

The Untogether



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Jeb Loy
Nichols

ALCEMI 

Dedication

Thank you Loraine

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*I hold this to be the highest task of a bond between two people:
that each should stand guard over the solitude of the other.*

Ranier Maria Rilke



1

I was called in the afternoon. What little thoughts I was thinking dribbled out of me and vanished.

It's your father.

My father?

Your father, the nurse told me, has had a heart attack.

I squinted at the window. What I thought was: this is a call that should take place at dusk. A call that should be made and received in the near dark.

An attack?

We have him on a respirator. He's not stable.

Sun came tilting through the window. Birdsong and the smell of something red. The green green leaves on the holly.

Not stable.

I thought: so no change there.

I set out in the early morning, pointed west, the sun behind me, to Wales.

I wondered if I might not make it all the way there.

It was something I often thought.

Accidents, wrong turns, apathy.

I might see something that would divert me, I might end up in some distant region, disoriented, unsure of why I started, of where I was headed.

I didn't trust myself to finish the job.

The car leapt into third; something iridescent fell from the dash and mixed with the rain that puddled on the floor. The puddle hopped towards me and offered pull tabs, candy wrappers, caramel popcorn. I drove in what I hoped was a committed fashion, hugging the top of the speed limit, taking the bypasses, offering no hope for squirrels and stray dogs. The song I sang was: Mercy mercy me, things ain't what they used to be, oh no no.

Just outside of Shrewsbury my mother called. Whole fleets of sugar lice scabbled behind my eyes. The good stuff, the red sour waggle, was in full effect. My tongue, since midmorning, had been numb. I felt nothing more than movement, inside and out. I slowed down, pulled over. Pushed at empty bags of liquorice allsorts, wine gums, toffees, Flake bars, at cans of Lilt.

She said, what are you eating?

I looked at the clutter on the floor and said, who can eat? At a time like this?

I had, a year ago, tried yoga.

Ate whole bags of candy on the way to class, arrived jittery, spent the hour trying to calm down. At the end of class I was where I should have been at the beginning, relaxed and ready to go.

I wearied through the class wearing a t-shirt that said Who Remembers? I Remember.

The thought of a headstand left me aching and humiliated.

I was inflexible, rigid.

Where had this stiffness, this immobility come from? Why could I not touch my feet? Even the deep cleansing breaths turned into stuttering gasps. The class, I felt, begrudged my presence.

I found it intolerable to be confronted with my own lack of adaptability.

Dank leaves and litter crept around the hospital carpark, from one forlorn end to the other, gathering in unswept corners. A man with a broom was pushing everything into a pile.

I threw back one last handful of jelly babies, looked across the bleak expanse and sighed. Here we go, I thought.

My own shadow father.

The old man.

In the foyer someone was talking loud to the receptionist. You aren't gonna make me sad here are you? they said. You're not gonna do that are you?

The receptionist did something complicated with a stack of papers. Shuffling was involved, and stapling. The receptionist had nothing further to say.

You wouldn't do that to a rate payer would you? the man asked. A solid citizen. You wouldn't tell him something that would tear him up would you?

His head barely dented the pillow, his speckled neck slack, cheeks dull. I hesitated by the bed while a nurse bent

over him, the back of her hand against his forehead. The blanket over his chest barely moved. His eyelids fluttered, the skin around his nose tightened. A sharp rectangle of light found my feet.

You never know, said the nurse.

Know?

It isn't for us to know.

She looked briefly at the ceiling. Her lips parted. People rally, she said. They heave to and motivate.

Things have been known to improve, she said, looking at the door.

I had nothing to say.

Your father, she said, under the circumstances, is a very lucky man.

What he did, she said, was bang a hole clear through his left aorta.

I nodded while she said something extraordinary.

He's a fighter.

Him? I asked, wondering if there was someone else in the room.

Think Henry Cooper, she said. Brian Clough.

My dad? I said.

Prayer, said the nurse, is a possibility. There's always that.

Down the hall, next to the toilets, a nurse was pinning something to the notice board. A black and white photo of a dog. Beneath the photo it said QUINCY. And beneath that it said

LOST - HAVE YOU SEEN THIS DOG? WELL

TRAINED AND FRIENDLY - PERHAPS HE FOLLOWED YOU HOME - IF YOU'VE SEEN HIM PLEASE CALL 01686 759 947. THANK YOU.

And beneath that, in smaller type, it said: I've lived with Quincy for seven years and I miss him more than I've ever missed anything in my life. If you see him or find him or have him please, please, please get in touch.

And below that her name, signed quickly in pencil.
Ann.

In a corner shop I filled a basket: milk, crisps, three bottles of sparkling water, bread, some ice cream, biscuits. The cashier had on an oval badge that said Les. He said, can I get you anything else?

There's nothing else I need, Les.

There were people back there, in the darkened rear of the shop, gathered around a table. Conspiring, I assumed. Les's t-shirt said: I'm Staying Out Forever.

In my father's house I roamed into the kitchen and stood in the yellow light. A box of Special K. A glass with ANGLESEY written on it. A painting of bug-eyed children. A necklace made of seed pods. A calendar. Slippers at the back door. A dish towel laid out to dry. A set of cards.

I returned to the living room, turned on the TV and watched a documentary about drought in east Africa. A starving child looked wide eyed at the camera. A popular actress asked for money. A number scrawled across the bottom of the screen.

A grief-stricken woman was talking. Subtitles flicked on and off beneath her.

She said: once my life moved like water but now it moves like milling
corn.

She said she had two children, both now in need of aid, the youngest a
daughter named Seraphim.

I was once sent to find my father.

You tell him, my mother said, to get back here right now or there'll be consequences.

Consequences, a word too terrifying to contemplate.
I ran to the place I knew he'd be.

The light was pale, washed out blues and greys that didn't reach the corners. The air was paisley with cigarette smoke and dust. The juke box played Papa Was A Rolling Stone.

I'd done this before.

I crossed the room; he looked at me and tried to smile. When I told him what my mother had said he slumped down and used words like bloody hell and dead to rights and inevitable damage.

He dipped forward and pointed at his pint. The bartender nodded.

I looked at his shoes, his pale fingers, his polished chin. Tears leapt into my eyes.

He had a jacket he let me borrow.

Take it, he said. Pure wool. Hunner percent.

I slipped it on and how little it made me feel.

On the street we ran into Vivienne, who really, my

father said, had no business being in that part of town.

Hey stranger, she said to me.

She was splashy and imposing, every separate part of her immense. She waggled her face at me and winked. And then, in what she thought was a whisper, said to my father, we're headed over to Blanche's.

Blanche's, my father said, is definitely not on our schedule.

We stopped in the Co-op on the way home. Chocolates, he said, for your mother.

Cars squished and grinded through the wet streets. The checkout ladies were talking about bus schedules and church duties and the remarkable things their children said. I looked out at the dull night while my father stood beside me and said nothing. He had a look on his face that froze something in my stomach.

He held a box of chocolate-covered cherries.

I had no plan, no hope of getting through the long stroll home.

Can you walk? I asked.

I'll do my best, he said, and looked instantly sad. Like he knew exactly what a shallow promise that was.

May I? asked a nurse.

I motioned to a seat and she did nothing. Stood in the crowded canteen and wavered. Finally, slowly, she sat down. I recognised her. Your dog, I said.

She arranged herself.

I saw your poster.

She nodded and said nothing.

Any luck?

Luck?

Finding Quincy.

Not yet, she said.

I sipped my juice, pulled the top off my yogurt and stared at the blue pulp that had gathered around the edges. Finally, after a few fluttering moments, I said, I'm Lee.

She nodded.

We didn't shake hands.

She looked over my shoulder at the window. Across the grassed courtyard a sign that once said NO BALL GAMES had had an E and a T added to it: NO BALLET GAMES.

Ann, she said.

I asked about Quincy, how old he was, what breed. She said he came from a shelter.

I went, she said, with a friend.

She talked about the bare cages, the smell of disinfectant, the bright lights, the whining, the despair.

What could I do? she asked. What the hell could I do?

Not being one who has ever known what to do I said nothing.

Occasionally he squeaked, a sound that spat dry from the back of his throat. His breathing made not a sound, his eyes rolled behind white lids. I'd seen no other visitors, there weren't any flowers.

I turned on the TV and watched an afternoon movie; lovely troubled people, all of them intimate and unhappy, embroiled in rich and ornate doings.

When the nurse came back I asked her if she knew Ann. She's new, I said.

Blonde? Big-boned girl?

I shook my head. Red hair, I said. And small. This high.

I floated my hand at my shoulder.

The nurse said, no. Doesn't ring a bell.

I turned back to the TV and saw a woman crying, her mascara puddling, her hands and dress covered in blood.

She called in the morning, immediately apologised, asked what I was doing, if I was available. I'm going out, she said, looking for Quincy.

I'd given her my number. I made a noise that meant yes.

I could use, she said, another pair of eyes. If you want.

I want, I said. Eyes. Sure.

She drove slowly, one hand on the wheel, coffee mug there between her legs. A map spread between us. Large sections of the map had been highlighted. These were where she'd gone last weekend.

This weekend, she said, I'm doing out towards Llanfyllin.

I nodded and she said, what do you think?

Think?

Would a dog go south? Toward the sun, toward the river?

A dog, I said, would go precisely nowhere we'd expect

it to.

Like most things, she said.

The streets there were narrower, the houses packed tighter. We drove slowly between second-hand cars and doubled back through gravelled alley ways. All the time with the windows down shouting Quincy!, Quincy!

The shouts of Quincy! punctuated our conversation.

She asked about my father and I said, never knew him well, Quincy! we weren't close, he left home when I was ten, Quincy!

I told her that he was a builder, that he dug basements Quincy!, that he dealt in excavations, that what he did was, he left behind holes.

I didn't tell her: I once put mustard powder in his tobacco. Cut holes in the pockets of his trousers. Super glued shut his teapot. Exchanged his sugar with his salt. Spat in his spaghetti, buttered his sleeping hands.

Ann said, Quincy! in 1979 the Russian space program took three new-born rabbits into orbit and killed them

In the name of science, she said, Quincy! they kept the mother rabbit behind in Moscow and as they killed the babies they monitored her.

I nodded and she said, each time they killed a bunny, Mummy rabbit would let out a shriek and her body would fill up with adrenaline Quincy!

Science, she said.

I watched two oily boys trying to coax noise from a scooter and wondered what it was she was trying to tell me.

My father frisked beneath sheets; rolling, he turned to

his left in a bunched S, then unfolded with a flourish. I looked at the nurse and said, Dad's dancing.

She lifted his wrist, made a note of his pulse.

This Fred Astaire business, I said. Is it expected?

As signs go, she said, it's a good one.

Shows, I suppose, desire.

To be up and at em.

Up and at what?

Life, she said.

It sounded a grand thing, wide with chance, as perilous as all outdoors. I noticed that her white shoes were tied with gold laces. A luminous touch. I said, he may be dreaming.

Possibility, she said.

I had no idea of what my father might dream.

I haven't prayed, I said. I can't. Never have.

She nodded and said, I did. I do. Each morning. Before I come on duty.

Thank you, I told her.

I was surprised to realise I meant it.

I called Ann from my father's house. I can't sleep here, I told her. I'm adrift. The windows let in insects, the bed lamp hums.

It's not, I told her, a pleasant house.

The walls were something like pink and grey. Over the sofa was a painting of a naked woman astride a swan. In the corner of the room were a stack of magazines. I grabbed a couple and flicked through them. They were all copies of Excavation Technology Today.

I adjusted the phone and said: now here's a scary

story.

I told the one where Dad and I visited an island off the Cornish coast. Our one and only father son fishing trip. A manly weekend away. Enjoy yourselves, my mother had said, packing sandwiches and lemonade. Have fun.

Sounds nice, said Ann.

What we did, I said, was end up humiliated on the front page of the local paper. FATHER AND SON RESCUED BY LOCAL SCHOOLBOY.

Picture a double crate of beer, I told her, a collapsed tent, a dumped and rusty refrigerator, a length of rope, a faulty flashlight, an early tide.

When I entered the room he turned, his hand hovered an inch above the bed. There's been progress, the nurse told me. Your father spoke this morning. Since when, I wondered, does speech count as progress?

I sat and said, hello Dad.

He looked up as if I was miles above him. I waited while he focussed.

Leeeeee?, he said.

The air filled with muted clatter. An amplified voice requested Dr Silver to paediatrics. The nurse assumed a policing position by the sink. Here I am, I said, next of kin.

His shoulders sloped into what I suspected was a shrug and he said, I had to. List someone.

I told him that I was staying in his house, on the sofa.

His head pushed back into the pillow. I watched him squeeze his morphine release. His eyes dilated, he seemed,

slightly, to swell. Spittle bubbled at the corners of his mouth. He squinted out the window, I followed his gaze and watched a magpie flap onto the lawn.

He turned to the wall and appeared to sleep.

I should've looked out more, Ann said, pushing a leaflet into a mailbox. Kept him close.

In my experience, I said, best intentions had little to do with safety.

We were distributing leaflets, the same one she put up at the hospital. We'd stapled some to telephone poles, taped them to the bus shelter, put one in the window of the Morningside Cafe.

Our shoulders touched.

It's not your fault.

He was my companion, she said. And I let who knows what happen to him.

I told her how, when I was twelve, my mother and I had gone swimming, in the late summer, the last tired days of August. It was a place we sometimes went, after school or on Saturdays, usually in the hushed afternoon when it was too hot to sit still, a deserted quarry, and on this day we'd gone in too quickly after lunch and gone out further than we should have, we were both laughing and out of shape and before we knew it we were treading water, tired legs churning while we gasped for air, our shoulders and backs cramping. We barely made it back. As we lay sprawled on the rocky shore, both of us fatigued and winded, my mother had turned to me, fixed me with eyes that were younger than they had any right to be, and said, sometimes I forget how easy it is to fuck up.

After dinner we sat on a park bench and listened to sitars on the radio. A family had their dinner spread out on a blanket. A dog lay on its back, a small girl squatted and rubbed its stomach. The family had samosas and a bowl of dahl and some rice and a stack of chapatis. I told Ann that when I was twelve I'd run away from home.

The family dished up their dinner and held up bowls inviting us to join them. We smiled and shook our heads.

I got all the way to Manchester, I said, before a policeman found me hanging around the coach station at three in the morning. He took me back to his house and bought me pizza. Gave me a lecture about drugs, about drink, about the dangers of older, predatory women, about the hollowness of a life without Jesus.

My mum drove through the night to come and get me.

On the drive home Mum didn't talk. Didn't ask me why I'd run away, how I'd got to Manchester, what I'd eaten, anything. She just drove, listened to the radio and smoked. Occasionally reached over and patted my knee. For most of the trip we were on the same highway I'd just hitchhiked. The same services, the same exits, the same signs and fields. But in reverse this time, like time was spinning backwards, like time and my mother were undoing what had been done. As if things, in this way, could be made better, splits healed, holes filled. And the only equipment required were time, silence, a well looked after car, money for petrol and a willing driver.

At the door to my father's room the nurse's eyes were full of tears. I hurried to her, touched her elbow.

She shook her head, looked quickly down the hall and said, I'm sorry. It's nothing.

Nothing?

I looked at my father's room and she said, to do with him.

She fluttered her hands in front of her face. I felt an unexpected wave of relief and she said, I'm sorry.

We stood together for a moment and traded skittish glances. I was sure I should say something.

I said nothing.

Unprofessional, she said. This.

This?

Tired.

I shrugged and said, can I get you something? Water? Some tea?

She turned, I followed her into my father's room. She crossed to the sink, filled a glass, drank it. We finally, after two weeks, introduced ourselves.

I get run down, Rita said. Comes up on me before I know it.

She wiped her eyes and looked lost.

I have a card at home, she said, that my minister gave me. It says: We are confronted with insurmountable opportunities.

I smiled. I waited. I wanted her to know that friendship was a possibility.

Walt Kelly said that, she said. An American.

I nodded.

I need a break, she said. A holiday. Tobago. Trinidad.

I have family in Jamaica.

I arranged my face. Travel clarifies, I said.

Helps gain perspective.

I nodded and she said, what it does is it gets you away from where you are.

There was, in Ann, an allegiance to the peripheries of her life that I recognised. The centre remained a mystery.

She told me about the flat she rented.

Hard to find a place, she said, that allows dogs.

Her eyes clouded. I nodded.

She said, they don't let you change anything. The sofa, the bed, the cream walls. Can't change a thing. Very strict. Not for six months. For six months you got to leave everything exactly like it is and learn to love it.

And then?

Then?

After six months.

They have a meeting of the Bankside Residents Group and they decide if you're Bankside material. If you are, you sign a new lease and you can do whatever you want. Course if you're Bankside material you don't want to change anything. So it all stays like it is.

I pushed a plate of biscuits across the table and she said, could be that I'm miswired. Defective in some way. Not plugged in.

Plugged in?

A misconnection. I obsess about things that don't matter.

She talked slowly, methodically, frowning just a bit.

I took a night course, she said, once. Pottery. Couple

of years ago. Like you do.

Like some people do.

First project was a bowl. Take a lump of clay, push your fingers into it and off you go.

She picked up a biscuit and said, I got nowhere. Never left the lump stage. Me, a table, seven classmates and a lump of clay. I felt stupid. Told the teacher I feel so stupid.

She shrugged and said, it was ugly and I felt stupid.

She broke the biscuit and said, it seemed to be the way of things.

What Quincy loves, said Ann, is riding shotgun. You know, up front, head out the window, ears flapping in the wind.

Sure.

I'd seen it, a dog leaning out the window, mouth open, muzzling through all that fresh air. I reached down and marked off another street. I leant back to the window and shouted Quincy!

She'd told me to do the shouting.

Your turn, she said as we left the hospital, throwing her handbag over her shoulder, slipping on an enormous pair of sunglasses.

What Quincy likes, she said, is night driving. Night patrol we call it.

On the horizon, somewhere over Llanfair, clouds loomed.

I shouted Quincy! and looked uncertainly at the coming weather; a single aeroplane crawled between planets.

What Quincy loves, said Ann, is to lean into the dashboard and let the dry heat lift his hair.

He didn't, for two days, say anything. Just slept and squeaked. Every so often a yelp. A short high bark. Rita told me he did it through the night. At eleven o'clock the doctor came in on his rounds and I asked him if this was normal, this squeaking and barking, this talking one day and then the next day nothing. The doctor looked at the chart, at my feet, at the array of medical equipment around us and said, normal isn't a word I use.

I sat in the canteen and watched people come in, sit quietly in the bright lights and hold cups of coffee. The toilets were busy. I spent time looking out the window, watching things that meant nothing to me. Ambulances, wheelchair people, tired doctors, creeped-out bald kids. I wondered about bad plumbing, hippy neighbours, the ugly downhill slant that marked my father's neighbourhood.

That morning Rita had told me: He does not seek God who has not already found him.

I told her my mother used to say that.

All mothers, she said, used to say that.

When I said nothing she said, c'mon, let's chew the fat.

Though she knew I'm a vegetarian.

We talked about growing up miles from where we were, counties away, across hills and rivers, through forests, along miles and miles of roads and motorways.

I never go back, said Rita. Not worth the aggro.

I nodded and said, who can remember the way?

All those exits, those left turns.
Not worth the bother, I said.

My father went south as if he'd caught a bug. Woke in a fever of travelmust and hopped it. I watched him sidle away, his laden car listing to the west. A blue type Ford boat with a reddened rag for a petrol cap.

I developed, at an early age, an inability to use public conveniences that plagues me to this day. I spent days and weeks, a lifetime, inventing stories about my father.

An example: the old man loose in London, a wastrel, dangerous and frail, a hair trigger, grunting into showgirls, wall eyed and wanted, one of those you see, when passing through the West End, hectoring tour guides.

Imagine my disappointment.

I felt sluggish, drawn to sleep and long mornings. I was having dreams in which I gained weight and was involved in public scandal. In one I took up tennis, grew ever fatter and less agile until finally there I was, a vast mass of immobile flesh, piss stained and pathetic, muttering at women, scaring children, flailing at the air with a stringless racket.

Poor me, I sang, poor me. Poor little porker me.

I wanted to hate something. My body, the dull mornings, my father, my mother. All the things that had led me here. To the leaden mess of life.

I thought: I can do without this. His, hers, mine, theirs, the slim and middling things we'd made.

Was this it?

In the morning I threw up a weak soup of ochre-tinted

phlegm. It circled the toilet and was gone, another bit of me lost, cast away.

I remembered a woman in a black and white film who said, this misery can't last forever, not even life lasts very long.

The first thing Ann said, after twenty minutes of silent passengering, was, is this a good idea?

Good, I thought, as any.

As any, she said, of yours.

I called my mother in the morning and I told her I had no idea what I was doing. Why I'd come, what I hoped to accomplish. I need goals, I told her. Twelve concrete steps of action.

You're the next of kin, she said. You won the lottery. You're it.

I'm nothing, I said.

You're everything.

What I am is the last one standing.

Then come home, she said. Up to you.

We talked for a moment about her neighbours, her gas boiler, about the way spring used to come fast and hard but now took its time.

It's all off kilter, she said. Something's wrong.

I tried to ask her some small question about my father and she cut me off. Snapped at me. Said, scuze me Mr Gotta Know Everything Right Now, but somethings are just off limits. OK? You know that.

I frowned and she said, OK?

I nodded once and said, sorry.

She sighed deeply and said, there are some things people just don't like to talk about.

Sure.

And for me your father is top of the list.

In fact, she said, making some little conciliatory sound, he's just about the entire list. Between you and me anyway. OK? Understand? Let's just say he's the entire list and leave it at that. How's that? There's only one thing on the list of things your mother doesn't want to talk about and that's your father. OK? You got that?

Yes, I whispered.

In my wallet is a picture of my mother. Taken when she was twenty-two, her feet bare, small hands fisted at her waist. I have the picture because I asked, on my thirteenth birthday, if she had a picture of my father. That's all I want, I said, for a present. A picture. Of the old man.

She didn't say anything, just stood and looked weary. Finally she rooted through a box of photos, found one and gave it to me. That's it, she said, brushing dust off her hands. All yours. Congratulations. Total photographic evidence.

I thumbed the photo and said, this?

She nodded.

My nose twisted and I said, this is it?

She said, take it or leave it.

I placed it on her dresser and stepped back. I was hoping, I suppose, for more.

She smiled and said, weren't we all?

She nodded and pointed to a shadow at the bottom

of the picture. That's him, she said.

That's all you got?

She smiled and said, his camera. Wouldn't let me touch it. Insisted he knew best.

She winced at the memory and said, God we were young.

I looked at the photo and frowned.

Said, there's nothing more?

We'd been out walking through once-old buildings that were now new buildings, full of fresh money and small dogs. Behind us prostitutes waggled themselves at passing cars and said things like, Hey there Mr Blue Vauxhall, you wanna get busy tonight?

We headed back to my father's.

He had a lampshade in his hall with all the signs of the zodiac on it. When the light was on you could turn the shade so that your own particular star sign was illuminated. When we arrived it said Cancer.

Ann was telling me that nothing made sense. Like I didn't know that. Like somehow I'd avoided that information. She was talking in tight little sentences that ended unexpectedly. She thought she was telling me something novel.

In my father's house I crept from room to room on tiptoes, making as little contact with the floor as possible. Dust and dead spiders clumped in corners, the windows were streaked and fogged. I'd bought new sheets, a pillow, a blanket for the sofa. The used sheets I folded and returned to the cupboard in the hallway. It smelt of undergrowth, of the funeral ground beneath hedges.

I camped in the living room, heating beans and macaroni on the stove, drinking bottled water. Watching TV. Reading *Excavation Technology Today*.

I said something to Ann about the limited appeal of my father's life.

Lone men, she said, giving the words a heartbreaking lilt.

Like father like son.

You're not him, she said and I was filled with an unreasonable gratitude.

I slunk into my father's room at the hospital, and sulked. Sucked sugar from my teeth and said, how's tricks?

Tricks, said Rita, are being played daily on backsliders and non-believers.

I heaved into a chair and watched my father's mercurial breathing.

I wished I had some little belief, some dollop of faith.

I watched Rita's skirt drift above her knees. Rain pooled on the carpark. Rita stood and threw at me the old chestnut about the Lord working in mysterious ways.

I told her what I'd read that morning in the paper. How a freak sandstorm from the Sahara Desert had dumped 80,000 tonnes of sand onto the ski slopes of western Switzerland. Seemed a rogue bank of Moroccan cloud had travelled north up the Spanish coast, swept west along the Rhone Valley, went east over Lake Geneva. And then rained sand for seven hours.

Gonna be cleaning that mess up for years, I said.

I had hoped that Rita might be impressed.

Sand, I repeated, in the Alps.
In the Lord, Rita said, the unexplained is made evident.
I trust in his plan.
Everyday?
All day.
Sand storms?
She had no need to nod. I knew.
Thieves and fanatics? Falling rocks?
Rita stood firm, her faith complete.
Stray bullets? I asked. The objects people throw from
windows?
She smiled and I was lost.

I entered my father's room bearing flowers. Four roses
wrapped in silver paper. For you, I told Rita.

I pirouetted.

She sighed and said we're not allowed to accept
flowers. We're seen with flowers around here and we're
finished. They think we've stolen 'em.

Which is what I'd done: saw them in the waiting room,
slipped them under my coat and come straight to Rita.

There's so little trust left in the world, I said.

We'll leave 'em here, she said, by your father's bed.

There was a sweet purple glow to Rita's forehead.
I liked that. That and her tight-curved short hair. Her
pressed uniform too. The way it collided with her hickory
black skin. Her name tag that said Margaret. Her gold-
laced shoes and white tights.

I liked the the way Rita ducked around the room,
clucking, checking charts, screens, the corners of the bed,
the curtains, the lotion dispenser over the sink. What she

was doing was keeping everything perfect.

I feigned interest, nodded at Rita's rantings. God's love this and Our Saviour that.

I trotted out my tired stories of Paracelsus, the renaissance doctor. I told her how, in 1527, he assembled the leading Swiss academics of the day with the promise of revealing the greatest medical secret known to western man. And how, on the appointed day, his precious secret turned out to be a bowl of shit. And how, in the face of outrage, he'd held it aloft and yelled, if you will not hear the mysteries of putrefactive fermentation, you are unworthy of the name of physicians!

I hoped to woo Rita away from her unseen god by way of Paracelsus's bowl of steaming shit.

The way of things, I said, is neither right nor perfect but long and dull. A tedious ride through muck and its attending filth.

Decay, I said, is the beginning of all birth! Look to the bottom and see the top!

I knew I held nothing for her.

She smelled of industrial strength disinfectant and my heart danced. Maybe later, I said, we could I don't know. Something like cake and coffee. The two of us.

She straightened and vaudeville'd some anger. You and me? she asked.

The two of us?

I nodded and she said, won't happen. Won't happen cause it can't happen. No flowers and no grieving relatives. That's the law. We've attended mandatory seminars about this stuff. Grieving relatives are emotionally vulnerable. Easy targets. So we got to remove and keep clear.

Lawsuits, misconduct, reprimands, it's all possible.

I just thought -

Don't try to Luther Vandross me. I know what you were thinking. Your daddy's dying, you're about to be a poor little orphan boy. You got that lost look in your eye. You need some comfort. So you come the crooner with me.

The room's translucent light was suddenly eerie, as if we were knee deep in clear jelly. Something, just on the other side of the door, began to hiss and rattle.

You got uniform fetish written all over you, she told me. I know your kind. I've been there. You like it starched and spotless.

I could hardly pretend otherwise.

I made some feeble protest. Said something about cleanliness and Godliness.

Don't you, she said, talk to me about God.

I took Ann to a movie. Gene Hackman was in it and he went insane. Ended up playing the saxophone in a torn up house. After the film we hailed a taxi. In the taxi neither of us moved. Finally the driver said, c'mon you lot, please, gimme a clue. Where we going?

And I thought: why should you know what I don't?

Ann and I lost ourselves in some distant neighbourhood, near the city limit. I shouted Quincy! and thought of awful things, of pictures I'd once been shown: two naked women on a beach, two bananas, a bottle of rum, a small dog. The heater in Ann's car didn't work, her fingers were turning blue. She was less than pleased, her eyes teared.

She was shouting something about hypothermia.

Soup, she said. And blankets. Blankets and a fire. Blankets and soup and a fire and maybe some brandy. That OK?

So let's go back and get warm, I said.

BACK? Go back? NOW? And leave Quincy? Just like that? Leave Quincy here to freeze to death?

She stopped the car while I shouted Quincy!

He may be just around the corner, she said.

She cleared her throat, the air in the car thickened.

I can't just leave him here.

I slurred some damn soliloquy that included, within it, the phrases the healing hands of time, better must come, tomorrow's another day. The great mysteries.

What I wanted was to leave and be somewhere familiar.

Come morning, I said.

Morning?

In the morning, I said, things will be clearer.

The night, I knew, was a dark season, labyrinthine and without end.

The night, I knew, was not to be trusted.

It hardly seemed possible but there she was, in the fresh produce aisle of the Co-op.

Rita, I said.

She looked menacingly at my empty basket and said, dear boy.

There stood at her side a trolley full of frozen pizzas, TV dinners, Pot Noodles, cans of soup, cat food.

She gave me nothing. A stony individual. Fixed me

with her presidential stare and said, do you hold a grudge, boy? Are you a grudge-holding heathen?

I assumed I probably was but could think of none I was currently holding.

Perhaps, I said.

A prevaricator, she said sadly.

I nodded and she said, prevaricating, grudge-holding, and loitering amongst the soft fruits. Hellava life for a young man.

Again I agreed.

Mind yourself, she said, nodding darkly in the direction of the check out tills. Mind that things left unsaid today don't turn into something altogether more poisonous tomorrow.

I nodded.

Take a tip from Rita.

I waited.

Talk boy! she said. Talk!

My father died early the next morning. By the time I got there they'd unplugged and detubed him, wheeled his unliving body away from the bright lights and bustle. What I found was an exited corpus, earthly remains.

Another heart attack, the doctor said. A doozy. Nothing we could do.

I signed papers, made what few arrangements were required. I sat and waited for Rita's shift to start. I paged Ann. Could be that I slept, shut down, all of me wearied and wrecked.

I felt under my arm, next to my ribcage, looking for lumps. I invented symptoms, read the posters that covered

the walls. Animals, cars, plants, houses. The lighting turned my skin yellow, the chair hurt my back, the walls were streaked pistachio.

I looked at a poster of a grinning baby and thought: I need to be less well than I am.

I was looking for something terminal. I needed an exit, a way out, I picked up a magazine, felt dizzy, listened mostly to other nurses, to waiting patients, to parents and friends, to the declining whirl and buzz.