowly filling, a crowd gradually taking dimension, a clog of cigarette smoke, lager, army boots and black-dyed hair. Again and again it is always the same people finding their way to these gigs, a repeating pattern, a secret word. In amongst the whites a fair number of Japanese, expensively ragged and chain smoking, abandoned hair that must have taken hours to perfect, fetishist kitsch, cool almost to the point of meaning it. Always a few Japanese girls with their white boyfriends as well: Amrita staring at the couple in front, him with his battered black clothes and heavy boots, long hair dyed black, lips and nose pierced, a gloomy selfish thunder hanging over his brow, and her clenched onto his hand, stockings and stilettos, tight leather mini and a skimpy top through which her pert little tits push, pierced, a schoolgirl's unlined face driven through with spikes and rings, bunches in her red-dyed hair, docile cud-chewing love spattered across her eyes. Crushing herself into a cardboard cutout for his desires, surety and security in sacrifice, a controlled form of sati, slowly destroying herself on the rock of his love. There is no other choice sometimes, Amrita thinks. The brute pain of sympathy, old images, remembering the sense of throwing everything away for love, the only way to know that it is real. Feeling Geoff's hands across her skin, shattering underneath the touch, the girl she had been flung into the fire.

Twice destroyed, and twice reborn. Waking each time to find herself paler, slower, the din of the world ever louder in her ears. Less every time to go back to. She watches the crowd, containing the untouchable mockery of memories within herself.

The first band, when they arrive, are pretty much what she had expected: a dull industrial grind, crashing minor-key powerchords hacked out on guitars, all the usual watchwords screamed out about death and corruption. The most banal of apocalypses, a vein-popping clenched-arsed forced hatred, the fraternity confirming itself in its sense of weltanschmerz, congratulating itself in tunnel-vision bleakness. The crowd love it, pogoing in rhythmless glee, moshpit erupting up the front, affirmative doom greeted, fists raised high. Jay stands, fag in hand, frowning in cynical disgust, whilst Natasha is half-laughing under the shadows of her skin, mouth drawn in a tight little line, meeting Amrita's eyes and bursting into giggles, burying her face in Amrita's hair.

It is a mercifully brief set, and without the much clamoured for encore. Conversation roars over the beefed-up PA, tinnitus clattering in Amrita's ears, the circular sound of voices rising and falling over heavy backbeats, a sweaty push of bodies. The place is filling up: the traditional late arrivers in wigged-out Gothic fancy dress; gig aristocrats and the occasional journo; tourists swelling the ranks, French and Spanish students after the grime of the white underground North London scene, willing to watch and cheer anything; rugby shirted lads who look like they stumbled in by accident, thinking the place was a fancy pub; the Japanese Goth fraternity draping themselves in artful ennui across one corner, cigarettes dangling from mouths or between limp fingers, drinking expensive bottled beer and glaring suspiciously at the Japanese tourists, the cute round faces and matching rucksacks, knitted cardies and impeccable make-up, constant beaming smiles and wild enthusiasm for whatever's going. Expectation crowding the air, babble of conversations, facing the front and watching the roadies, the DJ hitting the mood and blasting out the fucked-up bass-heavy chassis of early Funkadelic and Hendrix

cut up over doped-out hip hop beats; Asian Dub Foundation, Alec Empire, Techno Animal, malfunctioning slabs of sheer noise, bass force shuddering through her, watching the smoke twist and writhe in sexed-up cabaret, demon in her blood, the buck of hips to the beat waiting for the moment to lose control.

The roadies leave the stage, Amrita left watching the machinery, green eyes peering out from banks of equipment, guitars left standing like ancient relics, starfields rippling across cymbal surfaces. Sharp sting of anticipation, half-moving her body as the beat thuds through her, hips shifting, watching bodies flicker, heads move, personal demons rise in curling trails of cigarette smoke. The lights suddenly dim, hoot of cheers volleying out from all around her, the backstage curtain flaps back, an arc of light scything through the gloom to pick out the hunched jazz-freak drummer Koizumi, his eyes avoiding the crowd as he walks to his drum stool, hip hop beats slamming out over the PA, he sits and checks his sticks, rattles the cymbals as with a blare of acid colours the stage lights come on. He casually slips into the same hip hop groove, locking the rhythm over and over, pounding the kit, bass thump cracking at Amrita's ears, pushing her belly and her diaphragm. Nanjo next, staring out across the crowd, a skinny switch in black shades and leather, tight body sculpted in shadows and dry ice. Calmly straps on his bass and slides into a filth of distorted rhythm, a loping muscular groove, shakti slowly bleeding out through Amrita's bloodstream, infecting flesh and sinew, buffeted by the force of the noise, body like a machine, released. Two to three minutes, held in limbo, waiting for guitarist Kawabata, rhythm section locking more deeply into the groove, shuddering rivers of bass over polyrhythmic drum patterns, hypnosis, road rhythms, dirty machine rhymes of clogged motorways, factory robots locked in endless motion, her body

loosening, the curtain pulled aside for the third and final time, madman corkscrew hair explosion of Kawabata, guitar picked up and plugged in, scream of feedback rising over the bass and drums, held too long, shock of the thin metal sound drawn right through her, gasping and remembering everything she'd lost, endlessly traced details of St Teresa, skies of violet raining down on her sinning form, terrified of heaven, then the sounds drop, whole new harmonies, sheets of discordant metal ripping screaming through her, face peeled back to gory beauty of meat and bone, a repeating wave of distorted riffs burning over her, the noise an exhilarating chaos detonating around her, oceans of sound, deep currents of rhythm pushing her body into motion, clay vessel of her flesh splitting away in balletic slow motion, a cipher the music flows through, fabric of her jeans under her fingers in rough evocation, running against the buckled whorls of fingertips, organic tag of the city carved into her, roads and motorways spilling out from the creases on her palms, still somewhere holding back, enjoying the sense of Natasha and Jay watching, the shakti knotting her womb, shock of lust like a razor's bite, body remodelled in the shimmering colours of the music, legs wide and hips grinding, flesh melting from stone, from the petrification of some temple wall, a puppet to the sound.

With a banshee wail the guitar rips out from the rhythm, Kawabata almost collapsed over it, a long scream soaring upwards into the liberation of discordance, the uncreate before the dawn of time, blues and violets erupting inside Amrita's head, wild city skies, concrete lotus splits open and bursts into rubble, endlessly repeated, omniform, an annihilating blackness overwhelming her, last sense of self shattered, hole punched through her, the chaos of the noise flooding in, channeled down her back and through her

bones, synapses flooded, limbs jerked by unseen strings, body buckling and reforming in the wild shapes of the music, destruction pouring in through her open mouth.

7.

Natasha watches Amrita, a veil torn from the girl, shredded like smoke upon the wind to reveal something new and unexpected, dark skin glistening with sweat, body melted into the music and shifting with flickering poetry to its every nuance, responding to its shifts with a lover's subtle intelligence.

She turns to Jay, who is also watching Amrita, a studied casualness forced across his face. "You're right, she's a good dancer."

"She very rarely lets it show."

"I'm sure. It's the first time I've seen anything sexual in her."

Jay shrugs.

"You're not attracted to her?"

"It's not an issue."

"Pity, I think you'd suit each other." With a private smile into the acid splashed darkness. "She needs something."

Jay shrugs again, his eyes still on Amrita. "There's not much I can do."

"Oh, I don't know." Enjoying the brush of his lips against her hair, the stink from his body rising against the smell of smoke, beer and dry ice. "Tart her up, get her on the town, maybe. You never know what might come out."

"She's too conservative for that."

“There’s more inside her than she suspects there is. It’s just a case of getting it out. Like with her course. She’s forgotten that there aren’t really any rules.”

“Except for the ones we make ourselves.”

Natasha pushes back her hair and smiles at him openly. “Exactly.”

An arc of violet light scythes into the crowd, bodies caught in time, Amrita frozen in a decaying image upon Natasha’s retina, body arched up towards heaven, the ripe curve of breasts, an impression of the folded wings of her ribs, thorax a hard mark against the stretched neck, dark flesh of the face masked in electric warpaint, heavy shadows beneath cheekbones and jaw, the smashed nose a curious mark of attraction, buckled lips parted, eyes blazing in reflected light. Hair a flag of defiance cascading blackly about her, possessed, lost.

Natasha stands, watching.

8.

Flushed, her breath coming hard, body laced with sweat. Pulls back her hair and ties it in a ponytail, the ground reeling beneath her, garish light reflecting from every surface. Overwhelmed by detail: the crushed plastic mugs littering the floor, dead fag butts, marbled red meat slabs like statues beneath pale skins. A slow-motion world, crunched plastic and random chatter like the sound of sea rasping off a pebbled beach, all obscured beneath the constant scream of tinnitus. Taped music over the PA as the speakers are taken down and hauled behind stage. Amrita turns away and begins wading through the wreckage, looking for Natasha and Jay.

She finds them outside, words boiling off their lips and up into the orange skies, smiling easily at one another. Jealousy, a thin blade of fear slipped between her ribs, almost watching a replay of the way Priya had looked at Mike, feeling the locked groove of the same rhythm, wondering if she is destined to follow the same pattern, again and again and again.

Always watching from the sidelines.

Jay breaks off as he sees her. Natasha stares significantly and gives a sly little smile.

“Enjoy yourself?”

“Yeah.”

“I don't think I've seen you let yourself go like that before.”

“Well don't hold your breath for a repeat performance.”

“I wouldn't have thought it of you at all.”

Amrita shrugs uncomfortably. “I don't know what you're trying to suggest.”

“I always thought you were too self-conscious for that. If it had been me, I would have to know what my audience thought first.”

“I wasn't dancing for an audience.”

“Oh but you had one! Us, at the very least. Eh, Jay?”

Jay just shrugs and deflects the question. “I've seen her dance like that before.”

“And don't you dance yourself? Or was it just that you didn't want to abandon me the way Amrita did?”

“I'm too old and boring. My dancing years are behind me. I'd rather just stand there and take in the show.”

“And talk to me.”

Amrita watches as Jay flushes and turns his gaze to the wall. “And talk to you.”

She feels a familiar sickness rising up within her. “ C'mon, let's head off.” Not looking at either of them.

They head back towards the tube, cold night air hungrily kissing Amrita's skin. She listens to the other two talk, the amicable phrases flung at each other, and feels lost, left out. Suspects that perhaps they both slightly despise her for the conviction with which she danced. The sort of honesty that is unwelcome in public. Natasha's right; she should be aware of her audience. The constant theatre of living, permanently on display, permanently evaluated.

As if music could make a difference anyway. As if it could ever offer her tangible escape.

Harsh electric glare of the station simmering in her flesh, sweat cooling, echo of speech clattering from every side of her. Through the rattle of the barriers, following a stream of bodies into the open maw, the secret lives of rats and mice skittering past, beggars slumped in dejected poses about little cardboard signs, pools of vomit marking the walls like milestones, the too-drunk asleep on the seats as the trains shudder past.

“What did you think, anyway?” Amrita asks Natasha.

“Of the band? I would rather a snappy hookline and a decent chorus. All the things music is supposed to be about, like having fun. This is meant to be entertainment, after all. Except it was more like torture. But I see what you like in it.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” and Natasha smiles. “I think you just like being outside the outsiders. You might listen to the music and go to the gigs, but that's all you hold in common with the rest of the people here. You don't look like them, you don't dance like them, you probably wouldn't want to talk to them. I think you like not having the threat of there being other people like you around.”

“By which you mean what? Racially?”

“Not entirely, no. You're friends with Priya, for instance, but then again she's a completely different class to you.”

“Caste, maybe. But that means nothing here.”

“Do you really think so? I don't think you and Priya are even on the same ballpark, let alone playing on some level playing field. Don't even pretend you treat each other like the citizens of a classless society.”

“I'm not about to start tugging my forelock every time she passes.”

“You don't need to. She's already taken what she wanted from you, so treating you as an equal is probably a matter of guilt. What else could she do? And it suits you fine, because she doesn't understand you at all, so you're safe. Just like with this crowd and this music.”

Amrita glares at Natasha, upset. “Stick to art. Your psychology is shit.”

She watches the curve of that dangerous little smile, then looks away. Redoes her hair, trying to keep the anger and embarrassment from her face, reading the adverts plastered over the far wall, words running across her eyes, meaning nothing.

The rush of air washes over her, the scent of the secret places of the earth, the rails singing before the train finally crashes in upon a shriek of brakes and the clatter of

wheels. Covered by the noise, Amrita is surprised to feel Natasha's hand suddenly clutching her own, cool skin enfolding her, fingers grasping hard. Natasha leans across and kisses her cheek, "I'm sorry" whispered under the screeching halt.

Once on board, they are forced to stand; the closing time crowd reeling across the carriage, too-flushed faces and too-loud conversations, Natasha keeping hold of Amrita's hand even as she talks to Jay, Amrita staring down at the slash of white across her skin, the strange tender heat of contact.

They change at King's Cross onto the Northern Line, Jay leading the way between platforms, Amrita and Natasha following at a leisurely distance that, Amrita guesses, Jay pretends not to notice. She doesn't speak, clutching on to Natasha's hand, strange dreams seeming to wait at the end of every tunnel, stories told from pictures captured on camera, bodies bleached and anonymous.

Trapped by the glamour of ideas she dare not think.

Onto the Bank branch, heading south, the same drunken geniality slurring through this carriage as the last. The three of them stand in a huddle by the door, Natasha talking to Jay again, the thread of conversation lost to Amrita as she sinks into the rhythms of the train, feeling the shudders beneath her feet, watching the flicker of the cables fixed against the tunnel walls, counting the stops and watching the different people who get on and off at each. At Bank Jay leaves for the journey eastwards, receiving a rare and delicate kiss from Natasha before turning to Amrita, his eyes strange and hard, the so-familiar face alien. She curls her free arm behind him and touches her lips to the same cheek, the scent of Natasha left like a virus, the faintest mark of lipstick on his skin, and then he moves back and is gone.

Amrita turns to Natasha as the doors sweep close and the station falls away into darkness. A touch of pink lipstick still remains on Natasha's lips, her face suffused with a translucent glow, otherworldly and dangerous. Amrita wonders idly how she could possibly be painted. The force and light of Caravaggio, perhaps, a vividly unreal yet frighteningly proximate power, unholy and transcendent, the inner energy bending the corporeal frame. Eyes like the eclipse of an alien sun.

Crash of lines where hands meet, two different canvases forced together.

Elephant and Castle; cream and brown tiles gleaming from twisted spaces, the convoluted knot of tunnels, echoes of footsteps upon terracotta flooring. Space marked by the sound of Natasha's heels.

“Jay's quite funny. I can see the appeal.”

“Priya's tried this one on me a thousand times.”

“It's not meant as bait. I was just saying.”

Amrita shrugs. “That's why he's my friend.”

Natasha laughs. “And it's really as entirely innocent as that?”

“Yes. Really.”

“You've got to want something more.”

“I get all that I want from it.”

“Really?”

The lift, like a vertical coffin, scratched steel reverberating with the reflection of light and the stink of breath. They are the only two, watching each other peculiarly as the doors shudder close and the cage lurches upwards, bridge of flesh still joining them, every tiny detail seeming to be exposed.

It is a hazy amber night without wind, exhaust shakti dancing lazily about them. The huge menhirs of towerblocks stare down , cold camera eyes scything across the molten flow of the roundabout, Amrita and Natasha reduced to fuzzed ghosts, whited out, almost not there when the crash happens.

Neither sees the initial impact, but Amrita jumps as she hears the drawn-out shriek, clutching at Natasha and imagining a black hole in the sky, a puncture in the night. She turns as a sickening crunch ripples out across the air, catching the mangled ballet of the afterword, two cars locked in an embrace and swinging a crazy lovers' dance across the carriageway, tyres burst and asphalt smoking, coming to rest in seconds that last forever, one bonnet springing clean off, the other collapsing back through the windscreen as glass erupts in brief flowers, a ragged doll of a body bursting outwards in one final flight, head snapped back and staring at heaven, hands shielding nothing. Gravity wins and claims back its own, legs caught and the torso flopping back upon shivering metal and shattered glass, wheels locked and sparking through the tattered rubber skin, hubcaps gone, bouncing silver coins possessed of their own life, both cars seeming to arc in a beautiful ellipse about the carousel of the outstretched driver, now at the centre of a wheeling metal universe, lights drawn in long luminous lines announcing the show, the fantastic coupling of machines. Amrita crushes Natasha's flesh, fingers bloodless and palms slick with sweat, transfixed by the exhausted mangled union, ribs of chassis pushing out in splintered intimacy, blood of oils pooling in glassy sympathy for the carcass on the bonnet.

Several cars brake, most gun their engines and swerve past, eyes hard ahead, pretending it isn't happening. A man runs uselessly towards the wrecks, ripping at the

doors, tearing out the last shards of glass from the windows, trying desperately any way at all to get to the flopped puppets within. Others follow, weaving through the still-speeding traffic. A woman next to Amrita screaming into her phone: police, ambulance, fire brigade, she doesn't fucking care just get them here. People stop to watch, an odd voyeuristic intensity to their faces; others push through, got to get out of this fucking place, got to get the next bus, journey times spiralling madly.

watch

the

blood

leaking from the cars, the spurted black petrol semen, glossy finish to the paint jobs catching the amber light in graceful long lozenges, an unbroken back window, recently washed. Nothing happens, the drivers don't move, the men can't haul any of the doors open, one person trying to stop traffic and hopelessly lost in the wide-eyed beam of headlights, watching as in the outside lane the cars rush past, slicing through a petrol stream. On the inside lane the traffic mounts, horns blaring, the occasional car swinging aggressively into the offside lane, desperate to get past to the waiting arms of home.

Amrita staring at a thickening shape in the air. Darkness curling out from the buildings, leaking from windows, steaming upwards from the roundabout. A form shrouded in haze and blacker than the night, a body like a crack across the sky, crow-thin, hanging matted hair and shrivelled breasts, cunt gorged on decay, three blackstar eyes and a tongue lolling down, splitting the air. She reaches down a tender hand to smother the body resting on the bonnet, sucking the warmth from his heart, claiming him back.

9.

Every surface shining unreally: the shit spattered pink of the shopping centre, cracked paving slabs from the day's rain, skins paled to the same wax amber masks, eyes glassy and dumb. The road glitters with lost jewels, grains of glass picking out the light and throwing it back in constellations, glossy pools of petrol and blood, the grotesque flower of the wreckage rising above the asphalt. Car exhaust fogs the air, headlights beaming through like illuminations for the centre stage.

Turned to salt for looking, petrified by the beauty of the destruction, the gorgeous angles, the silence.

Amrita does not mention the figure she thought she saw. Like a trick of aqueous humour it disappeared as soon as she shifted focus, its hole covered by a veil of smoke shakti. She just stands, clutching Natasha's hand, the both of them watching the curious banality of the aftermath. A crowd of people now stand by the car, not knowing whether to remove the figure from the bonnet. One man checks its pulse, shrugs, turns away. The other driver has been freed from the car and sits in the road, headlights splashing over him, the honk of distant horns like mocking applause. Waiting for the police, ambulance, anything - there is not even the sound of sirens. Friday night after pub closing, the roads clogged and every service stretched, fights in alleyways with flashing knives, burst stomachs, ground reeling, nothing to attend the peculiar wake for the lone body stretched on its crumpled funeral bier, just one in a city of millions, just one life leaking away.

An unfamiliar smell to the air, like strange whispers in a language just beyond her comprehension. Brutal convulsions, the monitors in A&E departments across the capital going flat, unvaried electronic wail of grief, that shadowed arm reaching down, the lines

of her palm drinking in all pain as she closes her fingers over the cooling heart, stilling its final spasms.

A figure remembered from her father's stories. Gory carvings seen in still museum galleries. Kali.

Amrita shivers, hugging herself. Cupped in sensual horror as she watches the pooled blood upon the bonnet. Eight pints, she thinks. Eight pints, and that's all we've got.

Sirens. At last. Shocks of electric blue splashing across buildings, shadows flickering, the banshee wail splitting the sky. The first police car shattering the spell, the wake ended, the watching figures released of their terrible burden, their communion. They scatter, sinking back into the shadows, the dreams of home.

She feels the squeeze of Natasha's hand. "Let's leave."

Amrita gives mute assent. They walk, surrounded by the dreamlike detail of the Shopping Centre, passed through every day, so ordinary a setting for the extraordinary mangled bloom of the crash. Footsteps echo, special offer deals scream from the windows, the sirens still howling over the roar of the traffic, the flicker of blue light drawing different skins across both of them.

They pass south, towards Newington Butts. "I'm glad I didn't witness it alone," Natasha tells her.

Amrita shudders, thinking of the shadowed figure reaching down from the sky. "Me too."

"Do you think we should have helped?"

"There was nothing that hadn't already been done."

"Maybe."

The Draper House security camera winks down sympathetically. Two fuzzed figures hunched away from the loud blurred backdrop of the road, Amrita searching for her keys. She eventually lets them both in, their shadows merging against the wall as they wait for the elevator.

Doors opening to the stink of piss, the crude daub of fresh graffiti; the oblique tags and swastikas scraped into the metal from rival factions. “The same every Friday,” Amrita mutters, stepping inside. Natasha follows, carefully expressionless, her eldritch form etched harshly under the close lighting, every flaw and spot exposed, every strand of golden hair, the cracks in her lips.

“You're a good dancer.”

Amrita pushes a hand through her hair and laughs.

“No really. You've got the body for it.”

“If you're just trying to embarrass me, it's working.”

“Why would I want to do that? You just don't want to admit it. You're surprisingly athletic.”

“I used to play football. Did I ever tell you that?”

“No.”

“Oh, well, that's how I broke my nose. It's also how I got two false teeth and this oh-so-beautiful scar across my lip.”

“I didn't know women's football got so rough.”

Amrita smiles ruefully. “Oh, this was caused by the boys. Although we weren't allowed to play mixed-sex football, I did anyway, when they'd let me. And one day it just

got too rough.” She shrugs. “That was the end of it, though. Afterwards, my mum banned me from playing at all.”

“Shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted.”

“I guess I can understand it. It's not every day you come home to find out your daughter has lost her teeth and fucked her face in just from playing a stupid game. It wouldn't have come to anything anyway; I was too small, and my tits were already getting in the way. It was a stupid dream, never anything more.” She trails off, suddenly self-aware, embarrassed.

Closeness, the physical proximity of Natasha overwhelming Amrita; the penetrating blue eyes, the pale skin and full lips, the curve of her breasts beneath her dress, the cool smoothness of the slim supple fingers. Watching as the black spaces of Natasha's pupils played across her skin, following of the scar and the even, artificial teeth.

The lift shudders to a halt. Their floor, the familiar smell as the doors open, the familiar music washing out quietly from the nearest flat. The same graffiti scratched desperately into the paint.