

SKETCH BOOK

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ENGINES AND THOUGHTS

We don't have a name for it, the sound and motion of a bus with automatic gears changing from one to another – the lurching motion, the rising pitch of engine. The mechanisms of our progress. How many thousands of us know what happens next in the daily round of the diesel-powered vehicle by absorbing the noise and the movement as we stare out at the passing cars?

We have no words for the purr and whirr and breathing of the violent machine beneath the controlled exterior, its cycles and rhythms; we know but can't describe the greasy oily dust that deposits itself in corners, the colour of the steel after years of service beneath the hood. We can't formalise our knowledge of the exterior metal plate, the flimsy covering, the boxy, stylised dressing that hides innards that we can only guess at, but we know its own shuddering in conjunction with bus's halts describes an unsupported skirt.

The sikh walked in front of me in fawn jeans and jacket, dark turban, brown timberland shoes as the delivery lorry, boxy, square, draws to a halt and the doughy face of the driver high in his cab, stared out with currant eyes, his crinkly, grizzled hair thinly combed on the pink flesh. I thought he looked at me but he was probably checking the traffic as he swung out onto the road and away from where I stood. The goofy logos silly on the stolid, bouncing bodywork underpinned by tail-lifts and mudguard flaps and fuel tanks and tyres, foursquare.

I walked on into town wondering if I knew, if anyone could judge what reality is for another.

THE DRIVE NORTH

was interesting – I'd loaded up in the pouring, pelting rain (of course) which let up and showed a little sunshine as I left town, damp and dirty after all the stairs from the studio and a year's dust on all my things. With the sun behind us, we streamed towards a grey horizon; the country laid out on my left in a misty brightness like paintings of distant Umbrian landscapes, the cornfields on the right glowing golden in the slanting rays with bales picked out like fine detail filigree work and behind them, above the ranks of pines, the dark, dove grey of storms. The mirrors showed road so bright behind me that you could only guess amid the spray, the sky reflected in the wet road, a sort of light, sepia yellow, bursting into incandescence. Dark patches of cars punctuated with yellow dots of headlights.

Further on it started squalling - wipers on - hard to see ahead - I'm going darker, deeper into the murk. Everything became yellow, as if we were lit at a steep angle by a weak 40 watt bulb. Behind us, uniform and low, a fiercely amber sky with diffused sun below a bruised ceiling; ahead, when you could see it, a wicked sky boiling with cloud. Houses showed, off to the sides, solidly embedded in enclaves of dewy trees, with dark stone and slate roofs, lights in some of the windows (or maybe just reflections). Rolling fields and upholstered hedgerows, lush, green, rain-swept.

I even felt envy because these are peoples' homes, because that implies a vigour, an energy which withstands and encompasses days like these.

THE DIRT ROAD TO WUPPERTAL

I'm on the dirt road to Wuppertal, a dry and dusty ochre in the wide dish of blueing hills; miles, miles, miles of scrubby earth below a lifetime of sky. the yellows, greys and browns of sage

bushes and dry grass and the myriad seed heads give way to scattered dots, dark green on the red-buff earth. We've seen the circular colonies of ants, where the vegetation is changed due to their acid presence. We passed a lone kopje miles back, with goats and below, in the valley is a grid of fields and the roads curl, pale, beyond, up escarpments, below ridges, snaking, loosely draped. We have stopped – photo-op – or was it the baboons? And the hot breeze rustles the odd bag amongst rusting cans in the stony red dust.

We were maybe seven hours driving from the cape, I can't recall exactly, except the cool waves on the beach as we left, looking back to Table Mountain and then the lunch stop at the olde farm with wine tasting and the craft shoppe amongst the barrels with the pioneer verandah. The relief of our a/c. So eventually, off the main road and up mysterious winding tracks through towering orange boulders balanced like toys, with the rainstorm darkening the afternoon, we endured a torrential downpour as we passed some tomb of a western man. On, over bumps to the oasis on the plateau, its shallow pooled river and safari-print cabanas – the best - nestled in its savannahs and rooibos plants.

Leaving that, this morning, still we drive further into some interior, a place of emptiness on maps, a place with nothing, no-one, just vasts of rock and sky. Still we're not there, not yet at the last town at the end of the last road.

Day is a blueing of the envelope, a cooling of the avenue of spray. We go from gold to silver under the dwindling lights.

Headlights sweep down the hill towards me like tiny beads of water on a wire – early rush-hour traffic into town. The day has begun despite the gloom. Homes are scattered, empty, all over the country, left behind in the rain to meet the greying hours alone. A tendril of smoke rises from a house behind an earth bank. I can't keep my eyes from the lilac light as I crest the rise, from the pearl glow of cars in the mist. I note the play of droplets down my windows, the now damp opacity

of the glass, the light that falls on parts of the car, how the day is seen in the mirrors.

I write as I drive into the dimness. And dry my hair at the air vents and eat my grapes (breakfast) and see a man in a lemon suit by the council van and the spikes of trees and hear the crack of rain over the ragged raucous rolling beat of my engine. And I think about Victoria and yesterday's lunch and whether I offended her and whether I want to see either of them again. Or how early or late I will be or of the man I met on the plane who managed an abattoir and wanted to buy the wing of a castle in these woods. And between all this is the blunt, hard nudge of lorries, the thick, weighty slabs of their trays, the low, solid plane of their loads.

A fractured fraternity, the knights of the road. The plight of the road... They slog Northwards for hours. They ferry between grey cities, pale in the mist. Alone. Alone with anchors or beef or cattle or fish. Or chips. All night with stones or lumber or washing machines; far from home with beer, milk, flowers, furniture, hospital things. Dragging behind them mail order lingerie, tyres and pipes. I pass solitary men in cranes and repair vans and tippers and bulks; in containers, curtain-siders, buses and tanks; in lutons and car racks and ungainly brick grabs. High-siders, low-loaders, tail-lifts and tow-trucks; flatbeds and skip lorries and volvos and mercs. Double-bogies and artics, rigids and cabs. Log spikes and lifting arms. Two tonners, five tonners, forty-two. Thousands of wheels. All those diff-locks and air-brakes and exhaust brakes and suzies. All those leaf-springs and mud-flaps and side-bars! Hydraulic suspension, power steering... That tiny pin in the fifth wheel... How many steel-tipped boots and yellow jerkins, how many fags? All the offers and slogans, logos and catchphrases, questions and exhortations! All those phone numbers, faxes, locations. Symbols and stripes and stencilled explanations.

There are rooks in the treetops and dew on the railings.

I think of other drives, mile after mile of them. Tearing up the tarmac, skimming over the land. Could I have gone round the earth already? I'm sure of it.

OUR MAN IN IJMUIDEN.

My memories of that time are tinged with grey; drizzling motorways, acres of road – no tulips on the cobbled streets of Cuijk that we squeezed through in November. So alone that only Pepper knew I was gone, waiting, hungry in the rain. And I'm down by the Catty factory, seagulls preying on rotting rusk and amorphous fish among the skips and mist-wet slabs, courtyards tracked by fork-lift trucks and inching artics with steamy cabs and bright, limp pennants. And the meanings of our journeys? Ever-changing manifests start reading as the same.

Our time frittered away among saturday shifts and cigarettes; fell chill on diesel fumes and shabby snackettes; waited, hamstrung, interminable hours on bleak, deserted industrial estates. A currency of cages, pallets, drums was spent on empty roads. Loads came and went while dusks fell to the dashboard's glow.

I'M STILL DRIVING.

Low-slung cars grip the road, cat-like.

Trucks seen in the mirror, shouldering each other it seems, coming round the bend behind me in relentless competition, inexorable, conquering, flowing, weaving, hauling round a small, blue volvo with sedate and greying driver.

A tapering, nicotine plume streaming back from the shoulders of a ribbed, white tipper; its chunky, insect head gnawing at the road. The blue-grey dado curves of tree-lined and distant horizons.

Muscling lorries, drivers playing the pedals, looking out at the mirrors. The game of travel, even the frustration of tailbacks has a flavour - a checked-shirt, face-rubbing, brake-hissing, cab-

bouncing style to it, the old urgency of purpose, the purposefulness of urgency...

Norbert Dentressangle ... Polypipe .. Polyplumb...plastic plumbing and drainage supplies... Doncaster... COLUMBUS LINE ... Preston's of Potto... BP... Maersk... Parcel Force, Ward Roofing, P & O, Joliet, Cromwell Gravel Works. Jonkheere, Fruehauf, temperature controlled distribution... Cones, overlays, road-signs, lorry lettering, pop-art. Power lines, overpasses, railings, lines, spray and hissing tyres. Stripes, types, logos.

A little hello from Scotland over Beattock summit – pelting rain with the fat, grey wool of cloud bruising low over steely hills. Welcome back!

Back to where? Back to what? I drive past all the places I've known. On the road again.

All the ghosts. Martin, his furniture van and the rainy Sunday his dreams came true and the argument about the dictionary in his mum's flat on Brighton Road with the sticky floor. Strange scenes from a weekend at his friend's – the hand coming round the door to turn the light off instead of saying please shut up we want to go to sleep. And admonishments when I'd left my pills on the bedside table where their curious daughter could find them. Only flashes of these events come back to me. The seventies wallpaper, browns and creams. The smell of his feet. The old acne pits at the base of his neck. The wonderful endless ache as we lay in the park, were urgent in doorways. The ache of things never living up to their promise. It was a brief affair.

I'm driving on. I can't imagine stopping. I see houses I can't imagine living in, see lives and I can't imagine what they contain.

HITCHING

I went home once, in the middle of the night, between Manchester and some small place in the Pennines, with a man in a blue metro who said he'd put me up for the night. I had a bed on

the sofa while he went upstairs with his wife. I was tired and Sheffield was far away. Where was I going? Who knows? Who cares now? I left in the morning, said thank you and waited for a bus.

Wind-whipped hair and the flash of lights racing past – standing on a Friday night watching traffic on distant, frequented roads. The junction of the M1 and M62 deserted in the rain, high in the landscape so I could see miles of lights heading busily to places I would never reach, for reasons I didn't have. No one knew where I was that night – there was no-one to tell because I had already severed my ties. You might see me or you might not. A slip-road between motorways – illegal to stand on, illegal to stop on. I was there a while, only visible, only existing when occasional cars went by, a bright cardboard cut-out with outstretched thumb, surprising them. It was a lonely night. The first dim perception that life was to skip from spot to spot like a skimming stone, everyone thinking that it was occurring elsewhere.

Sun shines on newly harvested fields, a sky pale with late afternoon heat floats above the hedges. There is the deep drone of trucks, the rushing passage of cars, wheels moving. They sound like the sea. Glass glints, metal shimmers. Over the scruffy tarmac forecourt hangs the smell of diesel and hot oil. A girl stands at the curbside facing south.

A car goes by, family saloon with little heads in the back seat. A lone man in a Jag gives her a brief glance.

A white Luton van leaves the pumps, its dusty sides bare; the dark eyed driver slows but she is gazing elsewhere and bends to fiddle with the catches of her bag so he accelerates away. The girl straightens slowly and looks towards the few parked trucks, hearing a fully laden artic moving. The flatbed with the steel plate is pulling out and she holds up a cardboard sign, as he comes along the slip-road. He reins in, the cab bouncing, and she climbs up.

Little filling stations like this one are best left when the going's good – richer pickings else-

where.... faster rides, better destinations.

The cab is grimed with the working greasy dust of years and the driver's brown plastic bag with flask showing through its open top is wedged between the seats. He calls her "Pet" and has fatherly advice. The cab is noisy, bare and bare-boned, no plastic trim, no fascias or carpet. Off-white uppers and plate metal base with seats bolted directly onto its dark surface. Gear-stick and brake rise like home-made accessories, and the dash is endearingly simple.

He is a raw man, rangy, dark and needing a shave. His clothes are ingrained with oils and grease, brown and workman-like and he looks as if he could fix any kind of trouble and probably has. Practical. Down to earth. He is going home as usual.

Wide smile and a wave, turning towards the next trucks, holding up her sign, putting on her hopeful face.

The cushioned door closes on the outside world and the sound of engines is a smooth and furry thing, the cab undulating like a ship meeting the tide as he goes through the gears, clicking up through the box, checking mirrors, indicating. The stubby gearstick is a solid, chunky phallus and just as familiar. He is younger, blue-eyed and slightly wary, neatly groomed, wearing a quality watch; the cab is clean and smells of freshener.

Practical. Efficient.. Expensive truck, clean fridge-van. Times met, schedules kept, procedures understood.

JAN TO APRIL SELECTIVE TRANSCRIPTS

The roar of that tipper at the harbour as it flashed by on my left, coming towards me round a corner in the dock compound – a quick flash and gone... Noises... the quavering whine of a reversing engine – classic, and deeply recorded in our consciousness. Maybe I should elaborate on my

lists of truck types. Interestingly, already they are not brand names in my head, but descriptions. Thinking about their coded nature, I relent and describe more fully, to flesh out, to bring to life some of their character.

The trash lorry I was behind the other evening. It was larger than my van, hugely so, chunky, hard, burly, business-like and I at last understood the arms that stick up grotesquely. Its wheels had double tyres and I could see the axle and the diff, all dark metal, sprayed with gunk from the road and the opposite of what anyone wants in their life. I wondered about the driver's feelings for the truck, a means to an end I expect. Drive the bastard and get out of it without a backward glance. So it's a necessary part of our worlds, but no-one really likes it. No-one really wants it. Only those to whom it brings money (beyond wages) will think of it in any other terms than pure expediency. An investment. Or not, maybe.

THE CRANE SEEN FROM MY BEDROOM WINDOW.

Like a ship, it waits, throbbing gently – the beast itself: the crane. Its tyres are fat. Its lights are winking on the dash. It has arrived, cornering somehow through the tiny streets. It loiters at the gate, the star turn hired for the day - what cost for its magnificence? And the squat and balding driver? He pulls in beyond the opening and the lights come on for reverse but a self-drive van shoots across his rear, impatient, cheeky. The brake lights glow. Then he backs round into rutted hardpack. How he gauges where to put his stabilising legs to let the telescopic arm swing out so high, I can't tell.

NIGHT DRIVE HOME

I came through the hailstorm and over the hill from Kintore where the road cuts through Kirkhill forest, and saw the city laid out before me. It was as if fires had started all over the dark land and had raged out of control in bright seams. They smouldered still in dull abatements, in ridged ferocities. Embers glowed in singed brown beds of ashes. Cracks in the city's cinder crust hinted at its molten heart. Then I was over, and down, in the clear, clean, cleansing light of the carriageway; chill, cool somehow in the glittering wet; pale in the empty night.

THE ISLE OF MULL

The grey frail grit of the road sits on the pale yellow-greens of the land. It scrapes over the springy tussocks, clinging to wild convolutions as the earth dips and crags, it corkscrews round ochre cliffs and up dark ravines. It questions the very definition of road – it almost achieves a track's brief percentage but it is tarred, it is smooth, it is continuous in its windings. It brings man's presence to a remote and desolate corner, a semblance of domination and colonisation. Mobility and access.... Access to wild moorland and crumbling, sheep-tracked peat. To empty hillsides, to groves of thin and ancient trees. To sweeping bays, to heaving deeps and straits, all more brooding than the simple road-mapped lines suggested. The tarmac twists, falters at blind bends; it doubles back and hairpins, it confronts itself and runs away. It curves and fills out a little into passing places. It narrows and tatters at the edges, it perches on soggy slopes, it sports holes and fissures on the long, hard straights. It ducks below wispy birch-woods and oversees panoramic vistas. It crowds, secretive through windless dells and springs elated over crests. I ebb and flow along its path, I trust its undulations, I move like an air to its rhythms. My engine sings to its tune.

RUMINATIONS

There were two birds dead on the road that morning, and bins up-ended but I've learned that fate needs no omens and that destiny's blows fall in more bland and brutal ways. I was impervious by then to fickle signs. Their event was not necessarily mine, nor mine theirs.

You see, the fact was, that as I returned to my outpost in the Grampians, my hideaway in the land of Barratt Homes and granite block, as I drove back towards the corner shop's sentimental posters, I was omnipotent.

I existed in all things, I just was. I drank in the land that day. I breathed it, I became it. I knew the sharp green of new growing grass in the red fields and the brittle rasp of pale stubble round the hay bales. I knew the damp concrete of barns and the porous asbestos of their corrugated roofs, the gritty mud of yards and the wet residue in tyres.

I knew the film of dirt on the road signs and the particles of filth in the joints of vehicles, I knew the nodding lurch of the Shell tanker and its oiled articulation, I could almost smell its upholstered cab with the matt black plastic trim. I knew the bright sky beyond the fresh rise of country to the West and the bleeding clouds dark over hollows to the sea.

I knew the wheel of birds, black, white, crows, gulls, starlings, on the gusting wind. I knew the jerking tail of a kestrel as it balanced on the wires.

I had no need to stop and be at any place to experience each event. My eyes translated full stereo in code. I knew what I saw and it was enough.

Because for the first time in my nearly forty years, I understand... there is no understanding, there is no meaning. Life occurs despite everything – and the meaning is in the meaninglessness of that tiny span.

DRIVING NORTH FROM MANCHESTER

Jonquil-butter-soufflé sun lowers yellow, golden shimmering haze over midlands' dull, dun, brown, straggling grey. Joy peers briefly in as day sinks below the layer of cloud skim that has held us, like a plate; white in the old, cold, dish-water light of long winter's late delaying.

Among the jostling traffic's skein pulled on, weaving for exits, together in a hissing, rumbling, mesmeric rush, the land is an impression of enclosing or exposing only. In our vein we flow on, flow out, past concrete sprayed with oily stains and encrusted muck. Damp houses in woods, dripping, dwarfed by overpassing swathes of tarmac; lanes of traffic applied, sweeping, to the land. I saw moss growing on the trees; even in the weak light knew the dark, damp, soaking soil's coat of black; humus rotting in the mud.

Is it surprising that here they turned to industry and invented things? Here they tinkered in dim, cold, cobbled rooms?

I crave bright living rooms with comfy chairs soft in golden light, I want carpets thick and swirling round sofas and the sideboards loaded with glassware like grannies have, and teacups rattling in the kitchen. I want lamp-light and a door to call my own.

WORKING WEEKENDS

Towns hide behind me. Their orange lights twinkle in grey gauze, flat on my rearview mirror while headlights fade on the plate steel sky. A valley, russet and bottle-green against lead. Climbing. Olive scrub narrows to the black road. At the brow, pen and ink wires cut lines in a pale wash. Black birds wheel in a violent wind.

Snow dusted on chocolate fields, spidery shrubs fuzz to trees like a dark mist. Birch trunks at

the roadside pearly in a cinnamon haze. Grass banks plastered in streaks by dirty snow, tousled like dog fur. Roadworks in the wind, toy cones caught in the beam like silver tarnished by a thousand hours of salt spray, a million tyres passing, a lifetime on the front line.

Trucks, thick-necked bullocks with docile burdens bounce on firm hams and grooved rear wheels down the ribbed slope to sleeping Dundee. Three white tankers come up the brae, smooth, silent, frozen, imprinted for a moment on the black brow of the rounded hill. Obedient as toys, they forge, relentless, purposeful as tanks, voyagers into the distant day. Their dark shapes are flat against the blaze of lights, just patterns on my mirrors, etched in filth.

PASSING BRECHIN IN WINTER

I've found what it is that's been bothering me all these years – it's the light. The angle of insolation is too low. It has its place in storms, of course, and it's wonderful in the fresh early morning but not on chilly days at noon. During the ordinary day the sun's raking angle brings unease, it belies the wholesome warmth, lies about its smiling face. Something's not right.

Sunlight bakes. In the tropics, in its journey across the sky it tells me of time passing permissibly. Just. It unrolls the hours, building to the certainty of midday and then slowly, graciously lowers you to evening. Something has occurred.

The shadow pools at your feet, obedient, at lunchtime (and no shadows lean to any other destination). Until then, its still morning, still kind of fresh, a whiter kind of sunlight – and we are still in the first half of the day's opportunities. Just after noon, with the heat, the day seems to maintain a plateau, during which time its real purpose is hammered out, for, during the next part of the afternoon the sting slowly goes out of the sun and it relaxes affably, yellowing. Golden rays start glamorising foliage at five, slanting visibly through gardens, turning the walls of blank streets into

decorative murals with curious angles and effects. Home time, or leisure – the day is ending, and there’s nothing to be done about it. Night falls quickly, like the closing of an eye and crickets call in the fog of dusk left in spaces and amongst trees while the sun’s glow hangs somewhere far away, over the horizon. Windows light up in the fading landscape; dark patches join us to the night.

In Scotland, driving down the slabbed concrete carriageway the sun was almost in my eyes at half past one in the afternoon... The pale road surface was shimmering; long and pointed shadows slashed towards me. The golden light just caught tufts of grass on the left-hand banks, leaving cold, black smudges in the green; making the sun a chill, bleak razor emptying the day. Cold sunshine and wind slide over bareness, past silent houses, inert trees. Cold leaves yellow and dry in a parody of warmth.

FLIGHT

Little enclaves of lights, white and orange, are sprinkled warm in the lilac twilight between dark, wooded patches. The snowy mountains towards the north of Italy are a crumpled carpet far beneath us.

Hours pass and I watch life in the gloom below – silver, gold, amber, orange. Chains, dots, dashes, smudges. Infinitesimal palings in the pit of dark, in the bowl beneath bloody sunset’s rim.

Waxing and waning, twinkles curl in avenues. Threads of gilded, fraying silk lie on burnt chestnut velvet like scraps on a tailor’s floor. Further out, into the countryside, the lights are mottled - lesser riches in the pile of night. Away from cities’ extravagant boulevards, small ingots of molten copper litter the countryside as if they had been thrown out into the beadwork of the night. And spoor, spores, colonies of mould, delicately dim, dot the insubstantial earth.

In the dark completely now, over Luxembourg, tearing into a muddy void of cloud. There is a

consciousness in the vapour ... of the press of life beneath; the deals, the factories, the centuries of Western civilisation's rise. Yet when we see again the scrapes and scars of man's requiring, the gold-dewed spider's webs of comfort's snare, we are still remote, aliens, passing in a spaceship.

The coast stretches behind us like a thin slab, a shelf, an incoming tide, a skin over the deep out over which we venture, within which are two small white points – their tiny, shining reflections the only evidence of a surface at all.

Dover, like an encrusted knurl of gold rope and beading extending into the Channel; towns like frenzied bosses of embroidered symbolism. Southend and the Thames slide below in jewelled, espaliered trees stitched into the dark of Essex, emblazoned in stiff, metallic thread with a thin dust of glitter floating over the black.

NORTH SEA

I am flown towards a faintly blue horizon. The dark raft of our globe lies below. Stars above mirror the constellations of sea with its glow of flares, its bright and tiny moons of helidecks, its chains of mini bulbs like city streets in the fastness of the elements, outposts from whose home-like auras traces of voyagers can be seen, lonely in the empty void. Around whose nebulae flocks of exhausted birds wheel confused, and timid sparrows drop to sleep and to drink the dirty dew of poison from the deck. Rigs in whose steel legs men climb beneath the sea through trap-door after trap-door, sealing themselves into the arms of fate. Rigs where sons and brothers and fathers sleep in the roaring shake of generators in a crush of bunks with the slam of doors.

You, in the black night below, in the dark shadow of world, perched on the heaving hollow of the sea tiny below our wings and winking lights; no help for you until the morning, until the wild fierceness of the storm recedes.

SPRING COMPILATIONS

AIR JOURNEYS

Even in the 25 years since Pat planted the strawberry grape vine at the end house (who knows how long the others had been there) how many times had I thundered out at night in the ranks of aeroplanes overhead, making for the Atlantic... or have I circled in as the lights lay like glittering dust below? How many times have I shaken the windows of this rented flat above the office where I am now looking out from the kitchen, with the glow of yellow lamps and the hatch in the clumsy units reminding me of home?

Planes overhead – over the shed where rusting machinery is silhouetted in the gloom against meshed windows, where a chaos of oily sacks and abandoned tools has been brewing for 40 years, untended.

A green woodpecker screeches in the avenue of trees as a 747 shakes the air above us and thunders into cloud. Another machine rages over, its angle adjusts to an unseen hand, its track altering to unknown beacons. I can almost read the numbers on its cargo bay, its bellied under-segments.

GOING TO ORKNEY THE TIME I MISSED THE FIRST PLANE.

We descend to palely knuckled cauliflower clouds, becoming chiffon gauze with rainbow opalescence draped over canyons below, bottomed with the muddy brown striations of Scotland in October sun. Squiggly, convoluted, un-tended varicosities of burns, and razed paths in corded forests appear, and the knotted puckered piles of slag heaps before we land.

We set off again, NW, climbing to the gloomy scraps of cloud, leaving the Forth and Edinburgh in a golden slew of rippled bays and promontories. Above the grey candyfloss tufts, we rise, like a car in the brush at the top of a hill and spreading out behind us then is a shag-pile rug under the tail of our nacelle. The stewardess, a-tilt in the narrow aisle with the (original?) drinks cart pours a generous slug. Down, like a bus this time, diving into the furry fields of silver-grey, crash-landing; blind in a dim world, then burrowing into peach-tinted banks, sinking into a layer of darkly dangerous pinkly murky light and flying into a yellow glinting sunlight reminiscent of Greek balconies at 5 pm and down to the steely dusk of Inverness and the Beaully Firth. Wooded coves and salmon rafts, muddy creeks, estuaries of Tain.

White plume of lone factory on grey, dark pink crack of sunset in the distance like a glow of lava through viscous rock. Cream and grey landscape and terminal.

Up again, onward, over the slim scored lines of breakers and out into the military, pea-green sea, swinging round to 10 rigs parked in the next firth, like a convoy of fortified vehicles journeying into the golden haze, ripples streaming from their legs like manes. Into the cloud-rag fluff with powdered lilac greys and though we are earthed by the vibrating presence of working engines, heavy craft, we nonetheless seem to fly, weightless, as if we were free. More drinks from the scarred cart and just as quickly gathered in, descending over blue pools and green hills shadowed and sprinkled with sparks; deep, inky sea and bays hollowing the gaps of land dark now with empty flanks, still piebald stripes of sky between the clouds but no light to see more than silhouettes and soon the dulling, slowing fall and small landing lights come into view.

SATURDAY NIGHT AT LONDON, HEATHROW

Scattered equipment is everywhere; round each gate (descending, ponderous, on wheeled pilings) - a staggering array. Huge planes ghost continually between tiny blue lights in the black, visible only as lit tail-fins above dark and moving spaces suspended between us and the bright waterfalls of buildings far beyond.

Our bus angles back and forth between a fleet of parked baggage floats and a minibus straddling the pavement. We sway in the dim interior, boxed in by the plate-glass sheen and vistas of floodlit stripes, light-splashed buildings, tarmac with lines stretching off into the calf-eyed dark where soft rose infusions hone to red beacons; small, blue lights strung in the cavern of our seeing float like candles on a lake.

On, past walls of windows shimmering in the night, past lamps and cables, through underpasses. A flashing, glowing chiaroscuro of working parts; a scurrying, multifarious, massive machinery in action. We draw up eventually, to a calm, bland, guarded, aquarium-windowed stair-well ablaze with lights - an unsurprised, incandescent loggia, all pale formica and green, with shining escalators to feed us up into the stream of passengers flowing, with coded directions, in rippling tides across the hallways and the corridors, along hushed and soothing avenues that hold you in their brushed steel, down-lit grip between the furry carpet and the ethereal, plate-glass shine resplendent in its span across our view of dim planes, chaos and darkness far away.

EDINBURGH AIRPORT

Taxiing. Bland cartoon noses peer from huge doors. Planes, trundling like prams on their stiff and straddled eagles' legs, fat tyres like talons gripping, solid, reassuring despite the monstrous bulks lumbering, disproportionate, above.

Waiting now. Abandoned ladders on wheels, angled ramps, truck-lets with hoses disgorging into holes are littering the pale slabs around the star that fell to earth. The planes suffer their pit-stops. Wheeled and trolleyed booms, like pencils lead docile giants by the nose.

The plane, poised, at point, dallies on the apron, cast out, be-decked like a bulging, nervous debutante waiting for the tower, til it rolls towards the skies again. As its tail slips by the other bulks it is now a taxi, an overloaded bus – it flips from ridiculous pedestrian to awesome, winged beast with the grace of a carnival queen and sober in its serious roar towards the moment of glory, the transition from groundling to bird, dismissing the earth with a contemptuous blaze of power, tucking up its wheels and settling in, levelling out to droning, unsung hero.

Sun and wind on the sea, pale sand banks below the muddy waters' skin, clouds leave purple shadows like wind-blown stains as we follow the coast in the rake of spring sun. Expanses of mud like part-sanded tables with exposed grain. Towns shining like circuit boards, the schemes of all surfaces exposed.

I think of sailing into the churned approach to the Wyre – maybe that is it down there - with the car-ferry hard on our heels.

River-bends shine, burnished etching plates fading to wire-brushed steel and they slide beneath wisps, then back-lit towering piles of foam, fantastic clouds in whose shadowed canyons we float, whose peaks and mysterious, apocalyptic brightnesses, whose random luminosities remain remote from drifting bases, grey and ragged from below.

FLIGHT 594

We head out into the mogulfield of cloud, of chopped and crumbling snowy acres, a veil of make-believe through which the piebald carpet of Scotland shows - zebra-striped hills with gouges of old burnings between the vaporous pillows. White dustings on escarpments, powdery shadowing of cols seen from 21,000 feet. Land traced with the carvings of time in eroded valleys and burns; newer roads draped languidly between the mounds and crinkles, the fleshy curves and folds; cheeks, breasts, brains, buttocks, bays; smaller roads and tracks between the dark mould of forestry plantations, curling, pale and arbitrary cul-de-sacs.

Three feet from my head the dark disc of the propeller flickers and blurs the view.

We sheer up, we swell and soar, elated; we crest over the boilings of cloud, the vast, knuckle-headed mountains shining in the sun and our steadfast cutting wing austere with military rivets rises effortlessly. Money secures me a brief place beyond these summits. My participation in the world leads me beyond the clouds, through no knowledge or expertise of my own, through no special qualities over those who have lived before, who never left their villages. Are we all Magellans now? Marco Polos? Because I can pack a toilet bag I can travel the earth. But have I left my village?

RAIL JOURNEYS

Urban transport. Symbols of different realities sliding over each other as if pictures of the world are layered on substantial acetates that obey differing polarities. Going along in the tube, one is passing through and in and out of areas of influence.

Light shining on dirty glass with shadows of leaves. A negative, apparently arbitrary shape

controlled by distant lights shaded by unseen structures and vegetation. Things between us and the light. Overlays, factors from other realities, other spaces are impinging on the glass.

LEAVING EDINBURGH

A slant of banks with integral trees overlaid on silver grids of windows filigreed with twigs and railings, greyed with the blued shields from closer station lamps, unseen.

The bright train interior reflected in the pane, smoothes, blends, furs into a night faint with roofs and shadings, remote in sweeps of burnt orange. The train leaves, swaying, the twinkling scatter of traffic's homeward clog disappears to a rustling multitude of bags. In the satin glass, small brightnesses appear, distant flickers and the tiny glow of outposts flare in heads, through seats; sprinkled burnings warm in the vast of night; minute, perfect replicas of towns, excessences of avenues, thin scrapes of white on the stellar, multiplying canvases before my eyes. The moon blinks rhythmically to the nod of poles.

We halt, and a floating façade (dark, Georgian panes sketched by an orange-lozenged exterior lamp) is veined by branches and overlaid with the shades of seats, with the soft blurs of ticket stubs and falling light in dim glass, enriched by the sharper slice of real things, brighter, closer, harsher. A car (two light sources in the black) turns into a road below the embankment, behind a screen of trees and disappears in a purposeful flash.

I close my eyes and the rush of fast-moving train shaaahs from the sides. I am contained in this racing framework on its silver rails, this linear, hard-edged world as it forges through the winter night, taking me forwards, backwards, away, towards.

NEWCASTLE, GOING HOME

The Intercity screeches out, its carriages dissolving as the sky intensifies to chill twilight beyond the fretwork of scaffold and roof truss. Red lights float in the shining sides of the lazy train. A child waves with Daddy, the train voyages out into the wilderness of night. It must leave in order to arrive, the station cannot contain it, a raw thing, a primitive reptile with its armoured flanks its slinking sliding legless meander, gathering for the strike towards those distant towns.

Tonight there are floods and winds keeping people at home – the country is littered with late trains.

BRIDGES

Out of Edinburgh, over the rail bridge. Distant windows I see as rhomboids. The bays and vistas of orange sodium lights and the tiny cars travelling in shining clouds on wet tarmac in the void are magically unveiled and just as quickly disappear to leave the wet-veined glass sparkling in its place.

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A quivering, welling neon river surrounds us, reflecting electric sky. Dark, black, angled structures of bridge slide past, black, thin mesh presses after it in a delicate blur. Ribbed backs stain pools to the west with purple, midnight sand while river sides like wet-printed etchings of deep-bitten plates coat anonymous spaces in the void with night – traces of what is really there, shadows thrown by wooded hollows of the land.

PAST

Cars in a row in the dark street, pools of light outside the houses where bodies lie asleep, with the quiet river beyond, unseen, and the lights of Newport floating in the black.

I watch a lorry go down the road opposite under the orange street lights' glow and it reminds me of times, out travelling in the night, when towns, chill in the twilight zone of late-night darkness became toy-towns with soft throated engines waiting obediently for operations to continue, providing a sense of purpose and comfort. All others were tucked up in their beds, removed; I could be master of these orange worlds, swept along in the tide of others' making, safe to play in the knowledge I had no part.

The sweep of headlights transforms drab domestic detail into brief and starry, gorgeous fame; the coal-glow of brake-lights radiating in the service of some mysterious purpose, silent, earnest, pre-ordained and thoroughly familiar. No concern (for me) in the vehicle's bumping progress and contortions, reversings and hurried stops; no fear in the irate progress down darkened motorways to urgent deadlines.

EPISODES

Slight tilt of plane; seat-backs bulgy-topped in blue leather racing on, urgently, to late assignments with tarmac. Brisk, important, earnest. Dark blue and white plastic cups in the sunlight on my tray table. Blasted bun in a bag.

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I don't always understand what it is that I feel, but I know I must feel and find within that feeling the things I feed on.

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Enough! I am back with my haul, my thoughts and notes and photos. My new duvet, my brochures, my ticket stubs, my passport, my house-key (!) my money my diary my life, my old persona, my GNER delay, my ordinary old head full of stripey marbled columns and slanting sunshine in the misty frosty Florence mornings. But I am new, I am renewed, I am anew.

LONDON TO NEWCASTLE

Pulled up into the air on the back of a huge bird. The deep growl and low vibrations of the Rolls Royce engines (we're back in Britain now) impart a comforting solidity to the seat, a pleasant heaviness of body.

THINGS AND NON THINGS

Dusk, autumn, Edinburgh station; taxis disappearing down ramps. Warm glow through windows to Forte Hotel: safety, money, solidity.

Dark by 4.30 pm, Aberdeen bus on the coast road at Arbroath. Passing lonely buildings showing a single light – who does what there?- while the chill coast with its freezing sea dashes white breakers onto the dim, huddled land, whipped by the wind. I am passing, I have no reason to be here.

The coach driver in charge of this speeding box of metal and glass, soldier-like in his attention to duty and the lives in his hands, voyaging on into the night, against rain and wind, passed by other toiling, lumbering parcels of civilisation battling against the raw elements until day once

again reassures. Rolling in to distant forecourts, other cold, concreted, oil-stained, anonymous destinations.

Train leaving Aberdeen. “Industrial heartlands”; United Wire, Geoservices, Amerada Hess. Tubes, pipes, NOWSCO - aggressive offices with lit figures at work at 7am. Cars, headlights rolling in a glittering stream, focussed, self contained. Busy people, ambitious, desperate? Getting on with the “real” purposes of life – earning, acquiring. Jeeps with ski-racks, fleecy outdoor jackets.

Arbroath station, a place for people, currently empty; stairs to destinations, rails, things continuing out of sight.

IN TRANSIT

I see myself becoming a creature of the night, in the darkness tracing tarmac geometries in the countryside, in the ash-black evenings prowling lanes and backroads between fields, moving my dim lamps’ glow along the lengths of hedges. The sense of landscape will swing and adjust like a gimballed compass card around me; unseen earth and hills like a virtual grid in the black of space through which the purring blackness of my van will go, stitching and unpicking a brief connection to the real with its pragmatic beams.

I will fly among the softnesses of roads, feel their velvet through the furred breath of my diesel engine. On such nights I will find myself alone beneath the dish of sky, a voyager in space between the stars, the constellations of Tealing and Auchterhouse, of farms and distant traffic glittering on the bypass.

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My throbbing heartbeat, my little van; it speeds below the slender lights, the loom of towns,

the shadowed clouds across the moon. The sky a dark bowl flecked with stars.

I speed to the brow of the hill – the car soaring like a bird, flying in the dark, bursting on the rise, triumphant.

On empty roads lanes of bright beads interweave above in rafts like vast stage-sets; scene-changes like snapshots renew the drama of my passing.

MULL, AFTER THE PUB

Rain falls, soft, in sheets over Tobermory. Long shadows black the gardens and the lanes in slanting lines. A car whispers by on the faded tarmac of the sleeping streets and in the orange light behind the gable-end I am standing on the lawn. I smell the night, wet earth on the wind. I check for stars and find the heavens blank. I watch drizzle scratch halos round the lamps.

THOUGHTS 2

We wound through dim canyons with rain-streaked walls and dripping signs and the open-ended sky-lanes above us were felted grey except for the bright seam over to the South. Satin rivulets turned dingy pavements into toffee slabs, cars gleamed, though they had previously forgotten how. The twilight of the storm made the town an ant-hill, a maze in which dark lives groped for the light. My stay was ending. I left like a traitor, defecting, in search of another way; I was adjusting to other mores, swapping over, changing horses. To the clusters of schoolgirls on the hill I was just another car. To the trees along the field I was part of the bustle of the crowd but I was leaving. A faithless lover, a fickle friend, my pastures were greener elsewhere, yet again. I was kin to the

greasy sheen of tarmac, I was whole in the vibrating stream of traffic leaving, to the North, slipping out with them into the ending day. What reasons they had for going, I couldn't tell.

On we travelled, into the tunnel of blueing night, the sky whipped by the savage coast, the dark slice between the cloud and land scoured by blasts of pelting, wind-driven rain. Each of us in our box, alone with the armour of civilisation, removed from the drenching abscess of the ditch and the dubby farrow.

The route takes you towards the sea – which on some nights has lain shining beneath a silvery moon, the empty curves of the road mystical paths in the still, late air. On such nights the tiny rubies of the radio mast sing against endless blue-black and the velvet cliffs wait, a dark audience to the starry dome. I have seen the coves at peace with the lap and swirl of wavelets among the rocks and the gentle breath of aeons lifting my hair. I have made fires and sat on benches along this coast, walked the cliff paths and sooty night hollows with friends. I have sped its length in gaudy trains with misty windows and rainy clothes; have watched sunrise and sunset, moon-wax and moon-wane from carriages on its brow; have seen cities and villages slide into the maw of time and dreams flash past and fade. I have driven this road in hail and snow, on steely weekend dawns and late, exhausted midnights. I have driven with this one, with that one; have sat in cabs and expensive leather seats. I have gone for this reason, and for that, have taken this and brought that back. Have lost and won. And here I go again.

From the worn bucket seat in my loaded, ageing van, on that particular night the sea was unseen - in its place a churned darkness. I was small on the snaking curl of modern advance, puny between the hard shoulder and the central reservation, in the rain with other splashing lights. We ate up the carriageway in the drench of sideways blasts that had our wipers working overtime.

By the time I came down the brae to the Mother city the storm had left ragged gusts and a chill, bruised evening recovering in its wake. Down the canyon of the road that night, pinned out

beyond the stark trees by the caravan park the lights floated in a bitter chocolate darkness - a fairy swathe of gold and green, a lush and ethereal brocade. I have seen this view in all its guises... in blues and shadows, in sulking menace, in pale delight. I love its gemstone glow, its stardust in the hollow of the land. All our joy, our achievements, all our dreadfulness and pain. It all lies here, at the heart of such electric emanations.

What did I feel, arriving at these traffic-ridden gates? Home? No, I will honour my history within its arms but it has never felt like home.

But I breached its superstore-encrusted perimeter and moved up through the sodium spillings, the city's orange seams. I drove along the satin tarmac, slipped between the pale-rimmed curbs. Behind hedges, suburban driveways hid dim and cosy living-rooms springing back to life after an empty day. I ghosted below the shapes of trees and the jagged edges of coal-black gables cut from the haze of floodlit cloud. Red and green bathed the bright discotheques of intersections as the shifting tide blinked and breathed and sparkled - revolving streams in an endless dance.

I entered in the spirit that I departed - a spy, to watch and not take part, an infiltrator in a flow of merchants, thieves and innocents.

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