

HOPE – by Jethro Perkins

IV – DECEMBER 1998

1.

The Monument. The filth of three hundred years of history cling to its stone: exhaled breath and burning torches, gas lamps and pea soupers, Blitz-fire soot, the choking spew of cars. Amrita sits with her back pressed against it, feeling it push upwards, an accusing finger pointed back at God. The visitation of plague and fire thought by some to be the presage to apocalypse, a divine judgement handed down upon a city now vanished. Amrita feels the wreck of the old town spilling out through the stone fluting, ghosts throwing shapes upon the buildings of Pudding Lane, the shimmering vision of lost roads snaking out like blood upon the lines of a hand, a secret city buried beneath the stone and asphalt all about her. The reverse of Elephant and Castle, this a linga to its yoni, rising rigid with controlled potential, a site of Shiva, waiting for the dark shadow of Kali to squat overhead and bring it to life.

Images in replay: the dead man bursting through his windscreen, the shadow hand reaching down to still his final heartbeat. The lotus bud of Natasha's lips burst open, waiting for Amrita's capitulation. Such strange fruit from bad omen.

She's always admired Wren's architecture, his lightness of form and effortless grace. Fascinated by his control over the colossal disaster of the fire: such a simple overcoming of the devil's handiwork, all slender and elegant lines, mathematical precision in its height and positioning, the victory of reason over insatiable destruction.

The gold fringe of flames at the crown looking absurdly like wheat thatch, the hungry danger of fire made cold and still and male. Order reigns: chaos is banished.

Massive Attack playing on her Walkman, the voice of Liz Fraser building a delicate bridge over yawning heartbreak. The tape-heads slowly wipe the tape, the batteries slowly leak energy. She looks down at her trainers, white leather slowly splitting, soiled by the shit of years, lines gathered where her toes bend, her tendons stretch. She places a cigarette to her lips, cups the tiny flickering match-shakti, a mockery of its intoxicated forebear's citywide rampage, insatiable Kali dancing in victory. The sense of order restored by Wren in her aftermath like a Swiss clock vignette, the mechanics still in working order: the bells strike one and out the people come, following the same tracks traced day after day, ties flying, make-up reapplied, steel toecaps and court heels rasping at the pavements, clingfilm removed from sandwiches and thrown on the pavement, lines of age spreading out from fragile eggshell eyes, the cracks across the mask of a woman untying reddish-brown hair. Mouths slashed red drop chatter, hips curl, eyes catch and grow dark in the same old game. Amrita sucks the smoke asura back into her body, cigarette burning down.

It's not the first time I've been attracted to a woman, she tells herself, watching the female bodies to-ing and fro-ing across the plaza. She had always been dismissed her own feelings either as fantasies or as part of her religion. How much of that had been her trying to fool herself then, and how much was she trying to fool herself now?

Sucking back the cigarette. As they exited the lift, Amrita had seen Natasha hanging in the shape of St Teresa, mouth opened in ecstatic agony, eyes not seeing the emotions that Amrita hides, her the exquisite desire confused with a longing for the

vision of the Angel, the penetration of the Spear. I stared at her, thinks Amrita. Stared and stared. She tries to fit each event into a meaningful sequence: the dead man, Kali, Natasha's open lips.

Watching the bright young things flash their cash, the senior execs hauling their bellies towards another power lunch, lines of cars revealing flashes of immortality, each car a replay of the one before. Dark body waiting behind the clouds for the trick, the slip that gives them away, the heart attack, jumping the lights, mobile phone clamped to ear, remembering her father's stories of watching the same form called down by the funeral smoke at Varanasi, a necklace of arms about her bare black flesh, two hands raised in benediction. Air-conditioning, car exhausts, sewer mouths pumping out a dark and filmy shit, the shroud thrown across the city, St Paul's a pyre of molten lead, bombs, the body of London burning.

Amrita is scared of the unknown rooted within her, remembering pictures she has seen of shrines spattered in goats' blood, the gift of oxen as sacrifice, the loving butchery of the animal. Ashamed of her own ignorance. The poet Ramakrishna once described his vision of Kali as being of a beautiful young woman emerging from the waters of the Ganges to give birth upon its banks. The woman takes the child and suckles it lovingly at her breasts, before raising it in her arms and forcing it between her jaws, grinding the flesh and bones, drinking the blood, swallowing the dead child back into herself. She then descends back into the waters. Such is the love of Kali. All the carefully carved devotional images, her form as shrivelled hag or buxom maiden, an unflinching body mired with bright blood, the slurried slick wetness clinging to her black skin, pooling in her lap, her hands raised in benediction.

Benediction. Amrita shivers, clutching herself against the harsh breath of the wind. Can that be what it is? The body of the goat jerks, neck jetting blood and legs scrabbling for purchase that isn't there. A life ending on the bonnet of a car, a sacrifice, a blessing.

Amrita watches the City workers skitter past, crushed into their forms, their eyes on cars or doorways, admiring their reflections in windows. She stares down at her own body, the bass drum kicking at her ears, shape and curve, light and shadow, all the things that refuse to be drawn, a dumb perfection resting within every object. The song ends, sinking into the analogue crackle of tape, to be replaced by another.

Get up. Stiff muscles reluctantly responding, body shivering with cold. Amrita wonders, not for the first time, what it is Natasha really feels. Sitting pondering this when she should be working; eyeing the blank sheets, her earlier works laughing down from the walls, prostituting a potential she could no longer regain, her parents' voices whispering out from unmarked paper, accusing her.

2.

They are in Amrita's room. Outside, the shadows have deepened towards night, headlights streaking the roads with silvery illusion. "So you've been at the art?" Natasha says. "Very conscientious."

"It's the Catholic in me. If only that's all it came down to, I'd be a top grade pupil."

"Well," she turns round Amrita's sketch pad and stares frankly, "You try too hard. But I've certainly seen worse."

"Worse what? Catholic consciences?"

“I’d just take the compliment if I were you.”

“Yeah.” Amrita looks up, watching Natasha's pale skin, the clear eyes staring critically, the body almost unconsciously provocative; back straight, legs crossed, breasts pushed out. Genetic code, Amrita thinks. Nothing more. She's an accident of nature. “I don't think I'll be getting too many more at this rate. Ever get the feeling things are going horribly wrong?”

“Stop me if I'm starting to sound like a broken record, but I think you're trying the wrong stuff. If you're serious about art, you should really consider chucking all this in. It's dead, it's all been done before, there's nothing left for you to explore. If you want to say something, there are other ways for you to do it.”

Amrita laughs and runs a hand through her hair. “It's a bit late to find out I should have been a disco dancer.”

“I didn't particularly have disco in mind.”

“What then?”

“You dance like you mean it.”

“Yeah, right, dancing to rock music. That’s not exactly what I had in mind when I signed up for an art degree.”

“It’s got power. At least, you’re one of the lucky ones that can give it power. You know what I’m saying?”

“No.”

“Think of the priestesses of Ishtar.”

Amrita frowns. “Weren’t they prostitutes?”

“What else do you sell if not yourself?”

Amrita shakes her head and laughs, not answering.

“You’re stuck in a rut and you’re looking in all the wrong places for a solution.”

The surface of the bed dipping to Natasha's gravity, her legs crossed, one arm balancing her weight, hand splayed on the covers before Amrita. “I’ve got to do it my way, Nat. I’ve got to finish it the way it started. Otherwise my parents were right and I’ve -” She shrugs. “I’ve wasted everything.”

“That’s not how it seems from here. Why can’t you just be honest with yourself? Admit that it isn’t working, and that you should try something else. What is it about that which scares you so?”

Amrita closes her books. The madness of trying to draw lines upon the world: the statue of Blake's Newton sitting outside the British Library attempting to bound the world with his compasses, both heroic human struggle and epic foolery. All art is a lie, she thinks, a gaudily covered nothing. Art distorts, creates further crippled acts of creation, drags the world further from itself and into the human fantasy. An act of Maya, the veil of deception. Art, literature, film; the comforting colours painted upon the gridlock, upon the young mothers struggling across Newington Butts with six bags of shopping, upon every life buckled under the weight of unfulfilled expectations.

Maybe Natasha is right.

“I don’t know. I don’t even know why you’re saying all this.”

Natasha just smiles, a fault across her lips, Amrita suddenly clutched by the urge to draw her, to keep some fragment of this moment just as it is forever. To try unravelling her line by line, secret unwound by her form on the page.

3.

Another night spent sketching. Ever more convinced by Natasha's words, watching the limp procession of figures and shapes marching towards the margins of her page. Life is not contained within my pen, she thinks. Rather, it is out there, bending the world to its shape, Kali's mad dance threatening the world with destruction.

Darkness squats within the ring of tower blocks, seeping inch by inch into the sky. Shadows running hands across her face, spilling out across the pictures. Whispering into her ears.

She hears the office parties in the roar of traffic; slurred tongues, raging outbursts and snatched kisses, the never-never romances and disastrous flings. She looks at her sketched figures, bodies twisting pirouettes just for her. Where's the difference? she thinks. Shifting her gaze to stare out at the orange skies.

4.

Rich, full, sensitive lips, forming around words like they were fragile bubbles. Amrita sits across the table from him, watching his lips as he talks. She keeps the distance between them, waiting for him to want her, her own desires somehow locked behind her flesh.

Every nerve burning.

A week of silence between them, just waiting for this night. Controlling her body as if it were a puppet, hanging it before her parents and her sisters and watching with a cold fascination as it went through the motions. She feels she has done nothing, said nothing, keeping herself in reserve, waiting to come alive in this moment.

Feeling, under Geoff's eyes, her irrevocable transformation, the rhythms and patterns that have played all through her life suddenly disintegrating and becoming meaningless.

He orders another bottle of wine. He can't drink any more; he's got to drive, but if she wants to... He hopes she doesn't think he's just trying to get her drunk. She doesn't, and she would be delighted to drink more.

She had gone through agonies of wondering what to wear, thinking maybe she should scab some money off Sita for some better clothes, perhaps buy herself a dress, something feminine. One evening spent locked in the bathroom staring ruefully at her face, running hands through her hair and trying to arrange it every which way, anything to stop it being a mess. Eventually giving up and returning upset to her room, only to see Sita unfolding her slender body from its clothes in preparation for bed, and deciding there and then to give it up. It wasn't worth it. There would always be more beautiful women; there was nothing she could do about that.

He had waited for her outside the tube station. She saw the attraction that shivered over his features, and had tried to keep it from her smile.

They met in Hampstead. "I had a meeting here," Geoff said. "it always takes me forever getting home from here anyway, so to be honest, another few hours won't mean anything. At least the roads will be okay then."

"Yeah." they both smiled awkwardly.

He took her to an elegant restaurant perched halfway up the hill. After they ordered, she sat uneasily, letting him talk and drinking her wine like it was beer. The arrival of the food eased matters. Somewhere else to look, something to do with her

hands. She found herself opening up, telling him little stories about her childhood. Doing what they had promised to do: get to know one another. Geoff didn't seem nervous, eating calmly and with a good deal of self-possession, seeming to look up every time she stared.

They drag out the sweet. Amrita smokes, pushing the mess of her hair back from her face and giving him a gentle smile. He responds, a thrill that cuts her. She feels she can reach out, curl her fingers about his warm pale hands. But does not; sitting, one arm clutched about her ribs, the other bent, elbow resting on the table, fag leaking life as it dangles between her fingers. Each word she says charged with desire, stumbling through various topics before finding safe ground in art. Finding herself rambling almost meaninglessly about Turner. People get weirdly obsessed with him, she says. They can't usually articulate why. It's like Captain Beefheart, something you either get or you don't. His gift, she says, for depicting motion in stillness, lucidity from opacity of colour, depth of passion in the flatness of canvas. From his surfaces to her own emotions, the static turbulence within her, the hugeness of storm-tossed seas somehow realigning into secret self-portraits as she talks, turning his brutal tragedies and casual beauties into the stuff of her everyday, into the world surrounding her. She pauses, suddenly embarrassed, watching him watching, the words slithering away.

Remember, part of her wants to say to him. Always paint this same picture of me.

He smiles, looks at his watch and sighs. "I hate to say this, but I have got to go. I should have been gone an hour ago."

"That's okay." Amrita gives a little laugh. "I guess the traffic will just have to be exceptionally bad tonight."

“I guess it will. It's called enjoying myself too much. So tell me: if I invite you to come again, will you?”

“Most definitely.”

“Good.”

He pays the bill and they leave. Lights pour from the windows as she stares down the curve of the hill; a cradle of comfortable wealth slipping like opium into her bloodstream, its seductive fantasies of everything always being this way. So easy to forget the rest: parents, sisters, the ranks of cheerless concrete housing and metal-shuttered shops.

A sudden shock, the body on the bed pushing up at its own skin walls, older and slower, fingers of darkness reaching softly out to fold her into their own oblivion. That's why my parents wanted me to do finance, she thinks. For that comfort. For that casual ease of living which they could never manage. And instead I'm here, staring over blank pages.

But all that had mattered then was Geoff. The one thing in her that her parents could never control. The terrifying urgency of love.

Walking with Geoff upon the rough cobbles of this Hampstead street, slowly following its curve back down towards the tube station, her face masked in streetlight as she feels him watching her.

Geoff suddenly laughs. “My son's football-mad too. I'm trying to get the idea into his head that not every player ends up in the premier league.”

“Yeah, well, that's a hard one to learn. Much as my mum tried I never got it. I always thought there would be some kind of future where I would be able to play for

West Ham.” She shrugs. “Along with having silver shoulderpads and floating cars, I guess.”

“It’s a million miles away from a Finance degree.”

“That’s my mum. I wasn’t allowed to play football at all after I lost two teeth, broke my nose and tore my lip apart. All in one go. Bad tackle or what? That was just too much for my mum. From that point on I was only supposed to do proper things, you know, like learn how to get rich.”

“ I’m not surprised. If my son got in such a state... What position did you play?”

“Defence.” she pushes back her hair and stares across at him, letting the want stab through her heart. Suddenly aware of how he has watched her body, lingered over breasts and hips, of how he has held her crushed against him, their lips split and mouth pushed against mouth. “I, uh, used to get passionately involved. It’s not a good position if you want to keep your looks.”

“ I don’t think you’re any the worse for it.”

“That’s the most backhanded compliment I’ve ever received.”

“No, really. Don’t think you’re unattractive.”

A crooked twist of her lips. “That’s easy to say in the dark. Try me again in daylight and I might believe you a little more.”

“I wasn’t just saying.”

“It’s okay, here’s the tube. You can stop digging yourself deeper into a hole.” she turns to face him, grinning. She takes hold of his hand, pliant warm flesh, the secret lines of her palm touching the smooth skin stretched over his knuckles. “Thanks for a lovely

evening.” Reaches up on tiptoes, body brushing against his, the shock of want clutching her heart. Pinches her lips and kisses him lightly on the cheek. Withdraws.

“I’ll see you in class.”

He nods, his eyes possessed by hopeless desire. She slips into the harsh light of the station without looking back.

5.

Always like this at the moment of the Queen's Speech, feeling she could watch her mother through the pixilated movements of the Queen, a shape just the other side of the screen. Close enough to reach out and touch.

The only thing she knows for sure her mother will be watching.

Last night, Jutta had decked the pub out insanely, manic inauthentic jollity overwhelming everything with rivers of tinsel, clumps of mistletoe and wreaths of fake plastic holly, hats for the barmaids and mince pies at the bar. In a burst of party poppers and bad music they let the first punters in, got kisses under the mistletoe from the usual regulars, fired fake snow at every surface and felt the day begin to swing into its inexorable rhythm. The same crowd: gnawed-faced white gangsters with their verminous sons, the fast lads from the estate playing pool and flirting with the barmaids, the West Indian crew holding court out front and the pensioners thinning away in corners. Other faces, unrecognised, entered stage left and exited stage right, sunk into the hubbub, more calls at the bar, ashtrays to clear, empties to claw back from tables ready to be washed. The arguments started, sentimental politics, a lot of shouting from the fast boys, the same Oasis song played four times in a row on the jukebox.

After three pints the old geezers started standing at the bar, telling the same old stories, Jutta roaring along as if he'd never heard them, prompting them into a wealth of memories, tales of Kennington during the war and the Punjab during the partition, hiding from bombs in copper bath tubs, illegal jazz clubs in Brixton, the race riots in Notting Hill. Stories growing ever wilder, desperate for Amrita or Mandy's attention, talking with the playful wistfulness old men reserve for young women, and Amrita and Mandy encourage it, listening with the wide eyes and flirty giggles young women reserve for old men.

"It's good to see you enjoying yourself," one of the gnarled old Punjabis told her. "Every good Hindu should enjoy a celebration, no matter what it is." and he grinned. "Let's face it, we don't get enough of them in this bloody country."

"I'm a Christian."

"Oh." he screws up his eyes and stares at her cleavage as if he expects to see a cross there. "All this time and I didn't know. Well tell your God he needs to hold a few more parties. One in summer would be particularly welcome. The only ones we get then are given by the bloody banks!"

"That's Britain for you."

"Don't. I sometimes wonder where are these people's spirits?"

"In the bank."

"Yes, in the bank," another agreed, suddenly butting in. "That's all anyone's interested in. All my grandson thinks about is clothes and cars. I lay awake at night wondering where I went wrong."

“Don't blame yourself,” the first said. “It's this bloody country. It's what it turns us into. I don't think you can expect young people to realise that there's anything else. Ever been to India?” he asked Amrita abruptly.

Dark holes of eyes, pissed, peering glassily at her.

“No.”

“See? She's born here and brought up here. She doesn't know anything else. How could she?”

“She's still Indian, though, isn't she? She still gets the same rubbish thrown at her as we do. It's just that because she's born and brought up here it makes even less sense to her.”

The two heads craned round together. “Well? Doesn't it?”

Amrita shrugged. “I don't know. I've never really thought about it. I guess all I've ever felt is that home is where the heart is.”

Home is where the heart is. Like an incredible hole shot through her, the pain sliding slowly outwards into her veins. She continued pulling the pint.

“See? That's India.”

“Don't talk rubbish,” the other came back with. “It's not so much the girls I'm worried about anyway. You know, a boy is a boy. They think they have to compete with all the rest. There's no end to how far they will go. Especially if there's all this racist bullshit - pardon me” with a nod towards Amrita, “ - coming at them all of the time. So they have to have better clothes, louder music, faster cars, more swearing. And then all that's left of our culture is the odd sitar in whatever music it is now and a plastic Lakshmi in the front of a Ford Escort.”

Amrita giggled. "That just sounds like boys in general."

"Well I can't see them growing up to any good. It's destroying the point of us coming over in the first place."

"It's not as bad as you make out," came the other one. "We only notice the loud boys because that's what we see all the time. What about the quiet ones we don't see, eh? Working hard and making a good life for themselves. Finding themselves a decent Indian wife -" Amrita finished pulling the pints and moved hastily away.

She drank shorts at every break to keep herself happy, pissed enough by midnight for the work to seem easy. The regulars started leaving at two and by half three even Jutta's dubious friends had left. The bar staff made a token effort to tidy up and then just slumped in various attitudes of drunkenness across a table. Jutta, indefatigable, laughing away to himself, served them beer.

"Another fucking Christmas," Mandy sighed, head cradled in her hands. "I swear it wouldn't be half this busy in the centre of town."

"A lot of the pubs up there are shut tonight anyway."

"Yeah, well, who can afford to live near enough to be able to drink in them?"

"Only the sort of people who wouldn't anyway."

"So what are you doing tomorrow?"

Amrita hunched over her beer, trying to keep everything straight. "Food. Booze. Telly. You?"

"Probably the same. What else is there?"

They laughed.

"Now now." Jutta waved a finger. "Every holiday is a good thing."

A good thing. The alcohol holding her together, a rare feeling of peace and familiarity washing over her. The conversation gently ebbed and flowed in the darkness of the pub, the city outside eerily silent. The gaps in the conversation slowly grow, with even Jutta himself starting to look weary. Eventually Amrita had to leave, feeling herself sliding towards a drunken sleep. Muted farewells, the stink of beer on breath as they kissed, and then bolts slipped back, she staggered into the cold breath of night, trash scattered over paving stones, the corpse of celebrations scraped across the asphalt by the wind, tinsel hanging dead in shops, the lights off, bodies in bedrooms stretched out across quilted slabs. No taxis, no night buses, the odd choked rush of a car, nobody on the streets. Brick and concrete canyons funnel the wind, intricately ordered patterns of litter swirl in flocks, herself the lone animal hunched shivering about itself, pushed forward on unsteady legs. Elephant and Castle veiled, lights off at the tube, Shopping Centre steeped in amber shadow, adverts on the roundabout blinking out to the glassy eyes of empty rooms. She stumbled into Draper House, a pixilated black and white girl, the time of her entrance precisely recorded as somewhere to the East Asha awoke, waiting in fidgeting agony to be able to open her presents. Amrita let herself into her flat, sloughing off clothes and collapsing into the bed, grateful for oblivion.

Wondering now in the soft, fading daylight, what her mother thought, staring through the screen and seeing the imagined ghost of her daughter. So easy for me to just go outside, Amrita thinks, put a quid in the phone and tell them that I'm sorry.

Sorry for falling in love. Sorry for not being able to do what they wanted. Sorry for the divide that neither of them would ever cross.

It wouldn't ever happen.

She shrugs to herself and tries to concentrate on the Queen.

That strangled, stilted accent scratching its way across the airwaves, beamed out to all the set suns of empire, watched with gentle mockery or bug-eyed disbelief. Where, indeed, anyone bothered switching on at all.

The words fell unheeded into the silence of the room, punctuated occasionally by the swill of the whisky bottle as Amrita drunk more.

Brass blast of the anthem. Her parents already switching over, looking for an action movie to keep Asha amused. Amrita lets it play its course, staring without blinking.

Left alone with the ghosts rising from the phosphor screen. Amrita takes another gulp of cheap and bitter whisky. The soft sound of breathing, body enveloped by the noise from the television, the heavy drama of a film score, rising strings behind the slurred lines of dialogue. Other people's art, the endless wealth of creation, a set of mirrors infinitely reflecting ourselves, no answers save the same pat rubbish churned out by every church of every religion over the millennia. Another distortion, another crime to add upon so many already committed. Even before finishing it, Tolstoy had dismissed Anna Karenina for its lack of answers, its capability to only to reflect the world, and he had returned to writing fables, cutting out the worthless complexity of life. She shakes her head. Fables were no answer either. They were just part of the same old lie.

Watch television. Watch the clouds in the sky outside, a sick orange bouncing back the hellfire glow of earth. Staring up at a reflection of the underworld.

All the things that Jesus died for.

Her mother, face ruined by tears, screaming as she hits Amrita again and again, and Amrita naked, stunned, walking through it as if it was a dream, not even trying to hold off her mother's hands, the pain welcome as it flowers across her face, finally thrown across the threshold and the door slammed shut, a skin, inviolable. Every detail remembered. She had stood there, concrete biting into her bare feet, Geoff's coat held across her skin, hammering on the door until at last Geoff led her away. That dream she'd given up everything for, back arching and breasts pushed against Geoff's hands, the agony of the emotion driven through her, a meaningless skin thing, her mother's crying reverberating behind the silence, sky looming and shadowed with clouds, Amrita thinking that somehow Jesus died for this.

Another gulp of whisky. Shapes tumble one after another across the television screen. Watching herself.

6.

Dressed up meat, she thinks. The animal exaggerated; legs lengthened, lips reddened, breasts pushed out. Everything about surface, love at first sight, hiding behind impossible dreams of herself. At first so tortuously aware of her body, how differently it moved, the shadow of a stranger stretching out in mockery from her heels, a different woman staring back through window reflections on the tube. Standing in an unfamiliar posture as the train shuddered and bucked under her heels, too self-conscious to look about her, holding the rail with both hands staring at the patterns of her skin.

It got easier.

Walking from Farringdon station through the cluttered streets of Clerkenwell, painted by amber shadows and restaurant lights, shifting packs of revellers crossing their paths, she had started to enjoy herself, the whole ridiculous vaudeville performance, feeling she was moving through an outbreak of pantomime on the streets. Suddenly understanding the fun of it, willing to suspend disbelief and become what she wore, a trick she had never realised so many people knew.

Natasha saw this and began to grin.

A queue outside the club when they arrive, the natter of waiting, cold air licking bare skin, cigarettes and phone conversations and flyers, watching the odd limo pull past on the way to Venus or Turnmills. Amrita and Natasha drift past like royalty: they're on the guest list, Priya knows somebody who knows the promoter, eight free tickets with no problems, no awkward questions at the door and they are in, the fantasy world behind the shabby bricks, coats checked in and descending to the cavernous unknown halls below.

A triptych: drinkers, dancers, watchers. Impossible costumes on people posing like catalogue models. Belching smoke throws sinister shapes through sheets of laser, big fake luv'd up smiles on every face like it's torture, occult machinery spinning crazily on the ceiling, huge slabs of sound, rigs shaking in their brackets. The air thunders, a shuddering bass like a weight in her belly, acid ripples of keyboard shimmering over a hyperactive snare beat. Hazed light, a detonation of strobes and flickering blankets of neon, thick with cigarette smoke and a hint of nitrate. Dancefloor already packed, shifting barely-clad forms with flung back hair, sweat rising, pushing on through robot mantras for the Midnight Bell, eyes closed lips parted body shaking to the groove.

A madness of painted clowns, the same face staring back repeatedly. Amrita follows in Natasha's wake, admiring the elegant and arrogant poise with which Natasha cuts through the crowd. Like she belongs, Amrita thinks.

“There's Priya,” Natasha says, nodding her head towards the balcony. “I think that little o-shape she's doing with her mouth means that she's seen us.”

More likely, Amrita thinks, that she's seen you. And the low-cut, figure-hugging dress screaming out in competition. The two women glare at each other as Amrita and Natasha ascend the stairs.

Priya has poured herself into a PVC bodice and trousers. She leans with a careful assumption of casualness, watching Amrita and Natasha with a cool stare, her eyes expressionless.

“I thought we'd meet you here,” Natasha tells her as they exchange kisses. “Looking down on everyone.”

“And I guess you came up here because you wanted to do much the same.” Priya shrugs carelessly. “Nice dress, by the way.”

“Thanks. So you saved a few cows from the slaughter by going plastic?”

“Yeah. I'm just that little bit closer to moksha as a result. Lucky me.”

Natasha smiles. “You just never know when you'll need that extra blessing.” and she turns away.

Priya frowns momentarily, before smiling perplexedly at Amrita. “And look at what the cat dragged in. Did you travel here by pumpkin?”

“I've heard the tube called many things but never that.”

“Well it's funky gear, sister. What brought this on, as if I couldn't guess?”

Amrita shrugs, embarrassed. “She bought it all for me as a Christmas present. I could hardly say no.”

“I bet.”

“You don't seem impressed.”

“I'm just surprised. It seems unlike you.” and then Priya smiles, suddenly all charm. “It's certainly made a big impression on Mike. He doesn't know whether to ogle you or Natasha first.”

Amrita turns her head to see Natasha leaning up to whisper something in Mike's ear. He laughs. Amrita's suddenly feels very stupid, very naive, a girl in a game she does not understand, make-up seeping back through the mask of her face, indelibly staining her skin.

“How is Mike?”

“All the better for toying with that Barbie doll, I'm sure.”

“Shit, Priya. They're just talking.”

“Well maybe he should be over here talking to us. I mean, I am his girlfriend, unlike that –” she doesn't utter it. May be aware, Amrita wonders, of how it would sound.

Instead she just shouts across at Mike, demanding his presence.

Mike mouths a parting shot to Natasha that makes her giggle, then moves over.

“Hi.” he grins in that old, familiar way, and Amrita feels her heart contract. “Long time no see. What happened?”

Priya laughs. “He makes it sound like some sort of horrible accident.”

“No. I think it looks nice. Yeah, really,” he says to Amrita, as she tries to melt away from his gaze. She lights a cigarette; any excuse to look away.

“Well that's more compliments than I ever get. Aren't you going to offer her a drink, then? I thought that's what men did with debutants.”

Amrita watches Mike's smile, thinking that it looks slightly stretched. His eyes linger abstractedly over her body and she feels herself flinch. “I hear and obey. As ever. What will you have?”

“Gin and tonic.”

“That's not like you.”

“I've got to act up to the costume.”

“That sounds like Natasha's attitude,” and Mike laughs as he heads to the bar. Amrita pushes a hand into her hair and looks, troubled, across at Priya. Priya follows the movements of Mike's body, her eyes glassy and dark and unreadable.

“How's your project coming along?”

“Oh.” Priya tries to blink back the distance from her gaze, forcing her face into a warm smile. “Not bad, since you ask. Everything's falling slowly into place. Loverboy over there” nodding her head towards Jay, “has been a fantastic help.”

“We're just friends.”

“Well, at least one of the two of you doesn't want it that way. He talks about you a lot.”

“Like what?”

“Like anything. I could talk about great aviation moments in history and he'd still get your name into it somehow.”

“Are you sure you don't goad him?”

“Me? As if.” Priya stretches out one hand, superb blue talons arcing out from the fingers.” I wish he talked about you less, to be honest. It's making me feel insignificant.”

“So what does he say? Does he say that he wants to go out with me?”

“Oh God no. Nothing so crude. I don't think he'd even admit that under torture. It's just that - plop! - right in the middle of any conversation he'll suddenly start talking about you.”

“Shit.” Amrita frowns, rubbing the line of her jaw. “What have I ever done?”

“I don't know,” Priya replies languidly, “but whatever it is, find out quick and then bottle it. You'll have him eating out of the palm of your hand. But anyway, he's been a great help to me. I shouldn't bitch. We've got a lot done so far.”

“Still convinced that doing a virtual show is the way forward?”

“Oh definitely. We've started using random sequences in the display patterns, just sort of leaving the order down to the computer, and it's weird the way all these meanings you never thought of start appearing. It's like not being trapped in your own head anymore. It seems so much better than hanging things in a gallery and reverentially staring.”

Amrita shrugs. “I think some people like the passivity of that. And at least in a gallery people are forced to look at the context of an object, try to make out why it's there, why it's art.”

“Maybe that's what I'm trying to get rid of. Objects being only art. Maybe they need to have function as well. Maybe people need to be able to use them.”

“Isn't that what the Arts and Crafts movement is for? And your piece has no function.”

“It'll get me a degree.”

They both laugh.

Mike returns with the drinks, a spritzer delicately placed in Priya's thankless hand, gin and tonic received rather more gracefully by Amrita.

“So is this new image a permanent thing?”

“God no. This is just a one-off. Then it's back to normal.”

“Well be careful the wind doesn't change,” Priya puts in, “you might be stuck this way forever.”

“Perish the thought,” not willing to admit that after a week she already thought of lipstick as an indelible stain, putting it on almost automatically before she left the flat. She changes the subject rather hastily. “I'm surprised that you two came back to London for New Year.”

Priya laughs. “I was scared another holiday would just lead to Mike getting all gooey on me again. At least down here he's got plenty of other girls to look at. That tends to keep his romanticism under control.”

Mike, so long unflappable, raises his eyes towards the ceiling. “Oh please.”

“Well what am I meant to think? One minute you're asking me to marry you, the next you're chatting up whatever blonde the wind blows in.”

“I wasn't up chatting her up.”

“Well what would you call it, then?”

Amrita walks away, upset. She catches sight of Jay, sitting staring at his drink.

He doesn't look up until she closes her hand over his beer can. “Mind if I have some? I need to wash down the taste of this G and T.”

“No. Feel free.” He watches her drink. “Christmas presents?”

“These?” looking down at herself, less hideously self-conscious with the first drink inside her. “Yeah. Natasha's fault.”

“She's like you're big sister sometimes.”

“I dunno. I've got three years on her. And I would never have dared to buy Sita clothes, and she's the same age. She was always the one with style.”

“My elder brother was definitely the cool one. I would have loved him to buy me clothes, cos I thought he had taste. But he never did.”

“It would have been a bit girly.”

“Maybe.”

“So how are you, at any rate? Sitting here staring at your beer. You're meant to be having fun.”

“I always manage to live down to big occasions.”

“Cheerful.”

“Sorry.” He grins.

“So what's Priya like to work for?”

“She's not easy to say no to.”

“That's what all the boys say.” Amrita shifts, slightly uncomfortable, pushing a hand through her hair. “When you've been around her place has Mike been there much?”

“Sometimes.”

“How have the two of them been getting on?”

“I don't know. I mean, on the surface they never change anyway. You can't tell anything from what they say.” Jay shrugs. “Priya's maybe been a bit too sarcastic, and Mike's maybe not been there enough. But who knows?”

“I just wish sometimes that one of them would let it all hang out. Actually tell us what they feel.”

“They couldn't. Like all people of their class they've got an image to uphold.”

“And we don't?”

“It's maybe not so important to us.”

Amrita looks him straight in the eyes, trying to see what it is he always hides.

“Even so we still don't say what we feel. When did you last tell all your secrets?”

“I haven't.”

She stares at him, all the things they have never said twisting between them in the arcs of cigarette smoke. So many things to say, and the words with which to say them nothing more than lies, so hopelessly far away from the ideals they represent.

Taking on a life of their own, she thinks. Colouring and shaping the world about us.

“So what's your own self image? If you think we've got one to uphold too. How do you view you?”

“Definitely not like this,” she laughs, draining her G and T. “How about you?”

“Oh. I've got this stupid self conceit that I'm actually very clever, and one day someone's going to realise this and give me some sort of job where I won't actually have to do any work, maybe just mouth off all the time. Down the pub.”

“Sounds like a journalist.”

He snorts. “More like a columnist. The bizarre thing is, deep inside of me is a part that really believes this will happen. I don't think I could keep going if deep down I believed that I was going to spend the rest of my life in computer support. Could you imagine it? It would be unbearable. And so I keep myself sustained on this pathetic self-image, which has no basis in fact at all, and which I'm never going to do anything about.”

“There's always some part of everyone that dreams. Maybe there's nothing wrong with that.”

“Whatever gets me through the day, I suppose,” he changes tack abruptly. “Aren't you tired? First the eleven to seven at the pub and now this.”

“No. I think I'm just excited at celebrating New Year on the right side of the bar for once. It's sort of novel. I'm usually wanting to go to sleep at around about this time. Instead I'm usually running around all over the place trying to make out the words of mumbling pissheads.”

“Well, if you want the expense of the other side, you can always queue up with everybody else to get the next round in. You might just have made it by next year. Otherwise, feel free to join me in a dance.”

“Don't mind if I do. I wouldn't want Priya thinking she dragged us to such an exclusive do all for nothing.”

“Yeah.” Jay laughs derisively. “So far, you might as well just have stayed in the pub.”

She follows his slender back as he leads her down the stairs towards the cauldron of sweat and light, not looking back to where the others are seated.

7.

Midnight approached. The blackest hour, when fantastic carriages turn back into pumpkins and all the glamour rushes out of the world. Natasha sat with Mike and together they watched the others dance. Empty bottles and cans piled up on the table in front of them, a precarious fantasy palace.

Mike thought back and remembered with bitterness how breathtakingly beautiful Priya could make herself, how much she could care, with how much love she had treated him. With every breath his heart punctured with the hope that it could still be like this, that somehow they could make it all right again. Priya's down there somewhere and he knows he should go and find her. Be there for the big moment, time reset, zero-zero all over again, like it all had never happened.

He starts as Natasha touches his arm.

“Hey, you look like you're in a dream. This is meant to be fun, remember?”

“Yeah,” he grins. “Sorry.”

“She's a good dancer, isn't she?”

“Who?”

“Amrita. I thought that was who you were staring at.”

“Oh. No.” Mike feels the blood rush to his face. “I was just... being vacant.”

“That's okay. It's my little secret.”

“I should go find Priya.”

“We've got plenty of time yet.”

“Have we? Okay then, I'll go to the bar instead.”

“Get me another whatever.”

“No problem.”

He walks to the bar, air thick and dark and clinging. A heaviness in his muscles, sickening doubt weighing at his heart.

8.

A slave to the beat, bass thundering through her belly, her body raised like a charmed snake, a shakti moving puppet skin. Veils of light splashed across her face, a purdah of shimmering colours, the bliss of disguise, anonymity, secret self moved below the flesh. She watches other eyes, twisting bodies, pearls of sweat, vacant eyes watching other heavens. Her body pulled on strings, calves tight, heels driven down like knives into the dance floor, serpent of her spine writhing and pulling as she half closes her eyes and tries to let go.

The music suddenly bursts apart, an explosion of static and the rhythm drops to a steady pulse, taut notes of bass, everything else dropping away as a vocoder voice hushes out like pressed steel across the dancefloor, the words inhuman and precise, marking the moments out, striating time.

Ten.

Opening her eyes and looking about her desperately for Priya and Mike, Jay and Natasha. Some stupid idea in her head about reconciling them all.

Nine.

She catches sight of Priya and Jay. Pushing herself through a tangle of hot slick bodies, almost falling, panicking. Several people raise her up.

Eight.

Clutches Priya's outstretched hand and is pulled into a little hole between Priya and Jay. They both close arms about her and she lets her body bow, sucking in air to scream the numbers.

Seven.

Unbalanced and almost falling, her tits threatening to rupture out from their precarious hold, still looking about her, still hoping to find Natasha and Mike.

Six.

Dropping back through all the times she's ever counted down to this end, hoping for whatever. This stranger smeared in greasepaint, hung in dreams for the boys, remembering everything she used to be.

Five.

A girl lying in bed, hearing the noise from the other room, waiting for the whole block to erupt in celebration.

Four.

Hugging the sweating bodies of Jay and Priya as close to her she can, jumping and half crying.

Three.

The weight of bodies, the whole dancefloor shaking, shrieking with garbled voices, baying for the end.

Two.

Muscles strained, trying to melt all the flesh together, wanting to forget. Wanting to love everyone.

One.

Darkness staring down, Amrita's head flung back to meet it, staring wide-eyed and screaming as the moment decays, the smoke and the sweat and the lines of her hair plastered against her skin, an empty moment wondering what she's doing, the light plastered over faces and skins, a garish clown's coating.

A crash of sound, the bell struck, metal shivering and radiating outwards, a badly distorted radio transmission of Big Ben filling the club as she screams into its static hiss, the dancefloor dissolved in shrieking, bodies flung like rag dolls, arms out everywhere, body grabbed at from all directions. She clutches at Priya, pulling her close enough for their noses to touch, kissing her cheek as she feels Priya's lips touch her skin. Pulls back to face Jay, the curious division between them still unbroken, planes of sound from the newly resurgent music rushing in to fill the space between them, keeping them separate. Grabs his shoulders and reaches up to plant a neat, chaste kiss on his lips, then moves back from him, laughing ashamedly at herself and not able to meet his eyes. Then she turns to the crowd, letting herself embrace anyone, the warmth of skin and unfamiliar bodies, strange lips briefly leaving messages upon her cheeks, touching drinks together before being pulled into the snaking line of a huge conga, cheesy party music crackling in badly before being cranked up to full volume, her hands around hips and hands about her, careering over a beer soaked floor.

Gotta find Mike and Nat, wish them this reckless love of the new. She's sure they must be somewhere on the dancefloor, lost in the crush of so many people and given up on finding everyone else. It's several minutes before she can tear herself out of the conga, several more before she can move anywhere, unsteady on her feet and with sweat needling her skin, hair pushed back, staring wildly about her as shapes twist and weave

within the dry ice, faces grinning, eyes on fire, a wildly out of time samba, kicking legs and twisting hips. No sign of Mike or Natasha, not that she can see anything in here. She forces her way out from the dancefloor and heads back up towards the balcony. They're handing out free tequila slammers at the bar so she knocks one back and grabs another two for Mike and Natasha, weaving unsteadily away from the bar, having to avoid her own reflection from a mirrored pillar, infected by the determined chaos raging round her, her eyes wide at the beauty of people, grinning stupidly as she cuts a path through to the little line of tables right at the back.

And sees Mike and Natasha.

Bodies twisted towards each other, lips caught in an enigmatic line, perhaps six inches of empty space between them. Amrita can see perfectly, a dreamlike lucidity as if she floats above them; Mike's boyish and proud Brahmin features, the high cheeks and sharp nose, a blossom-like flush across Natasha's skin, her blue eyes shining and her hair fallen about her shoulders in a shimmering cascade of gold. No, Amrita thinks, the sick tequila fire gripping her belly, no, it's just paranoia, it'll pass, one of them will look round, see me and smile. But their look holds, some words perhaps falling from Mike's lips, then they close, the lips tenuously joining, eyes fluttering shut as Natasha's arms slip about his shoulders and they fall doomed into each other's gravity, mouths pressing desperately and furiously at each other, trying to swallow each other's passion whole.

Amrita's hands harden over smooth glass. Not wanting to move, and feeling if she does she will shatter. Telling herself it's not real.

That she can close her eyes and it will be gone.

She watches, her reflection in the mirror behind them staring out with glassy eyes upon another scene. Every tiny detail sharply focused, the shifting colours as Mike runs his hand through Natasha's hair, the lupine beauty of the kiss, the desire carved in every feature. Amrita feels ugly, so very ugly, low-cut dress leering and smeared lipstick line laughing, the mocking promises of a better tomorrow. Remembers fucking Mary's Geoff on Mary's bed, for a second so completely filled with love and fooling herself that it would be forever.

Men are such fools.

She's got to move, got to shatter the moment. One by one, she lifts each glass and drains them dry. Places them carefully on the nearest table, then rummages calmly through her bag for her cigarettes. She has to stop Priya from seeing this (she thinks as she pulls out a cigarette, places it carefully between her lips and lights it, sucking back the bitter body of smoke). As a story she has to tell, she can maybe twist the truth a little, but she can't believe anything would survive watching the flare of this passion, every little lie that relationships rest upon punctured. Amrita presses her hand to her head, appalled at the beauty, appalled at the people watching. She must find Priya. Must keep her on the dancefloor, on and on and on until the dull thunder of the dawn. Until none of them can think any more.

She turns.

Priya stands motionless as bodies brush carelessly past her, her back lashed upright, her face an open flower of hurt. She stares, unable to do anything else, mouth slightly open, hands clutched against her thighs. Eyes black and glassy. Amrita walks

towards her, conscious of Natasha's trappings hung from her body, the filthy ash of her heart. Priya doesn't even see, carved in salt for the act of looking.

“Priya.”

Nothing. No slight twitch. Desire still playing out the long, violent kiss in the hole of her pupils.

Amrita grabs her, repeats the girl's name more softly. “Priya.”

Priya looks at her, black and dreamlike. “I'm going home.” No expression to her face. She shrugs out of Amrita's grip, turns, and begins to walk away, every motion rigid with suppressed energy.

Amrita stumbles after her, trying to keep pace with Priya's whiplash speed, tripping into little intimate groups, kicking crushed cans, heels splitting plastic glasses that throw her off balance, forcing her to clutch at grinning idiots, smile apologies, all the while Priya slipping further and further ahead. At last she disappears into the haze of dry ice and cigarettes.

Amrita heads to the cloakrooms, staring about her desperately, the hundreds of faces, all wrong. Shit, Amrita thinks. She's got to come here for her fucking coat. She's got to. Waiting, body shaking with tension, nervously dragging back smoke from a cigarette, pacing up and down, staring into the opaque dancefloor fuzz. No Priya. Fuck. Stagger through the pounding beat, the pools of darkness fringing the walls, watching lovers draped in shadowed corners, the black patches of spilt drinks and the lonely figures slumped in the defeat of another year. Clatter down the steps, clumsy, thighs pressing at her dress, pushed-up cleavage wobbling in a sick flesh fantasy as she runs the best she can towards the bouncers.

Breeze-blocks in suits, staring at her with small cold eyes, watching her the way they would watch meat hanging up and drained of blood in a Smithfield cold store.

“Yes love?”

“Did an Asian girl just leave? All on her own, small and pretty and probably without a coat?”

“Yeah. She headed up towards the viaduct.”

“Ta.”

Amrita rushes out, clatter of heels underscoring the fat warm slabs of bass, staring wildly at the line of clubbers, fashion glitterati in tinsel and white leather, a circus on the move from club to club to club in search of the sheer hedonism they had once seen caught in the still frame of a photograph, caught in the act of blissful obliteration.

“Oi!” yelled from behind her. “There's no readmission. Don't yer want yer coat?”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Rain slipping cold hands lightly over her, breath escaping in white physical marks. That motherfucking donkey jacket. She has her bag; the jacket doesn't matter. “Keep it!” she shouts back, and chokes out a cracked rasp of a laugh.

Her steps ringing hurriedly on the pavement, only able to manage a sort of pathetic half-run, arms clutched about her. Life leaking upwards from her lips, face turned down from the rain that patters more loudly than the muffled tribal roar of the club, water pooling in the cracks of paving slabs and reflecting shivering threads of street lights, the buildings to either side high and dead, wasted blocks slowly calcifying in the darkness. Taxis move up a gear and roar past, lifting a fine spray in their wake, noise echoing from wall to wall before dying in the tongueless chatter of the rain. Tiny rivers running against

the kerb, catching the amber light and carving fluid and fantastical shapes; the streets running with gold. She reaches the mouth of the viaduct.

Priya is sunk next to the stairwell like a garbage bag, face hidden in her hands, oblivious to the haleated curtain of rain as it twists and curls with the wind. Amrita slows to a walk, catching her wheezing breath, pushing wet strands of hair from her face, feeling the cold impassive fingers of water run across her skin. She kneels upon her haunches, one arm out to the wall to steady herself. Priya looks up, eyes black wells, skin of her cheeks torn by tears.

“Oh Priya.” Amrita draws the resisting body into her arms, one hand pushed deep into Priya's hair. Priya holds herself rigid, passively rejecting Amrita's sympathy. The rain enfolds them both, careless.

Amrita feels Priya's body quiver, hears the girl choke, one sob forced from a tight body. She folds Priya closer, making herself into a shelter from the bleeding sky, arms clutched across Priya's back, forcing warmth into the girl's skin. Priya tries to hold back, breathing unsteadily, but she breaks, her voice stuttering wordlessly and her body melting against Amrita's.

“The bastard.” when the words come, they are small and broken, barely rising above the concert of rain. “After all this time of being together. After asking to marry me.”

Amrita can't reply. Feeling anything she could say would be stupid and trivial, soothing lies poured on harsh truth. She holds the limp, bedraggled body, rain falling upon her shoulders, sliding with cold intimacy over her spine.

“It's the same old fantasy shit, isn't it? We put up with them day in, day out, and then as soon as some leggy white bitch on heat comes along, that's it, you're dumped. You suddenly realise that's all you ever were. Just something to fill the time. You're just the one that shares their life, you're just the fool that loves them.”

Her voice breaks back into tears. “Bastard.” She leans against Amrita, sobbing heavily. Echoes against the angular darkness of the viaduct, drops falling from the metal, amber jewels caught shining in the streetlight, plummeting to shatter against the pavement. Amrita listens to the uncertain rhythm of their wet smack, her skin so cold she imagines it blanching. She shivers, clutching at Priya in an attempt to halt the dreadful, broken crying.

Half believing that she sees ghosts born of her boiling breath, staring down with careless eyes at another city heartbreak.

Amrita feels herself shaking uncontrollably, thinned blood slowing, body shutting down. “We've got to move,” she tells Priya gently. “I've gotta get you home before we both die of hypothermia.”

Priya shakes her head. “I'm fine here. Just leave me.”

“Don't be silly. Come on.”

“I'm not feeling too fucking sensible, okay? I don't want be warm. I don't want - I don't want anything. Just go.”

“No. I'm not leaving you. That's not what friends do.” Raises her head, rain catching her face and obliterating her sight. Eyes sting. “I'm not doing that.”

Priya still leans against her and cries. Amrita pushes herself off her haunches and struggles unsteadily upright. “I’m gonna go call a cab. You stay here, yeah? Don’t run off or anything, else I’ll get really fucking pissed off.”

“Hang on.” Priya feels about her person, bringing a mobile out from somewhere and holding it out towards Amrita. Her eyes stare with a hideous intensity. “Mike...” her face shatters back into pain, a hand pushed through the bob of her hair. “Mike set up an account with a taxi firm for me. The number’s in the memory.”

“I don’t know how to work these fucking things.” She takes the phone. Mike bought that for Priya too. His presence clinging like a malign spirit.

Priya recites the number unsteadily, a weight of unfulfilled promises seeming to resonate with each digit.

Amrita orders a cab, then pulls Priya to her feet and holds her there. They stand in the rain, half blinded by water trickling into their eyes, watching the occasional taxi slash through the mirror of the street, ferrying happy clubbers to the first destination of the new year.