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# Nothing of Substance

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Number Two

For Gentlefolk of refinement and taste.

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Published through The House of Inle [www.thehouseofinle.co.uk](http://www.thehouseofinle.co.uk)

ISSN 2049-3460

## **Lions and the Secret Hymnody of the Winchester Geese**

A single hairy seed blew onto my coat while I was on the bus the other day.

Just as I was about to sweep it off I considered its fate on the wet floor, trampled, doomed, its ultimate purpose denied forever.

I let it stick to my coat to allow its onward journey, but quickly became agitated about the fact that it might get knocked, or blown, or somehow displaced and in the end I took it gently and kept it in a lightly closed fist until I was safely off the bus.

I sometimes wonder if the male stag has any understanding of the actions of the rutting season? Or does he, one fresh spring, simply fight, fuck and go his own way, only for fawns to appear exactly as they have every other year of his life without any of the preceding activity on his part?

Later in work, having guarded the tiny seed carefully for several hours, I took it and flushed it.

In Italian, there is a single letter of distinction between the word for translator, 'traduttore', and the word for traitor, 'tradittore'.

Of course, there was a time when the 'road' was referred to as the 'motor road', to distinguish it from the 'rail road'. In victory, the automobile dropped the 'motor' and 'road' was once again definitive, ubiquitous and total. Ancient feet trudging across primeval landscapes knew nothing of this ebb and flow of significance.

Everyone knows that those richer than them are emotionally dead and those poorer are crass and stupid. In Syrian, the word for monk, 'Abila' translates directly as 'mourner', after all Christ cried, but no reference exists to his laughter. During the 6<sup>th</sup> century Mohammed commanded the faithful to pray facing Jerusalem. It was only later after a disagreement with Jewish elders he changed his command to face Mecca.

Do prestige brand buying habits support a fragile ego or communicate the boldness of a confident self? If the answer is 'both', can the message recipients at whom this subtle communication is directed tell these two instances apart? Perhaps this is part of the conscious and unconscious application of the illusion, the more numerous 'fragiles' bolstering the volume available in the tiny niche of the confident. After all, apex is broadly singular. You can't build a brand empire based on selling lion's manes to the pride alpha.

The level of social and financial inequality permissible in any political or economic system is (of course) proportionate to the level of natural inclination towards egalitarianism in human nature rather than any superficial commitment to fairness in a manifesto, white paper or textbook. This is why fundamental inequality has always existed at roughly similar levels across most dominant political systems and societies. Male lions don't discuss the optimum route to pride welfare or hunting rotas they just rip each other's fucking heads off. Are bacteria fair? It seems unlikely. Even the stones are probably fascists.

Does a flower bud 'know' that the sun is rising? This question sits at the heart of everything.

## Home

*Half bricks gathered from who knows where and dropped into the water, one after the other to form a line, an unsteady path from one side to the other.*

## The Copses

To enter the copses, you needed to bend down low and push the young branches aside. Once inside, you could stand up. On a summer's day it was all dark and cool, brief light filtering in through the dense canopy of leaves. The thick smell of earth, tainted with nicotine. The ground would be littered with discarded beer cans and empty sweet packets. Sometimes there was a pornographic magazine, either complete and rolled up and wedged in a branch cleft or selected pages scattered about the ground. In these loose pages, the images of the women's body were laid bare and exposed to both the viewer and the elements. Rain had soaked into their skin and caused it to wrinkle while the sun had bleached their faces and faded them back to paper white. One shoot had been altered as thick black lines had been drawn directly onto the image. Each line followed the curve of the woman's body, emphasising the flow from stomach to hip, the weight of her breasts, the muscles in her calves. Sexual excitement it seemed came not from the provocative poses or the intimacy of the image but from shape and form, line and weight.

## The Bridge

An iron bridge straddles the rail track. Its base of wooden floorboards is splintered and worn, pooled here and there with dog shit and the stains of their piss. To cross the bridge is to smell that feculent scent, thick and rank, and to listen to the constant drone of flies. As you make your passage across, you are flanked either side with robust metal plates, each held in place by numerous bolts. Painted white, the panels have been defaced by anonymous hands as graffiti has been scratched into or sprayed along the length of the bridge. The words are mostly declarations of love or affection, while others are simply names and dates, some with a long disconnected telephone number. Some are hard to read, others, like those that are scratched into the paint, are clear and crisp. With these word and declarations, passing youths had transformed the bridge into a Tunnel of Love, a corridor of passions that would last all summer long. Etched with affection, the panels are exposed to a constant cycle of winter rain and summer sun, alternately being saturated and baked, a steady and even process which has made the paint brittle. It has become so fragile that it has lifted from the iron surface like a layer of peeling skin. I remember carefully placing a fingernail beneath these layers and equally carefully lifting it up to see what lay beneath: hard metal with a ruptured and pocked surface, a mottle of orange, brown, ochre and red.

*To cross the bridge would take you to another part of town, its exit opening out onto a warren of houses, streets and back alleys that I knew nothing of. I, for some reason, never dared to venture across that threshold.*

## The Allotments

By the bridge that crosses the railway, the allotments have been abandoned. Its fenced perimeter of plastic-coated wire mesh buckles under the pull of the grasses and nettles. Having grown in abundance along this edge, their roots have spread deep within the soil, passing under the barrier to grow up the other side. The nettles and common grasses are

virulent and reach out to the barely defined pathways, the gone to seed plots and seek to surround the few remaining sheds. Of those few plots that are still visible, the soil is dark and caked, gathered in forgotten ridges and speckled with wind-blown seed. The weeds continue to grow, their thin, crisp green lengths fragile against the wind. Some plots have the remains of collapsing trellis, others the rotting stalks of corn. Nothing has been planted, nothing deliberately grown. Birds come to foraging and, recognising the abundance, weave nests into the spindly branches of the surrounding hedges and trees.

### **The Next Level**

Serge is busy out the back.

Listening to Kajagoogoo.

He is wearing nothing but a green and brown striped tank top.

His feet are wide apart and his legs are bent at the knees.

He rocks from side to side as he sings:

"Too shy shy

Hush hush, eye to eye

Too shy shy

Hush hush, eye to eye

Too shy shy

Hush hush, eye to eye

Too shy shy

Hush hush"

His flaccid member swings as he rocks.

He is hung like a Tuscan Raider.

His eyes are closed.

Serge calls this The Pork Sword Boogaloo.

### **The Swan**

The cat knocks the egg with its paw

It cracks

I pick it up

The egg opens in my hand

Inside is a tiny swan

It is grey, dirty and dead

I lay the egg on the floor

It rolls to one side

The swan becomes the black rabbit

**Lost/ last chapter from a book/ pamphlet about you/ someone else.**

‘It’s their third album where the magic really starts to happen’.

Gulp of fourth pint from plastic glass.

‘I saw them at The Forum on the tour just before it came out, they showcased some of the new songs and you could feel something special was happening’.

This place smells appalling.

‘Well’, I say.

‘You could just tell’, he continues, ‘I think it was more like a few of us in the audience were ready for the change, the new direction, most of the people there just wanted the ‘same old same old’, tracks they’ve heard a hundred times before.’

Some girl in front has the top of her thong showing out of the back of her jeans, she looks like she needs a good wash and her shots topping up, but momentarily I am drawn away from Elliot’s conversation and wonder where she lives. Probably in some place in North London full of overflowing ashtrays and constant excited discussion of climate change, an easily won certainty that their little insular coterie of Camdenite refugees is kicking against the pricks, seeing things with fresh eyes. They could hardly be more fucking conservative if they had stuffed stag’s heads mounted on plaques above their fireplace and spent the winter in Val d’Isere.

Elliot is now warming up and is wondering aloud about whether the lyrics of the early metal bands can be forgiven for being, ‘well, more than a little misogynistic’.

‘Well’, I say, ‘there could be something suspect about “Giving the Dog a Bone”, on “Back in Black”’.

‘Exactly’, says Elliot, spilling some of his pint onto the tip of his right shoe.

‘Exactly’.

The liquid glistens and stalls improbably on the tip just above his toes, I think momentarily about atoms and molecular attraction and surface tension and how I could probably calculate the precise sets of forces required to maintain the uncanny equilibrium required to keep the beer from hitting the floor, but I really haven’t got a clue how any of that crap works and there is a rather strong sense of being lost in a dark medieval forest hanging somewhere behind me, off to the left, somewhere behind a bar covered in confusing signs about a vodka promotion.

I close my eyes very slowly, kind of an extended blink, hoping that the scene might clear and something wonderful, bright and clean might replace the current picture, but Elliot is trying to remember the order of the bonus tracks on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary digitally re-mastered release of ‘Number of the Beast’ and I am feeling a growing need to get outside, not just outside this venue, but really outside, away from human habitation and away from the possibility of being spoken or advertised to.

‘I guess you need to have a grasp of the trajectory’, says Elliot, ‘the line from blues, through, rock and roll, all the way to what passes for innovation now’.

‘I mean, some of these kids can’t have even been born when Bon Scott died. Though as you probably already know, the whole drowning in his own vomit thing was kind of an exaggeration, really it was just cardiac arrest’.

‘Don’t you mean Scott Bon?’ I ask him, our voices now really straining against a rising and expectant swell of noise from the crowd.

The band must soon be coming on. Thank fuck, the sooner they begin their tired posturing and litany of promises about how much they love playing in this city more than any other and how the whole emotional circus is really being performed exclusively for you, yes YOU, right here right now, to affirm your place at the centre of the universe, the sooner they will be playing an entirely predictable encore and the sooner they will fuck off to hoof lines, screw girls or boys of uncertain ages and slump in hotel rooms waiting for it all to begin again.

‘What’ shouts Elliot?

I wonder about mumbling enigmatically in German for a while, but I don’t really know any, so instead opt for just listing all the different types of lettuce I can think of. I speak without raising my voice, just the required level for Elliot to hear but not be absolutely sure what I am saying.

‘No it was definitely, romaine, little gem, rocket, frisee, iceberg, bak choi’.

Is bak choi really a lettuce? Or is it a cabbage? It is almost certainly a cabbage, but it is used in salads. What is the strict definition for a lettuce? Is lettuce part of any legitimate botanical taxonomy anyway? Or is it all about usage? Some kind of set of culinary conventions entirely independent of biological classification?

‘What was that about Bon Scott?’ Elliot senses a possible humiliation, like maybe a gross faux pas is lurking there and I am trying to cover it over now.

‘Is bak choi a lettuce or a cabbage?’ I ask, louder now, hoping he can actually help answer this question which seems unduly pressing. As though, if not solved here tonight, it will be lost to time, something I will never know.

‘Don’t try and change the subject’.

‘No, I really need to know, do you know the stuff I mean, Chinese leaf?’

‘Yeah, of course it’s a lettuce, what the fuck are you on about?’

‘It isn’t a type of cabbage?’

‘Oh, I see what you mean’, he says, genuinely intrigued now.

It is a great question I think to myself. I feel horribly interesting suddenly. I am in command of an endless range of highly abstract possible subjects, all of which on the surface seem like simple empirical enquiries, but underneath hold awesome insights into the actual fabric of life. I wonder where to lead the conversation next, but really can’t think of a single thing to say and look at my own fingers for three and a half seconds.

‘I guess there must be some sort of EU directive about such matters’, Elliot says, trying to bring an external force to bear, a third party opinion beyond question.

‘China isn’t in the fucking EU’.

‘No, but the word “Chinese” isn’t a Chinese word either he says’, incredibly pleased with that idea, ‘It’s all about what Europeans have chosen to describe it as, it’s totally subjective’.

I am absolutely consumed with conviction that this cannot be a subjective matter. Whatever the necessary and sufficient definition of lettuce is according to some august body is what we need and I just can’t conjure up enough convincing detail at this time to make Elliot believe that I actually know what that definition might be.



The band are on stage, the crowd pretend that an important cultural event is about to unfold and jostle for position and cheer in a way entirely at odds with the seventeenth run through of a pretty tired set-list by a band that have done this a lot of times before.

Things don't pan out quite how I imagine. The largely old-fashioned idea that the band might pretend to be enjoying the adulation, be grateful for their moment and recognize the fleeting and inequitable nature of success is completely contradicted by their blunt and disinterested style. And it is a style, the clearly selected attitudes of self-deprecation and understated modesty let us know, that for them, this is an 'art' thing. It's about sharing something beautiful with us, something that they and we are lucky to witness, but too cool to over-play.

The vocalist says something about Barak Obama and people cheer, like he's going to come along after the gig and buy everyone a kebab.

I wonder what the range of a Japanese whaling harpoon might be. We are quite a long way from the stage, like maybe fifty rows of people away. It's probably good from a distance point of view, but accuracy? I guess harpoons are aimed at big targets in the main, a sperm whale has to be twenty metres long? Of course in a rough sea, you would still need a fair bit of skill to nail the bastard, but it seems like it's an easier shot than a single willowy figure at a good distance in a darkened room.

I am again drawn to the mathematics of the thing. Whether it is more significant that the whale is moving or more significant that the harpoon gun is moving and what the multiplication factor might be if both gunner and whale are in motion? Could it be there are critical moments, when the two directional forces cancel one another and work in favour of making the shot? I start to see diagrams and spreadsheets, though I really have little idea what might populate them, sure that answers could be found that would correlate in some way with the thoughts in the head of a gnarled Japanese fisherman. A hateful figure with highly attuned senses in the hunt, shunned by his fellows back on shore, tainted by death.

It is the encore. People cheer like Hitler has just stood aside at Nuremburg to allow the national body politic to release its vast and total approval. The reaction is a re-enactment of scenes witnessed and imagined at all the concerts that have gone before this one. The crowd complicit in the understanding that the value of the event is in part a function of their excitement right here, right now. Cheering is just what you do at gigs, it is required, like tipping in New York. I remember once seeing a crowd genuinely stunned into silence by the total intensity of a performance and the singer actually stormed off assuming the lack of automatic applause was a failure on the part of the crowd to appreciate his efforts. Messages sent and received, all mangled up in the static.

Apparently, when Stalin spoke people would keep on clapping so as not to be the first to stop during one of the frequent compulsory standing ovations. Even an ego like Stalin's demands some end to such displays and a strict clapping limit was enforced. Presumably some state occasions demanded a solid three minutes of ovation, maybe a closed meeting of the Polit-Bureau could make do with a flat minute? Seems to me that the evil old clown would find a way to have your head if he wanted it, all clapping aside. Maybe clapping limits were changed without much advance warning? Not getting the email wouldn't get you off the hook with Stalin, don't let the friendly uncle moustache fool you.

Certain people just demand appreciation of their efforts. At the end of really quite ordinary TV programmes about weather patterns, maverick cops and the cash value of objects found in skips, people's names are listed. If you think of the per-minute-value of TV when sold to manufacturers of potions, lotions and assorted bric-a-brac, the announcement that Alan Pennington did the sound on Antique Scramble is a five grand round of applause for the guy? Why doesn't the man who takes your appendix out get his heraldic crest tattooed on your ass for his trouble? The lady who quality controlled the filling of your cereal box get a name check under the crowing cockerel's head?

'Shit, I'll have to queue for my jacket', says Elliot, and then it's a twenty minute wait as people that only moments before were part of an imagined community of like-minds, push one another aside to get out into the yellow night.

### **The Shopkeeper**

The Shopkeeper stands in the middle of the shop floor.  
He is slowly brushing the wooden boards upon which he stands with a long handled broom.  
The stave is worn from many years of use.

The shop door opens and the bell above it rings to signify a customer has entered the premises.

A well-dressed man approaches the Shopkeeper and smiles.

"How much is that doggie in the window?"

The shopkeeper replies,

"The one with the waggley tail?"

As he finishes the question there is a jump cut.

A single frame of black.

One in twenty four.

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## Isaac's Storm

"Why Dealey Plaza?"

"Because all major events involve some sort of collision."

"I don't understand."

"It's about impact. The force of a moving object impacting upon another object."

"Are both always moving?"

"Not necessarily and, with respect Doctor Holden, that seems like a redundant question."

Holden considered Isaac's response. "Why?"

"Why? It reflects your constant desire to put occurrences and situations into categories."

"And what is wrong with that? Without categories how can Science understand?"

"Because categories are simplistic and restrictive. Those that have been allocated into them can just as easily transgress definitions, shift borders, enter into other categories."

"Such as?"

"Me, Doctor Holden"

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"Isaac," said Holden, "is the first true cosmonaut. A traveller not just of space but of time and the dimensions as well. He is our future self and our present, sent to us by our alternative selves to save us from that catastrophe. He is then and there. The here and now."

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"So the Colonel is dead then."

"It would seem that way," said Holden.

Holbein ran his fingers along the edge of the desk, thinking about the multiplicity of the implications of Isaac's conversation. "To conclude then," he said, "Isaac thinks there are multiple versions of all of us in multiple dimensions, living different but tangential lives."

"It would seem that way, yes."

"In that case, in a number of other dimensions, the Towers still stand."

-----

"We have meet before" said Isaac. The Colonel looked across to Holden before asking

"Where?"

"I met Doctor Holden here and you..." his voice trailed off. "And me?"

"You were my commanding officer during my first deployment. We got on well. You liked to joke with your men. Our Humvee came under mortar attack and took a direct hit. I lost part of my legs, you your stomach."

"But we are both here, alive and well Isaac. You have your legs and I my stomach."

"With all due respect sir, that was another you and that was another me."

-----

"Who I am talking to right now?"

"I am not sure Colonel. I may be Holden."

Isaac sat for Holbein once more. Stripped to the waist, he stood leaning against a portmanteau. On its shelves Holbein had arranged, with great care and attention, a series of objects: a collection of ariel navigation devices and celestial globe on the top shelf, open books were layered and propped up on the middle shelf while, on the bottom shelf, lay a decommissioned M16 assault rifle, spent bullet cases and a battered Cockpit Voice Recorder. Holbein had placed a skull at Isaac's feet but then, having looked at the composition, decided it was too obvious and removed it.

Once happy with the arrangement Holbein smiled at Isaac and then knelt down next to the black box recorder. He adjusted the device slightly and then plugged a short cable into one of its output jacks. This was then attached to an old audio cassette player. Holbein inserted a tape, simultaneously pressed *Play* and *Record* and, within a few seconds, the contents of the flight box were broadcast through the cassette player's speakers. Holbein smiled once again. "A little music," he said, "to set the atmosphere."

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Before leaving the holding cell, Holden decided to leave his pen and paper for Isaac "to use in any way he saw fit." While this created an opportunity for his patient to harm himself, Holden as more interested in what Isaac might either write or draw upon the paper.

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"Can he walk through glass?"  
"It's unlikely Colonel."

-----

Holden looked at the numbered inventory:

- 1) A sealed vial of transparent liquid, possibly a water-based solution.
- 2) A coil of crudely wound copper wire.
- 3) Cotton pads.
- 4) The interior circuit board of a black box flight recorder.
- 5) [blacked out]

"Well?" asked the Colonel.  
"These are not parts of a crude weapon Colonel. They are parts of a device to enable time travel."

-----

"He is becoming obsessed with the assassination of John F. Kennedy."  
"That is, perhaps, unsurprising."  
"Why?"  
"A bullet to the throat is no different to a plane colliding with a building."

-----

"What are you thinking about?" asked Holbein.

“Landscapes.” said Isaac.

“Anywhere in particular?”

“Three specific locations: A bridge that crosses the rail tracks, close to the village where I lived as a child; The Dealey Plaza; the interior of Colonel Johnston’s stomach cavity.”

Holbein put down his brush and, wiping the moist paint off his fingers, said “I think we need to adjust the celestial globe.”

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Later, while eating alone in his office, it occurred to Holden that Isaac could, in some way, construct something out of the paper.

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As Holbein painted his likeness, Isaac looked down at the collection of objects that surrounded him and questioned their purpose. Each one, it seemed, held great significance for Holbein, a quality exaggerated by his insistence on setting the navigational devices to specific times and measurements as well as making sure the angle of alignment between these devices equated with the angle of impact.

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## **Roadside Markers**

*Bunches of flowers bundled together and tied to a tree. A small vase with fresh flowers lent against a hedge. Flowers laid upon the grass verge. Handwritten cards and messages, sun bleached and windblown, placed amongst the petals and stems.*

Placed along the roadside by grieving family members, these symbols of remembrance and loss are placed upon the grass verges as cars speed past. In this placement, the bereaved transform the roadside from an innocuous tarmac edge to grave site. Those flowers, vases, and handwritten notes function as markers, indicators of the place where a son, daughter, mother, father, a loved one, has lost their life. The road is no longer an impersonal carriageway but a site of personal incident and tragedy, of accident and death. Subconsciously, the road has always had this possibility embedded into its potential meaning but, with those tokens of remembrance, the bereaved have chosen to make that conscious, to make clear that meaning by defining the location of their loss. And, in the anniversary of those deaths, those sites are revisited and the flowers replaced, the grass verge as pilgrimage, as memorial.

## Sock Drawer

The box sits in the back left hand corner of my sock drawer.  
It seems like the most sensible place for it.  
If such an item has a sensible place to be kept.  
It is a relatively inoffensive box, thick board covered with a light lilac paisley design.  
It has a ribbon (also lilac) at each corner of the lid to prevent it opening all the way back.  
I think it originally contained stationery of some sort.  
I don't really remember.  
Sometimes I open the drawer, take out the box and hold it.  
I don't need to open it. just hold it.  
Secure in the knowledge of what it contains.  
It is insurance.  
My opt out clause.  
My rainy day box.

-----

I read a lot about the various methods you can use to end life.  
Most seemed messy and even though the likelihood was that I would not know those that would find me it felt unfair to subject them to certain things.  
No one likes a mess.  
It didn't take long to discover that the method most used by doctors is barbiturates.<sup>1</sup>  
Google is a truly wonderful thing.  
I figured that if barbiturates were good enough for a medical professional then they would be good enough for me.

-----

In some ways I was fortunate. Twice.

1) My Grandmother died.

This was obviously not fortunate, especially for her, but it meant that my blind and house bound Grandfather would need to be moved to sheltered accommodation of some description. This in turn meant that the council house that they had shared would need to be cleared out. During this process my parents and I found many things. From the poignant (a half-eaten box of chocolates my Grandma had been given a week earlier for her birthday) to the pointless (old newspapers and advertising leaflets stuffed haphazardly into drawers). But the relevant find as far as you and I are currently concerned were the contents of the medicine drawer.

Firstly, Luminal, the barbiturate phenobarbitone. There were 2 packs. A 24 tablet 60mg pack which had been opened and from which 4 tablets were missing and a 24 tablet 100mg pack which was intact.

Secondly, Diazepam. A bottle of 100 10mg tablets. I later counted them and 87 tablets remained in the bottle.

I have no idea why either of these things were in the drawer, along with dogged eared half empty packets of paracetamol, a tube of insect bite ointment, the paint flaking from the tube revealing the silver grey metal beneath, its end rolled on itself to extract the last of its contents and a blue plastic eye wash cup that i convince myself I remember from when I was a child.

The tablets were put in a bag along with all the other medication in the drawer. I volunteered to take this to a pharmacy so that it could all be disposed of.

The Luminal and Diazepam never made it to the pharmacy.

I kept them in the box that may have contained stationery that is kept in my sock drawer.

2) A few years later we had to repeat the process for my father's uncle.

No pills this time, not that I found anyway, but he was an insulin injecting diabetic so there were many unopened boxes of hypodermic needles in his flat.

I kept some of these for myself, adding them to the box in the sock drawer.

-----

My plan was as follows.

I would begin by preparing 4 syringes of Luminal.

I had experimented a little and could get 3 of the 100mg tablets to dissolve into the 1ml of water that the syringes held. The process was helped by adding a small quantity of citric acid, a trick i stole from heroin users. That would be a total of 1600mg of intravenous ready phenobarbitone.

When the time came I would begin by taking the diazepam orally, then I would add some of the barbiturates to the mix.

Before finally injecting each pre-prepared syringe one after another into my left arm.

If all goes to plan I just fall asleep.

I was going to add a nice bottle of red wine to the occasion as alcohol increases the effectiveness of my chosen pharmaceuticals.

But I have not drunk in many years and my concern is that I would vomit and along with the wine would come the tablets.

-----

Which is worse?

To sit in your own shit and piss alone in a care home, losing your mind as you are abused and neglected by strangers on minimum wage?

Or to have your care needs forced onto your partner, your physical wellbeing becoming their life?

Humiliating and degrading which ever scenario you pick.

But we all have choices.

Mine is the box

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One of my concerns is that i remain sane enough to use the box.  
If mental deterioration begins then a line has to be drawn.

-----

Some days I think I should tell my partner about the box in my sock drawer.

-----

Sometimes I imagine the various scenarios that will lead to me using the contents.

Loss.

Illness.

Isolation.

To name just a few.

That's why the box contains what it does.

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Perhaps I will write her a letter, to be opened in the event of my sudden demise.

Tell her about the box that once contained stationery in my sock drawer

Tell her how to use it in case my need becomes hers.

-----

I'm just planning ahead.

For now the box that may once have contained stationery sits in the back left hand corner of  
my sock drawer.

And waits.

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## The Beach

and are ordered to get down  
in the minutes later  
the boat stops  
begins to water  
getting a large platoon  
in the waves  
the ramp goes down  
heading in  
on naval gunfire  
waist high in texas battleships  
the fire was floating  
on their so intense colonel  
observing  
something hit my left magazine pouch  
stops  
shore lot caught me  
dead centre  
high on my own artillery and mortar flames  
my helmet is gone  
the seawall is calling  
gun  
pulling me under  
to the burnt out hulk  
still remains  
chin strap sting  
inconsequential to the beach  
here to die  
like rats  
rifle jam  
floundered  
rapid carbine spray  
crouch  
through forward positions  
knuckle bone toward england  
dead end emplacement  
mammoth concrete friends  
collapsed  
never staggered  
bodies washed  
live tracers ashore  
and behind me all is pretty  
we have landed i yell to the beach

## **Vrykolakas**

The old man found the revenant amongst the cattle, slumped in the corner of the stable, a calf huddled close to his body. With eyes closed, the creature ran his fingers over the animal's throat, the splintered fingernails catching on the soft, fine fur. In the shadow of the open door, the old man stood watching, rifle broke over his arm, until the vrykolakas opened his eyes and looked into the darkness where he stood. "Are you going to do what you came to do?" He continued to stroke the calf, his gentle touch lulling it to sleep. "Her mother is dead," he said, "not by my hand but by God's. He took her and left this little one behind." His filthy fingers paused for a moment as he drew in a breath, the exhalation a pale vapour that drifted lazily up towards the stable roof. Rain fell dull upon the wooden shack, an unsteady rhythm in the darkening night. "Why would God do that?" he asked.

## **Far Away, So Close**

At Easter, our grandparents would take my brother and I to Yarmouth for a holiday. My grandma populates many of the recollections I have of those days as a warm and caring person, willing to play and willing to talk. Always cooking, always smoking and adamant that we be back in time to watch the wrestling on Saturday afternoon. Yet my grandfather exists more as a presence than a person within those same memories: a strong, quiet and contained man who smoked his pipe as much as his wife smoked her cigarettes. It is that which I remember most about him, so much so that the deep smell of cedar created by the slowly smouldering tobacco now scents these memories. I would watch him clean out the pipe bowl with a seemingly blunt knife, carefully scraping away the crusted embers. He would then gently tap it into his palm and blow into the bowl only to fill it again with fresh tobacco. Once the last flakes of tobacco had been smoked, the empty tin in which the tobacco came was put into his small workshop before a fresh tin was opened. He would line up the empty tins on the shelf above the workbench, filling them with various sized drill bits, cogs and spindles for clock making and an assortment of nuts, bolts and odd screws. Sometimes those empty tins were given to me. I still have one them and I hold it now: the surface is worn and scratched, one of its length slightly buckled. If I open it I know I will smell that cedar scent but it will be for one last time so I am content to hold the box and the memories it contains.

## **Buffet the Vampire Slayer**

Sausage rolls  
Scotch eggs  
Vol au vents  
Cheese puffs

Potato Salad  
Rice Salad  
Pasta Salad  
Fruit Salad

Cheese on sticks  
Quiche  
Prawn cocktails  
Cocktail Sausages

Mini Kievs  
Crisps  
Chicken drumsticks  
Pork pies

Daylight  
Sharpened Stakes  
Crucifixes  
Garlic

Next 7<sup>th</sup> February 2013

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ISSN 2049-3460

