

NOTATION

by David Rutherford

PART ONE: CHARLOTTE

She Could Have Danced All Night

Family legend tells that Charlotte was a whirring girl, spinning from one place to the next endlessly, never bogged down by mud or sand, making gorgeous impossible tracks.

Family legend has it that Charlotte was still just once, light on her father's knee, leaning at a keen angle, face full like she had seen gusts from the sea finally revealed to be a flock of glittering creatures.

Family legend remembers that Charlotte was fixed to a point by Astaire and Rogers – but cannot decide which specific routine put the pin in her.

First Person Form

How can she not think of it as a conversation?

The characters keep looking straight at her. And they keep returning, so much the same, their nomenclature worn lighter than their clothes: names that refused to move with their bodies, words that spoke less than their shoes.

Charlotte is brought up knowing it is rude to ignore someone.

The way that babies take for granted a world of smiles, Charlotte answers the characters. She remarks how lovely the night is in her town of black and white daylight. She agrees the coincidences are funny despite a routinely disgruntled father harrumphing through his life behind her.

There are her hands, turned out, open as part of the talking. And the spine and its delicious shivering. The wit of feet, giddy with meaning, and watchable, like separate animals.

How can Charlotte have anything to say to the rest of television, when all it does is turn its shoulders in, ask her to perch there observing such still people and their selfish involvement in one another?

A Body of Work

It seems unfair, to her, how rarely Ginger got to dance on her own; and she can never warm to the muscular technicolor of Ann Miller, so Charlotte begins on the L-shaped paving outside the kitchen to fill in some of those gaps, to make movements to express the foldings of Ginger's lips, show that skepticism of a back-street girl unwilling to fully trust in making it good.

She shuffles out what is, to her, a reluctant coming to joy.

A Guide for Visitors: Welcome To

The town's a cul-de-sac with only a bottle's throat of land between river and bay along which residents and visitors must squeeze in and out. The houses have stale gingerbread walls and all the sweets lost their colors and peeled off to the pavement, were flattened under foot and tire, their gummy substance diluted by heavy weather until the original tastes were merely a memory.

At the bay's southern tip, the nuclear reactor's rudimentary menace hums grey songs to itself. It won't let people forget the awfulness of wants and needs.

The sun – when it's in that sort of mood – arranges a bouquet of the hills across the water. It's prettier there and that's allowed.

Inside Gestures

Sundays Charlotte considers her hands. Lessons call out the way they can betray you, beckoning reality back into the minds of the crowd. Finish the gesture, one mantra. Find the line through your body, another. Since then, she's come to experience her palms as buoyant, catches them drifting up, floating prettily, uselessly, asymmetrical twins of her anchored feet.

So she wonders if they can be traitors in other ways. If the hand her father holds along the promenade is saying something Charlotte doesn't mean, giving away a secret which she doesn't yet know well enough to keep. Is the hand to be trusted in this routine? Will it cleave to the pavements they take, to the look-both-ways road crossings, the trimming and timing of the roast dinner being worked through at home?

Compared to Charlotte's other parts, the hands seem more kin with the whimsical elements of the weather and the water. She doesn't dare look at the hand unheld. It might be pointing – or worse, dancing – off into the distance of the guttered tide.

Room 1

Room.

That'll do. At a pinch of the nose when feet pedal the smell of years-old cigarette smoke from the carpet swirls. Paisley seahorses prostrate in an ocean of lifeless blood.

Dark for upstairs. Paneling leans heavy. Chairs in corners, tumbled, not all the legs they were born with. Piano, an aside, back turned to the room, keyboard lid flush to the wall.

These bits Charlotte thinks little of. The piano's just the place she lays her bag, spot to station her sensible shoes. Otherwise she keeps to the middle, where the carpet doesn't flow, boards the wooden island of the dancefloor.

She could learn irony here if she wanted to, if she listened to more than the duet of the CD player and the voice of the teacher. Because the parents call it the ballroom. Because their parents called it the ballroom, without remembering if that was a joke and, if it was, who that joke was on. But here's where Charlotte comes to work, where she comes to sweat and blister, comes to beat her growing heart against her skin. Her body's a functional room of her own she can build, and then build again.

It's nearly the whole of her youth before Charlotte breaks routine enough to see what the room used to be, or hear the submarine mumble of drunks in the lounge bar below. When she has a key to the handle-less

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door on the alley and knows there's no film in the security camera that meets her eye as she climbs the stairs. Not that any of it surprises her.

Cheap as back street fish and chips. Lashed with salt and vinegar enough to leave taste reeling. It'll pinch. But that'll do.

Training Her Dreaming

Apparently, she needs less fervor and more control. Needs to stop hurling herself at the floor, learn to let a little bit of the surface in to each writhe and fall.

She is not sure she wants to.

Charlotte listens, but she is not sure she wants to.

At night, by torchlight, under the covers, Charlotte likes to slide out of her night clothes and push herself towards sleep by reading the story of her bruises.

A Guide for Visitors: The Seafront

The hotel curves like an ear cupped to the sea. The sea says do better to the town or the sea's never coming round the town's way again. It'll leave the black mud to dry out like cancerous lungs, show a map of the earth covered in tar. And it'll present a few pebbles which the town can use to test the speed of an object's disappearing down. For all the sea cares, people can swim in their own liquids – tears and saliva and all else they can bear. They can fill up paper buckets and dig with rubber spades.

But the sea's a softie really. Or – more likely – a show-off, or a tease. It comes back, always. Gives the town a daily dose of proper beach. Turns the fairground colors from bruising to brightness, shows blood how to do its stuff. And the hotel becomes a boat that just might float, that just might be arcing escape. Two hours of elegant sense. The possibility of a cruise towards a permanent peace.

Which all ends with the sea withdrawing from promises, retreating back to the low ground of threats. The whole town goes barnacle and tentacle on the hotel for as long as it can. Drags all the sails in, refashions the cloth to resist the wind as extra bed linen. Then the town finally drifts away in the other direction. The hotel is left as phantom hand for amputated limb.

At least when all the water's gone, everyone can see what exactly they are stepping on.

Motion: Double Feature

Things changing and things staying the same.

Concentrate hard and Charlotte can separate them out within her Sunday looking. For example: the drizzle in air that becomes a picture of nothing (like the emptying out a television does each evening) but which on her coat is a solid down-moving, bricked in bits of water building the weight of the walk's obligation.

She thinks her father's pretending when he says he likes the rain, mostly because she never hears him say he likes anything – his usual preferences clear in the habits of his patterns.

They're bound to the park and back again, to the circumnavigation of the model boat pond and its demonstration of rain's surface chaos, or its stillness dreaming of being torn to foaming. First past the buildings fixed by maps, the town's grander scale: paused cinema, curtain-drawn theatre and the shell-like hotel which this grey weather renders whiter, subtracting years from the usual pounded aspirin color.

All the better for seeing when a piece of plaster the size of a herring-gull's open throat falls from the wall under a first floor window ledge. Plants itself in the silent soil of a November empty flower bed.

Charlotte's father's flinch makes it all the way to his fingers: a tighter moment, then a full loosening. Better go in before we head on. Half turn towards. They won't care, but. Two steps forward. Better tell them.

Fiction

Grim focus on things changing and things staying the same as she and they and one and all go merrily along.

Sand Pilot

Right down, under, against the place where concrete cries the tears of its framing, where the sea wall sucks in its stomach to pretty concavity, where rubble has been bundled to take the weight of the sea like a lover – the bearing of the weight changing the stones forever – right down, under here, Charlotte can't be seen by anyone taking the air above.

This is where the sand is most sand, where the mud sneaks least, where she can lay her day aside and stretch as far as the strings of self allow.

From far out, where no one should safely be, Charlotte appears as a child playing but close in it's clear there is no play in her.

Her face is nothing. Whatever exists of Charlotte has gone within, become pure shape.

She does this at sunset simply because it is convenient. When the sun has drunk all the giddy cocktails it made there will be the horizon tilted to the vertical and spined inside her.

Donkey Jacket

Once, when Charlotte took up her father's work coat from the carpet and staggered under the unexpected dread weight of it – the shoulder patches more tarmac than leather, cloth like pitch and bitumen, the smell of it all of smoldering road, disaster aftermath distilled as safe fragrance – and she held the sense of just how much she was still child, no matter the wear in her toes or the built expertise of her bones.

Once, when she watched him at the job just off her long route home from school – the way that opens to the shifting sea, that counts the endless yes/no of vacancies – and she saw him move beneath that coat and his breath's December steam as if all the weight was held by puppet strings and a spade might be a silver-topped cane so she thought what a dance that humans were, no matter what, and what a shame that was and what a payment that was and, after that pause whispered into her routine beside the sign of that road he was remaking, how – once – she skidded home, resistant to the friction of pavements and waited to witness the work coat being hung atop her own.

Collection of Universal Possibilities

Charlotte takes her films with a “Gowns by...” credit, likes to see a dress travel, and a finely angled cocktail tease the light, but gave up early on elegance for herself.

Too little height for it, and something clear in her chin so pugnacious – as if it wouldn’t just take a punch but throw one too.

Aside from swaying towards shimmering black and white presentation of stories, Charlotte doesn’t go in for sentiment. She’s seen too much of that shuffled around town – keeping one side of the summer throng coming back, keeping the other stuck around, that feeling changing hands in the grubby grooves of coins. It keeps their eyes on flashing rides; leaves their hearts in off-season.

She won’t come to love anything above reality.

In motion fluent and heady as the bay bore, Charlotte will still remember the blooming blisters laid at the graves of her slaughtered feet, be aware of how hard she’s trying not to grit her teeth. That’s the lesson of the sea: all the surface flash and the meat underneath.

Anyway, who needs another girl trying to be pretty and failing?

Not a seaside town wearing its perpetual adolescence and false eyelashes. There’s only so far and so fast someone can move when they bear an entire film crew upon the pads sewn into their shoulders.

Fiction

Beauty's too busy to stay tethered to stillness.

The Miming of the Theme Tunes of 1989

This is music, is it? This round and round, this over and over, this swerving to the very end of emotion. An idea of music at this particular moment.

Two of them in the room (if you don't count the people behind the screen): Charlotte leaning forward; her father reclining. His voice also supine: no spirit in his dismissal, no investment even in misunderstanding.

Meanwhile Charlotte's frustration is the disguise of construction, that nothing bodies are doing offers the basic impression of generating this production – there's too little discipline in these strumming stabbing repetitions.

Next on, the nature program. Which also won't go far enough. She needs more than Attenborough intoning. She wants a digging camera, inside the heart, inside the lungs; shown subjects moving with the whims of blood.

She's leaning forward; television's only standing back.

Like a father apologizing for a percussive cough into the flimsy wall of the newspaper behind her back. The articles between his head and his lap.

The Whole Thing Off

All in pairs. The past she can't touch and the future she can't taste. Other girls in jeans and trainers – walking hard – on the promenade. The tide coming in and the tide going out. The hotel guest and the early-rising server who make a neat breakfast together. The sand piled on both sides of the sea wall. The striker and the goalkeeper – their goalpost jumpers. The grand painted screen of the front houses and the torso of town naked behind. The lights over there and the lights over here. Sunset and its threatening reflections – both worlds burning down. Nature-made and man-maintained. The shouting kind of anger and the uselessness of it. Mum and Dad. Ginger and Fred. Narrative under two speed scenery – sky racing and mud staying. Wings of birds that tickle the surface. The tide coming and the tide going. What is hidden and what is shown. Her feet. Intention of choreography and the experience. The distant world of ballet and the toe-keen dreams. The seaside ballroom tradition and the British holiday's desperate state. Luxury and the north. Hotel's improbable curve and the straightness of every building else. School and home. Doing and moaning. Dancing and whatever. Bacon and eggs. Ginger – and Fred (who, with all his dapper dressing and mugging complications, the tide could take and not bring back, for Charlotte's sake).

Cross Curricular Cross Country

They come to Happy Valley and Golden Hills, arrive at Sandy Banks and on Mount Pleasant – names that impose undulations onto a flat landscape.

They bring in accents that peak and trough their walking way through the syllables. All through the summers Charlotte listens to standard conversations being sung around the tune, some tongues jazzy with sherbet, some thick with ice cream blues.

And she learns to kiss with the kids from these caravan parks. Those landlocked lips that taste of less. They're looking for a story – which makes them pretty easy, really. And it's good to know her secrets will leave town in a week, how far she goes disappearing into the distance while the present truth remains just her version of it. And only in another place – a distant landlocked island where salt is preserved in its place on tables – will Charlotte become bike or dyke.

Odd moments when it is nice to imagine remaining someone's special someone. Though when the dreamier ones come along, she's always careful: never fakes the same address twice, flits from Lakeside Gardens to Hawthorn Villas, smudging at least one letter as a means of encrypting each postcode, a hint that a solitary tear might have been unluckily bestowed.

Charlotte's sixteenth summer, girls with whom she's shared uniform distortions and heat-stuffed classrooms make up bingo cards for dobbing in the different voices they take to their lips. The rest of the north boxed

Fiction

into a simple grid. Everywhere below Birmingham put into one square, bottom right.

From mid-July onwards, at the drop of every sunset, Charlotte listens for the gasp of house, wafting through the grip of the speed of the rides.

Trying Hangover

Charlotte huddles up with apathetic memories in her father's massive jumper. She's stretched it shapeless through the course of a week of time-killing June evenings. Body boring under the tent of it pitched over her knees, she looks through the young men to the boys inside them who never seem to leave.

Once upon a time it was climbing frames and roundabouts and swings they could twist into iron knots. Then, anywhere with an overhang. The beach feeling like other people's: too much their grandparents' ideas of delight and too advertised. They stand back a moon's distance and spit phrases synonymous with, a seaside town without the bleeding sea. No targets hit.

Older, still with mouths of jellyfish, they wait in the car park of the boarded pub that lends its name to a bus route's end. Here's where the pier started before it was storm-stomped in a year they're an inch too young to remember, and what was left of the structure was hauled off to give the sea the chance to repair. While the town shrunk a little bit more.

They'll pass round and scrounge most anything digestive but the rule is no one goes saying that a logo is plastic – or market. Especially if it is and everyone knows it.

And there's – even this evening, after the last and rest of the week's evenings – the possibility of leaving. But it'd take more than the puddles of petrol that they can afford, and a drip-feed diet of engine roars. Still more than the repetition of the names of the cities they wouldn't know

where to begin with. Or the rumors of what will be happening in a field beyond their map range. Like their car parts, culture comes in second hand. Cold salvage.

These leaning lads – if they crumpled themselves up among the beer cans, or viciously stubbed out their own hands? Might they be glad to be swept away in the council's pre-season cleaning? One less rusty stain to note the shape of the growth of on the pavement. Here they are drunk on imaginary liquids, synthesizing fuel from the skin of younger girls' fingers.

The jumper returns to Charlotte's father's drawer without his notice. The new memories tuck in there too. Just bits of fluff to pick off. Stolen to lose.

The Light Reflects Upon the Water Left

From the bay she learned looking out. She learned shifting paths; she learned the rhythm of sunsets; she learned the different shades of what gives and what takes.

From the bay she learned what is vicious in flatness; learned the triangles of birds in the residue of stalking and in flight; she learned the mating songs of the arcades.

She learned warnings.

She learned looking out.

She learned to kiss it quick, and to cry into the wind.

Fresher

You grew up by the seaside, they gasp. That must have been amazing.

And it's not the wide sky they are thinking of, not the amphibious birds, or the wounded skin of the water healing over the toes. No, it's the inland side of the line: the candy floss, the rollercoaster, the windmill golf.

Charlotte can see in their eyes the idea of every day's journey to school as a donkey ride.

Wasn't it exciting, they say, so much to do and ice cream for your main course every day, and a series of crushes hitting you like dodgem cars – or the other way around?

The thing is, Charlotte can't even say they are thinking of the residents at their best – they knew them desperate; they knew them ruthless. What they witnessed was the gaudy focus of an osprey rending its first kill for days, mistaken for the common form of eating.

Happiness can't exist at such a pitch – like a dance can't be always. There must be stillness. There must be the rest.

Charlotte remembers her coat tugged up over her neck, in the salt sharp winds of January, turning her back to the arcade's façade, letting the movement of the lights behind begin to reel through her mind.

She thought a twitching dance of temptation dripping into a vacuum.

Fiction

How to explain this? It was alright, she sbrugged. Bit odd, I suppose. All that hurry in summer, then the long run through winter, you know.

Contact Improvisation

Traffic lights are trampolines – should Charlotte think of cars and roads as different body shapes within the same species. Such the kind of fanaticism to which her logic’s now trained. And that awful sweating dream of fluidity, the final tread taken on a staircase that casually becomes the first step of a dance, is also a pumpkin that is permitted to keep a pair of ballroom shoes, bouncing imprecisely against Christmas, Easter and Summer too.

No one told her it would be easy. She wasn’t shown this artist’s impression of a community.

Rehearsals, classes, lessons, reading, theory – all need whittling into one sharply pointed pencil. In the lighting booth a heart sits with its feet up, reading a broadsheet, making bland remarks upon an occasional headline, but not required to do any pumping. Arteries are wriggling up an independent head of steam.

Black box petrol painted. The outside daylight – even when seemingly just waiting on streetlight – is only a slightly slower version of the swirling same.

Impish demons of an unhinged routine. Country reels slung over city wilderness. Linking arms – slick and promiscuous so every second thrown into another throw. Charlotte’s feeling of realizing what she’s never known. All Ginger’s excesses of skirt were brilliant misdirection; being surrounded is the gift of freedom.

Restless Environment Exercises

Odd for the land to have the speed. Views over fences. Cranes pull apart the webs of concrete spiders. Bricks like litter. Furniture drawn out of packets. Something of rumbling which might be the sea's jealous thinking.

Tip-toe walking. How a student's always between the lines of a city's writing. All that practice at keeping her balance. Those broken nail buildings. And the sand and the soil beneath a reputation.

Charlotte can't slow down. Sitting still is a thrilling row with her lower limbs and her wide-eyed lungs. The closed doors of the studio freeze her hand. Bone ice as sharp as the day's last goodbye.

All the blink and squall of the Oxford Road means dreaming dancing won't leave her alone. All the skin's salted need. To be ever motion, constant target.

It's not the same for everyone. Classmates don't want to bite time down to its cuticles. Doesn't matter to them if the library has a robot's face, or that its curves only go round to there.

Charlotte can't keep going to the Spar on spurious excuses. Can't keep looking lasers through her curtains.

She needs an entire estate to swing herself at. She needs to box in a space her body can map.

How to Destroy Comfortable Stories

The first show begins to breathe in the dust of a sun-shy bric-a-brac palace, with a book crouched on a shelf beneath two squirrels stuffed ferocious. It coughs itself up from the book's analysis of certain human poses, the telling behavior of men and women towards one another. The author has the air of a wishful thinker. The book – and some of its dust – originates from 1968.

She takes tableaux from the book and explodes them. She takes the certainties and animates them. She takes the apparent alphabet of body language and makes it into visceral physicality. She starts on stage with her legs crossed. Then she ties and unties her arms, her stomach, and her audience. She makes knots.

The lights hold for longer than is comfortable on her return to stillness. She is castled in motes of sinking dust. The music is done. Her breathing does its work. She waits on the front edge of the stage, legs – crossed calf to shin – reaching out like wishful thinking.

Joe Bloggs on the Way to the Shops

Charlotte sees men who have made their whole lives a dance, taking it to the streets, walking it like a dog. There's a drag in the shuffle that says I'm young and I know it, that boasts of embracing awkwardness while it can still be avoided. And there's the swagger there, too, hips throwing out, you're old and you know it, begging for disapproval like the burnt out car by the bus stop.

She sees these circular beings, their torsos swelled to rolling things, layers of clothes permanently rinsing and tumbling, but what they know of bodily ambition wouldn't fill a shoelace; their freedom fits under a bucket hat and into anorak pockets.

She wants more commitment from them. She wants it as a group piece. They should reel themselves in and out from the town hall, getting into the faces of the non-conformists' statues, to the accompaniment of brushed drumming by trailing denim and lazy pigeons – the men's rubber-soled shoes curling in quiet adaptation to the city's paving.

Direction of Travel

Isn't everything expanding? Like the noise of the aluminum can moving like a rabid rolling pin over the floor of the carriage. Like the distance she's trying to cover.

Charlotte's cutting it fine for Christmas. The absence of her housemates is already a cupboardful of dishes; the Radio Times has ticked off a bunch of old favorites.

And, yeah, partly she needs the shifts that she's chosen not to miss, but mostly she doesn't want the town which she's chosen not to miss. She prefers the bar's meaningless apostrophe: her possession by a made-up surname, an exercise in generating a homely brand, the spinning gesture of a towering hollow man.

Better that than hopes and anchors – the latter's deadweight around the former's ankles; fermenting shipwrecks of the acts she was known for.

Charlotte can only sit backwards on the train, trick herself to thinking she's journeying that same way through time. It seems the only how that'll make her destination likely to arrive, and the only chance to make its smallness right.

Because isn't everything expanding, except in Charlotte's lap, where a scarf and a fist are both wound up awful tight?

The Beginning of the End for Her First Boyfriend

a. Poster: Investigating Agency

Two black-clad bodies. One pale face, open and anxious, one face masked. The mask is easy and unsettling. The bodies hold themselves in shattered air. The one with the mask steals the place where the shadow of the other ought to be, given the bright light that tears into the scene from the top left. Ink from the images breaks over the borders. The title is bottom right, stenciled along the arms and across the shoulders of an uninhabited raincoat – the kind with the belt at the waist. The kind from spy films.

b. First Night Reviews

And she can scratch precisely in to him the long-broken patterns from the teacups used for best and for worst by the character's grandparents; and she could gasp out the strangeness of the first tug of tea in the character's mouth. She is able to send him blinking through a twelve-album photographic expedition flattening the locations where her creations have provided wind resistance.

If he likes, Charlotte can scare him with the speed with which fictional memories coagulate. The tourniquet of the weightiest stakes, the morphine of the highest danger.

But why not tell it? he says. Why not write it down? Why not give us a story?

The worst of it for her is the bits of his face, small in shadows of lips and eyes, which tell/write/story the way he will not trust himself to know the answer.

He continues: If you've thought that much – if you've thought so far – Why make it so

–

c. All That Is Unforgiving

How can a body be – obscure?

She sits on the bus and simmers. She sits on the train and seethes.
Charlotte carries his language all the way home.

She looks at the obvious bones of her hand. She gouges a bleeding scowl in her face. She considers every piece of clothing that couldn't be drawn any tighter and the amount of buildings which could be wrapped within the material unfurled from the sum of these garments. She sees it like an advertising stunt – or an act of terrorism.

She walks from the station. She'll arrive unannounced – the house more unready than it's ever been (February not a month of visiting) and her mother making questions in the kitchen.

She awards a glance to every window she passes. She determines to know herself without rehearsal.

She thinks of how close she has been to his face.

She thinks of how she has moved to and from his hands.

She thinks of how through him she has been.

She wonders how many meanings have caught and have held – and, if so, how fast.

Fiction

She makes fists. She makes pace. She takes the stone on the park path to give a moment's anchor to a kick.

She lets herself really mean the absence. She makes the space where a body could lapse into bitter solidity.

Graduation

Because every community falls off the edge of eventually.

One bag must be first to wobble away, crabbed on a sweating back, a bulky obstacle to hugs and hugs.

Because home summons; or living expenses are granted only by parental approval of direction of travel; or jobs dictate terms in the blue, green, black of the major routes.

Some stories of their futures were written long before the new inventions of lively characters and placed in settings more easily sympathetic than a city spitting gobshite and drizzle.

These are really holiday endings.

Beyond the raving of laid-back sirens, and the scrape of cranes juggling bits of buildings, is squashed the softness of long-term possessions. The broad hard stuff is all staying put.

Not for Charlotte the rare convenience of bundling her matter into a pre-booked taxi. She's staying and thinking about a new kind of spontaneity, a different crack to make in residency.

She claims life with strangers over the possible succor to be found in minor friendships, treats that little she knows as roaring demons, goes inside the firm lines of tiny adverts for vacant places.

How she lands in a vaguely legal attic reached by a ladder that looks like a finger left to linger on a mouth and, on stripped floorboards that beg for silence – a room in which to practice lightness and confinement – unpacks little at a time.

It's not the private spaces where Charlotte wants to spread herself out. There are all kinds of emptinesses waiting and she needs to find them for herself now.

Something as New as an Old Feeling

Headphones hold her tight. Swooning tumble bluster bulges. Music pushing pins in every organ.

She waits to know which part of the stilled her will flinch first. She thumbs her nose at the wind; at the petty demands of breathing: those aren't movements but the twitchings of movement's dreaming.

Her whole life, she thinks, this stuff, this new sound, punching up speakers in the clubs, must have been inside her. Beats scattering like biblical seed; bass with swollen knuckles and fat lips.

What Melody Maker says is locked in a here and now time frame, seeing no further than the weekend.

Her mouth. Charlotte doesn't know if smiling is dangerous, whether opening wide will let out all of this filling. She looks like a mad scientist's pet project, wired like a rumor of the new half-mechanical human, bones both rubber and brutal.

She looks like all the words of a book layered into the title.

There are places in this city where they'd ask what she's on with a long loving grin; and places where they'd ask just the same with teeth sucked grim and eyes rolled and shaken in.

Someone's finally programmed a computer game where music chases dancing through the chaos of obstacle-strewn sloping platforms.

She Will Fill Their Dead Mills With Her Making

But you know it gets harder. Props are kicked away and the arms must commit to basic vertical stretch, holding up the whole structure and ignoring aesthetics. Charlotte has to scratch out the time and the space and the money, to work her mouth as much as her body to persuade a rotten landlord who's cottoned on to the demand for dereliction and is waiting to be taken up in the spinning wishing well bucket of the city council.

Call in favors. Whistle up acquaintances. Shameless (though it's her own cash put up front in several stages). Spending one Sunday sticking up posters and another reiterating what is rained out or covered over. And now everyone's a designer – it just gets harder.

The posters need to fascinate, from further than arm's length take someone by the throat. Though not so you'd notice in the immediate moment because there's a line of too much trying – and it's a sneaky river you've got to keep an eye on, right, or it'll slink off somewhere to emphasize a different typeface. Hard.

And harder. She has to tape together an audience. People have stopped looking for scrappy saviors. Art's only a part of a package. So friends are shy of forcing friends on a risk into the bits and pieces of the city. While far away or further out or onwards into real adult life move those with Charlotte's previous efforts dipping a toe in and out of their memories.

She's fitter, stronger, more strangely productive than the studying years when she could have nothing but dance to think of. Possible steps haunt

her like raindrops. The beats run ever wilder but she's got the guile to track them down. The practicalities harder, yes, but a waltzing to the ambition. With the correctly imperfect location, Charlotte thinks she can show the way a body deftly warps history.

Endless Regeneration

When the hangover's wearing off. When the energy's burst and blown.
Lottery tickets rocking and rolling in the gutter. Heads flushed in toilets.

Charlotte has seen people dancing only with their feet. Charlotte has seen
people dancing only with their arms. So many eyes scratching the DJ.
Stuck in the groove of the moment.

Community that couldn't outlast a dance craze. Warmth that burns a
brand on the back of the hand. Scratch it sore. Get lost in the infection.

New civic direction.

Feel the city accelerating, headlong permanently towards the evening –
inevitable as a tram's destination. Old stone struck against new design.
Soft firelight synthesized.

If it could always be evening, with money slipping into a bottle's
emptying. A whole cast of extras try to be people with jobs more said
than done. Days spent taking personal calls behind computers without
screens. The new favorite genre of comedy-drama. Something like life. In
between serving drinks, Charlotte can down a joke. Or calculate the speed
per minute of her hourly wage.

Here comes the DJ's daring deceleration. Here's his drop. Patrons greet
them both with nods. Movement small enough to be absorbed into
conversation. Soundtrack to, not music of.

In the new bar world that's the clearing up of the old work world, there are no spaces for dancing. Clear dialogue privileged over bubbled action. Canal suspension over river rolling. Nothing of the night and everything of the evening.

Improper Property Speculation

Charlotte found it tough to countenance pebble-dashed semi-detached as luxury. The garden view of surrounding fences or back rooms of the house, with some windowed human motions or other, most often her mother, diligent at the kitchen sink.

And round their streets with the names of different places – English towns with racecourses – where if she looked half-eyed every man was the image of the image of her father, hard to notice anything even partly remarkable. Child, she tended, despite her apparel of grazed knees and neutral colors, towards the princess view of architecture so the more a house looked like a tower the better, drawing Charlotte to the awnings of the many-storied seafront array.

Older now, she follows her father's point in the city (they don't come down much) when he wonders who'd pay the ransom demanded to live four floors up in third or fourth hand riverside bulk.

Both know how the guesthouse castles back home (she couldn't go up more) have been sacked, broken into awkward flats available for sums of low enough humor to make even Charlotte's wages laugh.

Perhaps a man who buys a house with a driveway but never owns a car knew what he was doing all along; and maybe Charlotte is always too careless about such English privacy, has been wrong to enjoy her wordless resistance to the shouting city.

Their collections of half-informed, half-inhabited opinions could live together in the third bedroom – muss up and muddy the linen that’s been stored there, waiting for years for guests to appear.

Appropriate Footwear

Exercises measuring the arm's length. The shrillness of the early evening shift. Children's heads, bowling balls; earth and moon views. Scores tick over in some distorted time and motion survey.

The Superbowl.

With constant logo of polo shirt, sweat fried deep into the stitching, behind a succession of counters Charlotte's kept in rotation. Some of her mouse-hole rent; few of her movement needs.

Shimmies gathered into the arcing arm. Inelegant halts. Guttered dancing.

This warehoused version of seaside. All the noise of scattering. Trigger moments. Explosions.

The shoes follow her from the building. Carved down the middle in ugly intention. A gang of red and black. The blood and the rotten after.

In tram tracks, in hubcaps, in packs of checked shirts she sees them pigeonholed. Under her eyelids, the shoes are given, tied, removed, given back. A dance always being refused. An endless warm-up.

Even beneath the stage lights of the smoothed-over car park – eternal surface – these hauntings are a repetition she can do nothing hopeful with.

A Last Stand

No music. Sound of effort.

Come on audience. Give it everything.

Scratched through title. “A piece by – “Vague as pencil.

One passage just the mutter of a beat per minute. Her foot in pixels. A body rolled brittle. An LED time limit.

Sequences rewinding. Slower each time. Pushed without. A doll pulled through. A demonstration.

Beyond the obvious. The question she’s always wanted.

The same question repeated.

How can you stand this?

The doll to the pocket. Blood-filled language. Meaning pictured as a night-washed crisp packet.

PART TWO: JONATHAN

The Perfume of His Mother's Voice

Always the flowers in the vase on the table; always suspending the gaudiness of August.

Homework in the shadows of that, four-thirty till six; piano with his back to this, from six until seven.

Back to the table for dinner, then, and for another house this might be where they let god in. What they have, though, is, “standards, Jonathan”, and not the kind that Frank Sinatra sings. These don't get you, under your skin, but they handle love with the correct pieces of cutlery.

Always the flowers in the vase on the table; always the stillness of the crop of the hothouse.

The Nuances of Diplomacy

Life on the outside edge of a bracket.

There is the curve the crescent makes, leaving the house in the middle of a moon that never keeps to its promise of fullness. A street forever drooping on the cusp.

Here is the car Jonathan's father takes, leaving the house in the middle of another year that will drive through far more days of absence than presence. A vehicle pulling tight the loop of its journey.

Can you know a man simply from his goodbyes and hellos? Can you sound the depth or judge the heft of someone from just their hand moving in and out of the shake?

Jonathan hopes that he can.

Jonathan is too aware of too often depending on temporary bindings of his hopes and his hands.

Neighborhood Watch Schemes

How to be an only child.

Stand by the windows street-side. Become an expert in the times that other doors open, in gaits, in cars' starting and stopping motions.

Place meanings on the sagging degrees of the shoulder of the postman. Cough and sneeze out exposition so every narrative verb becomes host to its own diseased, melodramatic shadow.

With each parking of a workman's van, renovate the interiors – lurid suburban glamour.

The only taken box at a frothed-up domestic opera.

When he's older Jonathan will compare the touch of any woman's finger to the brushing of a curtain against his cheek. A stroking (either / or / neither / nor / both) of wistfulness, of frustration.

Or linger by the kitchen window, tap rearing its cold neck beneath the chin, a glass in hand poised, unfilled.

Learn the names of birds, and impose reason on their miniature journeys. See cascading feelings where none probably exist, their patterns sketching a theory of how memory is written. Wings, leaves, wood, light, raindrops all bouncing.

Fiction

Cherish the long-tailed tits, the goldfinches – species that come in clusters then swoop into elsewheres all together.

Notice the blackbird: his beak-bright salvage round the base of the bird table.

Instability Inherent in Early Photographic Processes

First day of grown-up school and Jonathan is overcombed and straightened to the point of breaking. From the tugged together air, his mother forces pictures and Jonathan sends his tongue to search for his lungs – leaving all of his questions to grind at his molars. He feels he is being waved into danger. The vocabulary in his head is that of governmental collapse, of evacuation, of failed diplomacy. These are the words taken from his father through keyholes, or heard in the infrequent low moaning of the similar accent of the television. He knows it's all irrational – a deep crime in this house – and he can't believe that the lexis of crisis is really relevant, but his mother seems closer to excitement than he's seen, her face fighting agility. Against the other hand, half Jonathan's fingers flicker, play a small pattern that has no chance of growing. Yet the high notes ring out from the photographing.

Performance, With Reservations

Blue goes up to a place above the lungs on the walls around the school hall. A river to be leaned against, one cosseted from tidal whims, not to rise or fall.

Royal blue. Prestige ruffled in curtains pulled for once – a rare hand over the daily yawn of the stage.

Blue. Kinds of it scattered through the audience – in eyes, in veins.

The Summer Showcase.

Jonathan's first real performance (or so he's told). The bill's youngest: a punch his mother can throw amongst the proud outfits, to crown careful parental couture with a bruise. Some revenge for the purpled shins some older boys have taken care to color in for him, between the guidelines of the bones.

Nothing much in that, though. That's the common blurring of blue. Each of the squirts carries for now their own excuse for victimhood. There's worse than music. There's the toe-curling rumor that one of his classmates dances.

Anyway, the moment he has to hand. Jonathan – first – pays dutiful tribute to one of the usual composers. Does it with brisk competence.

Wouldn't do to emote in this space of minor reverences.

Polite applause. His mother's looking around it; no one's clap is more reserved than hers.

Domestic Service

Does the game remain hide and seek if one person plays both parts simultaneously, and if what they seek is to hide?

The best cleaners achieve a finish that might be described as unobtrusive. Afterwards a house looks as if nothing has ever happened. So Jonathan's mother says.

School holidays with little form for the gaping days. Except Mondays, Thursdays. There's the game. The cleaner takes her stately progress through the chambers (to be anything at all, the game requires this elevated language); Jonathan avoids leaving even a shadow of his presence in the domicile. Sometimes he capers ahead, sometimes he sashays behind. Always he blends his breathing with the swiping, scrubbing and squirting.

Workers with high standards are becoming ever harder to find. So his mother says. Overseas, her husband knows nothing of such difficulties.

Towards the end of the game, when most of the house's workings out have been erased, the two participants' positions must be exchanged. The landing is the place. One point where Jonathan allows himself – in the mirror shaped like a landscape painting – brief evidence of his own existence.

The cleaners grow younger while he ages. Their movements are shorter and more violent; their clothes less uniform, more television. Jonathan mimics his mother's voice to say this.

The game develops a higher level of risk: a tight-rope plaited with observation and discretion. Now what the player needs to hide is his seeking.

In a School of Blue Boys

In margins. In corridors. In liniment. In changing rooms. In found/borrowed magazines. In novels and in plays and films.

In history. In dictionaries. In rumors. In distances. In older and just younger sisters.

Not in their mothers.

In half-masting trousers. In slack-shouldered jumpers. In VHS pauses. In daydreams. In gel and combs. In elaborate scenarios.

In agitation. In boredom. In science. In art. In catalogues. In street perfumes. In slippery questions. In ridicule.

What is a girl like? What does a girl like?

How do they feel and how do they feel?

Do they wait for a boy writing tentative songs?

Do they want the bland love of the radio?

Will they hold hands that know an abundance of
chords but very little of the truth?

In solitude. In groups.

How do they feel and how do they feel?

The Suitable Child

Jonathan's mother's husband. Father in conception. Father in absentia. Possibly husband in those too but not something a son cares to understand.

Dedicated servant to the idea of his country. Dedication apparent primarily in the hot hearts of other countries. So many chaps to catch up with on trips back to the idea. Long lunches. Courses spreading like summer butter and winter flooding. Dressed dinners with hosts known by definite articles and plural surnames.

Leave the boy at home.

One visit, one formal father/son question/answer session. Mid-morning. When the newspaper's lowered and the sun gnaws on the leather covers of the study's furniture. Is Jonathan the suitable child? Does he know the suitable way to a suitable life? Where should the correct folds be made when packing a case so it stays packed and it remains a case? The folds aren't merely literal folds, you realize. And the world is only complicated for those without the faith to simplify.

Every second Christmas Jonathan is sent a watch. What men give. Sometimes he puts them into lines on top of the piano when his mother's not at home, plays with an orchestra of metronomes. Lacking further occasion for so many faces, some evenings he unscrews the backs to look at the working, wondering if other clickings would come from the parts in different arrangements.

Better still to look at the boxes that wear the watches so beautifully, that even with such purposeful emptiness appear more substantial than Jonathan's wrist. Because when a box opens and opens and opens again, it becomes a map to what the box has been; because a box can have a torch shone in and the available shape redefined by the fall of the torch's beam; because music comes in boxes; and pianos are just boxes; because, because, because, because.

From interviews, Jonathan discovers that decisions in the midst of being taken are not so good as ones hardened with months of sunburn and blisters. He sets himself to sleep on calloused skin and a pureed-pea mattress.

Time seeps into everything.

Even polish. Even tightness.

Room 2

Room.

But perhaps not. Could be a cupboard. Yet intention of a room, Jonathan supposes, as a space where one is meant to linger. With piano, timpani (no hammers for the latter). So, also, sense of a cupboard – place to keep loudness.

Opens halfway up/down (which one is optimism, he wonders? Sky or exit?) the narrow back staircase, the one no official tour has ever acknowledged.

No windows. Vent in the very top back right corner. Slow air. Lagging two days behind the outside weather.

Strictly off-limits to junior students. Use only by permission of Head of Music. Jonathan's by-day place to disappear into doing.

Strange empire, with rugs hung and laid everywhere. Flashes of the exotic in design and color. Plenty of overlapping and no care taken to avoid clashing. Waiting for sound to be hurled against them.

Bare bulb on long cord. Sometimes Jonathan sets it swinging.

Practice a back and forth interrogation.

As the Music Stands

Boredom, now, with all these sweeping gestures. Stuffed rooms. Notes as desperate ornaments. Carnation heads inside balloons. Jonathan winces at it the way he winces at silent film acting.

And his own performance all flatbacked. The stalls long for transportation. Only feeling enough in him to inflate hopes.

Not easy, symphonies – he’s not thinking otherwise, but they’ve come to seem to Jonathan like information you tip for in hotel lobbies.

What might be bravery fidgeting in his fingers. Time to step into the freedom of limits. Cowardice nibbled at the nails. To run along the wildness of repetitions. Wrists’ stress injuries. Re-fashion some of the old ambiguities of cultivated silence. Itching and scratching; both hands.

When the Revolution Comes it Will Have a Bus Ticket in its Back Pocket

Further in. That's where he's going. There he is, stepping some urgency into the lope of the crescent. There, pressing like a chord progression, or the suggestion of the same.

On a bus as if it were his routine. Sharing a heat-smear window. Wiping the outside world into blurred existence with his sleeve. Underground even. A steady dive. Warm wind and fizzing tracks: clockwork bellows of the city's breathing machine.

Further in. Reading all the cards on walls of galleries and museums. Words placed over the lines back towards origins. Balancing his eyes on third floor windowsills. Curlicues. Cornices. Finding the shadows of architecture's creases.

In. The music of the scene, then the music of the scene's scene, or the sound of the theory of the scene's commentary on the scene. Playing and all the cartoon movement lines underneath. The tube map version of melodies. Transcribing into pop-up books. Further. Scores and skin cut together.

Always a different stranger beside him on the bus. New breathing straining against his ribs. As if touch comes through headphones. No one waits by the gift shop. He has the script of speeches printed on the back of his teeth. Pencils' self-defeating whispers into notebooks.

Fiction

All of the iceberg. Rendered in a precise diagram. That's ambition.
Parenthesis within parenthesis ad infinitum.

On the outside. Back along the crescent as neat as a keyboard. Nothing to
see and nothing to be seen.

Jonathan Begins His Experimental Phase

Go down, Jonathan. Delve into the guts of the piano.

Knock at each place of each panel.

Make the instrument feel felt.

Go further.

Open your veins over the strings. Split your bones above the hammers.

Growl. Teeth keys. Stomach music.

Understand.

Here's a machine a man imagined, and the gripping of it by modern times.

These might be demons who whisper in his fingers but god, it would be
rude not to do –

Rude not to do what he's asked.

Each Step Potentially in the Foot; Each Stone Certainly in the Concrete

Some parts made earlier: shoes on the strings, as much like treading as a hand can think while it matches the actions of a prepared-even-earlier film (Jonathan kicking early morning out of his local park); the hammers from a dead piano (bought solely for slow dismantling) escaped beyond the mechanism, hitting the keys of a piano still alive and complete – blunter fingernails on a tougher glockenspiel.

Like child challenging clockwork, worrying at contentment with cogs and a pendulum.

Sound reeled around tape hiss. More sibilance from a recording of instrument surface being clothed to a polish. Whole sent rippling up and down volume. The rhythms of insistence in a long-distance relationship.

Through, with, over, round this Jonathan displays some of the usual notes, posts diagrams of how melodies might work. Ten stubby patterns – one for each operative digit. Conveyor belt tugging then halting again. All a kind of brutal prettiness. Suppression acquiring incidental grace. Scrubbing clean a coarsely graffitied wall until a few out of context curves resemble the scattering of a rainbow.

On Certain Academic Terms and Contractual Conditions

The life of the mind. Butterfly thoughts. Pinning.

Oh, and caterpillar days. In the life of a mind of a department, a research context, a field.

There are parameters that are obvious. Office walls. Titles on doors. Library collections – butterfly words all caterpillar bound with covers the last of the summer colors leaking out.

Bag full of common brown. Leave as a day-moth. The paper kind. Fragile. In the mind of a life still striving for pattern. The search for new symmetries. New outlines. Comma splicing.

The eighty-eight keys that can't fit in his mouth. He's yet to find out how high his patience can count. With black and white comes shallow clarity.

Cocoon. Warm for a while – this life of the mind. But not all that quiet. And not so winged.

Within the Phrase ‘Basement Flat’, ‘Basement’ is the Emphatic Word

Not so hard to see the resemblance. Piano as smoothed out staircase.

Comments like that can put a hole through a friendship.

The fraying of too many favors. The inability to explain why this worst of things can't be trusted to the experts.

Jonathan likes the love of amateurs.

Perhaps that's why the basement flat. Perhaps there's no feeling in him tougher than the wish to take awkwardness, with grinning grimace, into a jutting hug.

Not to be said at this active moment of these friendships.

Five steps down. Ten more to go. And the turn near the middle crooked below. The wrongest of all right angles when drawn with a piano in hand.

There must be no whistling. No ironic reprisal of the dwarves' union song. No saying at all. Just gristly grunting under his slightly more than quarter of the weight.

And calm the heart with the thought that at the bottom of this all, this solid hunk of currently neutered music won't be coming up in one piece again. Not if he can help it.

The Undergrowth of Business

Round the back of apparently everywhere, through loose spaces and tight passages, in a place where concrete has yet to be formally introduced to bricks and stone, old railway arches hunch their wings over displaced furniture. Minor histories that explosions left alone.

Jonathan's resorted to looking like a tourist, rather than bluffing his way towards the familiar. He bears bagel crumbs in his creases, a borrowed A to Z and a second-hand satchel as he acts on a tip from a more true local.

Headless lamp limbs. Plague-pocked mirrors. Rows of chairs like ants. Bed frames in spidery crouches.

From the other side of the tracks he hears everyday continuing in the unseen nearby – conversational beginnings of buses – but here's the city as fairytale forest where giants lived once.

Table.

All inelegance and heft, marked at one edge with the shapes of impossible scale fingernails.

Jonathan sees love in them, not punishment – the digging in, the holding on. Drama such as he's never done.

He taps by these legacies as he barter, courage in his hand, thrilled by damage, his opponent a man of drooping pockets and shrugging upper body parts.

All the numbers they knock down from the selling sum climb right back up, count themselves in to the price of delivery.

Early Research Paper Music

Manuscripts and spot the difference. The flourishes of tight handwriting. No saying how another person changes anything. Hole in a doughnut – embrace it. The daily whim of meaning. Playing dot to dot with kicked loose dandelion clocks. The cross words signed and pantone numbers colored in-between the lines. Every puzzle's a frame tossed into a piece of the sky.

He has tall organ tones to be stunted. Stuck out noses that can be broken to the pertness of fashion. Shruggingly ugly rhinoplasty which he will perform on choral harmonies.

Even combined with thick skinned electricity his instrument's an infant beast – all heavy thought, no cunning wind in it. To ride a piano backwards through time is to ask a steam train to pull a plough. Something to witness from behind both hands; something to tell a friend about.

He takes the freedom to forget all that fretting about what goes up and what goes down. Gravity kicks hard inside the piano.

Happy to accept that those in the past knew what they meant; the joy of hoping to say the same for himself.

Life Out of Concert

The pretending the estate agent tried – all that garden flat, natural insulation, up and coming area, shifting cultural patterns, indeed – is pretending he'd dress up less youthfully for his mother (what she'd have made of the tough veneer of that young man's hair, his middle-finger-thin tie, the moment when the light stabbed down into the kitchen and he suddenly tried to catch the sun in his teeth) if she hadn't come so determined to hear all the evidence as a phrase in an argument. No truck with the next street's parade of bus stops. No pity for the upper floors' fading paints of distant trades which mismatch the ground level mini-marts and kebab shops.

She'll ask again why Jonathan feels the need to fake his own starvation. His mortgage nothing but a fallen-flat illusion; his doctorate placebo medicine. Why's he so hungry for struggle? Dishwasher unplumbed to a damp cupboard. Why found a life on unlabeled tin cans? Tidiness momentary relief. Squalor to be an indulgence of privacy.

And only peasant food could sit comfortably on that monstrous table. Broth won't impress anyone, for long.

This is what comes from the music of stiff, studied meaning. This is the result of playing for cheap conceptual poignancy. To think he could be a component of expertise, the largest surface in the orchestra's polished duty. Why squander so much vocabulary?

She won't return here. They agree – oh so silently – on that idea.

Some People Just Don't Know What's Good For Them

There's a sense in which every performance does not, apparently, exist. So Jonathan learns from the keynote speaker at a conference. Which is called 'The Music Without' and happens on a concrete campus of strange elevated pathways, a hanging garden version of a suspended future. The place is so solidly in and over its landscape (and Jonathan is beside a window so knows this intimately now that the afternoon has stretched itself out) as to make the speaker's words about fragility and ethereality and absence more incongruous than they otherwise might be. Because it's not unfamiliar, the discourse with John Cage and with 'before notation', and with the uncontrollable beast that is the audience who just cannot be made to understand that what they are hearing is more than the tune of their own pre-experience or the closeness of the harmonies of their current feelings. Even if the heavy lunch – the roast lamb; its muscled gravy – is gently pummeling his (and probably everyone's) body, Jonathan knows it's the audience who are the real enemy. Chameleonic, with more escape plans than a sequence of P.O.W. films from the sixties, the audience are always ignoring the signs and fences of theory. Jonathan's sleepy thoughts are that it might be better to ignore them right back, to focus instead on how the music built itself into being, rather than how it is. He rolls the past tense around his mouth with the sweetness of a dream of a pudding.

Big White Set

Dowdy baby grand one side of a white cube. Gloss wiped out of the piano. Flat black. Not rising to the projection. Resolutely in second.

Fifty photographs. And fifty pins and needles of music notes in pricks and stitches. Fifty portioned minutes.

Same man fifty times: friend of artist friend walks, sits, stands, lies his way through a day shuffled by machine chance. For each blocked scene Jonathan plays homemade codes. Specific sound signal for repose, and so on. Volume pitches around degrees of in and exterior. Light measured by speed.

Close differences in patience of fingers. Collection of tunes like a locket gallery of family miniatures.

The day's a fiction. It has to be. Representation. A man doesn't stay in place so often; more people fall accidentally background.

One live performance: Jonathan waits for the order, screened from the audience, so aware of their little cloth frictions, half-steps and thumb fidgets, bumps in breathing, jumbling stomachs, hand communions. Whole held hour.

He'd like all that failure of hiding existence of living smeared on the recording but the artist believes in clean listening. Says photography's a kind of scrubbing.

Month of exhibition. Jonathan's stool position loaded with his weight in broken stereo equipment. Self-image in high and low fidelity.

It's All In You Somewhere

Jonathan kept his arms by his side. Never sharpened his elbows. He believes he is capable of great love. Pianos look smooth from the outside. Open, you see all the hung heaving wire that crushes trust. Escapement: felt magic; mechanical juggle. His hypothesis has never been brought to the proof.

Mild in everything but your music, Melissa said at him. Insufferable dribbling of notes. The aggressive wheedling of a broken tap. It's all in you somewhere and I dread it coming out. He liked her in profile. Not when she wouldn't speak in public. Make performance look spontaneous.

Just because he won't kick the world's shins or poke the sun in the eye doesn't mean he doesn't hope. The kindness of Claire washed too white for Jonathan. He kept twisting to see his back, looking for greener grass stains. He waited inside a bus stop with a hostile sloping seat for her to begin to discriminate.

That year he streamlined his feelings, giving records to charity. How he learnt to start worrying and pity his upbringing. In comedy the piano barrels along like a thousand monkeys in a banana hurry. Students sound brash on Fridays and blurred on Mondays. Something about that kindness meant he never went beyond watching.

Spare him from the holy relics of Jerry Lee Lewis. Tough guys rattle like toys being untidied. Every essay ever written should come with a disclaimer: in my opinion; from these examples; one; sometimes – there is still nuance. The upright version placed against an internal wall.

He kept his tongue by his side too – in a scabbard.

A Workaday Melody

That note. That one note. House, transit, work. Work, transit, house.

Middle C. Bare shade of coat. That same note five times. Hit while thinking.

The shape of bread. The size of milk.

One note. Air in bubbles only. House, transit, work. Work, transit, house.

Half a joke in how are you. Questions in reply. Hello in middle C.

Five times that note. Sense of self pinched by the smell of someone else. The pattern of stop. Of go. The pint. The loaf. Too much coat.

That note. Traffic held on one note. Where to put a screw or a bolt – to work the tone; to house the note.

In transit. Go.

Five times, go.

Escapement Mechanism

a

When a conference is held it causes small felt-covered theories to be thrown against the tiny ear bones of those tuned to the specific notes of the scale. The conference incorporates a contrarian mechanism which detaches theories from the laws of logic just before striking the bones so they are skittled by an apple driving a removal van. The exchange of momentum causes the delegates to vibrate, and it is these vibrations which are the origin of the unmusical sound of arguments conducted through analogies of fruit and wardrobes.

b

Jonathan believes he can see the vibrations in all the parts of Dr Appleton's beard, rippling out from the edge of the mouth at the drop of each word. And through the grain of the ice cubes plugged at the bottom of the table's jug of water. He thinks he can feel them – clean steel cold – approaching up his arm from the hand with the knife so he takes the utensil out of the air and harbors it in his hot-plate toughened meat. What kind of propulsion machine can he design on the small blankness of his napkin with only a fingernail and a diminishing puddle of gravy?

Outside dark is flat fallen but there is no talk of owls or the extra weight that night seems to attach to trees. The vibrations again, flung out from a finger raised, sand scattered over a spell. Shirts quiver at the chest like tiny lightning strikes. The tines of Jonathan's fork have crossed themselves repeatedly, a string of stainless knots gathered to a single point. A focused

focus on peas. One of these pieces of grey-green ore for each medley of polysyllabic words in the day. His hands have too many gaps and too many levers and not enough feeling to successfully levitate them. No other agitation of vegetable could garner applause.

a 1

When a conference is held it causes small felt-covered rebellions to be thrown against the apron strings of those hung solely on the specific notes of the scale. The conferences now incorporate escapement mechanisms which detach Jonathan from the informal networking opportunities and idea interchanges so valued by the profession just before anyone strikes the dinner buffet hot-plates with their tepid lights. He exchanges career momentum for taking the train to the next sane stop on the line, loosening a string of slack words about the weather with a guest-house host. He stops seeing violence made miniature in the act of a kettle boiling. He learns that an orange is an un-rhyme-able ball. Listens to the vibrating citizens who are happy to pick up halfway through the origin story of the musical sound. Like those unpeeling their office days in the bulb-sown bar by the old dockyard, nodding solidly along with the DJ's beats which are as stone as the cobbles beneath his feet.

View From the End of Music History

All the notes exhausted, gasping on a beach. Police with skin sickening pushing the crowd back, having commandeered five washing lines. And someone says their makeshift barrier is just like musical notation paper. Wailing begins. One joker tries to harmonize with a piece of genuine grief.

No patterns left across the usual dimensions. Jonathan slows ‘Stardust’ down. So far down there are no time words to describe the way of the tune’s grinding. But listeners still recognize it. The reverie smolders over post-industrial history.

He turns from the means of expression to the means of production. He takes a component from an old song – a simple one – and rolls it out and over in assembly-line fashion. From this block he builds suburbia, an estate in pre-fabricated shapes. Each same space waits for an individual to love it from the inside out.

You know, he would brush the lid for a year with his fists, or arrange the legs unevenly at the knees if that’s what it takes to sound out a new instrument. To make a monolith into a million asterisks.

PART THREE: RESORT

Feet and Words Can Both Be Tripping Things

What brings someone back to the home town at which they repeatedly shook their head; the place they splattered with the angry parts of the sunset, and finally left to the tread of boys with fledgling faces and the postures of invertebrates? What makes a person remember the bitterness of piss against the sea wall on a Saturday morning?

It's discovering that all the train tracks reach a terminus. It's a sense that their forever is skulking somewhere in the past. More, though, more than that – and less – it's a father's body turned into a puppet with a hand pulled out.

Here she comes then, here she comes – out of season, with her skin all tear-peeled plaster. Charlotte clothed in layer upon layer of collapse.

Room 3

Room in its second iteration. Slide-doored sideboard cupboards emptied of sewing basket and photo albums, and the thick tar of 78rpm records, all the family's unbearable ornaments. Two top drawers of paperwork – phone bills, insurance, pay slips, birth certificates – moved to the two bottom. Open shelves relieved of their fragile items: best glasses boxed up against the coldness of the garage.

All the middle of the room all a bed. A bed all the bigger looking for being downstairs. Something of a begging in the swing of the bed's tray table. Where bed and sideboard almost touch, space for just a sideways shuffle. Old serving hatch hidden behind the headboard. No more passage into the room; no secret way into the back of the mind.

Sideboard re-filled with synthetic softness. Medical packets of fluid-proof plastics. Cloths and tissues and stacked containers. A sickly inversion of a kitchen.

Every pillow plumping makes the air denser; every tucking of the sheets tugs the ceiling down. So the air gone bulging. Walking in is breaking through years of spider purpose. An old radio sounds bound by fluff, a permanent fraction off station. Cheap clip-frames display a couple of sea-starved landscapes.

Curtains the part most alive. A determination in their regular unveiling of the garden. A sometimes apparent shaking at the state of the lawn and how the borders of the path are growing undefined.

Fiction

Blessed condensation.

Some Secret Lives We Hope to Find

The shed, of course, was daddy's place. It was also daddy's lawn and garden between the shed and the kitchen.

Her father had a real skill, Charlotte thinks, for hiding his imagination between straight lines and straight mending. She finds it hard to believe that he could spend all that time conceiving something so unremarkable: a grass rectangle with flower beds arrayed on either side like cannon; a set of stones slabbed plumb down the middle.

He was thinking of something else, she tells herself. He was dreaming of somewhere else, she tells herself while moving.

The words help her keep time – help her regulate her breathing – while she makes the gestures needed to help feed him, or is partner in the dance now required to bathe him.

Sedimentary

Charlotte wishes to sabotage the engine while it's on the bridge that draws the line between the bay proper and the easternmost estuary, leave the train nowhere, herself nowhere. She wants to do this at the top or the bottom of the tide, have the train suspended above while the water runs the full extent of its covering, or its revealing, while the blurred beneath tumbles itself into some impression of being fixed.

She might hang over the edge, her ankles held in carriage doors, the blood in her head like the tide as she lies, and again as she stands to take whatever punishment they need to give to her for making nowhere last so long, for leaving everyone just in time and showing them it go, having them realize they only partly recognize what is being left behind.

Viewing the Dailies

Then the sunset appears. For a party trick, the sea swallows fireworks.

Then Charlotte forgets what hangs on her back – the butchered buildings, their desperate preservation in salt.

That view. The distance fizzes across public house gulps and fruit machine laughs.

She spins her memories around her, is the stick inside the candy floss.

She teases minutes to small pieces for her tongue. They slip back into the bloodstream.

Careering Paths – Hotel

The feet get weak, unlucky, crossed beneath a desk. The heart throttles back; the spine begins to make a too solid shape. Charlotte imagines herself as a museum piece: human female in work situation, nineteen ninety-eight.

She could administrate. She has all the skills listed and all her own fingers for counting them off.

Wiser though, she thinks, to be kept restless, to take a Chaplin path through the working day: wriggle forward, shuffle back, loop around the self and the partnered furniture – never sure whether the table leads the chair or vice versa.

Better to keep understanding the body as both a machine and a good read. She will balance plates with the wants of customers as counterweight.

At the start of early shifts she looks for the marks she hasn't made on the floor, steps which other workers would be paid to scrub out anyway.

She knows exactly where these would be, if they were.

Careering Paths – Abundance Studios

‘The fling’ is the thing that Charlotte brings to the second lesson she gives. For the length of a song – thick, rapid – the children can move however they wish. For the benefit of the waiting parents Charlotte breathes the lie that this trains the dancers in spatial awareness. It might. But Charlotte gives the fling as an offering of love. She opens the floor to joy with a bow and a rose plunged between her teeth.

Such sweetness.

And Charlotte’s watching with her eyes and with her body. She estimates students’ sways into her own versions of movements made, translates the youthful babble into precision, or into jargon. She steals instinct. Pushes it down as deep as she can to line the pockets of her muscles while smiling equally deeply at any child who makes eye contact.

She gives space. She allows permission. Who can tell – and who cares – who is winning?

Nice Work If You Can Get It

There are drooping days when the town is left to itself, the view sheltering in an overcoat on its own side of the bay. She reckons she could get away then with serving herself, flicking her demeanor from waitress to diner before the not-very-ness in the eyes of her seemingly hologrammatic customers.

Even in call-and-response bright blue afternoons there's no one bothered to admonish Charlotte for never using the service entrance. This is on the side, under the first floor's uncooked ribs, place of stink and suspicious skitterings, where her blinks fall often, and there is always an up to her looking, an avoidance of for-certain knowing what places teeth on the hotel's bones.

So, instead, progression through the lobby for no reason beyond aesthetic admiration. With similarly no one to inquire which reasons do lie beyond aesthetic admiration (one or two, she'd say, under torture: giving her name and number, before sinking mute as mud-ruined lungs).

The staircase – the tipping place.

There, whatever crumbling ugliness the building blisters itself with, is always a dance, is a stately pace coming to a tilt about her waist, the elegant thrill descending into a debut evening, each flight a cooling medallion. It's the toe to the heel of the stiffness set in every table-laid shift.

A Guide for Visitors: Local Attractions

Have you seen our sunset? It's the asking of parents with a lost child, of a small child lost without their missing pet. For the Romantic poets' sakes keep your eyes wide open and don't you turn your back on the landscape that isn't actually this town's to tout. Unless the stunning stars of the golden age of the silver screen were really ours all along in the way promised by the fan magazines, or by their inhabitation of amateur characters in their most winning films.

They've kept the prosaic residences back a respectful distance and secured long stretches of railing to take your weight, so you can keep on looking out and not become disturbed or tired. They offer hills rising to exoticism, height enough to be of another country, an imagined land of cloud-drunk people, wind-hemmed chiffon.

Hopefully – goes the thinking – there will be enough solar warning flares shooting out of the beautiful unreal to scare you into staying – and spending! – here. Consider that becoming too love-muddled might send you running out across what looks like nothing. They've made this free map with all the roads around to the other bits of the bay erased and Here Be Dragons writ all over the mess that's been deposited exactly where you thought you were getting the sea.

Salt Sprinkled Upon a First Impression

Phone box looking station. No temptation for staying. Automatic doors that won't open, making ghosts of everyone.

Step out into local efforts at Anytown – car parks, proud roundabouts and brand names. Disappointment a whale dried out in Jonathan's mouth.

But he's not reached the sea yet; only beside a signpost for it. The beached whale coming to mind is briny promise in the way the wind tastes. A layer to place over the flatness of town land and imagination.

To the shore! Where the shells are.

The Brochure: A Cover Version

The lager can in the doorway looks familiar from a distance. It's a cover version of an advertised brand. The sky is a friend in the same way: sudden laughter hidden under its puffed-up hands.

At a certain point in the approach the building's damage is comic; like the hotel's an object someone's performed ageing upon, a brutal scaling up of a school project – facsimile authentic.

Jonathan prepares to hold his breath inside it, is ready for a single night terror cough to destroy it, expects to be given a room less cleaned than haunted. The plumbing will speak of accidents; a sequence of malevolent carpets – eager for the living color of blood – will seek to bring his face into agreement with the pattern.

He thinks he might wake in the morning with the tide up to find a copper dragon curled around them. It will be plugged in, the hotel lights left nothing, all available electricity playing scales down the dragon's neck (and this dragon will be all neck). They'd try to screen the women and children but find the young would do their running towards the dragon, and away from the building.

Jonathan takes a more humming grip of his suitcase. He whistles over what his mother would think. He steps into the promenade.

Room 4

Room that with the windows pulled as closed as they can be smells too much of the sea. That has been scratching its skin at the joints, making ragged scabs in the wet flesh of its wallpapers. With a mirror positioned to give back merely half of the available light; a bed that wishes to be left alone to fold into itself. Range of submerged electrics: the bedside radio bubbles up one short breath of static; all five television channels play narratively illiterate cubist animations. The sink has the look of neglected feet; the carpet's a servant of threads and patches.

But these are all the bits you put your back to. The room has windows and the windows have none of the room and the whole of the view.

Jonathan Tries to Take the Air and the Air Won't Be Taken

He wears his sleeve on his sleeve and on top of that another sleeve, thinks about breaking into a rare run back the way he's come to find another thing sleeved.

Jonathan's not – never, ever, seriously – trying to be enigmatic; it's that the wind's erring on the wrong side of direct, cutting straight to the point of his bones. London's huddle never leaves him this exposed; when he looks he sees no one's standing close, unless they are watching, cozy in local laughter, from upper story windows.

It's April, he shouts, and the wind devours his words, dessert for the feast-meat it has made of his skin. Who knew spring came with knives? Or that incoming water spit-splashes winter? The promenade railings are as blue to the touch as any cold sea has ever been.

This is small talk at full volume – an Englishman in open conversation with the weather. He's packed inadequate layers. He's a heart in there somewhere.

Postcard of an Emergency Exit

There's a dampness in Jonathan. Phlegmatism on his chest. So he evacuates before the last session of the conference. He wants to be beside the sea for his health.

He waits for a bus outside a building with a clear longing to be iconic and made into a logo for a letterhead. After the bus, short train and shorter walk into his extended stay: two more unnecessary nights and one-and-two-bits more of grace days.

Behind him there'll be summary of which issues have been resolved and what further matters those resolutions have raised. Academic stature slides from one end to the other on a see-saw. The shrunken dried heads of questions. How hard he must concentrate these days to distinguish their distinctive features. They are flowers briefly bunched and explosively disarrayed.

Give him the hotel and its modernist inconveniences. The sink strangler; the radio of silence. Its flaws can be turned into genre novel titles. The grim tarpaulin. And Jonathan can write postcards to himself about the way the building's skin looks like daisy petals handled by teenagers feeling greedily romantic.

He will pay it attention worth more than the drip of pity or embarrassment. He will fill himself to the brim with fascination. Then tilt at the hip.

Fiction

Let the gulls go up like sirens, as he wrestles the wet doormat back to enter the arc of that blotched bracket.

The Hand in the Sound

He blames the staircase, or the hole it spirals around.

It's like a dare. The perfect drum just waiting for skin – to be touched, to be made audible.

It's laughing at him: with its teeth stained blue and green, mouth full of cocktail foam.

So he takes it on.

He shows his practiced hand, tumbles his notes like a deck of cards. He gives his music knuckles. Eighty-eight keys versus four flights in the title showdown to end all hype.

They punch themselves into echoes, out of tune jabbing out of kilter.

Both delight in the space where a crowd should be – free in this time of its ugly commands.

Somewhere Between a Stage and a World

Ethel and Enid* (*not their real names; Charlotte's invention) in the doldrums of their second cups. Charlotte's made sure the scone plates are gone and the women's bags lie on the table again, hovered over by the non-drinking hands.

This is how Friday afternoons go: these two old women, Charlotte, plus whoever's new enough not to know to swap out of this, the slowest of all slow shifts. The teenager who Charlotte's training (five months of staying power making her that kind of expert in the niceties of the long-fallen-from-luxury hotel trade) has been lured into the warmth of the kitchen, to listen to the two lads there develop their skills of creative swearing, splicing meaty syllables inside the names of vegetables. None of the language as lurid as the supermarket packet that evidences where the cream tea came from – the only homemade element the thumb that levered the plastic open.

And Charlotte's glad to be spared the new girl's too expressive face, that way she's still spooked by the ghoulish moments on the premises when glamour's quicksand corpse slips back out to the surface. Charlotte likes the quiet, likes to imagine Ethel and Enid's ballroom past (that, disclaimer, they may never have had. Charlotte knows full well that only in selective film history was every life that kind of dance).

Sinking into a tendency to try to stick glitter onto dampness, when Charlotte hears music, she curses herself for weakness and checks the reality of Ethel and Enid (still not their real names. Too much reality in too much hurry is like too much anything – sickly). Ten more minutes

before they settle up and move on out to their other ordinary routines that fill the times before the same time next week.

Only as the sound splutters into approximate gorgeousness beyond her level of dream knowledge, does Charlotte understand the music as a solid. Thus she slides with all her silentnesses into the lobby to see a man plucking the neglect out of the piano, veiling white obliviousness over the hotel's grief, filling the staircase with appearances and announcements, liquid gowns and pomade slickness.

Her shoes eased off, in hushed bliss of stockinged feet, Charlotte dances slow and sweet, striving for unseen agreement.

Merge Moment

Sliver of motion on the edge of her larger dancing. At her back a knot's little unbecoming and then the consequence of straps unbinding.

Flicker of sound in a softer timbre. The brushed cymbal of apron and floor kissing.

His hands stay sunk in his last chord. She remains in her last figure. Beginning realizing. Realizing beginning.

The rising beat of rummaged blood.

Peeling paint and untuned dust. Light poor enough to muddy a blush. Shadows the fuller part of the design. In every shard of air the room's alive. An elastic moment of between. A staircase springing down itself.

There was a man playing a piano. There was a woman dancing. Now both are only looking. They see the hotel's bludgeoned aspirations. They see radio pictures.

They see each other. Wait, says Charlotte. Don't go anywhere.

Back to her employment briefly, while he keeps checking there's an apron on the floor.

PART FOUR: AMUSEMENTS

Together in Ghostly Choreography

To be real people. Abandon the piano.

To be two people. Flee the hotel's bulging past.

To be just people. Shuffle lines of streets between themselves and the sea. Turn the wind off as they leave. Move through the accepted silence of the world's all along noises in their arrhythmic tuning-up harmony.

A municipal bench designed to be a bench and nothing else. Here are the shop names that chain-link Charlotte and Jonathan to anywhere. The gravity of the ordinary. No longer can anyone convince them the world is spinning hugely in two directions.

Bodies as mannequins, they lay out some histories. What dance cannot say. What music doesn't hear. Temporal. Portable. Dizzy concepts; solid words. Drifts and impulses gifted unlimited vouchers and settling for buying multiple replications of the one outfit.

To be people, first. Then individuals, distinguished. To rise and walk, to be brave enough to risk meeting the character of the place smoking on any corner. To mark a sympathetic arrangement. With all the surging jollity about what occasion demands a bow and when it's necessary to mock yourself with a curtsy. Where to draw the parentheses in which a performance lies anyway.

Translation

He watches.

She lights up: not in flame but with luminescence that sprays the surroundings. She becomes a speck of nothing on the ground and goes under sound. She is demolition in the air. Walls ripple away from her.

He watches and watches and watches and watches.

She rushes through the alphabet and puts it to sleep.

Music As Imaginary Objects

Play something harder. Play something in a shell. Play the crisp edges of a definite shape.

Play a thing with corners. Play a staircase.

She goads him on and on.

A nonagon; a windmill blade; a frying pan.

His mind is slow but his fingers produce.

Play a dishwasher, she shouts. Now play a man mimicking a dishwasher.

And play the bay mud coming up through a plughole. Play it taking your dry clean hands.

Days of Rest and Creation

Sunday morning and a space in a sun-cut crevice of the day, their backs against the wall, the wall against the wind. Charlotte tucks up her feet beneath her body, Jonathan pockets his hands, and they roam in other ways.

He tells her his four-day version of the town and she digs out the rootings that seem the least wrong. They hoist her little life in ragged garments in front of a funhouse mirror. See/love in watery symmetry.

They assemble a new creature: a pouting seahorse, walking on crab claws, its cockles and muscles all alive-alive-oh!

It's a landed lover. A danceless cloud god with a grubby toolbelt. It starves for breath. Instead, it sucks in glamour.

The Great Artist is Known by the Handling of Transitions

While she dances and he plays, Jonathan nurtures new curse words – every time he lowers his eyes.

Those curses are to be cement, thick enough to block the channels that split the keyboard into its separate notes. Because now he really knows that she has no between, that her moving from one phrase to another is also phrasing – that she owns the more complete machine. One like the bay when it's all water, or all fastened channels.

She's a system for pulling down the whole sky. He's still hoping his digits can turn their function into something prettier.

He finds a pair of white gloves for his curses. He explores the gospel of exclamations.

Decide What You Want Of Gravity

Shhh. Don't tell. Try to mention it less to yourself. It is weak silliness to want to starfish beneath his piano – for the opposite of shelter.

What onomatopoeic expression chides the ears? For she needs them to stop their hearing. The notes aren't droplets of anything. Aren't beads. Or the sight-rhymes of a charm bracelet.

And the brain? How to swamp that with sound – give all logic up to cutthroat mud?

When the body is too ready to believe in other corporeality she's still ignorant of the places to fasten ropes where they will hold.

For there's nothing underneath that piano but volume. The collaboration of dust. Spidery childish derangement.

Let only nights fall. Have music and its metaphors rise. See and rouse moths. Pinch the arcs their wings describe.

Infrastructure of Popular Song

Welcome to Dreamland. The north end of the prom. Place of harbor, years back. Before the water and mud switched position – that endless argument that occurs in sand-stung flashback.

Most of the bulbs on the ‘n’ are iffy. When darkness shades in the sky, the sign’s a promise that can’t be kept. One from a song from a northern sixties.

Ey, Dreamland, wake from my sleep tonight.

You’ve got me swaying like a shuggy boat.

Charlotte would laugh if she hadn’t come here too many Junes wearing each year’s favorite t-shirt, and the hope of something different, to only end up beneath the rafters of the rollercoaster – eyes plugged, all her senses leaning toward her ears, waiting for the rising tumult of the descending clatter, for the feeling of other people’s screams.

None of that comes out loud. None of that is allowed. She only points at the word. Where Jonathan’s already looking.

He thinks it’s hilarious. And laughter is easy with no anchor below it – experience as meaningless as the top prize behind a rigged coconut shy; humor like one hand juggling one ball.

We can use this, he says. This is gold dust.

Magic E's Performance Divides the Crowd

He doesn't use 'home' like she does. He's not trying to stuff an entire town into its long vowel sound till it becomes too big for his mouth then bumps against the tongue and catches on the lips while it makes its jerking way out.

Jonathan thinks he could stop anywhere on the short walk from hotel to station – among the car park gravel, in the lit harbor of the traffic island, under the awning of the doughnut van – and, should the weather be kind, live there awhile.

The same could be said for any station concourse between this lazy-waking terminus place and the basement flat with all the other bits of capital piled on top.

He prefers 'house' anyway, actually, as the name for his final destination.

Perhaps, she says. Maybe. Walking backwards for a few paces on her toes, Charlotte frames him against the morning-mild full tide, the pretend straight lines of water and cloud. But, have you ever really left?

You might say it differently once you've lived somewhere else.

Greetings From

With a clipping from the newspaper about a man stuck in the not-really sand overnight, rescued with his neck the only distance left between his breath and the greedy morning tide, through the letterbox comes:

a dance of this with the boring human stuff out of the way first so we can mostly show the sea and its easy accommodation of something new, the unflustered way it can always continue

or the dance of two halves: the guests and the paths they make through a hotel stay, initial uncertain exploration turning into minor familiarities then something like resignation when they realize they've still brought themselves on holiday with them and magic is only conjured at a safe distance. Followed by the employees who react and smooth the after, their more efficient resignation, their thin giving mirror

or something more subtle, more slow. The view – the hills, the fields, the distinct places of life – fading in and out, an endless appointment with a curious optician

With no small talk, no extra context, no enquiries after his health in between or as a frame, her words go on:

or a compilation of sharp pieces. The chip forks dropped and left lost on the beach, spikes on the shopping center clock to keep the gulls and pigeons off, open razorback shells, the curlew's beak, derelict hypodermic needles, the clouds solidified by the sunset into pointings away and upwards

or a week long acceleration across everything that can possibly be done, a helter-skelter striped with foods and games and soakings, a disco-lit blitz of what the town has to offer; and then all the same pulled slack across a year, every step a stodgy filling of time

or the whole history of the embrace of the holiday, building from toffee apples and penny chews, through to sickliness and the droop of hugging bones broken – movement and music gloopy resentment and confusion

Last – so far as he can tell – of the scribbles, in a different colored pen, on sheet twenty-seven torn from her waiter's pad, are:

fluency and collapse – danger responded to with stasis. not necessarily balanced that way – or in those orders

Allowing the Tide

There were years, Jonathan says to no one, to the reflection of his own shrunken face in the television screen that lurks above the desk, and says again, later, to an elongated version of that reversed self which he finds reclining upon the grand piano's toothed-walnut back, years, he says, when I took more interest in the space between notes; in just how much distance I could scatter amongst the constituent parts of a melody and have it remain knowable, looking for how far a song could expand before it stopped being itself.

It was like, he thinks, in the minutes before rehearsal, to the sensation of waiting for her, it was like trying to always use windows instead of doors.

And then, he knows, he simply wants to unfold all the notes all at once over the whole of every day for the entirety of the next year of his life.

Feet Twisting Precisely on the Grounds of the Daily Grind

When weekends become weekends. Punctuation points of shattered glass. The light on shards a brooding biker, the light a catch. All collections of have and hold disappear in the ways that balloons do. Her spine splits and lays itself as train tracks.

A change of scale and Charlotte's new elastic calves ping her over the flats and on to the bay separated hilltops. Summit pirouettes excite her looking back and, whirled, the cairns collapse and she tucks the rocks under the downstairs bed, stacks them in the sideboard. Her nose forgets medical smells. If it's a chore to haul the stones back later then she'll bear that chore with epic patience.

Water comes now beneath her sleep: the world blurred solid in constant flowing, a bird out there in every raindrop, wings flinging gifts of moon and sun. She can wear the tiniest of colors, curl ideas inside a worm cast, to show her discovered regard for the Monday to Friday she'd always heard so much about.

Anticipating accompaniment. Saturday, Sunday. Going to happen.

Comparison is a Game of Time

Hotel haunted only by itself. A clean line ghost holding a firm pose, smiling for a camera not strong enough to cope. A photograph in perpetual light agitation from one side to the other of under the nose, so eyes remain stuck in the focusing process.

It could be a body. Charlotte's future pensionable self. Brittle bendable health. Full of feeling's frayed edges. The imprecision belted to comparison.

Which is what she feels when she makes both of them laugh, there in the party-deprived, panel-peeling function suite, quoting from the filmed history of dance as best she can. Which is to say, always paraphrasing – even if she could bring the rain inside for her feet to sing into (being too much the worker to kick the bucket beneath the spot of leaking roof); or if there actually were a drum kit stacked up behind her to rattle the plaster in jazzy disaster.

She's imagining split mussel shells clad her feet, close as she gets to shoe-shone tap. She's not other hoofers but her past child, like the hotel is solely its built design – bone food that can't really be chewed.

No Strings for Her Eyelids

Someone like Charlotte's dad does something like breathing as he hovers in the space where the big table used to be laid once a week – placemats with views of lakes observed by three knives, three forks, two spoons – in a room that talking mice who speak commentary rather than conversation clean one dust mote at a time; and this won't be the night when she finds out if he dreams like she wants him to as the door to the room is closed because it's what she believes he'd want her to do since if you can't shake a man's hand there's still no need to offer a fist;

and mum's put on her better coat, the one with lapels and a butterfly brooch and left Charlotte alone to not be alone (gone to Mecca, Charlotte said when asked, glad to remind Jonathan that he's still a tourist in some of her references, as the moment pausing his face attests) though now at the end of a day of swabbing and bailing and serving and shaping and all too much ersatz enthusiasm she's ready to have this over with to follow the hypnotic shivers of the VHS lines and fall under Fred's sandman spell into funfair dreams where Venice is built out of cardboard and ostrich feathers and that hotel could be their hotel if only the flood in the basement could be accessorized as a canal and herring gulls were hairdressers and shrimps were make-up artists;

and if all the comparisons in her rickety analogy world could ever be finished or really make sense when what used to be is always, always also what is – and what will – and the self's a viewer compulsively shouting at the screen lacking the patience to wait for a narrative's resolution;

and she's wearing the prince's undarned socks having run far away from the mechanism of the pop-up box that offers up her cold glass slippers; and she's forgotten the pieces of footwork she wanted to point out this evening, can't even remember if she was aiming for an aesthetic or a practical education; and tiredness is the place where a gown's sleeve is gathered; and clarity's a hat pin that's sunk to the bottom of the sea or the mud, depending; and everybody is rehearsed and so determined;

and Jonathan's eyes are shuffling icons like a broken fruit machine while the feel of him shifting forward in his seat is how she knows she's not asleep in an England stripped of all flowers and losing wars of expression with new-fangled syncopated America; and how she knows she's not really married in four different countries; and her affairs aren't committing bigamy; and nobody died in the audience when that beat was missed but wasn't really so long as you understand that jazz is an alloy stake driven by a tap plate into a quicksand bay;

and top hat, white tie and tails make men into silly shapes but at least that meant some equality in the effort of getting ready recognizing the importance of the ceremony; and sleep is metaphor, or desperately wants to be; and don't worry about the talking bits because they're fine for breaking up your stick of rock when the plot's written through the numbers – solo, duet, spectacle – just to prove that dance can be economical.

It's finished, he says, but she knows that it's not. That the film can go on, is forever in its middle, in its start and its end. That a dance will always be steered back from private alcove into public space. Goodnight is a

Fiction

streetlight lined up with the moon from the tired height a woman can
summon in the doorway of her own home.

So Long, Daytime. He Won't Be Seeing You Anytime Soon

The moon is seen in a whole new light and hollow socket craters gain twinkles and eyes, when Jonathan sets himself to wandering through the Great American Songbook.

When did sleep ever even happen and how did these men get anything done through all that looking up? Was romance the bruising consequence of just so much bumping into? Did all songs and songwriters meet as cute as clumsy brutes?

It's blind feeling for the keyboard to deal with the strange responsibility of weightlessness. Tapping the rim of glasses with his fingers, coughing up consumptive gossamer; the glee squeezed out of prohibition and repossession inhabits the tenanted properties of melodies.

He tests the feel of his cheek against every experience he's ever tarnished, dresses up in hectic smoothness, makes a gilt wardrobe for all the suits he never uses. He dusts off his copies of 'you' and 'I' and lifts them high into the drifting night where each manifestation of the moon's waxing and waning simultaneously exists, bobbing up and down, mounted upon the ceramic horsebacks of a merry-go-round. Beauty's slung a shabby purse over her shoulders but she is charging in the old old money. Jonathan's pockets and mattress are loaded. He gorges himself dizzy, picks himself up and dusts off the piano stool all over again.

Known Haunts of Melodies

So Jonathan sings a song and his voice – a timorous beast – only winks at the notes. But the song is one so familiar that somewhere it's always singing itself in cul-de-sac radios, on house-bound televisions, or alongside the steps of the walking whistling.

It's one of those songs folded into sheets, or put up with marquees; a song always wearing someone else's shoes, or pressing pleats into Charlotte's father's mothballed suit.

Songs like that one might be the hotel's foundation stones – both mortared with the outlawed magic of sincerity.

Charlotte can only sing along like her mother would, and shift herself; close her eyes like a brittle lover would, and disguise herself.

She assumes Jonathan's wearing a costume too, playing that time-flooded piano in a bypassed lobby one unremarkable morning; yet the paucity of his voice is a worry.

She won't look to see where and how his eyes might be behaving.

Don't Ask Her. She Won't Dance. Not Like That

She doesn't want to write her own expectations. She doesn't want to dance alongside a name. She doesn't want nostalgia for a partner, and she doesn't want to tap out the codes of a game.

She wants to make a thing as new and glorious and silly and thrilling, and difficult and willing, as every new thing that led her to this damn thing.

Glass but not a mirror. Glass above and under water. Glass outside in sunlight and among the mist. Glass arrayed together in layers making complex lenses. Glass heels with seahorses illuminating during lifts.

There it is.

Inside the breaking point. Possible shattering: there's the present; and there's the freedom.

Unsilver every mirror so no one sees their position between the expert and the ridiculous. Every character an amateur. Steps taken as ordeals and risks. Desire for movement rubbing the world – and being handled in return – in ways that are not tender.

Choreography packed up in a blank white van, receipt laundered into crumbling thickness in pocket. She can tug at what might well not happen rather than at what might be remembered.

And together can mean together. Partner equal partner. No follow. No leader.

England and the Three-Minute Pop Song

Local paper on the table – good fences stories; good neighbors – becomes less local by the minute. First reader long gone. Intended audience two rivers back. Train scratches through another city. Straightness measured against a timber mill. Goods and proud boundary. Other barriers – varying resolve and brutality – between track and warehouses, splintered-windowed factories. Backsides of industry joylessly mooning travelers. Looking as the international gesture for meaning.

Mature gardens stand to attention. Day gathers itself up to its full height. England under inspection. Like a sandwich removed from cling film, transparency creased through speed. Only suspended here and there does Jonathan truly believe this all exists. All the switches. All the gears. The raw material and its litter. Such crawls away from the black teeth of stagnation, dust cloths attached to elbows and knees. No studio backlot could fake this much riddled detail. Fields patterned as impulsive graffiti. Walls tagged with wind-strewn meadow flowers. Music in his headphones lowers the plough.

In the brief dark of every bridge there's dancing. He never realized before that a hug is a compression. And so is a journey and so is a song.

Local paper gains a drained coffee cup for a companion. News briefly handled by someone outside its discontent's jurisdiction. Under a bypass. A tire pile. A scrap yard. Cars with their insides sucked out through a straw. A hanging claw buzzards the shrinking sky. Platform population. Immigrants emigrating. Uneasy flickering motion like a cow tail lazily describing evolution. Seat beside Jonathan sighs through a tiny vacation.

Carry on in a minute. Sound of the wheels will throw up the sound of the last town as a muddy stain on the end carriage of the train. Bigger buildings break like waves into house pieces. The way out a reflection of the way in. Sky and ground meeting in imagined water line, surface and ceiling. To be going to an edge, to a place that professionally holds the pose in profile. Jonathan's glad.

In the popped ears of every tunnel there's singing. A country is only a compression. And so is a story and so is a dance.

Inciting Incident

Under uncertain skies, moving through days as yet undefined, out along the promenade before breakfast is even contemplated, and walking to the click of the turnstone's vaudeville impersonation of a metronome, is where they plot.

They know they need love.

This must begin somewhere. A meeting must be pulled out of a hat. That meeting needs to be a string of all of the flags. It should be the whitest temptation that a rabbit can ever be.

When they have it begun, they can bring the love in like the bay tide: oh so insistent, riddling through space unable to resist the mischief in its glittering eyes; teasing up new little ridges, making yet more orthography of mud and sand before surging megaphonically over it anyway.

They can bring that love in until it has everything, until the body, the mouth are all gushed and filled; bring it until it has eroded all confidence that any other state has ever been.

They will make their protagonists feel – will make their audience feel – that, if that other state has ever been ... well, it did not have the sense of this, not even the distant glimmer of this.

Circulation System

Charlotte in the garden, on the L-shaped paving, concrete warm beneath her backside, the wall hard against her spine.

Headphones on, she's there but not. Knees drawn up, arms holding this pose. Tucked out of view of the house, where she is, though not.

In the valley of her lap the tape box – fashioned from description resistant plastic and pulled from the padded envelope. In it – but not – him, and now her.

Listening compresses time: all his thinking, doing and undoing of patterns of notes made almost instant. The further back of research, absorption, all such careful hearing; then rehearsal – tone, phrasing, the thick and thinness of variation. There are days inside these minutes in this small garden worth twelve of her most ordinary steps.

The music is like one of those tubes which loosed from beneath the skin can scarf the world a time or two. The music must, she thinks, with its always arriving and leaving, come from the pieces of his body involved in circulation.

Charlotte in the garden. The tape to the beginning. She notices that the grass needs cutting. The tune again, evermore itself. Her focus fixes on sitting still, eyes closed inside his reels of already motion.

The Light Reflects Upon the Water Left

From the bay he learned looking out.

He learned different steps. He learned the rhythm of sunsets. He learned the ringing notes of what goes and what stays.

From the bay he learned what is offered by flatness, learned pentagons of homes in the redemption of shadow and in the different grace of light.

He learned the dancing ways of promenades.

He learned warmings.

He learned looking out.

He learned to kiss it quick and to sing into the wind.

Most Persistent Experiences of Living

Always her body returns.

In tidal surges, in rain shadowed waves. Movement a tone that stretches along hellos and goodbyes, constantly one step off to the side. A test of balance on the garden fence; or on the railing at the promenade's edge.

No stillness in anything. The wind in stitches at the idea of a position. Blissful breath of insistence.

No stillness nor no silence either. Witness the wheezing greed of her father's lungs, the drooling of his bodily fluids. Listen to the songs that Jonathan has sung, his voice skittering all over the tune.

All this is out there. At the tip of the jetty. Early mornings not yet cracked open. In the compass ring marked on the walkway.

Where Charlotte does what Charlotte does. To the water's chatter or the mud's whispering.

Surrounded without, and surrounded within.

Protagonists in the Coconut Shy

Line'em up.

Architect, savior. Historian, sceptic.

Out of town. Born and bred.

Optimist. And something else that lovingly smears together the sunrise and the sunset.

Log flume. Dodgem car.

Sincerity. Singed by irony.

New Labor. Old socialist who'd scratch every part of that label off the jar.

Straight-lined clothes. Thumb-ruined cuffs.

Future tense. Past.

Oh, the songs they could sing, solo and in duet; ah, the steps of misunderstanding, the dances into comprehension.

The places they could go. Where they might remain.

Obstacles – knock'em down.

All these either ors – knock'em down down down.

Notes

Inside Gestures (page 14) incorporates phrases heard during a dance technique class observed at Plymouth University during March 2017.

How to Destroy Comfortable Stories (page 36) describes elements of the book *Body Language* by Julius Fast (London; Souvenir; 1971 – originally published in USA in 1968).

Something as New as an Old Feeling (page 45) uses a quote from Simon Reynolds from the article ‘Welcome to the Jungle?’ included in *Bring the Noise* (London; Faber and Faber; 2007).

Escapement Mechanism (page 85) is based upon the following paragraph from Bernard Richardson’s essay ‘The Acoustics of the Piano’ in Rowland, David (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Piano* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press; 1998):

“When a key is depressed, it causes a small, felt-covered hammer to be thrown against a set of strings tuned to a specific note of the scale. The key incorporates an escapement mechanism which detaches the hammer from the key just before striking the strings so that they receive a single, unimpeded blow from the hammer. The exchange of momentum causes the strings to vibrate, and it is these vibrations which are the origin of the musical sound.”

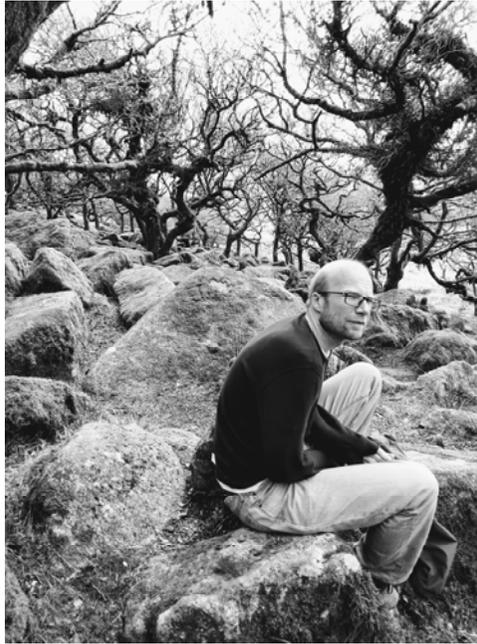
Somewhere Between a Stage and a World (page 105) uses a phrase from Jane Feuer’s *The Hollywood Musical* (Basingstoke; MacMillan; 1993) as its title.

The Great Artist is Known by the Handling of Transitions (page 113) uses a phrase from Agnes DeMille's *To a Young Dancer* (Boston; Atlantic; 1962) as its title.

No Strings For Her Eyelids (page 122) is based upon a viewing of the film *Top Hat* (1935; directed by Mark Sandrich).

Don't Ask Her. She Won't Dance. Not Like That (page 127) uses a number of ideas about dancing from Deborah Jowitt's introduction to Bremser, Martha (ed.), *Fifty Contemporary Choreographers* (London; Routledge; 1999).

Most Persistent Experiences of Living (page 133) uses a phrase from Lois Ellfeldt's *A Primer for Choreography* (Palo Alto; The National Press; 1967) as its title.



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