

Beneath grimy Victorian window arches, Paddington station is cold and black. Under the disinterested eye of a pair of obscenity-crowned policemen, stray herds of travellers wander like ants. Signs blink in dirty orange dots, a flickering list of drab British placenames: Redditch, Moreton in Marsh, Northampton, Hull. Grim towns of grim people, where life bleeds slowly in the rain. No one smiles. The PA system chimes, belching unintelligible gobbledegook in an alien tongue.

Ducking low under the roof, a pigeon glides down through the iron rafters, sweeping through the spiralling thermal jets of cooling trains, cupping its wings against the air as it twists downwards, narrowly avoiding a middle-aged woman running to make her train. Its scaly claws skid on the dark tiles as it lands. Suddenly lost in a forest of thudding footfalls, it scuttles, head bobbing, between thick wandering legs, around a tall iron column, past a set of black-shoed feet crossed at the ankle, and on into the darkness, chasing food and sex and a safe place to sleep.

Anthony uncrosses his feet and stands upright, freeing himself from the iron pillar he had been leaning on. Amongst the cogs and wires, the fading sparks of youth, there is a sharp hum in his head like the static feedback of an idle amplifier. Caress the details.

Dry wood piled up in the dark, waiting for that one fatal spark. Winding through

frowning

German

platform.

It was

Vancouver,

<p>Jealousy works like strychnine, all my nerves ending in poison. Every time I see her I get sick.</p>

businessmen and chattering

backpackers, he heads for his

like this in the early days in

too; a strange familiarity in the

faces of strangers, the rising flame of incredulous recognition – “You? Here? But how?”

– stamped out by the turn of the head, the change of lighting, the unexpected eye colour or jawline melting an acquaintance, maybe even a friend, into a scowling stranger. God, or nature, or whatever, shows a surprising lack of imagination. Or else the mind can only conceive of a few hundred individuals before it begins to merge them together. Even her, maybe. The features of the one who came before reincarnated, reshaped, but undeniably recurring in her. The pale shell skin and the candle glowing through it; the heavy black hair, a moat of pitch defending heaven from the assaults of hell. But the golden sunburst of the iris, though; the spokes of radial glory like faultlines of gold in a sea-washed granite rock – those were hers alone. The impossible black pupils, darker even than her shadow-shaming hair, like a black hole swallowing the sun – that was her, alone.

The first three cars of the train are first class; every seat in the next two is reserved, a ticket sitting in the headrest of each one like the crest of a military unit. This fucking country. Anthony carries his bag down the aisle, through sliding doors and luggage racks, finally finding a narrow seat on the window side of a corpulent old degenerate eating a store-bought ham sandwich. Two girls sit directly in front, loudly discussing their menial job – chambermaids or cleaners or something. People keep piling on. Silently willing the train to start moving, Anthony pushes his headphones into his ears and tries to pretend he is somewhere else. Alone.

I'm taking back what's mine: my heart, my blood, my eyes; the things she can't imagine I have seen. The wild bare solitude; mine. She was never as beautiful as the orange streetlight on a rain-studded window in a lonely room high above the world.

He was supposed to feel it, the tiny explosion of hollow bones breaking in his hand, but he didn't. The fluttering body span suddenly from him, spiralling through the newly hostile air and collapsing on the shit-streaked floor. Revulsion opened his murderous fist, and the head dropped like a stone, its beak opening as it fell in a silent scream of horror, unable to comprehend the inevitability of its own destruction.

He watched the body struggling to right itself, balanced on feet and outstretched wingtips, trembling in helpless agony. Dark, oily blood geysered from its orphaned neck, great fat gobs of it rolling stickily down its matted breast. Then, at the raw limit of pain, it arched its back, red vertebrae rising from the tortured stump as though it was trying to escape its own ravaged body. In slow motion, it toppled over backwards, wings folding over itself, into its own blood.

Seagulls screamed from the parapet, calling one another to the gory bacchanal, the smell of blood jagged and metallic in their nostrils. Scooping the pieces of the pigeon into a garbage bag, he dropped the remains down the laddered shaft and climbed down after it.

Outside, a hairy hobo of indeterminate age and sex sat in the sun, cutting its toenails on the sidewalk. He tossed the tied bag into a dumpster and drove away.

Outside of dark London, green fields and hedgerows roll past, clanking. Sheep and cows grazing dully in the fields, the yellow scream of – too much? All right then, the yellow *fields* of rape grass. Still think mine

I don't care. I don't care what the vermin
I slaughter each day think of me; and I
don't care what she thinks of me. I live
only to taste her blood in my mouth.

bright against the
was better.

On the far side of a hill, Anthony, travelling backwards, sees a huge horse carved into the side of a hill, the white chalk beneath the turf standing out against the shifting green of the valley below. They're all over the place, these hill figures – horses and giants and geometric shapes, carved fuck knows when by God knows who. It was something that would have interested him once, maybe. But he's different now. His eyes have been branded by blue mountains and green forests, grey spires of rock tattooed with perpetual snow, ancient trees groaning in the foam-flecked wind from the sea. The moss grows thick in the innocent gloom.

As soon as he lifted the hatch into the attic, he knew there was something there. The eerie blue flashlight swept around the darkness, taking in tunnels carved through the insulation by successive generations of rodents, the dark dried-out pellets of rat shit scattered like seeds in a fresh-ploughed field. Gloved hand on a beam, breathing through his mouth, he hauled himself inside. His flashlight picked out a trap, flipped upside down with the violence of its steel spring mechanism, a fat furry body visible beneath the wood. The familiar death-stink hung in the air. That, and a million dancing particles of fibreglass dust, warming themselves in the molten bolt of sunlight that cut a ragged shape out of the darkness, the attic's permanent night stabbed by a spear of day.

He turned the trap over, the rat's heavy body and scaly worm tail trailing watery blood and effluent. Behind bared yellow teeth, its mouth was wet with chocolate syrup. The thick metal arm of the trap was almost buried in the fur at the back of the rat's snapped neck. A good clean kill with a mouthful of sweetness; we should all be so lucky.

There is a whore in Amsterdam who sings, lilting Mandarin ballads ringing in her small room while she bounces on top of another stoned tourist.

There is a girl awaiting death in an Iranian prison, scratching pictures on the wall with her fingernails.

There is an Indian woman who travels the world, hugging strangers.

There is a woman in the earth who died the night her husband was taken from her.

The miles roll past, green and flat. All of it owned by someone. On the flight over, the sky was clear over arctic Canada, and Anthony had looked down from the edge of space on hours of wilderness, brown earth dotted with hundreds of frozen lakes. Not a city, building or road in sight. A thick bar of night, rushing west, met the plane head-on in the middle of the Atlantic, and a few hours later, the sun rose in an empty English sky. Fields, roads, cities; microscopic cars hurtling along shadowy motorways – everything owned. Not an inch left unclaimed.

You can only love what you can't have; anything else is just laziness. Love is just lust with scars.

Every time he comes back, it gets worse. The naked hostility. Every race under the sun gathered here, and everyone hates each other. Police clutching machine guns in underground stations. Gangs of marauding teenagers filming random beatings on their cellphones. The signs, everywhere you turn: “No Smoking”; “No Loitering”; “Private Property”; “No Spitting”.

The train clatters on, cutting endless dull miles towards a city he hated long before he left. Worn out but not defeated, neither willing the train forward nor missing

what was left behind, he leans his head on the window and listens to the howl rising in his skull.