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Online Originals

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This diary is not a work of fiction. It was written by Colin Mackay over the nine weeks preceding his actual suicide on the 26th of July, 2003, which was his 52nd birthday. The manuscript was transmitted to Online Originals before he died and received shortly afterwards.

But {when so sad thou canst not sadder}
Cry—and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross

from 'The Kingdom Of God'
by Francis Thompson

One
Nine Weeks

Soon I will be dead. I am going to take the path which many regard as cowardly, feeble, or neurotic, and kill myself. With these words I have begun the process of setting my house in order, securing the windows, switching off the lights, and closing the doors. Now I feel free and easy in my resolve for the first time since I believed in the Christmas world where everything was warm and loving.

Two people took great trouble over me when I was born. They were recovering from one war, another seemed imminent, there was hardship and rationing and fear, they had come through so much, and they thought I was a blessed thing, a harbinger of peace, like the dove that came to the wandering ark. It is so hard for me to think that once—just once—I really did bring joy to others. I was their garden, their meadow, their field full of flowers. I had not yet disappointed them. I had not yet disappointed myself. To think—I too was once adored. Now, fifty-two years later, the mansion of my soul seems narrow, cold, and full of dust. It is the domain of damp and shadows. The spider lives there, immobile on his web.

I am going to die. It is that simple. The wilderness will take me like a lost explorer, the sands will cover me, nothing shall remain—but I prefer to think that I will pass from this solitary place and walk in sunlit uplands with the true companions I have always longed for. And I shall not grow old, I shall not know heart disease or cancer, my body shall

not crumble and heap humiliation and squalor upon me. No. I shall be in a field of flowers. For ever.

I made the decision to kill myself quite calmly, quite rationally, and without drama. One evening, eighteen months ago, I simply thought, "End it." The paths of glory lead to the grave, but all paths lead there, and if self-murder is wrong, something will murder me, and isn't that wrong too? If every ending is wrong, then wrong has no meaning. At least, my own hand will give me dignity; I will arrange my shroud, I will sharpen my dagger, listen to beautiful music, watch the setting of the sun, and go to my ancestors like a Roman.

Quite a heroic picture; and so I thought, "How?" I reviewed the possibilities, like a traveller wondering whether he should take the train, or fly, or perhaps the car would do, and if not there was always the bus. I decided to electrocute myself. Drugs seemed uncertain. Then, as I investigated further, I learned of a safer and surer way, mixing drugs and suffocation, and so I decided upon both. One or the other will surely accomplish the deed, and dying like Socrates does have a certain propriety.

I did not think, "Why?" I knew the why. For years I have known it. For years it has walked beside me, whispering in my ear. It is my fury, my shadow. Its name is failure, I think. Failure to become fully human, to give life, and save life. Failure to do more than observe the passing of the world. Failure to return my thanks for the gift of breath, and leave the world a richer place than I found it. It is what I see from the corner of my eye, the thing that always vanishes whenever I turn to face it. I cannot enter a room without wondering if it is waiting for me, if it has finally tired of the game and is going to let me meet it, face to face.

This failure is not abstract. Twelve years ago, in another country, there were people who trusted me to save their lives, but I delayed, because I was afraid and incompetent, and they were murdered. They are what I see. They are what haunts me. They are there now, at this moment, waiting for me. My Horla. And what can I say, this fool who survived? I did my best and it was not good enough. It never was.

Sometimes I think that I am dead already; that I am merely a dead man walking, a grey shadow, perhaps a ghost. If I wrote about my life it would be a story about the ghost who did not realise that he had no body.

And yet I look at myself in the mirror. I do have a body. True, I am not a handsome man, and never have been, but the life that has borne me for fifty-two years is still in my hands. It is my holy water, my vital spark, my precious. Now I am going to throw it away. I am going to do that which is irrevocable. Perhaps it will be painful. In the films electrocuted men die screaming; the water hisses and boils around them, and the wires thrash like snakes. I am afraid. Yes, I am afraid of a moment's pain. That moment is too long; it is an act of injustice. I don't deserve to feel pain; it was not my fault that these people died on that bloody field in Bosnia.

They don't look as though they hated me. They just look at me sadly. I could live with them, if I had peace. But where do you go to find peace in this world? A monastery?—a cave in the mountains?—the land of green ginger? The way is dark and I am far from home. Where could it be?

The planet shrinks daily, and our age is noisy and charmless. It is riddled with scrutiny, and lacks both mystery and gentleness. Such an age is decadent, not because of its

conscious brutality, but because of the brutality of which it is unconscious. Wherever I go the noise follows close behind. The curs of everyday snarl at my ankles. Litter blows in the streets and across the fields. Paradise lost cannot be regained in this thin world.

Perhaps there is another world—perhaps there are many worlds—perhaps the Cosmos is a Russian doll—and in some other world I could find the tree of life or the waters of oblivion. But not here. Not in this tedious place.

A mental place then, a garden of the mind, a Patmos not on any map in the land of wherever. Oh, to slip between the planes! But my body is physical. It is vulnerable. Age and disease gnaw at it. Cruelty leaps at it like a demon, claws bared. The will of others imprisons it, tortures it, consigns it to suffering. And where is my Patmos then?

No, I must shed this body. Die when I will it; die before old age wrinkles my spirit and makes the cheerfulness that I still have, despite everything, wither. And if I did no good, and achieved nothing, I hope, at the least, that my intentions were decent, and that my end will have some seemliness. I hope that I will cease to be haunted by the dead when I have joined the dead, and am one with the corpses who cluster round me. And I hope there will be someone to think kind thoughts of me when I am gone, and this weary river has wound down to the sea at last.

This book is the last flicker of the flame which I once hoped would burn so clear and strong that humanity itself might be delighted and comforted in its glow. How silly I was. Not wrong: just silly. This is light from a long dead star, and a tale that is told.

Enough of that. I have decided that I am going to kill myself in the summer of 2003, when the days are long and the sky

is pleasant, and my cat will have time to settle in his new home before the cold nights come with the rain.

Here is a paradox: I do not want to die, but I wish to kill myself. I wish to kill myself because it is an act which will free me, but I do not wish to be obliterated. No. I wish to return to the place my memories come from, with each grain of dust, and each drop of rain, the place beyond time, the land where no one weeps. Once upon a time all my life was in front of me. Now all my life is behind me, and I'm not entirely sure how that happened. Past and future seem to have got strangely mixed up, but they are full of excitement, and promise. The present alone is a dull place, a flatland across which the wind sighs.

Yet there are times when that wind speaks my name, when the clouds smoke towards evening, and I remember when I had never seen evening, I had never seen the sun set, or the night, or the stars walking across the floor of heaven. I could not imagine what darkness was.

Just occasionally I wish I was back in that age of faith, but it would be as easy to climb to the moon on a beanstalk. So I will try to remember the time of loving kindness, the days of gentle sunshine, the nights of moonlight—and then the blizzard will blow it all away. And then—when life goes and all is darkness—nothing.

I was born to parents who loved me, when the world was young and wonderful, and the hills were green. I had a small room of my own, and on the wallpaper were redcoated soldiers, and a big house with a flag flying from its roof, and Alice, and Christopher Robin.

I remember—though I do not remember exactly where it was—walking hand-in-hand between my parents in a place where the tank traps that they called "dragon's teeth"

stood left over from the Second World War, and where there was now, around these ugly concrete obelisks, a field of blue and yellow flowers full of sunlight. And there was the smell of the earth, and of animal dung, rich and pleasant, and my parents waved over me like two tall trees —my father, Hugh, broad-shouldered, silver-haired since the War, and Margaret, my graceful mother, her hair raven black, and her face very beautiful. I was proud of her. I was happy when she walked me first to Nursery and then to Primary School. No other child in the class had such a pretty mother, they all said so, they all envied me.

I remember the first time we came to Edinburgh; I remember how we walked up Waverley Steps and how the Balmoral Hotel towered over us like Everest, and the sky above it was the colour of cornflowers and bluebells.

I remember the first time I saw the moon. She was a thin sickle shining in a very black and cloudless country sky, and I saw her over a hedge, above a field, at the bottom of a garden. And I thought that she was the most lovely thing I had seen in my life—though at the age of three, as I think I must have been, the number of things I had seen was few. But I wanted to touch the moon; I remember that.

I wondered what dreams were, and my mother explained that when I closed my eyes in bed I crossed a bridge, and dreams were what was on the other side of the bridge. That made sense to me. From the Castle we could see the broad waters of the Forth, and the green fields of Fife on the other side, with its tiny houses and trees and rolling hills, and sometimes it was raining in Fife and not here, and sometimes the sun shone on Fife when Edinburgh was grey and dismal. That was what dreams were like. The ability to see two worlds at once. I understood; it made perfect sense. I could be here on a dull day inside my

cumbersome body, and see the wonderful place washed in gold, like the land of Naphtali, and the gardens of King Jesus.

There was a bridge, it spanned the Forth like God's meccano set; I had never seen, or imagined, anything so huge. When did we cross it? I was four, five perhaps, and I can't remember where we were going or why. It doesn't matter. I do remember the seagulls that came and shrieked at the windows of the train. I remember the water beneath us; I remember how solid it looked, not at all like the water that came out the tap at home, but like some great dark jelly whose surface rippled mysteriously, and upon which small boats bobbed like crumbs on a pond, and the shriek of the gulls over all.

My father pointed to the islands in the east. He said their names: Inchkeith, Inchcolm, Inchgarvie, Inchmickery, Cramond, Fidra, the Lamb. On Inchcolm, he said, there was a monastery, a kirk of sorts, a place where monks in brown cassocks used to sing psalms out there among the fish, with only the gulls to hear them. "And God," said my mother. And my father laughed.

At the weekends we walked in the Pentland Hills. We seldom, if ever, saw anyone else, apart from an occasional shepherd—not in those days. These little hills were the Mountains of the Moon, they were Gilead, they were Tekoa.

So I grew up, without brothers and sisters, in a house that stood by itself, with bookish parents who lived between bindings, for they were both librarians, and loved books very dearly.

And the future was full of exciting possibilities as the night sky was full of objects, both visible and invisible.

Let me tell you about my father, Hugh.

He belonged to old Edinburgh, a place of wynds and slums and the stink of decay, because this was 1908 and Calton Road and the Canongate and the Cowgate probably had not changed much since Robert Louis Stevenson walked there. He was brought up with three brothers and a sister in a house near the Meadows, and played cricket on the grass in summer. In 1914 volunteers began to drill there. In 1914 a battalion of Royal Scots marched down to Waverley Station to take the train for France, and its officers rode on horses, and the bagpipes skirled, and my father and his brother carried a soldier's rifle between them.

He did not know what chocolate was during the first ten years of his life, and could remember as an old, dying man how his tongue had thrilled the first time he tasted it. He could remember the cry of the street vendors, the fishwives who came with creels from Newhaven, and Coconut Tam at his place in the Lawnmarket. He read 'The Boy's Own Paper' and knew about Lord Bobs and Kitchener and the charge at Dargai.

He called his mother "the Old Lady", and I can remember her, looking like a very old lady indeed, sitting beside a black iron hearth in a dark room wearing a brown shawl and with her hair pulled back in a grey bun. She was convinced that the Kaiser's Field Marshal von Mackensen was not only Scottish and came from Edinburgh, but was the little boy who had once smashed her window with his catapult; so when she read about von Mackensen's army invading Rumania, she nodded her head grimly and said, yes, that was just what she expected from the likes of him.

Hugh was self-educated, and proud of being so, for this was the age of the Workers' Educational Institute, and a virtually religious belief in the printed word. He had been

brought up in the Free Kirk, with three services every Sunday and nothing but cold food to eat, and was as Puritan as the Wee Frees could make him, and as Socialist and Atheist as his rejection of the Wee Frees could make himself.

He had a scar on his chin because he had tripped and fallen on an iron mat when he was five years old, which would be exactly ninety years ago now. He had a scar on the crown of his head where a mounted policeman had hit him with a wooden baton during a political rally in the thirties.

He loved Shakespeare and the great poets, despising everything that had been written since Swinburne. He wanted to write poetry, and produced some smatterings of rhyming verse which were not very good. He refused to read novels, insisting that they were all about kings and queens and not about the common people. Where did that idea come from, I wonder?

He loved classical music—above all, Beethoven—despised everything that had been composed since the decade before his own birth, and was proud of his collection of records. Many times, after miserable hours at school—lonely, bullied, and making mistakes—I would play his waltzes and marches, overtures and symphonies, and lose myself in a world of glory where sounds came down in floods, everything was heroic, everything made sense, death was brave, and nothing hurt.

He kept a diary of his early life and hopes, but destroyed it when the Second War broke out in a fit of self-disgust, and I never knew why.

At Salerno in 1943, he took a lump of German shrapnel in his thigh. The British doctors were dead. The American doctors had no anaesthetics. He lay down and they dug it out of him with their cold knives.

Months later, he alone of his company walked round the streets of Pompeii while the others were playing cards. In Belgium, the next year, he was the only one to visit the field of Waterloo, and telling an American officer about it in Brussels that night, the American said, "Wellington? I've heard of that guy. Say, what front is he on?" Working in the Public Library after the war, he was the only one to read books and not just shovel them around like commodities. His fellow librarians spent their time playing golf.

I wonder where that American officer is now. I wonder if he is alive. I wonder if any of the men who knew him in the war are alive; any of the children who played cricket with him on the Meadows. I wonder so many things.

He liked to laugh. He was a humankindly man, full of sympathy and decency, but in the end he lost his hope, grew weary, and the last years of his life were grim and drear.

He gave me the first book—the first adult book—that I read. Called 'Scotland For Ever' it was a history of Scotland's famous regiments published to raise money for the Red Cross during the First World War. It was illustrated, and perhaps remembering those redcoat soldiers on the wallpaper, my father bought a second-hand copy so I could look at the pictures—because I was as in love with war as every other boy was then. I had a Fort Laramie made of board with the Stars and Stripes flying on top of it, and it was garrisoned with blue and grey plastic troopers two inches high. I had a Medieval Castle inhabited by two inch high plastic knights. I had a cowboy's six-gun, a repeating rifle, construction kit battleships, and a model train set whose open freight cars I packed with tiny soldiers.

So I looked at the pictures, then began to read the text. Soon I knew about the exploits of the Gordons on the North West Frontier, but not about Bilbo Baggins, and the

Black Watch were my friends, not the Famous Five or the Secret Seven. I would be an adult for many years before I ever read 'Winnie the Pooh' or looked into the wardrobe in search of Narnia, but before I was ten I could have walked along the ridge of Mount Saint Jean and said, "This is where Pack's brigade stood, and here was where the heads of D'Erlon's columns appeared out of the smoke, and across this field came the Scots Greys, and down there were Jacquinot's lancers and the cuirassiers of Milhaud."

My father collected books with the discernment of a bibliophile. Regularly, once a week, he would visit one of the many second-hand bookshops which Edinburgh boasted in those days. Seeing my enthusiasm, he began to buy books for me—history books, all about fighting—and take me with him as he prowled those book caverns in the land of golden dust.

How odd it all seems. I took to war as though it were the most natural thing in the world. The books he bought for himself were works of literature—essays, Shakespeare, biographies, Churchill, Thucydides, John Cowper Powys, 'Arabia Deserta', Gibbon's 'Decline And Fall', the poets {up to Swinburne}, books about book collecting, and books about collections of books that other book collectors had collected. One day {he would tell me} all this would be mine. One day I would inherit one of the best private libraries in Edinburgh. He said all this very seriously and with genuine satisfaction. He took it for granted that his library was one of the best in Edinburgh.

Why did he do it, I wonder? What did he think I was going to do—achieve great things, wonderful things with all these books that he so lovingly collected? Yes, I believe he did; I think that in some primitive way he believed that the quality of great writing could be inhaled, or perhaps

transferred by physical contact from the great books in which it lay. He dumped it all down there in front of me, and without further comment or direction waited for it to work its magic.

His ambition was to write a great book. He had that ambition for me. He was the Father Abbot, the wise hermit, I was the young acolyte. So he thought.

And I? Oh, the tale of these heroic men in their red coats and kilts and tartan trews wrapped itself around me until I was cocooned with valour. It never occurred to me that it was the valour of other days; nor did it occur to me to question, until much later, the right with which our soldiers had gone to kill and be killed in every corner of the world. What an odd thing for a Socialist to give to his son: because my father was a genuine Socialist who believed in peace and hated war. He gave it to me anyway—those pretty pictures of the redcoats in which there was no blood. Perhaps Lord Bobs and 'The Boy's Own Paper' just had too great a hold on him.

He was my father, and I loved him very much, but it came out that we fought, with words, and we hurt each other bitterly. I remember how once, at the height of our endless, stupid bickering, the three of us watched the film 'Red River', and at the end, when John Wayne and Montgomery Clift are fighting, and Joanne Dru orders them to stop, because they know that they love each other, I wanted my mother to stop us, and say the same, because it was true, and I wanted to say to my father, "Yes, I love you." But I didn't. I never did—nor did he say it to me—though we both loved each other dearly. What fools men are. Why was it that I could see so clearly what to do, and yet could not do it?

Why? Has any son answered that question? I suppose

because, as I grew closer to him in one way, I grew further apart in another. I discovered that he was not God Almighty after all, that he did not know everything, that he was capable of pettiness, and selfishness, and deceit. I was human, and I wanted to be the first human, Adam, who had come from God, and not from a mere mortal man. Why? Perhaps because in looking at his face, lined with disappointment and care, looking at the bottles of pills he took for his ever-increasing number of ailments, which irritated me so much, living with the sounds and smells of his body, his flatulence, his sneezing, his complaining, his bad breath, I saw what I myself would become in time; I saw death working from within and the sight horrified me.

He looked beaten. That was it—that was what I could not forgive him. He was sodden with disappointment, but I was too young to realise what a terrible thing that is.

One day, visiting him in hospital, where nobody read anything except tabloid newspapers and the television screamed continually, and he had no one to speak to about anything that meant anything to him {except me, his disappointing son}, he told me that he had read every book worth reading. He hadn't, of course, but he had read a good number. Yet, these companions on life's journey did not seem to have made any great impression upon him. He had not acquired any philosophy, any armour to keep out the buffetings of fate, any fires to repel the chill of failure. The accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the human race was something that he looked at in his bookcases as another man might look at his postage stamp collection, or a miser run his fingers through his treasure. But with that treasure he did nothing.

He was such a complaining man. In his last years he sat and hugged himself in selfish misery and complained, and

complained, and complained.

Thirty years later, and I only have to sneeze to hear his complaining voice again. "That is a fine cold you have got to give me," he would say, his protruding eyes bewildered and moist with self-pity. I forget my answer. It was no kinder.

Ah, well.

For the first years he and my mother were happily married. This was before a crippling heart attack, and the first stirrings of dementia, turned the last twelve years of his life into those of a demanding invalid, and drove her in turn towards drink, disappointment and bitterness.

They loved each other, once, my parents. Subsequently they nagged each other, hurt each other, despised each other, hated each other; and the hell that they built, each for the other, filled my heart with despair.

My mother, Margaret, was a beautiful woman. Her taste ran to detective stories, Jesus, flowers and a belief in the Scottish nation. Her Scotland was a warm shine of a place I would spend years looking for and never find. It was a very brave place, poetic and lovely. She was a Lowlander, but her thoughts were about Highland glens and mountains and legends. My father was proud of his Highland name and ancestry, but his Scotland was all Lowland cities and industrial unrest.

Needless to say, I preferred her swirling Jacobite vision. I loved the land of the kilted heroes, the Braes of Balquhidder and the Birks of Aberfeldy, and fighting for the Queen and the Old Scottish Glory seemed a far more valiant thing than agitation in favour of higher wages. I could not imagine any Alan Breck carrying a placard on a picket line, or David Balfour chain-smoking as he discussed

the workforce's aspirations with the management.

She went to the same school as my father, thirteen years apart. I have a photograph that appeared in 'The Evening News' in the late 1930s—it shows a group of pupils from Boroughmuir School arriving in costume at the King's Theatre for a school production of 'The Pirates Of Penzance'. My mother is there. She is one of the Major-General's daughters. She looks incredibly pretty. She is wearing one of those horseshoe-shaped Jane Austen bonnets, and her hair is black under it, her eyes are dark, and her smile is dazzling.

She enjoyed school. So did my father. Her memories said that school was a charming social club where she had had fun with her friends, and done lots of interesting things. His memories were of a place of robust violence, which he had shrugged off because he was a strong man.{My memories are of pure misery.}

I can see her as one of Jean Brodie's girls. I can see her in the hard straw hat of the period, holding it onto her head as she walks along the pavement, so the Edinburgh winds don't snatch it away and throw it over the Braid Hills. I can see her walking along there with her friends, a bevy of pretty schoolgirls, gossiping together, giggling, planning their futures. If any gypsy fortune-teller had told her what her future was to be, she would have died of a broken heart there and then.

I never saw her sad, not in those days. She smiled all the time, and life was a pleasure. When I was four years old she walked me to Nursery School, and when I was five she walked me to Primary for the first year. I was very proud of my pretty mother.

She got a job in the public library on George IV Bridge, and met my father there. She was the bonnie one,

whom everybody liked. He was the disputatious rebel. He had long hair, like James Maxton, and was an ardent Communist. She was a Conservative, a Christian, and a church-goer. What an odd couple they must have made. Apparently, few people thought the marriage would last.

We lived on Haddington Place, above another public library where McDonald Road meets Leith Walk. It was a big black stone building with two flats above it. Ours was the top flat. I looked out over the Walk like a sentry on a castle's battlements, and that is what I often played at being.

And out there was Edinburgh, this city of hills. They raised her tenements in grey uplands, and clouds grazed in the sky like the Pentland sheep. When the sun blazed down, as it did in my childhood, the tar melted in the streets, and we played tar marbles in the gutters; while in winter the snow turned the long slope of Leith Walk into a glacier, and the Castle Rock looked like a plum pudding covered in white custard.

It was a strange place and a strange time, and I doubt if many boys had a stranger upbringing, reading military history when others were reading Rupert Bear, and fighting solitary war games in that long sprawling flat above the traffic when others played in the open with their friends. But my parents didn't like me to have friends, did not want me to invite anyone home, did not approve of me being out with others. They were jealous—I don't know why—and guarded me like a prize possession.

One night, when a storm was raging and rattling the windows so that I couldn't sleep, my father read me 'The King Of The Golden River', and on another 'The Sunken Bell'. One winter's evening when the snow was falling, and the world was white and mysterious, I curled up in an

armchair and read 'Old Peter's Russian Tales', while my father sat listening and smoking his pipe, and my mother smoked cigarettes and clicked her knitting needles, and the fire crackled in the hearth. And I thought, "One day I will make my own tales, and people will listen to them."

I thought this as I grew taller, and in some ways, at least, a little wiser, and started to read the fiction my father despised—Dickens, for example, Flaubert, Tolstoy. I was Nicholas Rostov, his pains were mine. I understood his anxiety over his school test. How often had I prayed "Please let me pass; please don't let me get belted; I'll do anything!" I fell in love with Sonia. I read the episode of Nicholas and Sonia again and again. I didn't like Natasha, and Andrew's concerns were too complex for me to understand. I read about Austerlitz and Borodino. I read about Mary and her father. I read a great deal.

In those days Margaret's father lived with us too. He lived in a room of his own, read detective stories as well, and he too smoked a pipe. He had been in the First World War. He had been in France and Flanders in the Royal Scots. I would like to say at this point that there was an ancestral sword that was passed on from father to son, and that each one of us bore it in turn for the Queen and the Old Scottish Glory—or perhaps that he was the soldier whose rifle my father and long-dead uncle carried on that day in 1914 as the regiment marched to Waverley—and if I were writing a story, yes, that is what I would say, but real life is seldom so satisfying. I just remember thinking at first that he was an adult like all adults, with his head up near heaven; and then that he was very old, so old that I could not imagine anyone older, unless he was Father Time himself; and then—that he was the adult I could always talk to, when I began to realise

that sometimes I could not talk to my parents.

His name was Robert Ogilvy, but to me he was always Grandad. He could remember things from another age. He could remember the Boer War. Yes, I once knew a man who could remember the Boer War. He could remember the village postman running up the street shouting, "They've crossed the Tugela!" He could remember Queen Victoria's funeral. He could remember the age of horses and carts and Sunday church-going, when women wore long skirts, and men had moustaches and were patriotic. He kept a black top hat for special occasions, and I used to polish it for him. He had medals from The Great War For Civilisation, as they called it, and I polished them too—and my father's from the war against Hitler—I polished them time and again, so they could both wear them on Remembrance Day and show how brave they had been.

Grandad used to tell me about the long route marches his battalion made across France in the rains of 1916 and 1917; going up to the Front, three abreast, the man in the middle dozing, and all dreading the first sight of the Hanging Virgin of Albert because beyond her steeple lay the terrible valley of the Ancre and the hills above the Somme. They would sing "There is a long long trail a-winding into the country of my dreams" with heavy irony: but returning after a tour of duty was over, and looking forward to a long rest in the peaceful land out of range of the enemy guns, they would sing it with gusto, and each would have his own dream, and my grandfather's dream {so he told me} was—of a hot bath, a long, steaming hot bath, in which he would wash off the dirt of the trenches, and then fall slowly and blissfully asleep, and not care whether he ever woke again.

He died nearly fifty years later, still with a piece of

German shrapnel in him {almost in the very place in which my father got his}, but he died, and my mother wept for him, and I was so frightened that I wept too, and my father was angry with me, as he seldom was, before the bad times came.

So there were four of us, four of us and many books; and it did not occur to me that this life was a strange one, and not at all how other boys lived.

I remember them now, these long-dead people, on the eve of my own destruction. It is as though they entrusted a secret to me, which I cannot read. As though they passed on a torch, which I cannot hold; a promise which cannot be kept. I wanted to leave this world a better place for my having lived in it, kinder and more beautiful than it was left to me; but I have failed, failed utterly, and I cannot forgive myself for my failure.

And those golden moments? They have gone like butterflies, and I no longer feel any kinship with the earth which bred them.

Two
Eight Weeks

Oh, this is a difficult road. Destroying yourself goes against everything your body wants to do.

I think no one dies happily. No matter what pain or present misery you want to escape from, no matter what unendurable future you see stretching before you, around you now is the memory of the life that should be, the one that you deserved, the one that surely must have been promised to you before you were born. It covers your shoulders like a coat; the scent of it is in your nostrils; its treasured pictures shimmer before your eyes. Perhaps it never was; now it never shall be; because you are going to destroy yourself, and it too.

"Stop! stop!" the voice of your body screams.

Why are you doing this? You tell yourself that you will be in eternity with Beethoven and Jesus, with Yuri Gagarin and Kant, with King Arthur and all the heroes who slumber underneath the magic mountains, with our fathers and Genghis Khan, with everyone who ever lived, with all those for whom Xerxes wept at the Hellespont. Oh, if I thought that—if only I thought that ... But I don't.

I am afraid.

I walk towards it. It beckons me like a black hole.

How strange all this seems. What a strange path I am on. I am going to kill myself, but I don't want to die at all. Yes, it's a paradox! I want to live forever in a world where people are kind, and there is no pain or destruction. I know

that is not this world, but I have no belief in any other. I think we are like flowers. We open our petals, we wither, we die. The stem may carry a flower next year, but it will not be the same flower, it will not be me.

And so I decide that I am going to die, regardless of what I want, and I look at the future the way a fish looks at the sky—cold, unblinking, and utterly without hope.

The rest is metaphor.

Here begins my march to the scaffold.

Eighteen months ago I made my resolution. I let everything continue as normal. Last year I planted late summer bulbs that I will not live to see flower. Last week I went to the dentist and got a tooth filled. I worry about my cat, Max. I have told my cat-loving neighbours that I am going to die this year, but that I do not want to talk about the reason, and they assume that I have a fatal illness and promise to adopt Max. That makes things so much easier, because that cat is my entire family and my best friend.

I plan my will. I start to work out what I must do.

I am angry with the world. It does not know of my existence, would not care for my existence, and has no interest in my continued existence. And yet I love it, and always have. Why has no one noticed? I love the setting sun. Perhaps I am disregarded by a world which loves the rising one. Perhaps that is it. Death is the place where baffled love and frustrated ambition shall take me. What will it be, this final mystery? A night with no morning? Or a day with no night? Plotinus's highest state of being, free from all the toils of life? Or ...?

No. I shall not be. There is no soul; there is no immortality; there is no after-life. They are the dream that has haunted man since the first Neanderthaler became

conscious of his mortality. All such thoughts are mere speculation.

{And aren't these thoughts too mere speculation?}

No! I shall not be. There will be no regrets. Likewise no fear, no suffering, no waste. The world was without me once, the world shall be without me again, and what the world shall be when I am not, the world must see to. My cat is all I worry about. And the hedgehogs who come to my garden at night. And the squirrel, and the birds whom I feed. And ...

And failure!

Oh, God—failure!

Failure, the ghoul that has made my heart die within me and become like living stone. Failure! Having failed in everything else, suppose I fail to kill myself?

Suppose the drugs I take do not put me into a sufficiently deep sleep. Suppose I vomit. Suppose I wake to find the hot plastic bag pressing down upon my face. Suppose ...?

Why then I will electrocute myself. The hair dryer will be sitting beside my bath, plugged into the mains. The note taped to the door will warn the police about the possibility that the water is full of electricity, and I will tell them where the mains switch is, and they will know what to do.

But suppose that doesn't work. Suppose the voltage is inadequate. Suppose the fault switch falls too soon. Suppose ...?

Why then I will hang myself. I will have a ladder there, and a rope tied in a noose. And if suffocation, electrocution, and hanging do not kill me—then perhaps God wants me to live after all. The God I don't believe in.

But suppose the drugs blind me. Suppose the electricity cripples me. Suppose I lie there helplessly, paralysed, with

brain damage. Suppose ...?

No!

Suppose no longer.

I am not Hamlet, and this house is not Elsinore of the battlements. There comes a point when supposition defeats the purpose.

Eighteen months ago ...

It was in the autumn of 2001 that I appraised my position, finally. This was the prophesied year of wonders, the year that would see us walking through time: and where was I?

I was standing in the graveyard at Innerleithen, where I had stood forty years earlier, closer to the ground, with a shorter shadow, and with the same gentle Border hills towering up like mountains all around. Forty years earlier I had imagined thundering, glorious stories of wild horsemen galloping through these hills as I stood there, among the rude forefathers, with no notion of melancholy ever marking me for her own.

Now I was lost in a shit-sweeping job, writing books that no one wanted. My parents had died demented; I had no family {except Max}, I had no prospect of any family; I was haunted by the memory of the people I had lost, the people {I told myself} I was coming to care for; the people who just might have come to care for me.

There was no drama in the decision; simply the realisation that my life had no point. Even the music of Zarathustra, even the song of the sirens, was being drowned by the bellowing inanity of the present. My heart was in the past, my hope was in the future, but I could give nothing to that future, for I had nothing to give, and, seemingly, never had. Whatever gleam there would be in the future, would

be without sparkle of mine. End it.

"End it," I say to myself, walking though the city night.

The night which is so beautiful; which seems to throb with a thousand flames.

When I finally decided to kill myself, and set a date for doing so, I ceased to be as other people. I have become a dead man walking, and life is more precious than any treasure, because all the little things which make life grubby have fallen away.

They no longer have the power to touch me. Think of all the everyday frustrations that I can now end, whenever I want to, and all of a sudden they disappear. Bills?—what, mere bills? what do they matter? Security?—pish! I am the man who does not worry about his pension. I do not care if I contract a terrible disease. Threaten my life? I have mastery over your threats. Even a drunken acquaintance who talks endlessly about her so-important problems, becomes someone I can view with—dare I say, pity? What does she know, after all?

I listen to her and think, I am going to destroy myself, and you do not know. It gives me the feeling of being invincible. How strange! Soon I will be corruption, and she will still be alive, and still talking about her problems, to someone else who will still be alive, yet I am the one who feels like a victor, the dead man among all these living.

I listen to her, and slowly the realisation dawns that where I stand, one day she will stand too. Then she will know what problems are. The fears which I confront, one day will be hers as well. Yes, pity—that is my feeling, because life is so wonderful, and so irrevocable is the step I am going to take.

At first I was afraid—not just of failure, but of the pain,

because there will be pain, even if I don't cut my throat or bury a knife in my bowels. If I knew that I was going to be struck by a meteorite hurtling towards earth at thousands of miles an hour I would be afraid of the pain, even though I knew I would not feel it.

But more important, I want to be forgiven. I want God to exist just so He can forgive me. Throwing away life is such a terrible thing to do.

Why?—because I remember things, small things, foolish things, unimportant things that are suddenly so very important, and I am the only one left who remembers them, and when no one remembers, all will be lost.

And then you are not afraid any more; just lost, lonely and sad. When I think of ending my life, I think of the people who gave me my life, and that thought makes me feel almost ill with grief.

Why?—because they will be so disappointed. And yet what a foolish thought that is. They are not here to be disappointed, and I do not believe that they are anywhere else either, except in my memory—and when I have obliterated my memory, I, and they, will not be at all.

For I have no memory of things past. I was not, before I was conceived. Not once has the suggestion of a previous life impinged itself upon my mind. I did not march with Alexander to the ends of the earth, nor stand upon a peak in Darien, nor bring the good news from Ghent to Aix. I did not even labour under the lash on the pyramids, sweep up lion dung in the Coliseum, nor till the ground as a medieval serf. Why, therefore, a future life? If I cannot believe that I was hanging upon a hook in heaven's warehouse for an age gone, should I believe that I shall hang upon a hook again for an age yet to come?

No. Immortality was indeed invented by Heine's

shopkeeper who sat and smoked contentedly before his door one warm evening and could think of nothing better than that he might vegetate there for ever in the gloaming.

I cannot think of anything better either. To be content, for ever, at the end of a day's work well done ...

I just hope that I shall die thinking it, for in that very day shall all my thoughts perish, and I will not have the God of Jacob to be my help. I will be in the desert, in the stony places, an outcast even among the outcasts of Israel, and when I cry "Father, my hour is come!" the sky shall not hear me, there shall be no river to cross, and no trees waiting to receive me in their gentle shade.

Oh, to sit in the warm gloaming contentedly for ever! But I am an ill angel, alone in the city night.

End it! End it! I shall do this and I shall not suppose.

Kill myself, and—who knows?—maybe I will live in eternity.

Wouldn't that be odd?

I begin to look forward eagerly to my death. I am like the little boy who is afraid of fire, and yet is fascinated and longs to touch it. I will burn. It will hurt, and I am afraid—but I am going to do it, just because it will hurt and I am afraid. I shall not be predictable. We all must die, we are all mortal, but I shall be the one who runs forward to embrace it, and when you come to seek me in the morning, I shall not be.

I feel rather brave, and that makes me feel less afraid, just a little less, because I shall die with a grand gesture; and less sad, because I shall will my life to the very end; and less lonely, because I shall be one in the hall of heroes, and I too shall have the right to say, "Stranger, if you go to Sparta ..."

I feel like a man possessed of an amazing secret. I am the one who knows. Ha! After all, what am I leaving? This is

not the Land of Heart's Desire, this is not Middle-earth, nor the Happy Islands. This is a boring place, and a noisy place, and there is no peace in it. Lord, this cell is cold!

End it!

Suicide gave my life a purpose. Isn't that odd?

I gave up the job at which I was earning my living, and that was easy, because it was a menial and mindless occupation, but I find it difficult to accept that I will never again have—or need—a job. So I look here and there. I pick up an application form or two. My eye lights upon an advertisement, and I think, "Yes, I could do that." I try to think of a future for myself: the ageing bachelor who lives with his cat in a house full of books, who cycles to work in a department store, who comes out at night as an office cleaner, who sits at the check-out counter of a supermarket, or arranges shelves in a garden centre. What would be wrong with that, after all? Many people live so, and they find happiness enough, I daresay.

And then I think of myself in ten more years, in twenty more years; the failed writer, the writer whom no one reads; the anachronism. I think of myself dying of whatever will kill me, and I know how I will despise myself in that hour for having made do with so much less than I had wanted.

The light of a better day still gleams fitfully on my head, and I will leave before it is extinguished.

Kill myself. It is my duty. Send myself up the ladder to Kingdom Come. If my future is in the hands of the Lord, then I am stepping forth as the instrument of the Lord's purpose.

But the fear of death disturbs me! Still I grasp at life like Claude Frollo clinging to the walls of Notre Dame. Oh, it seems so sweet just to breathe!

I listen to people talking, talking, talking. I listen to

their talk, their problems, their incessant selfish talk, their trivial petty problems—and I think, "You do not know what I am going to do. You do not know that I am planning the most selfish deed of all. You don't know, you with your open mouth, that the time of talking is over. You do not know how sweet it is to breathe the air you take for granted!"

I have given up my job, and people wonder what I will do. Ha, ha! I say that I am a gentleman of leisure, and laugh, and they laugh too.

I feel like a medieval man fallen ill with the pains of hell battening on his mind, and the notion that he must square God somehow. So I am writing this book, this talentless book, this tale told by an idiot, this cry for forgiveness. This shall be my account of myself in these last days as I sweep and garnish and prepare to meet whatever comes.

Here is my inventory: 25 sedatives {I lied to the doctor and told him I had insomnia} and two anti-nausea pills; two large plastic bags, one inside the other, and some rubber bands large enough to go over my head, which I had to order specially from an office supplier's; a number of cable ties to bind my hands behind my back so they don't tear the bag away when I am unconscious; the hair dryer plugged into the mains as a reserve; and a ladder with a clothes rope done into a noose should the battle come to the triarii. These are the ritual implements of my sacrifice.

And I shall die at night, when tired creatures are enjoying kindly sleep. When forests and fierce seas are at rest, and the circling constellations glide in their midnight course. When no one walks on the Pentlands, except our ghosts, maybe, on the Monks Road by the Monks Burn, where the Font Stone is, that could be Jacob's pillow. When the Cairns stand under the sky as they have done for centuries, and only the breeze is on the Caldstaneslap, and

Saint Catherine's is under the waters, undisturbed. When the Botanic Gardens over the road are like the setting for 'A Midsummer-Night's Dream'; when no one human walks there; when the swans sleep on the pond, and the squirrels in the trees. Then the sleep which smoothes away the cares of living creatures shall smooth away my life.

I am going to pull a plastic rubbish bag over my head, and into this rubbish bag I will empty all my dreams. In a previous, bloodier, age I could have fallen upon my sword like Saul; but a rubbish bag is perhaps more appropriate to such as I. After all, the Lord has not rejected me, since the Lord never knew me, nor I the Lord.

Hopefully I shall not be vainglorious at my end. Hopefully I shall not go like a silly fool, moonstruck with despair. Self-pity I do feel—indeed, I am very well acquainted with its snivelling face—but I feel something else besides, and I think that it is nobler. It is as though my pretences have fallen away and left me here as Everyman, facing alone the one thing that every man must face alone: Death.

Had my grandfather been hung to rot on the uncut wire of the Ancre, had my father drowned in that sea of bullets at Salerno, I would not be. Had my mother married the man she wanted, and not the man she married, I would not be. So many accidents could have prevented my being, surely my fate is not important. And yet it is mine, and when I am gone I have no belief that I will ever be again.

I am just the child who once wanted to touch the moon, and I am going to die in a rubbish bag bought on a roll from a supermarket whose speakers play insincere music. Perhaps that is the way for Everyman to die.

One thought, gleaned from Epicurus via Burton: "Where I am, death is not; where death is, I am not."

That is my Evangel. That shall be my Excelsior.

When I think, with a shudder, "Is this where I am to end my days? Is this how I am to end them?"—that phrase comes to me, and brings comfort with it.

There will not even be nothing. There will not be.

Language was constructed because we want to believe in immortality; now language persuades us that immortality is real.

Perhaps it is; but I do not believe it. Certainly I am going to find out. One day, so shall everyone.

Until then, forget all the theories you fell in love with, forget everything. Put these night-thoughts out of your head. Go out into the sunlight and be happy with what you see. That comforts me so much.

And so does the opposite. That perhaps a new light will dawn, and it will be better and brighter than anything I have ever known, and I will be, after all, and the great myths shall be seen to be true.

And perhaps an arm will come, clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful, to draw me through the door.

Three
Seven Weeks

Every minute another fool such as I comes off the train and stands on the platform looking round with big, hopeful eyes. Every minute.

The minutes tick by. They turn into hours, days, weeks. They pass so quickly now, and I have nothing to show for them.

I live in a house full of books. They are not merely furnishings, not just the recreation of a lonely man. They are a quest, they are a judgement on the waters, because any book, any work of art, is a vessel making the voyage of life. And these books have been my vessels, my cargoes, and I have sailed with them through storms and onto moonlit seas. At night I have laboured to earn my living, like Cleanthes, and my thoughts have always been far away, out there upon the deep.

I did not value them so much until I realised how absurdly fragile life can be, how much of a tightrope it is, and how precarious the balance that we hold. In the midst of life we are ready to fall, always ready to fall, and should I plan confidently for the distant future knowing that? Books were steady things; the constant, the anchor; and the older the binding in which the words were enclosed, the steadier that anchor in the swaying tide. If the present was a tyranny, they were monuments to the cause of freedom. If the present was absurd, they were temples of a time when reason reigned. If the present was a battle, then they were

the flags of a gallant army.

Paradoxically, though, embracing the absurdity of the present brought order and familiarity to the day, whereas when I sought for purpose and cohesion I experienced only frustration, bewilderment and despair. I longed so much to find the One who lives for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and whose kingdom is from generation to generation. But I could never find Him. Others are luckier, others have more faith, perhaps more humility, than I; but for me He was only words; beautiful words—the Lord who drives the clouds as his chariot; who walks upon the wings of the wind; who makes his angels spirits, and his ministers a flaming fire—but words, nevertheless. Only words.

Yet they give such pleasure, these words! They are so rich and heartening. They are more glorious and excellent than the mountains of prey. I never learned how to play chess, but I enjoy the picture of myself playing chess with one true friend by the light of a log fire while Mozart plays in the background, and the air is crisp without. And in describing it in these words, the picture is in my mind with the clarity of a vision—the flickering flames, the warmth, the smell of the smoke—a vision in all the senses, and changing in all its details, and I realise that I am God looking at my Eden, and feeling that it is fine.

Words are the act of creation, the calling of the firmament, the dividing of the waters. They shine like the lights of heaven.

They stand at my right hand; they reward me good for evil, and love for hatred. They are the language of Shakespeare, the wonderful English tongue. They walk beside me, they are my true companions.

They are so beautiful they are actual. They shield me

from oblivion. They hold the perceptions of the world together. They sing praises in the morning.

That is what words are; and books are churches of syllables, the religion of letters. The act of reading is a prayer: Keep me from the hell of oblivion, Oh Lord, whose ministers have made Your name to shine so brightly; shield me from the Nothing which comes in the night.

When I read great books, I feel that I am one of the faithful, one of the little flock. I too am a flame in the fire —a small flame, certainly, but there, shining to the best of my abilities, with a pure, clear light.

I would rather read than be with anyone, because, when I read, I am alone and surrounded with dear friends. When I read, I am alone with my dreams of not being alone, and I would rather dream of not being alone than have company, because the dream will not disappoint, but the reality will. How strange that is.

How strange and inspiring. I could see little else that was so in my youth, in the days of desolation, after the time of joy had passed, and before life became something to be accepted with a shrug, a sigh, and a smile.

It seemed so simple, so long ago. It is only now that I wish I had had friends to play with when I was a little boy; but I had no friends, and I believed that this was the way of the world. Outside, beyond the windows, where the traffic roared, was cruelty, ugliness, and intolerance, while inside was love, and kindness, and everything that made life worth living. So I didn't know what it was like to have friends, any more than a blind boy might know what it was like to see.

Perhaps it was raining on the day that I was born. Certainly Doubting Castle loomed in the background—not Edinburgh's magical castle high up on its rock with its flag flying against the clouds—but a bleak place where only

despair lived, the Giant who could vanquish everything, even Christian and the angels; the Giant that only Great Heart could beat.

Dreams were my great heart. They were the collective memory of everyone wise, and brave, and honourable who had gone before me down the path, and I thought, and hoped, that I might add to their knowledge, and I in turn would become part of something valorous, and guide others on the way. And if I was not the stuff of which heroes were made, if I was not the man who stood up against the forces of evil, I could write about those who did: I could be a storyteller, a minstrel, a singer of songs.

For I was always aware that this was fantasy. 'The Lord Of The Rings' might be wonderful, but my body knew perfectly well that it had no desire to be chased by Orcs, let the mind do what it liked. Tellingly, even in my dreams, I was always the loyal lieutenant, the one who stood dutifully by, David Balfour but never Alan Breck, one of Napoleon's marshals, perhaps the plucky cabin-boy who played Drake's drum. I suppose, even then, I realised that I was not what I longed to be.

So dreaming was my land of Beulah, and reading fuelled my dreams. These books extended to heaven like a rainbow, like a golden ladder. They were my crowning mercy, the bridge to paradise, the keys with which I escaped from the Giant's dungeon. They were the Interpreter's House and I never wished to leave it. There I would sit and read the words of all those who had gone before me.

Outside, everything was boring; the traffic rumbled up and down Leith Walk, the rain fell, and I trudged unwillingly to school like a prisoner across the Bridge of Sighs. Inside, however, I was Aladdin with his lamp, looking into an enchanted kingdom and wanting to be part of it and

live there for ever.

Outside ...

But there was one exception to the bleak and dismal outside. Outside was the cinema. Once a week my mother would take me; and then I would take myself. She went to see Tarzan films, and Westerns that invariably had Audie Murphy in them. This was before the days of babysitters, when women, if they possibly could, looked after their own babies.

That cinema was a temple; it was dark and warm. It had statues and mysterious lights high overhead. Then the lights dimmed, the curtains opened, and I fell into the waters of the wonderful river.

And then television appeared—a small chapel, a little household shrine—and in it I was one with the Cowboys, and the Cavalry, the Indians, and the heroic men who voyage to the ends of the earth, and fight for freedom and justice.

So there were two complementary lamps—books and films—and I rubbed them both. There were two genies that attended upon me. They never said that I was stupid or ugly, plain, boring or useless. They never punched me, humiliated me, or spat on me. And they were inside, those magical lamps, where the dreams were.

Beyond the streets, beyond the roofs of grey slates and the aerials waving in the wind, beyond the seven hills of Edinburgh, and the fields, and the roads that circle round about, is the place where the river runs into the sea. The bridge leaps over the waves there, and the gulls cry, as they cried for Malcolm and Edwin and the legions of Agricola..

So did the bridge of dreams leap from one world to another, for the world is a dull place that has neither angel

nor monster in it, heroes nor adventure.

Books and films together held up my bridge of dreams, in them I crossed the troubled waters into an enchanted place where there was no loneliness, and the very air pulsated with life. There was the land of glory; there was excitement; there was love; there was everything that this world did not have. The bridge might be built of paper and celluloid, but the force which held it together was imagination. Beneath it the torrents roared, while the clouds passed over like sacred songs. That was the bridge of my dreams, and I was never so happy as when I stood there.

The cold streets of Edinburgh vanished with their boredom and the noise of cars. Instead, I rode with John Wayne's cavalrymen and fought for Spain with the Cid. I walked through the aisles of Notre Dame de Paris and the streets of ancient Athens. I knew passion and nobility—yes, even this sack of skin, this unpleasing face, this bespectacled creature. I knew what hope meant.

Dreaming, even lying, is a natural protection against hurtful odds, and what is the writer and the film-maker but the spinner of gorgeous fables? And the older the film, the older the book, the more noble it seems, the more humane, the more in love with the past, and optimistic about the future; the more at odds with everything that is squalid today.

Books and films, these two.

These two, my sun and moon; shining in the face of tribulation.

These two; and could I create a third - a small, orbiting meteor, perhaps, no bigger than a hand, no bigger than my brain?

As time went on, I wondered if I too could not add to this wonderful bridge. I had learned to be afraid of people,

and a film-maker must work with them, but the wordsmith needs only paper and a pen. Could I give pleasure to other people as these books and films, these stories and dreams, had given pleasure to me? Could I use words?

Could I?

Even then I did not want merely to be a passive vessel. I longed to give something back to the world in return for its precious gift of life. Words, I thought, would be my hymn of thanks. They would be the robe of glory in which I would wrap myself. They would be the bread I would scatter upon the waters.

To write seemed such a noble vocation. To give back even a fraction of the treasure that the world had given me; to play the demi-god and share the dream! To escape the loneliness—for a writer surely has every reader for his brother and sister, a secret family who know each other by mysterious signs.

Even to write one single phrase which is remembered—to call Petra the "rose-red city half as old as time."! To contribute one note to the music of the world, one note that is mine, and lets me leave behind some relic which says that I once existed, that I too felt the sun on my face! How joyful that would be—for the notion that all I have been is a passing breath of wind that stirred the molecules for a moment or two is appalling.

Let me create something! I am not a builder, nor an explorer of place or thought. Of time, maybe. And that is what writing is: to be an explorer in time.

So I hoped to give tidings to the world. I could never be the saviour, but I could be the herald of the saviour. I could not be the knight, but I could be the minstrel who would sing about great deeds.

For words are adventuresome things. With them I

could walk in glory among the sons of the morning, and at night be one with the daughters of the moon. We had books in our home instead of wallpaper. I grew up in the forest of Arden. The heroes were my friends. The map of Treasure Island was as familiar to me as my bedroom.

Words are memorials. In the trenches on the Ancre {this tale my grandfather told me} men who seldom ever wrote, did write, or had written for them, letters which might never be delivered, diaries which might never be found. These words, they seemed to say, show that my brain does not have a bullet in it, show that my heart beats, show that my hand is not severed; show that I am still alive. In one minute or less I might not be.

With words I could escape. And most of all I wished to escape from school.

School was a penance. It was a place of noise and cruel, pale light, of coldness and inhumanity. It looked like a cross between a prison and a castle. The playgrounds around it resembled the killing areas which surround a military fortification. There wasn't a single tree, tub of flowers, or patch of grass; not a swing, not a shute, nothing. Just an expanse of grey asphalt permanently splattered with spat-out chewing-gum.

On the first day—I was just five—I tried to run away because I thought that my parents had abandoned me, and ever after I hated it. I don't know why they did not explain to me the night before that I was not being sold into slavery, because I thought I was. It was a loveless place, the stairs were echoing, the corridors long, and the tiles that walled them were always cold and dirty. I remember that the classrooms smelled of pencil shavings from the sharpener on the teacher's desk, and of children's sweat. They smelled of

dirty socks and breath sickly-sweet with the aroma of Barr's Iron Brew and bubble-gum. They smelled of the belt.

Bullies ruled the playground. Their favourite place of torment was right underneath the headmaster's window, and the headmaster must have heard something sometimes, but I suppose he said "Boys will be boys", and that is why he never did anything. None of the teachers, Primary or Secondary, ever did anything.

No, I tell a lie. Once, when some torturing was going on among their parked cars, all the teachers came rushing out the school door in a mob to see if any damage had been done to their beautiful parked cars. God knows what would have happened if they had found a scratch on one of their Morris Minors or a dent in a Hillman Imp! They would probably have paraded round the playground carrying the offender's head in front of them on a pole. As it was, there was only some boy lying there, beaten sick and crying, so they all turned around and went back to their lunch in the staff room and let boys be boys.

Here you had to use your knuckles. It wasn't enough to be a gentle dreamer. But that is all I was, and the one time, the only time in my life, that I ever hit out in anger, I felt so bitterly ashamed of myself, I decided that—come whatever—I would never do such a dishonourable thing again. I have stuck to that resolve ever since; not out of strength, I suppose, just out of stubbornness, because my body was a disappointment, I never had fighter's muscles, and I was mocked and bullied from the start. I felt myself to be a joke, a mere joke, and knew that I wasn't even ugly—I was plain, mediocre, uninspiring.

For a long time I would have nightmares about school, and my nightmare was of corridors, long long corridors that just went on and on. And I was walking along those

corridors, and I knew that I was late for something, though I did not know what, so I walked quickly. Being late for something is one of the two things about which I am quite certain. The other is that behind me something else was walking, something horrible, and sad, and lonely. I cannot see it because it is always two bends of the corridor behind me, but I know that it is there, and that if I start to run it will get me, so I walk very fast. I walk as fast as I can along those endless corridors, and that nameless horror walks behind me. I cannot hear its footsteps, but I know that it is there. I know that it hates me, and that it will do me all the injury it can.

School had long corridors and high Victorian ceilings, and to my eyes they were as high as the clouds, and as long as a line of latitude.

And yet, as I walked home up the Via Dolorosa that was called McDonald Road, I saw the Castle, which you can see from many places in Edinburgh, and it looked so brave up there, like a giant on its rock, and the flagpole on its topmost tower was raised up like a sword, and the clouds streamed around it like a great mane of silver hair.

"Take me," I wanted to say. "I am a warrior. I am your brother."

I would look at that vision, and think how far short I was falling. I would look at the bridge stretching there, I would look at the door, at the beckoning sight and the golden land, and the contrast with the squalor that was around me made me wish that I could spring off a cliff and embrace the freedom of the rushing air.

If only I could find the door which would let me escape from this place!—because I felt that, inside this lacklustre shell, I did have treasures to give. Surely, I thought, one day it would come—the opening of the door, the crossing of the

bridge. And then the trumpets would sound. Surely?

I dreamed. I amassed a horde of chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil, and they were doubloons and pieces of eight, and I was Jim Hawkins.

I dreamed—that one day I would give my dreams to the world. That one day I would create something wonderful. That one day ...

I dreamed.

All I know is that in my dreams I was once a little boy, and the world was exciting, and people cared for me, and I loved them.

Ah, well.

Once the misery of school was over, it seemed that the adult world beckoned. To Carthage then I came. Edinburgh University, which, when I was eighteen, shone on the far horizon like the towers of the celestial kingdom, and of which I had come to expect so much, and hope that it would be so different, proved to be a vain endeavour.

It was a place where conceit forever had the floor, where fashion was enthroned like pharaoh, and we were taught to be the slaves of fashion, taught to admire fashionable dictators, regard their cruelties and massacres as fashion statements, and derive pleasure from delivering other people up to pain. It was stiff with the most mouldy devices that evil ever used to bait its man-traps. Professor Gradgrind and Doctor Dryasdust mumbled in their corners; Professor Badman and Doctor Cowardice strutted upon the stage.

Looking back on it, I am ashamed of university, ashamed that a place of such potential should promote such baseness. It turned out too many who were smug, dull and

lethargic, and too few who were bold enough to be different. It taught bullies how to use their tongues instead of their fists, and claimed that therein lay progress.

For there was no debate in that place, just the insistence that you conform. The old voice of authority had expected the previous generation of students to conform, and it had conformed. This generation was expected not to conform, and it conformed with that. What Marx and Marcuse said, everyone was to do, though few had read either Marx or Marcuse, and only the new voice of authority told you what they had said; and what they had said was not to conform, apparently, and any who did not conform with that were punished for not conforming.

I listened to the voice of this new authority, I listened to it again and again, because it yelled everywhere and always, and it was a sarcastic, sneering voice that repeated itself like a decimal. I looked at its face, and it was bloated with bigotry as its predecessor had been heavy with beer. I looked at it and saw flat eyes bright with malice.

Was this, I wondered, the land of the dreaming spires? Could this be the school of life, that taught self-righteousness and moral imbecility, and a cleverness which bore the same relation to wisdom as dentures do to teeth? Was this the air of learning, this totalitarian stink?

The past held me then, my reading, the memory of all these fine Scottish soldiers. I felt that Scotland was a part of Britain, and that Britain was a great and lovely cathedral whose spire pointed towards God, whose walls were the work of loyal generations, and whose foundations rested upon the bones of many heroes in the chambers of the deep. This was my country, my glorious fatherland, my dear motherland, and I felt every insult to her as a blow in my own face.

How many blows I bore for her! I was not persecuted for my beliefs: merely given to know that I was isolated, alone and ridiculous. No sour-faced security policeman glared at me, just the well-fed Grin—the Grin that attached itself to everything complacent and obedient, cowardly and cruel. Wherever authority was, there was the Grin. Wherever fashion was dictated, it was dictated by the Grin. Wherever I looked, there, staring back at me, the ubiquitous Grin.

I believed, and believe, that we were once great. I felt, and feel, that we have become petty. My country's downfall has been by slow crumbling stages, and to this day I feel alike her agony and my own impotence. It seems that all that is high and holy has died away, and that Grin has replaced it. I tell myself this is my age, every middle-aged man feels like this as his own face turns into lines, and joy dulls around him; but I felt like this when I was a young man; I felt like this as a boy. Even then I detested the Grin.

Am I wrong to attribute greatness to Britain's past? We achieved so much. We were the home of progress and patient reform; the unifier of one third of the human race. We stood up to Fascism and fought it without waiting to be attacked. We took from that beaten enemy the good we could find among his ruins and created National Health and Social Security.

How proud I was of Great Britain when I was a boy! How great Britain was to me! It was no mean place; it was a city on a hill; a land of heroes and mother of parliaments. Here I walked on clouds and stood on thrones. Here was the home of Churchill and Gladstone, the Puritans and Levellers, the Labour Movement and the suffragettes, and I was one of their children. I had that privilege. Over my head flew Spitfires. I talked the language Shakespeare had talked.

Could anyone be more happy?

Now Britain seems like a place of deception and false promises. It is not a strong habitation any more, nor a green and pleasant land. Was it ever? Perhaps only in my dreams. I turn to the image of my Motherland and say, "I am a fighter, I am your son"—but she does not know me. I cry out, "I am your true champion, your faithful one"—but she does not hear. I stand alone in the cold and the rain and the wind that blows, and nothing marks my presence. I would be a witness, but no one wants my testament.

Where is it, this land, the place I love? I see shopping malls, but not the homes of a liberty-loving people. I see consumers, but not citizens. Even to be a subject would be preferable, because a subject has a certain loyal dignity; but what dignity does the consumer have? That of a stomach demanding to be fed.

What has been lost? A sense of history, perhaps. The cenotaphs we raised to our heroic dead are covered in graffiti, most of it obscene, and rubbish lies around their plinths.

Music darkened with unwisdom is mere noise. Sensuality without exuberance is sour as vinegar. The Sea of Fertility is a barren place strewn with rocks. How tired I am of this world and all its noise! How I long to find the place of purity where peace dwells under the visiting moon. Where is this land that I want? Far away somewhere, wandering in the pathless winds.

Why is this?

When the Pax Britannica ended with the failure at Gallipoli, those twins of War, Communism and Fascism, in turn disturbed and desolated the world, scattering the wealth of nations like sand, and lavishing the blood of nations like water, until the final echo of that failure had

faded away, and the sons of those who had died at Cape Helles and Suvla Bay were themselves old, old men.

The succeeding Pax Americana was preferable to the alternatives displayed in Berlin and Moscow, and however grotesque and absurd the extravagances of American politics might seem, there was an innocence, of sorts, behind the grotesquerie.

But now I look at America and I see the face of a feckless thug. This is surely not the land of Abraham Lincoln and Mark Twain. What is America today? A consumer circus inhabited by money clowns. A monument to illiteracy, a land lacking in thought, a people lacking in place, lacking in time, lacking in so much.

But not power?

No, not power. Thought is not power; success is power, and successful inanity is in power—there as here, but with arsenals of weapons to back it. And when some other inanity replaces it, the thoughtful will rejoice, and think they had a part to play in its downfall, and they did not, and they will think that the New Jerusalem will arise where thought is valued, and it will not.

Only the Grin is always valued, and always able to adjust itself.

In the days of Soviet power the Grin had beamed upon the land of the secret police with benevolence. It had looked upon the concentration camps and found them good. It grew fat on corpse-meat.

There is such a thing as a revolution complex. People who sit and talk and read about fighters and revolutionaries long enough can get to thinking that they too are violent, tough and ruthless, and quite up to ordering death sentences and assassinations without batting an eye.

{I know; I thought this of my redcoated soldiers once. But I grew up.}

They think that revolution is sexy, and revolutionary killers are romantic—though having seen people who have been killed, I can think of nothing less sexy and romantic than a dead body lying in blood and excrement with its guts spilled out. However, on occasions when I have said this, the people with the revolution complex shout slogans to tell me I am all manner of bad things, which evidently boil down to someone who does not like dead bodies stinking with their guts spilled out—to which I plead guilty, guilty, guilty, and proud to be guilty in the face of the vicious Grin.

There is something dismal about this; it is the repetition of a lesson inadequately learnt. This notion of revolution is akin to the private school subaltern's idea of war in 1914—something heroic and God-ordained, involving such fine words as "sacrifice" and "duty", and made really quite painless by dint of its chivalry.

{I know. I once hoped a war would break out so I could win the Victoria Cross. And then I grew up.}

Could no one tell them? Their ignorance let them live in a magic garden where wicked things could be contemplated in a state of mental peace, and they were remarkably cheerful in the face of others' torments, dangers, and death. They felt that the slaughters they condoned happened only in the realm of words, and any Wilfrid Owen who sought to tell these doomed youths that revolution is mere pork-butchery, and that there is no chivalry amid fanatics, criminals, informers and spies, was shouted down by the new authority as "bourgeois"—a word whose meaning is infinitely elastic.

Am I bourgeois?

I was called it often enough, by people with cars and

money and a lust for killing.

Am I? Yes, for I will not feed the eternal flame of hatred between nations and classes. The most beautiful star, and the one which our love can truly affect, is that which only the astronauts have seen shining in the night—this, our own dear Mother Earth—and my hope has always been that common human kindness will play the greatest part in redeeming her.

Is that bourgeois?

"Yes!" screams the Grin.

So I am pleased to be bourgeois.

So I was pleased when Communism fell and hope raised her smiling face. Yes, I thought that when Communism went down the future would be a happy place. I thought that liberated Russia would surely explode with long suppressed talent, that China would grant the world new revelations, that singers would rise from the dark earth of the Ukraine who would paint the morning sky with trailing clouds of glory, and that we would create a world which promised to be altogether wonderful.

What was Communism, after all, but the sinister member of the family whom you knew in your heart to be a murderer, but whom you could not bring yourself to report to the police, because, however shameful, however disgraceful, he was still a member of your family, and there was a time—or so you told yourself—when he too loved, was loved, and was beautiful.

Once upon a time there was a huge rambling mansion house, and we reached out to the door, and turned the handle ... and the whole edifice came crashing down and left us standing there, bewildered. It was too easy. It should not have been.

So Communism fell in ruins. And the Grin froze for a while, and looked perplexed.

What a happy day that was, when the Grin was silent.

Yet Communism did not fall because it was immoral and murderous; it fell because Capitalism had more spending power and a greater acquaintance with the paths of pleasure. Communist criminals were not condemned for their many crimes, but for the sole misdemeanour of being boring.

Are we so decadent that evil is a mere sound to us, devoid of real meaning? It is served up as entertainment, it is an act in the media, the capering of a clown; and to salve our consciences we can always warm up the Nazis. And how many writers and film-makers do just that?

Boring is dammed, cruelty is overlooked, and now the Grin has embraced money and the power of money, and hope has shambled back into her twilight lair. And the fall of Communism, which should have been a feast of rejoicing, is another devils' triumph and a sorrow for angels.

Lenin once said that a capitalist will sell you the rope with which you hang him. He would have been more prophetic had he said that he will sell you the rope with which he hangs you.

It is the easiest thing on earth to preach that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us, and forget that, if this is the case, the Kingdom of Hell must be there too.

In the country I want we shall love freedom from the west, and its glory from the rising of the sun. We shall make a covenant that will stand against the flood of lies and injustice whenever it comes back to roar at us. Against the harsh bright glare of tyranny it will stand upright, and in its shadow goodness shall grow and prosper when everything

else lies burnt and shrivelled on the ground.

I owe this to my parents and my grandparents for all they endured, for all they suffered, and for all they hoped. My father fought with a rifle and wished to fight with words: I will fight with words! I will not surrender. I will not betray the cause. {Again and again I have renewed that vow. Hear me, Oh Israel!}

There was a time when I went among the members of the wonderful club which never opened to me, and now never shall. That Parnassus, that temple of literature! How I longed to be accepted, to be welcomed, to be invited in!

Oh, to write! To be a light to the world!

I thought there was a flush like the dawn over my writing, the sweetness of the rose, the freshness of the morning dew.

I tried, God knows.

I communed with myself, and chewed my knuckles. I was surrounded with mental indolence and ignominy, and dreamt of heroes casting majestic shadows in the evening light.

I wrote plays, which proved to be a debacle, and poetry, in which I was one among thousands. I wrote novels, and every time I wrote a novel I thought "This is it! This is the one that will do it! This is the key to the door!" But it never was. The door never opened, and the boat which had sailed without me never returned.

Plays, poems, novels ... These were the vessels with which I tried to cross the River of Grief and the River of Wailing, and find the parents I had lost, and the childhood that had gone, and the life that had been promised to me, perhaps before I was born.

Each year Edinburgh has its Festival. Each year I am there—that little, furtive figure peering jealously from an

upper window, hidden in the shadows at the back. I watch them pass, the talented, the successful, the acclaimed; and the years pass, too, and the little furtive figure grows older and greyer, and still no one notices that he is there. And around him stand ghosts, and only he knows of their existence.

"I am here," I say. "I believe in freedom and justice. I am ready to fight for them. I shall not cease from mental strife, nor shall the sword sleep in my hand. Take my sword," I say. I hold it out like a true knight, the sword of my talent, the sword of my imagination, the sword of my fingers drumming on a keyboard.

"I am here," I say.

But no one notices. I once wanted to touch the moon. Now I inhabit a desolate place over which the blizzard of rejection blows.

This is not for me: I will not live this life of a melancholy shadow, longing for a little dignity.

Shall I continue to send my books off to uninterested publishers, like a habitué of racetracks and casinos, always hoping for the lucky break which never comes? Shall I continue to beg editors and agents for their attention, and pretend not to be hurt by their scornful retorts? I would rather die with a little dignity, than live with none.

Sometimes, even now, I will look at the words I have just put on the page and think: surely this is well written?—surely this will reach my brothers in the world?—surely at last I will enter the land of warmth and light where the kindred spirits are?

No, it never happens. Against the impenetrable wall of rejection these feeble vessels shatter, one after another, and all that remains is something that drifts across a churchyard in the moonlight.

A book that nobody reads; a mirror that nobody looks in; a song that nobody hears; a touch that nobody feels. A prayer that is unanswered.

Why have I failed? Perhaps because I never truly found anything beyond myself on which to fix my devotion, neither God, nor country, nor woman, nothing to be pursued as an end in itself, except perhaps my pleasure in literature and the beauties of creation from the evening to the morning star, and the warm, kind world between that still makes me want to sing with the joy of living. It is such a small thing to enjoy the sunlight: it is such a terrible thing never to see it again.

Why do I fail? Is my ambition unworthy?

It seems that my contribution to my own life's story has been a slight one. In every instance the real arbiter has been Chance, a strange, lumbering creature, an external force synonymous, perhaps, with Luck, Fate, or Destiny, whose workings I have never fathomed, and whose direction I have never been able to comprehend.

Certainly, if this is the hand of God, He keeps it well-gloved. Just as certainly, when I have appealed to His clemency, He has shown His teeth in a wintry smile and returned my prayers unopened.

I have seen some terrible things. In Bosnia I saw such things.

I wanted to write about them, and I hoped that by my writing I would leave the world a better place than I had found it. Well, it never came about. I have been told from time to time that I have talent by agents and publishers who then turn their backs and walk away.

Nevertheless, to write was what I wanted to do with my life. I felt that I could not be utterly mistaken, and was confident that one day—that elusive "one day"—acceptance

would be mine, and then all else would be accomplished. So I gambled to win, or lose all.

And so my life has crept by on a broken wing, while my keyboard gently weeps.

I tried. What else can I say? For more than thirty years I have tried. And now I have lost, and, having lost, my life has lost its purpose.

Why did I fail? Why do I fail?

I have waited, and nothing has happened. I have tried to make it happen, and nothing has. I must be completely without talent to fail so completely.

Perhaps I was just unprepared for the outside world. Perhaps I was too in love with green things, with peace, with the sound of running water: they have no place in this land of retail and marketing, where the Grin counts its money.

Perhaps the fault is mine, and not of anything into which I thrust the blunt muzzle of my naivety. I was just too in love with books, and the past which is in these books, and the future which is just an illusion.

Perhaps I comfort myself by blaming the Grin. Yet what is the Grin but men and women, like me, mortal as I am, wandering as I do in the wind. What is that Grin but my invention and my scapegoat?

I should have seen that the day of books is surely in its twilight hour. Who cares now what Prince Andrew saw in the sky over Austerlitz, or what tales were told on the road to Canterbury? Like the crown imperial, it carries all the seductive glamour of a bygone epoch, and doubtless its Jacobite adherents will toast the king over the water for an age to come: but their numbers will dwindle by the year, their significance pale, until they are merely the shadow of former things lost in the steady light of the present.

Sometimes I go among these people to whom the written word is precious. I look at them. Am I one of them? I suppose I must be. I have ridden out of 'Redgauntlet'. Already I feel like some old bewigged émigré of the ancien regime reminiscing in exile about the glories of Versailles when the Pompadour reigned, and how I once knew someone who spoke to someone else who held the gloves of the Sun King. Already I feel the dust of ages pouring down on my head. Each book I write is like the statue of Ozymandias: "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

And do the Mighty despair? My head will not fall on the guillotine. I am not important; I am not significant; I am not relevant; I am not there. Why should the Mighty despair? They do not even know of my existence. The lone and level sands stretch far away, and my wreck is not colossal. No one notices it.

How could I have been so wrong? How could I have thought I had ability, when I have none? Was it part of some divine plan that I should be such a fool?

After each failure, after each rejection, after each time the hand I stretched out in hope and friendship was slapped away, I would look at my books—those I had bought, those my father had bought and left to me—lined up there on the walls like the gods of a forgotten religion.

"I am here," I would say. "I am still here."

Literature is like God—it means everything to those who believe, and nothing to those who do not. My father thought that books were a vessel full of grace by which everything was to be saved.

So did I.

I want to be like Aeneas, and take my treasured household gods to some new settlement, far away over the seas where the world is still young, the woods are verdant,

and failure is not known.

My father took a volume of Montaigne with him to the Western Desert and was reading it as his landing craft approached the beach at Salerno. It was a thick volume and he had "Mac" painted across the cover. The other men in his platoon thought that he was mad. I was not alive then. I wonder if any of these other men are alive now? I wonder if any of the Germans are alive? Shakespeare could do something with the possible coincidences; so could Dickens. I only try, and fail.

My early morning was golden, but the period of silver never came; late morning and long afternoon were made of bronze, and this evening is leaden. What baser metal twilight and midnight stars will look upon, I do not choose to discover. An electric current will, hopefully, destroy me before that moment comes, and let me pass from life into history; a history which no one will read.

I fail myself. I fail my parents. I fail everyone.

Sing, oh barren, thou that didst not bear.

These books! These increasingly unread books! People today no more believe in the wonders of literature than they do in the glories of paradise, and Cadmus of the golden prow is one with Jesus. What is a library now but a necropolis? And what am I but a gravedigger in the house of a long dead Lord? I think of all the hope which these volumes represent, and it is enough to make me weep. If my house stood alone I think I would set fire to it, like the priest of the Temple of the Golden Pavilion. It would be a beacon that might still burn, no matter how fierce the coming storms; a trumpet call that might still echo in the ears of those yet unborn.

I am still here. I am still loyal. I will die for you, my Lord.

That is what I wish to say.

At night I think I can smell my father's tobacco among the books that he loved so much, though he has been gone for more than twenty years. The place is a tabernacle scented with Saint Bruno Flake. Its scent too is among the flowers of Edinburgh.

He wanted to write a book: he never did. He wanted me to write one.

Me, useless me.

I am evidently suffering from that sort of insanity which lets a man write pages of rubbish under the impression that he is creating something of significance. If any one is reading this, and at this point agrees that everything that has been read up till now is indeed rubbish, then I will have been right about something, at least.

Now I stand at the door through which went the Tommies of 1916 and Aristophanes and every single one who lived before me. My bridge has indeed become one of sighs and pity, because I know that I am merely human, and that each and every one of us is unique, each a precious vessel, every one a glorious creation, and all bound for the same destruction that is about to swallow me.

I only wish I had left something behind; but the books I have written are like houses built for happy people, and so they stand empty, even when lived in.

The world is a place of beauty and sorrow, of great hope and great disappointment. It shall probably be so for as long as the moon endures, for as long as intelligent life walks under the sun. And I want to speak of its glory, and sing songs to creation. I have no voice to sing with, nor hand to draw, but words I love. Still.

I look for eternity in things which are ephemeral, and

infinity in the smallest objects I can find. I want to build a cathedral, a place of worship and rejoicing. Instead, I have created a foolish mausoleum which nobody shall ever enter.

Yes, I should burn this library: I should immolate myself with it; that would be a fitting end.

And yet even now I write.

Why?

For the reason that a penguin swims, I suppose—it is what I do, and all that I can do, and what I most enjoy doing, and I feel the fresh air of life in my lungs when I do it, even if I am an anachronism. Even if I am ridiculous.

Me. Useless me.

Still, someone may read this, if only to find out what leads a man to end his own life. A lyric poet or a singer could have managed it better, but I have never been a lyric poet or a singer either. A novelist might manage it, but my attempts to write novels ... say no more. Maybe these words will fall like rain upon the sweet grass, like a shower that waters the earth, and perhaps some late harvest will grow out of it, perhaps someone will notice. Perhaps I will finally do something that is not just the passing of the idle breeze. Perhaps, in opening the door for the Sandman, I shall finally win a friend. Perhaps, at least, someone may hold this up, like the petal of a long-dried flower preserved between two pages, and wonder who put it there.

Perhaps and perhaps.

And so I have lived my life, like Marius among the ruins.

What am I but a grey-haired child?

But on the day of my death I shall still believe in the parliament of man and the federation of the world—those beautiful dreams that inhabited the heads of so many who have gone on the path before me—and I shall still love the

creation from which those dreams spring even in the moment and the act of destroying my own little part in it.

I am not Arion and death is not a dolphin. He won't return me to land, no matter how much I sing to him. I know that, and accept it.

Every minute another fool such as I gets ready to depart, takes one last look, and turns sadly away.

This book is the sound of my spirit breathing, and when I come to an end of it I will have no reason for living any longer.

Four
Six Weeks

Of late, my connection with the world has grown thin. I have felt it stretching and stretching until, thread by thread, it has begun to break. There are a lot of threads, of course, but you hear them snapping nevertheless, and the cable which holds you shudders just a little bit more with every thread that breaks, and you wonder how many more will have to break before the cable itself gives way and hurls you down towards oblivion and whatever monsters lurk there.

For that very reason, in these last months time has come to mean a great deal.

When my father asked what the time was, he used to say, "How goes the enemy?"

The enemy?

When I was very young I lay and looked at a clock going tick tock, tick tock, and thought, "This second will never return; this second of this minute of this hour, day, week, month and year has gone for ever. This minute of this hour of the 26th of July, 1959 {say}, is in the past, withered like a flower. What have I done to make it immortal?"

That thought scared me as nothing else has ever done.

We are at war with Time: Saturn, Chronos, Old Father Time with his beard and staff and the hour glass in his hand. Saturn devoured all his children save only three—Jupiter, king of the air, Neptune, ruler of the sea, and Pluto, lord of death, the three things which Time cannot conquer.

Otherwise, Time tricks us all. If I look at the sun for

the most convincing evidence that the world is as I see it, then I am looking, not at that which is, but at that which was eight minutes ago, and assuming that it still is. "Of course it still is," says the voice of common sense—but how do I know? If it were suddenly to explode and its light vanish from the cosmos, I would still see it, and the hemisphere would still be bathed in its warm glow even though it was not there; and life would continue for several minutes on the assumption that that which we see and feel is that which is—only it is not, our senses have tricked us, and Time laughs in our faces.

I assume a present which continues, a moment which is prolonged for ever, which in its essentials will never change. Even though my head tells me this is wrong, yet my heart still contrives to believe it. I look at the night sky and see a place of repose and gentleness wrapped in the eternal moment—and I see that, even though I know I am looking at the history of last week, last month, last year, or many years before that. Perhaps I am looking at a star at which Napoleon looked on the road to Waterloo, and the light which he saw began its travels when Galileo lived and wrote in Florence.

I did not always think like this.

When I was small I thought life was an eternal present. Nothing could have been further from my mind than change, and death was unknown, even as a word. I remember that I had never seen darkness, and could not imagine what night might look like. I asked my parents where the world went when I slept, and my mother told me that it went into the Land of Nod. I asked what that was. Night, she said. So I asked what night was, and how it came, and from where. My mother tried to explain, but all that I could make of it was that some great hand drew a curtain

across the sky, the way she did when it was time for me to sleep, and I thought that night must fall in a couple of seconds, which was as long as it took her to close the curtain on the bedroom window.

Neither past nor future existed for me, only that eternal present, and it was good; the sun shone on the high roofs of Edinburgh, the summers were so hot the tarmacadam melted {it did—I remember it}, and in winter it snowed; my father was ten feet tall at least, and my mother was infinitely kind and gentle. In my memory it stays like that, that everlasting moment; it is preserved like a photograph which never ages, and is never creased nor discoloured. It happened so long ago, when time was the name of another country, and death a strange rumour from a distant shore.

Now I see that the present is the process of becoming the past, and what is the future but the expectation that this process is perpetual? "Continual becoming and never being," as Plato says, the moment which never stands still long enough to be so defined. Time itself makes the present an impossibility, and yet the present is all that is actual, for the past no longer is, the future is all a dream; and those who wish to hold the moment and have it last are damned, as Faust was damned—and which one of us has not wished for that very thing?

The present is my preparation for death, the past is a cupboard full of memories which sadden me, and the future is obscured with whirlwind dust-clouds through which my eyes cannot see. Everyone I have ever loved is dead, and those threads are snapping one by one.

Time means so much now. A million little things become so important.

When death stands in front of you it does that. So

when the first frost came at the end of October and the bird bath had a sheet of ice over it in the morning, I thought—this is the last October I shall ever see, the last time I shall know the first frost of a coming winter. I count the weeks between now and the date when I intend to kill myself, and when now was October I thought—a baby just conceived will be getting born when I die. Perhaps we shall pass at the gate?

The weeks pass. I count the days to my execution, and raise up sign-posts. This one says, "Christmas, the last I shall ever know"—and I feel sad, yet happy at the same time, because the Christmas trees stretch into the past like a magical forest, and I remember how it was, in Haddington Place, when I was very young, and the candle was a star, the streetlights were chests of treasure, and the real stars gleamed like jewels on the coat of the night.

So Christmas passes; New Year comes, the last ... And then it is January. I wonder how many more full moons I shall see—seven? six?... Then February comes. I look at the coffee in the large jar I have just opened and wonder if it will outlast me. I wonder who will feed the birds and the squirrels next winter. I hope my cat will settle down with his new family. And it is March already. Last week is so long ago, and yet decades can disappear, and I am a little boy in short trousers again listening to stories of a world that has gone.

It hurts me that no one will know how we laughed together, my parents and I. No one will know about those winter nights in the country forty and more years ago when the snow was thick and we shared one bed for warmth beside a fire of logs. No one will know about Old Cambus, where we holidayed on the Berwickshire coast, summer and winter for several years, and Fast Castle, and the roar of the

waters, and the sheep on the Lammermuirs.

No one will know the song the water sang, the song of the Baddinsgill and the Monks Burn, or how we once climbed Skald Law and passed through the rain clouds and entered the sunshine, like three gods on Olympus, while the storm soaked Edinburgh at our feet. No one will know that we were pilgrims beside the Font Stone, Covenanters at Wolf Craig, and Old Mortality where the grave is on Black Law, and the battlefield of Rullion Green.

No one will know how we walked the path of the solitary moon. No one.

We were travellers on the same road, but they are dead now, and when I die they will die all over again. It is wrong, but nothing I do can ever put it right. And everything will come to an end, all manner of things will come to an end, and no one will ever know.

Unless, after all, they are waiting for me in the Island of Avalon, the land of eternity, where the sun always shines, and everyone is happy.

I will be the Roman soldier at Pompeii, standing alone, unflinching.

I will keep the faith, I will stay loyal, I will be the true one.

I shall not abandon you, dreams that were.

Then it is April, next comes May, and now it is June, and half-way through June, and soon it will be the First of July, and I know that I shall never see the first day of another month, because I am going to die upon my birthday, like Cassius. And when the day will end, the end is known.

Tick tock, tick tock.

This is my midnight.

Passing my thirtieth birthday, I remember the sense of utter depression that possessed me when I realised that I was now older than Keats, older than Shelley, and their names were written in the stars, and mine—not at all.

There are so many things I have not done. I have not read enough of Goethe to do him justice, nor Tasso either. I never did plant my flag on top of any summit. So many places I have only heard of and never been. Names whose sound was like being summoned by silver bells—the Mountains of the Moon, the Golden Road to Samarkand ... what magical names!—though I daresay that Samarkand is full of McDonald's franchises, and the Mountains of the Moon are covered with rubbish like the pine grove at Mio. How splendid to have stood on a peak in Darien! How fortunate to have been D'Annunzio writing poems while planning the seizure of Fiume! But the world is becoming one large retail park, with nothing left to explore, with no risks left to take, and that is so dull.

And I hear time passing. It is a clock which goes tick tock, tick. I note annual events: my last Christmas ... then monthly events: the last full moon. How many times will I fill that bath before I kill myself in it?—eight? seven? perhaps six? Six is not many, and next week it will be five. There is only one season now, I will never see the snow or ice again, or the sun setting so early over Corstorphine Hill and the western sky blazing like the robe of glory while it is still late afternoon.

I will never see my lilac bloom again. Nor the daffodils. Nor ...

But I will die when the lavender is in full blossom.

And now it is midsummer, and the shortest night has passed; neither Oberon nor Titania shall come any more.

Because no shell killed my grandfather on the road to the Ancre, and no bullet left my father's corpse on the beach of Salerno, I am here. I think destiny, history and fate are merely the combs with which men groom themselves into self-importance. We are vain creatures, in both senses of the word. Vain in that we want to matter so much, and vain in that we die thinking we have achieved so little.

I could believe in God the great imponderable; I could believe in God for the same reason that I believe in the weather, since it seems to happen whether I choose to believe in it or not. But of moral purpose I see no trace whatsoever. That, I think, is a human creation which we have foisted on the cosmos, and God is the cosmos, or rather the cosmic demands which He was created to satisfy. I feel proud of my brothers and sisters to think that they have created eternal truth. Otherwise, Epicurus was right. There is no order, or purpose. Life is not what it is in the films. It has no scriptwriter. The lucky coincidences do not happen. There is no poetic justice, and its workings make no sense.

An accident was my birth, an accident shall be my death, and there shall be neither significance nor purpose, because I do not think that nature has a purpose—or a lack of purpose either. I think nature is too untidy to possess anything of the sort. She throws her darts in all directions, and serendipity is the best we can hope for. Perhaps I should throw myself into a volcano like Empedocles, voyage to Valhalla in a burning ship, or take Young Werther's pistol and blow my brains out.

No. I am not dramatic. I never was a hero.

I will die when the lavender is in full blossom, and be content with that.

I suppose every life is a tragedy in part. Even in the quiet suburbs it is a horizontal crucifixion, a Gethsemene of privet hedges, a Golgotha of paving stones, gravel drives, and nicely clipped lawns.

Philosophy arises out of this experience of tragedy. The experience may be mine, or it may be the experience of another with whom I empathise to such an extent that I can stand on his shadow until his experience becomes mine. Or it may be that I can only sympathise, but again to such an extent that I find myself standing near that other, seeing, with my eyes, a part of what he sees with his, while I am seen by no one, like a ghost in daylight. Then I am the eternal observer who cries out for the passion, the tragedy, the pain even, that belongs to someone else, someone whom I feel is more alive than I, someone I so deeply envy.

Whichever of these holds true, the man who experiences tragedy must feel tragedy, and feel it with all his blood and soul. Then let him philosophise; let him paint his pictures, sing his songs, write his messages of hope or despair and throw them into the ocean.

Then let him create.

So what is philosophy? That which deals with issues so fundamental that it has to be part of our common reality —the world in which people really do sleep, eat, shit and die. There is so much vain philosophising and so little that makes you cry out when you encounter it, "Ah, here is a new thing!" Philosophy must be precise and discriminating and humble as a well-written poem, accurate as anything in Ecclesiastes, but braver than Ecclesiastes because it does not give up hope. There is no virtue in hopelessness, unless you are the author of Ecclesiastes, in which case your despair becomes an affirmation simply because it is so strong, and its words so powerful. Chesterton I think it was who said

that pessimism and expensive cigars are things that only rich people can afford. If you are rich, then be like the author of Ecclesiastes and cast yourself in black marble, and if you are poor, be like Epictetus, and perhaps people will still be reading your Moral Discourses in two thousand years.

Or in two years.

Or at least you can hope it—if the collection of accidents that men miscall destiny falls in your favour.

Yet the hunger for ultimate knowledge, stuff of heroes though it be, always has a streak of paradox in it. Do I really want to discover the meaning of life? What would I devote the rest of my life to discovering? Do I really want the key of the cosmos in my hand? What would I do after I had turned it? I am sure there were many times when Columbus wished his new world had remained an unattainable dream. I am sure that many of those whom he blessed with discovery wished it too.

Perhaps we are just fated to love the act of desiring more than that which we desire.

If to doubt is to be wise, I must be very wise because I doubt so much.

I don't think I have truly been a Christian since I was a child, though I have always longed to be one of the faith. It is the map of the Garden of Eden, and how nice it would be to find my way back and encounter no fiery angels with drawn swords at the door. But I am just a dreamer of dreams, wishing to walk after the Lord, yet fearing that there is no Lord to walk after, and not strong enough, brave enough, or stupid enough to rejoice wholeheartedly in the freedom which this gives me. For I keep thinking, When things are wretched, what can hold us up? When everything is falling, what can prevent us falling? The world is in a new

decadence, and therefore it is due a new revelation; and when the blood-dimmed tide is loosed {again} and the ceremony of innocence is drowned {again}, the mere educated commonplace will not be enough to sustain us. And the rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem will trample that commonplace into the ground.

The teaching of Jesus is that all actions should be based upon the love of goodness; but then who is the Antichrist whose teaching is not based upon that principle? From Greece to China, among shamans and juju men, universally is preached the love of goodness. Then why is the world so blood-stained?

Perhaps the merest hint of the transcendental elevates an ethical teaching into an orthodoxy that demands to be enforced with violence. Claim that you have unique understanding of the workings of the universe, claim that you are in touch with the Absolute, the Moral Order, the Will of God, the Spirit of History, the Force of Destiny, or any other abstraction whose initial letter must be printed as a Capital, and you have created the first commandment of totalitarian intellection:— "I am on the side of God, and therefore I understand God, and therefore I am God." The second follows as the night the day:— "They are not on the side of God, and therefore they are base, and therefore they are Satan." The justification of repression, imprisonment, torture and death follows with the tiresome predictability of a dripping tap.

All the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels could probably be said within forty minutes, in thirty-seven of which a servant of men describes the path to goodness and happiness, in terms which could just as readily have been uttered by Epicurus in his garden or Zeno in the stoa, Siddhartha or Confucius. It is upon the remaining three

minutes that the huge edifice of two thousand years of intolerance, inhumanity and butchery has been built.

How could the gentle teaching of the Nazarene lend itself to such perversion? Simply by claiming the sole path to salvation, in the name of God, and therefore consigning all others to the paths of darkness where the dead are, with the devils, monsters, murderers and the jaws of hell. These three minutes constitute the teachings of a master, and masters are jealous as gods are.

Philosophy, like wealth, is a good servant and a bad master. As a servant, it is the light which guides you through the darkness. As a master, it is the flame at which you are burned, and which enables you to burn others with a good conscience.

Jesus was the cleanest of men. There is nothing about him which seems false, tawdry, or squalid. Could he possibly have claimed to be the one and only way to the truth, or did some subsequent commentator claim that for him? Is that why Christianity triumphed, and the teachings of Epicurus slid into the shadowland—because, in these three masterful minutes, the foundations of an imperial structure were laid?

The Greeks with their many gods did not use religion as a persecutor's lash, and their theologians were all poets. How truly civilised that seems.

Truth changes in order that it may remain the same. It shines like the stars, but its light is forever altering. Perhaps I am just failing to see a truth which would be apparent to another man.

Tick tock, tick tock.

Yet how beautiful it would be to be clothed with immortality as with a garment, and enter the golden garden where God's children walk in glory! To know the God of the

worlds, the friend of all, the source in whose arms we can rest and attain redemption in the time of peace. To be where the altars and the groves by the green trees upon the high hills are. To know the still waters and the verdant pastures and the paths of righteousness. Every moment in life should be the beginning of something great. So may the moment which ends my life be the beginning of something radiant. May the setting of that sun be the door to a world of joy!

I don't believe this any more, and yet these words comfort me, because words have in them a sense of possibility in the face of all odds. They tell me that it may be so. They tell me that everything is in the hands of God—even my atheism.

Perhaps there is a heaven, created by those who did good on earth. Perhaps the bad created a hell for themselves when they tormented others. Perhaps there is a secret tabernacle after all.

And so I have prayed, because in my heart I believed that if I prayed there must be some source there for me to pray to.

Once, in Bosnia, we drove through a valley where wrecks were, and dead bodies, and sniper shots echoed among the hills, and I prayed with all sincerity. I repeated the words of the Twenty-third Psalm, and when I came to the line "yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil" I felt a shadow lift from me and my hope took wings. I thought how many times men had been in desperate positions such as this, and these very words had given them comfort. And I felt better; the thought of these brave unknown men who had been my brothers made me powerful, made me feel that I knew them, and I believe that there on that day I glowed with that knowledge. And my companions were warmed by that glow,

and together we got through that valley, and no sniper took our lives.

My companions looked at me that day as though I were an inspired one. They assumed that I belonged to some devoted sect who prayed constantly and believed in the New Jerusalem; and I let them believe this because my heart rejoiced. But my head said: No. It was the words which had inspired me, and the feeling of companionship. That was the glow. God was a great absence.

Ah, to die with a song on your lips! ...

The Norman poet tells how Taillefer the minstrel sang of the songs of Roland and Oliver, of their great king and the battle in the pass of Roncesvalles to the host assembled before Senlac Hill. Then he asked a favour of Duke William, and, when the Duke asked what it was, answered that he might die first, striking the first blow in the battle. And Duke William granted his request, and Taillefer put spurs to his horse and charged the enemy line and foremost fighting fell, with that song on his lips and the broad promise of Heaven soaring over his head. And so he entered eternity, and became one with those about whom he had sung. As the saying has it, he died young and made a beautiful corpse.

I saw corpses in Bosnia, but I have never seen a beautiful corpse. Those two words do not sit well together.

I spend a lot of time thinking about the phantom woman whose love I don't have, and whose baby will never be. She was a corpse. She was not beautiful when she was a corpse, not beautiful at all.

Yet there are times when the living think that death is sweet, when it seems preferable to the life that lies before. And what does Jesus say about the sin committed in the heart?

This is how I came to wish my father dead:-

Our endless arguments had come to an end at last; our rages had blown themselves out. We looked at each other with bafflement, embarrassment, and disgust. Then he went to bed at night, and had a heart attack. My mother came to wake me. He was rolling from side to side among the sheets, whining, and waving his hands feebly in front of his chest. He looked ridiculous, that is what I thought, ridiculous. Neither of us knew what was wrong with him. We phoned for an ambulance and waited. His performance was not manly. Had he screamed, it would have been; had he tossed violently, had he made angry gestures, we could have believed that something wrong and terrible was happening. As it was, we looked at him uneasily, disbelieving this weak display of petulance, ready—almost—to laugh.

In hospital I hardly recognised him. Instead of the familiar angry face, there were just two huge startled eyes that wandered about and didn't seem to focus on anything. When he talked it was the talk of a shell-shocked man. He had urgent things to say, but could say none of them. He knew who we were, but looked at us as though we were strangers whose presence was inexplicable. He knew where he was, but seemed surprised to find himself there. "What?" he seemed to be saying, "am I still here? Am I still alive?"

The doctors, these dedicated professionals in their white coats, had yanked him back from death with a hole in his heart the size of half-a-crown. That's bigger than a fifty pence piece in today's currency. I suppose God had laid out the welcome mat at the front door, my father had gone down the corridor into the bright light, spectral figures had stood there to greet him, and—suddenly a stethoscope is thrown over his head like a lasso, and he is hauled back into his crumbling, painful body lying on a hospital bed, and

—that's it, chum—you are condemned to live for another twelve years; twelve years that, for him, would be nothing but humiliation and indignity, disappointment and self-loathing.

The green linoleum began to shimmer because water was covering it. It was me crying, of course. In my seventeenth year I was crying for my father, but he was not there to see it. My mother sat silent, and stared at the door, and did not notice.

Actually, she was good at not noticing. I remember the eve of my first ever day at Primary School, how she didn't notice that I was terrified. I thought I was going to be given away; I thought they were going to abandon me; I thought that I was never going to see my parents again. I don't know why I thought that. I have a notion that I had overheard my father talking about the benefits of a socialist upbringing in a state-run children's home, which he attributed to the Soviet Union, the heavenly place that he attributed all good things to. Maybe that was it; but I do remember sitting cross-legged on the carpet like a very small and frightened Red Indian trying to bribe my mother to keep me with crockery from the sideboard. Of course, I thought it was a treasure chest which I had discovered, and she didn't know was there. Please, I said, if I give you this cup, this saucer, this salt cellar, will you please keep me, please? She made vague tut-tutting noises, and clicked her knitting needles, and puffed her cigarette, and read the detective novel that was open in her lap. And my father? He was snoring with the evening newspaper tipped over his nose. There is an art in not noticing someone who is willing to die for you.

There, in the hospital, my mother still looked rather beautiful. I could see her profile as she sat staring at the door. So could everyone else in the corridor. Her knees

were together, and she was kneading the skirt in her lap, and biting her lower lip. The way she was rucking her skirt up, you could see quite a lot of her legs, which were long and pretty. I could see quite a lot of her legs. So could everyone else in the corridor. Occasionally she would run her fingers across the back of her neck and toss her hair out over her shoulders, and her breasts bounced. She kept staring at the door.

We went home. Silence, cool and dark. It was long past midnight, and all the neighbours were in bed. My mother sat down. I put on the kettle. She took off her shoes, those pointed shoes with high heels that women wore then. I looked at her. She looked at me. We could think of nothing to say.

My father's life still hung, "in the balance," they said, "by a thread," they said. He lay there in that bed that smelled of sweat, in that noisy ward that smelled of laundry and boiled food, and his eyes were huge, and pleading, and so afraid.

And several times I crossed the road from Edinburgh's Royal Infirmary, where he was, and went into Greyfriars' kirkyard, where there are old stones that are mossy and covered with skulls, and prayed, "Please God, let this cup pass from him. Let my father die." But God did not hear. Twelve more years he lived, and his end was miserable. Twelve years later we heard, when the phone rang first thing in the morning to say that he had been dead for two hours. My mother cried a little, though she had hated him for years. I cried too when I was alone, but the news was merely unpleasant, not tragic, and I set out to trudge up the ramp of funeral arrangements, and forms, and lawyers, and registrars. No one knew how I felt: no one noticed.

I wish he had died on a day when I truly loved him,

without condition. I wish he had died on a day when it would have broken my heart. That is how I wish my father had died.

I wish a sniper had shot me in Bosnia, on a day when I was doing something worthwhile. That is how I wish I had died.

Though there were no heaven, I would still dream of heaven. It is the darkness between the stars where the gods are. It is the eternal thought in the minds of all men.

As it is, who will answer when I knock on the moonlit door? What will the fire at the end of time do to me? What will I be burned into?

If I could find the plain path which leads to the House of the Lord, if I could hear that voice of glory, that voice which thunders full of majesty over the surface of the waters, then I could leave the land of the living without fear, knowing that my death would be a sacrifice of joy.

Lucretius sees a wonderful symmetry: the past state of non-existence before conception, and the future state of non-existence after death. Why should one be more fearful than the other? Because the one is to be anticipated, I suppose, while the other is in a past which my mind did not receive, and Forever must be such a big house, and I will be so lost and lonely in it. Yet I will have crossed Lethe, the stream of time, the river of forgetfulness, and if I am, as a traveller in an undiscovered country, I will no more remember what I was, here, in this world, now, than I remember now what I might have been in some previous past existence.

So as far as I am a creature of my own memory, I will enter Nothing.

I shall not live in any future generation. Why is that so

hard to bear? Because death is right in front of me. When I expected to die of old age I could have borne it with utter equanimity. When death was a future event—a distant future event—it stirred no fears. But now?

Where is my courage? Did I never have any? Maybe from the start I was just a moon bearing reflected light, who underneath that surface of stolen warmth was in reality cold, arid, airless, and orbiting in eternal night? Not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; perhaps just the Fool.

It is so hard to conceive of a time without me—foolish me. I sit there on the garden seat outside my door staring at the evening light. How can I explain the ages which passed before I was born? Reincarnation? Was I there when Moses crossed the Red Sea?—Did I push a plough under a burning sun, work the oar of a longship, or carry a pike for Cromwell? Metaphysics—there were no past ages; they all exist in an eternal present because time is simultaneous? Eternal recurrence, perhaps? And the ages to come {if there are ages to come} after I am dead? Why then there is Heaven, and I shall look down upon it all, while Heine's shopkeeper calmly puffs his pipe.

I have heard the chimes at midnight. I have dreamed the dream of Narcissus. I don't believe any of it.

Fear is the interpreter of every rumour, and language tricks us. So it may well be that the concept of an afterlife is ultimately just a trick of language, each word seducing the critical mind into a state of calm acceptance. For it is impossible to say "I will not be" without implying that "not being" is a state of existence, and that "I am not" is merely the dark brother of "I am." Strip away language, and underneath my mind is shuddering with the anticipation that what I am going to do to it is awful, irreversible, and the end of everything—an end so profound no words can

describe it.

I think of those words which I loved so much. I think of my song, which is every word I have ever written, and every word I have ever wanted to write. When I am dead I will not sing; when I am dead I will forget the joy of words; when I am dead my bridge will fall into ruins. When I was a little boy I would build a castle of sand or cardboard, wood or paper, fashion it lovingly for an hour or more and deck its battlements with flags, all for the pleasure of smashing it down in a few seconds of destruction—and isn't that what is going to happen to me, so much work destroyed in seconds?

And where will I be, being dead? What does this word mean? Perhaps in Heaven, perhaps I will wander the corridors of glory, perhaps some Valhalla, Nirvana or Elysium awaits me; but I suspect that I will be nowhere, that all these words are illusions, that language traps us into a belief in immortality which we have no reason for accepting except that language, those comforting, loving words, makes us do so. For if I say that I will be dead, then dead is the place that I will be. If I say that I will be nowhere, then nowhere is my house and no place the street on which it stands.

I remember being with my parents in a field of blue and yellow flowers when it was high summer and the sun was shining and I was very young. Many years later I remember being with Svetlana and Ludmilla in another field of blue and yellow flowers, and Ludmilla held our hands, and we swung her in the air, and she was laughing, and oh she was so very young. I remember finding Svetlana and Ludmilla dead in that field, and everyone else dead also. I remember how sticky the blood was, and the smell of burnt clothing and scorched flesh, and the flies that clustered there. I remember.

And have they gone into nothing? Is it all at an end for them? Oh, how I want to believe that they are—somewhere—living on. How I want the promise of Jesus to be true!

We may claim to know life, but what can we know of death? We who make it are like it, for we made it like ourselves. As we made God our king in the sky, so we made Death our life eternal. And shall we live for ever, being dead? The Psalmist says that the dead praise not the Lord, for there is no praise from those who have gone down into silence.

Perhaps I have been born many times, but I have no memory of them, none at all. Perhaps the body is the garment of the soul, as clothes are the garment of the body, but I have no reason to think that this is true. Perhaps this is all a dream. No god drives my chariot. Krishna does not stand beside me with the reins in his hand. There is no one to whom I can turn and ask why these things are so. I answer myself by saying, You are dreaming. You recognise the steps. This is the bridge you have crossed so many times. But this no more means that you have before, than your book can write itself, your painting paint itself, your music compose itself. Without you, you are not, and your dreams will cease in that same moment. Do I have any reason to think otherwise? None.

I once saw a man's brains lying on the ground, and I wondered, which bit of this mess first loved a woman? —which found most joy in life?—which bit sang in the morning, and which watched the sun going down? I saw his brains lying there beside his broken head—grey, they were, soft and crumbly—and it all seemed so foolish. What did it matter, the pattern and colours of the flag which fluttered overhead? What did it matter, who owned the railways, or

whether elections were contested or not? I sat and looked at his dead, ruined body, and thought that nothing mattered more than this—that he was dead, gone for evermore, and all the rest was mere nonsense.

There is a great fear which I will call the Nothing. It manifests itself as loneliness, and loneliness is time's consequence, the great enemy, the great chasm into which we all seem fated to fall. Loneliness is defeat, failure, futility, the fact of extinction.

I have spent my life walking alone, like Ignorance, who came so near to heaven and did not know it. How sweet to believe that beside me march the spirits of my comrades, that over me hover the golden wings of many angels, that the saints are by my right hand, that heroes and martyrs surround me, protect me, sustain me and glorify me in all my tribulations, and will surely take me to my longed-for home. To know that is to know that I am a witness, to know that I also testify to the truth which they share and testified to before me, to know that I am a part of the whole which is the radiance of the king, and that when my breath leaves my body it will not have been for nothing, it will ascend to that crown which is forever, and I will march in spirit with my earthly comrade, I will be with the heroes and martyrs, I too will be one atom of that which is eternal. And I will not be alone, and I will not be forgotten, and all will be well with me on that day and forevermore.

What is this but the fear of death? And what is death but the knowledge that I shall no longer exist in the mind of the world? That is why I write. That is why I invoke the muses who are the daughters of memory. I want to record all the things that exist in my mind so they will be there for someone else when my mind has ceased to exist. But that is

not altruism—at least, not solely. If someone knows I was here, if someone knows what was in my mind, if there is someone to share with me the joy of living, then that someone is my triumph over death; that someone will remember me and think how good it would have been to have known me when I was alive, how enriching. And for that someone, I will be a companion on the journey; I will be there with the presences who surround him, as he marches on; and so my life will not utterly have been without purpose.

What a pathetic ambition!

Lord, let your servant depart in peace. Let there be a future, even of damnation. Let there be anything, but Nothing.

For Death is not the fulfilment of any dream. I do not see my drugged, suffocated, electrocuted body floating in bath water as the door to glory. I do not believe that my soul will fly out of its mortal cage in an epiphany of joy. I believe that, for this man, Death will be the end of everything, the destroyer of all worlds, and that only hope, and the language of hope, tricks us into thinking otherwise. Think how impossible it is to express the concept of Nothing, since Nothing itself seems to be the presence of something, however dread.

And yet it is my ambition. If Jesus offers us triumph over death, it is that we shall live on in the mind of God, in the place that is contentment. But not believing in the God of the Gospels, the place of my contentment can only be the memory of my fellow men.

This is what I want, but does my wanting it make it so?

No.

To be in eternity, with Edward Gibbon and Horatius of the bridge. To find the day that lasts a thousand ages; the

night that is immeasurable; the world that is beyond time. To voyage from death to birth, and from birth to death again, like a wanderer within the rings of Saturn, or to find the pure light which shines beyond all human thought.

It is no use. My thoughts are human; they cannot transcend themselves. My words are finite; they cannot embrace infinity. Only God can do that, but a God conjured into existence as a logical requirement is a God spread thin, and in that thin God I can find neither peace nor salvation.

When I knelt weeping in that field, and there were dead bodies all around, and their blood was on my hands, and I smelled their putrefaction, the God of logical propositions was not there. Only the waters of life could wash my hands clean, and I could not find the place from whence they flowed.

What then is the fear of death but the fear of the truth that there is no one marching there beside me, no kindly spirit hovering over me, no one ready to embrace me, and that when I die the Nothing will eat me whole, and no one will know, and no one will care, and the world will go on without me as though I never existed?

I feel truly sorry as I realise this. Truly sad. And this is my self-pity. Wild things are supposed never to feel self-pity. I must be a very tame thing, therefore, because I feel so much of it. It makes me hesitate, even now. Stop! it cries. Haven't I something to give to the world? Some little thing in return for the precious gift of life? I might not know what song the sirens sang, but I do know who asked the question. Let me build my small shrine in your vast temple, dear Life!

I should like to live forever, but I won't. I should like to be remembered forever, but I won't be. When I come to die it will be in a corner, in the cold, with no one to notice.

When I am blotted out I shall become one with the

mighty men who were before Agamemnon sailed to Troy; one with all those who died in vain, in ignorance, in a corner that no one remarked upon; one with the statistics that no one credits with warm blood or a feeling heart. And, no, I shall not become the stuff of other men's lives, like the heroes of Plutarch, for who is to know that I was ever here?

It happened one night that, as I sat reading, the words —they were in Burton—suddenly came to me: "Where I am, death is not; where death is, I am not." Suddenly my brain ceased to feel as though there were clouds rushing through it, and something inside me sighed and was still.

Yet this was no blinding light, it was not the Voice, the bush did not burn. It was merely a glass of cold water on a warm day, a seat after much hard labour, a soft bed in which to lie. I felt neither triumph, joy, nor elation; just the possibility of peace.

For if immortality is the promise, the password, the golden key; which gives Christians, and all who believe in heaven, the final victory over death, atheists too have their moment of hope; and to this hope I cling. It is the hope of the hopeless, and as much a testament of faith as the words of any evangelist who has witnessed the traffic on Jacob's ladder. Is there, can there be, any particle of time in which I and death shall coexist and find ourselves walking hand in hand in the shadow of the yew trees? I think not. I hope not—for if there is, then I shall have a very rude awakening indeed. I will trust in God's mercy to the extent of believing that He knows my reasons for not believing in Him are good ones.

I will die, and see the world's blue devils scatter, screaming, before me. I will die accepting that there is not even Nothing, there is not. And I must not think of myself

being in death, but rather not being at all.

Oh God, even now I am flattering myself with words! I am like a tribesman who chants to give himself courage as he circles, stamping, round the fire.

I still wish to live in people's memory; I would like so much for my poor, forlorn books to be read. Why, I wonder? I will not be there to hear readers' praises or their condemnations either. No; it is my weakness. I would just like someone to think that I did not waste the world's oxygen for fifty-two years.

Perhaps I should bury everything I have written, everything I once had such hopes for, in a hole in the garden; perhaps in a picturesque chest under the floorboards, at the bottom of an old well, or in a high secret place known only to bats and the whisperings of the east wind.

Where I am, death is not; where death is, I am not.

My Evangel. My Excelsior.

So I must not think of myself being in death, but rather not being at all.

But ...

But to think of myself not being is still to think of myself.

How can I exist amid such illusions?

Only through faith that these illusions are true, because to have faith is to trust, and to trust is to walk forward, even when doubt is in your mind.

But does illusion become truth simply because I have faith in it?

No.

Then what?

Then I will be comforted and feel less alone.

And if I refuse comfort and know that I am alone?

Then the Nothing will come.

So I will not be alone then, if the Nothing is there.

No, the Nothing will take even that. The Nothing is the never-born and the forever-dead. The vales of tears surround it, the paths of evil, and the planes of torment. In swallowing me, it will swallow itself. A Nothing world where Nothing is, was, and will be, where time is Nothing and space is Nothing, where atoms are Nothing and language is Nothing, and no words describe it.

Even the ones I have just used.

How can I step outside my own knowledge? How can I be without knowing that I am? And how can I know that my knowledge corresponds to that which is?

I must have faith that there is that which is and my knowledge corresponds to it. If I look at a wall, what do I see? My image of a wall. Do I know that the wall is there? No. Suppose I walked into it, would I know that the wall was there? No. Perhaps I would not even know that I had ceased to move. What would I know about the wall? I would know that I had an image, and that the image told me certain things, perhaps many things, profound things, beautiful things, frightening things. But what would I know about the wall? Nothing. Even that it was there? No.

Tick tock, goes the clock. Tick tock.

I will crown myself with willow and die upon my birthday, and where I did begin, there shall I end; my life will have run his compass.

And no one will be disappointed in me any more—not even I.

Yet I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

But they never sang to me.

Five
Five Weeks

For the last twenty-three years of her life I cared for my mother, Margaret; from the overdose that she took in 1977 until her death, demented, in 2001. Twenty-three years of affliction in which her life was blighted. I looked at all our books, full of some of the most golden words which have ever been written, and none of them could help her, neither the poets nor the philosophers, the essayists nor the historians. My father had been so proud of his books. They meant nothing to her.

She drank, she smoked, she made obscene phonecalls; she sank into insanity as into a quicksand, struggling—and her struggles drew her in deeper.

I loved her, though there were times I wanted to hit her.

I loved her, though I never said it {why?}, and her last years were a prolonged miserere. Those years when she could do little except complain and weep. Those years.

I fumbled, tried and failed, and she called me useless, many times.

In those dismal years I read fine books, and wrote poor ones. I was as full of contradictory wants as any Madame Bovary or Tartarin. I wanted to die, and I wanted to live in gaiety. I wanted to know adventure, but I longed for a quiet life and a comfortable fireside. I wanted to serve the human race, but I liked my own company above all else. I wanted companions, but I was never so happy as when I was

alone—with my cat.

So I thought, as I endured her abuse, her rages, and put her empty whisky bottles into the bucket. I have written about this in a novel called 'Mary Balfour's Apple Tree'. Of course, it isn't very good—nothing I have ever written has been—but it is there, anyway.

She spat poison into my ears, the mother who had once been so pretty, of whom I had once been so proud; vicious, sickening poison. After she had gone to bed, I captured an hour or two in which I could read—books full of decency. I sat and read until my breathing had returned to normal, and my head ceased to ache, and the pain in my heart had gone away.

We always had a cat. I talked to the cat. I wished there was someone else to talk to, but there wasn't.

Time and again I peeped out of my tiny window into the grim waste of life, unlit by any perceptible purpose, and drew back in dismay. I saw the role that I was playing—the eccentric, pathetic, unmarried man who lives with his demanding mother—and how different it was from all the parts I had cast for myself. Was this ageing eccentric the discoverer who had crossed deserts to reach the court of Kublai Khan? Was this pathetic man the excited boy who had worn the uniform of John Wayne's cavalry?

Throughout those wretched years, while I nursed Margaret, news came from abroad of many disasters, famines and wars. These I approached in my imagination from all sorts of different directions. I would see myself on a battlefield, like some hero in a film. I would see myself saving lives like some latter-day Livingstone or Schweitzer. Surely, I thought, there was work for a willing pair of hands? Surely, I did have the potential to be brave?

I had many fancies, selfish and generous too, but none

of them came near to the desolation of what actually occurred.

Once upon a time there was a country so far north it was even further north than the North Pole. That's where all the children went whom grown-ups didn't want to notice any more. It was easy not to notice people in that country because it was so cold the frost covered your eyes and icicles kept your mouth shut, and you could not say "I love you."

I wrote that in a children's story that got rejected many times, but the country I eventually found was in the south. It was in that mysterious area known as The Balkans, where Byron died, the Prisoner of Zenda lived, mountain bandits wore bright sashes round their waists stuck full of long daggers, and Ruritania existed on some alternate map. This was the world of gypsy bands and the Danube Maiden, Timar and the Iron Gates. It was a place of enchanting names: Transylvania—the land beyond the forest: Albania —the land of the eagles: Montenegro—the land of the black mountain.

There were names that took me back to the history books I had read long ago: Macedonia—home of Philip the king, his son, Alexander, the divine, leader supreme of the Hellenes, and the all-conquering phalanx. There were names that sounded as though they had stepped out of the Arabian Nights: the Banat of Temesvar, the Banat of Novi Bazar, the Field of the Ravens, places where surely Sinbad had once ventured. And some whose faintly sinister sound was wrapped in sepia: Herzegovina, Bosnia, Sarajevo—the place where a pistol fired at a man in a plumed hat in an open carriage had echoed louder, and longer, and with more fatal consequences, than the atom bomb.

For 1991 had come and Communist Yugoslavia was

crumbling. The television showed appalling sights, in a country which was not so very far away. I had read Fitzroy Maclean's 'Eastern Approaches'. I had read Evelyn Waugh. I had read 'Black Lamb And Grey Falcon'. I had even read 'Force 10 From Navarone'. And here it was, on the familiar screen, looking like a sight seen through the roof of hell.

When I saw those pictures I thought, I must go. Now. Not tomorrow, not in dreams, but in reality. Now.

I knew a man who had a van. He had also been watching the television. We phoned each other that same night.

I could leave Margaret, at least for a while. Soon, I knew, I would not be able to.

We packed the van with foodstuffs, and went.

Was this me? I am no adventurer. I want a quiet life, in a quiet house, with no one but my cat for company, music playing softly, plenty of good books, a comfortable chair, a warm bed—especially on a cold night—a television on which I can watch classic films, and pictures on the wall showing meadows, and forests, and houses with snow on their roofs. Yes, I would far rather sit in an armchair and read about the Retreat from Moscow, and limit my experience of the freezing cold to knocking the ice out of the birdbath on a winter's morning. What was I doing driving across Europe in a battered van?

All my life I have longed to be a hero, the fellow who rides the whirlwind and lives the storm; the sort that glows down at you from the screen, that Plutarch wrote about and minstrels praised, the sort {I tried to persuade myself} that my father had been, and my grandfather before him. Anything other than what I was—a shy, timid boy with round shoulders and poor eyesight, who became a rather

timid man. Some day I would do it! But the day was always in the future. Tomorrow would be my dancing day—never today. And now that today had arrived I greeted it with a certain panic, a certain excitement, and a certain disbelief.

{And it is odd, because that is how I view my approaching suicide. It too shall be my dancing day. And I look forward to it, and yet I cannot believe that it is going to come, and that this useless creature shall finally succeed in doing something after all.}

So I went forth into the world, I won't say like Don Quixote, but like Mr Polly I suppose, determined to do what I could to help those in need, believing that, however little it was, it would still be worth doing. Oh, I thought I was so well prepared, but I could not have been less prepared had I just run out the door like Bilbo in my shirt sleeves with no handkerchief in my pocket, heading towards a land where trolls and dragons lived.

There were many doing this job, and doing it much better, but I hugged the thought of it, and believed that at last I was one with the Samaritans, and bearing witness for my fellow creatures. That thought prevented me from running away. If I had been Bob Hope I could have mined my cowardice for a succession of amusing quips. As it was ...

Bosnia ...

Recalling that bloody place my memory has nothing but ashes to stir up, nothing but disasters to recount, and gravestones to write on.

Yet it was a beautiful land, but laid waste by the fanatical cruelty of men. It could have been Mount Zion, the holy mountain, the joy of the earth, a city not forsaken. It could have encompassed the nations. As it was, it was the place of skulls, the desecration of humanity. The blood of

the lamb.

What I saw there made me wish with all my heart that I was back in my own quiet home, dreaming. When I settled to sleep in the back of the van, or perhaps in the open under the stars, I wished so much that I was in my own soft bed. The war was an abomination, and sometimes I find it hard to separate my memory of it from what I have read or seen in films. It hums in my ears even now: it flickers behind my eyes and is not still.

I was only once under artillery fire, and just for minutes, but what a harrowing noise it was, and how terrified I was of it. My father endured so much worse, and for so much longer, at Alamein and Salerno, and my grandfather heard the guns of the great attacks on the Western Front. Am I so feeble compared to those who went before me? So it would appear.

Where was the poetry, where was the dream? The chapel in the woods is a place of dead flies, and the Master who watches in silence from the vast spaces of heaven can do nothing in the face of this horror.

There comes a time when you forget the goodness of humanity. You forget those happy summer mornings, and soft white clouds floating in the mild blue sky. You forget the faith of the saints, hurrah for Karamazov, and the wind on the heath. You forget your mother's face, the touch of her hands and the smell of her cooking. You forget your father's voice, your children's laughter, your wife's warm body, because there in front of you is something so hideous you realise that Jesus died in vain, and love is nothing but a joke.

Bat wings blot out the sun, colour drains from the world, and there on that cold pale plain stands the Nothing.

Then you think, it is not Jesus but Mani who is the crucified One. He got it right. He knew there is a war in the cosmos. He believed that this world was built upon the pits of hell, and men shared the tastes of devils. If there were a loving God, would He let the Nothing exist? What moral order can cope with it, what psychology explain it? I see the mouths that open and shut and open; I hear them talk and talk; and behind them all I see the Nothing, I see that which makes nonsense of everything they say, I see that in which I do not want to believe.

And they fall backwards into it—their legs kick, their arms flail, their mouths gape, and they are gone. And I stand and look at the Nothing, and it comes closer, and closer, and closer ...

Ah, there was a woman, the inevitable woman ...

Hers was indeed the face that launched a thousand ships, but I can't remember now what she looked like. I thought I would remember every pore of her body forever, but I have forgotten.

How often in the days of my loneliness I wondered if there might be a village in a valley, where there might be a street, where there might be a house, where there might be a home with people whose hearts were warm, and whose faces smiled, and whose arms would stretch out to greet me as I stepped tentatively through the door. There would be a fire, there would be a garden, there would be laughter and true companionship. There would be love. Not here, of course, not in Scotland, but walking in a dark land, perhaps, under strange moons.

There was. Yes, truly. Once in my life I found all this. There was a valley that the war had not ravaged. There was a village that the nationalists had not burned. A young

widow lived there with her daughter. Svetlana was her name, and Ludmilla was her daughter. Her face was round, and her cheeks were red, and I thought that she was very beautiful.

She had considerable English, and I six words of Serb, so in her country we talked my language as though I were a sahib. How foolish that made me feel, and how she laughed at my embarrassment.

I am not a desirable man; women have never cared for me. I have got used to my solitude, like an animal to his cage.

I am diffident and speak badly, but, perhaps because she was translating my words into her own Slavonic, I did not seem to bore her. In fact, she seemed to find my company acceptable—pleasant even—as no woman in this cold land has ever done.

And for one night ...

I am auto-erotic, a term for which there are so many pejorative synonyms. I have learned through long years to have sex with myself and not with other people, because I have never been attractive to other people, and unsatisfied longing for other people's love has given me so much misery; but that one night I felt that at last I had become a hero, at last I was on the road to the stars, at last I was all the men I have ever envied, because I had done what men are brought into the world to do; and if an earthquake had swallowed the house that night, I don't think I would have noticed. And maybe she did not find me entirely disagreeable either.

Her breasts were so beautiful I could have died happily with my face between them.

I wish I could write poems about it, I wish I could sing, because I do wonder on what distant Bethlehem Earth was

shining like a star that night.

I wish ...

And there came a day when I came back to that village in the valley, and found Svetlana, and Ludmilla, and all their friends in a field of blue and yellow flowers.

Blood is so sticky.

This page is not to be written.

It was a beautiful day; the sun was shining merrily. It was the sort of day which made you think that fortune had a gentle smile, and that even in war she was smiling on these people between the Drina and Sava rivers, between the High Planina and the Adriatic sea.

And I found them there. In that field.

No, this page is not to be written.

The heavens and earth should have trembled at that sight. But nothing happened, there were no portents, the day was calm, and time flew away.

They lay there; they just lay there.

I have tried so many times to describe it, that sight which made me so sad I could not have been sadder. I have tried. I remember I cried then, but I did not see that beautiful promise pitched between Heaven and Earth, and I did not see these butchered people pass upon Jacob's Ladder into the future. All that rose to heaven was the stink of the dead, and the flies that fed on them.

And I saw then that when the dead are dead they are

gone, and not just removed to some room in the hereafter from which they will jump out to welcome us with cries of joy. They are gone for ever, and I will not pretend otherwise, because it would be a lie, and I will not lie, even if I can see no other way to prevent evil from triumphing.

Oh, Lamb of God, where were you on that day of wrath?

I must stand firm against the gates of hell. I must.

Men do not kill; machines kill, and men kill when they are part of a machine. And a man may kill in his war against the machine, the machine having made him what he is.

That is when you go through the gates.

Beyond the gates of hell the enemy is not human. The enemy are vermin, bugs, germs; creatures so dehumanised that they merit no human consideration—and killing them becomes easy and dutiful.

How thin the ice is. How dark and cold what lies beneath.

I glimpsed what lies beneath.

I must stand firm.

The killers had been in her house. I could smell their cigarette smoke. When I came out I could still smell their smoke in my clothes and on my skin.

Why didn't I die then? It would have been better, it would have been more apt. The killers had gone, their work had been done, I heard the noises of war in the distance, beyond the trees.

Perhaps I should have rid the world of myself that day. The little I had done had been for nothing. The much I had not done howled at me. I had indeed made my mark on the world, but it was on the headstones of those whom I had failed to save.

These things leave their fingerprints on you. You want

the atrocity again, just so you can contemplate it again, and be shocked by it again, because you could not believe it the first time. Its hand has gone inside your head, taken hold of your brain, and given it a clammy squeeze—its hand with those long, cold fingers and ragged, dirty nails. Its mark is on you now, forever.

You exaggerate, although there is no need to exaggerate. Ten corpses become fifty, and fifty a hundred. The blood laps around you in seas, and mangled limbs float there.

My head is inhabited by corpses. I see them in broad daylight. They hold out their hands to me. I see their faces, their poor faces, bewildered by the terrible things that happened to them. I managed so little, so pitifully little, and their eyes follow me. We walk together through that awful arena, night after night. There is not a day when I don't see the storm of ruin that engulfed them all.

And the ones who did it ...?

I would like to believe that these crimes were committed by Satanic beings from some fiery world beyond, but what I believe is so much worse. Men did this—men! I was no Tam O'Shanter. I was not looking upon the work of witches, or ghouls, or devils frolicking in the dark. Men, and only men, did this in broad daylight; men who work in offices, men who have families, men who sit at home watching football on television with cans of beer propped on their bellies {because I am sure they have bulging bellies}. Do they remember what she looked like? Do they think of her at all? Are they proud of what they did?

Sometimes I wonder—did I see it? Was it really there? And sometimes I realise that I have made mistakes: I have said that a journey took one day which actually took two, or two days when it took one, and this has made me sound like

an impostor. All I can say is that my memory is rusty with blood.

Oh, dear ones, soon I will join you, whether in oblivion, in the abysses of interstellar space, or in the memories of a few, a very few, who one day will be oblivious in turn.

A field of blue and yellow flowers.

I looked at those Medusa sights and said, I will forget seeing them, otherwise I will go mad. I heard those dreadful sounds and said, I will forget what I heard. I knew how cruel and wrong all this was and said, I don't know cruelty and wrong, I cannot imagine how cruel it is, I must not judge, I will forget this too. But I could not, would not, and did not.

They have haunted me ever since, and I think they have killed my faith and my hope. They are with me in the morning, and throughout the day, and when night comes they are still there, and when I lie in bed they lie beside me, a cold succubus with wide-open eyes, and they breathe into my mouth, and chill my heart, and never go away. I failed them.

I was the witness of Cain with his bloodstained knife, and of the evil spirit which has sucked itself into man's soul, and will cause his dissolution.

And I am a man too.

God, I wish I were a worm! I wish I could crawl out of my man's skin and become innocent!

I wish ... I were dead.

No rock in the desert. Waterless, waterless waste.

I came home. Scotland. Edinburgh. No guns firing.

My mind is troubled. Some things which should have been remembered have been forgotten, and some things which I remember may not have been. I see things which are not there, except in my mind, for I seem to be the only

one who sees that field of flowers and the bodies that are in it. But then everything which I see is in my mind, so how can I tell what is and what is not among these phantoms? What was merely an intriguing proposition for Berkeley or Schopenhauer is for me a weary complaint, and my mind is troubled with it, sorely troubled.

Every night I dream the same dream over and over.

There are sights that are burned into my eyes.

I wait for Puck to come with oak, ash and thorn, I wait for the bliss of forgetfulness; but he does not come, and I do not forget. I can smell the blood, and the ordure, the semen and the cigarette smoke to this damned day.

The people I talk to stare at me with their mouths open and their ears closed. Then, at the first opportunity, they start talking about their offices, their health, and their marital problems. What do they think of my strange news? Perhaps that I have invented it; that I am engaged in an elaborate joke, perhaps; perhaps that I am mad.

Yet I am a sympathetic ear. I listen—oh, how I can listen!—to the talk, the same talk, the same never-ending talk; offices, health, marital problems. I have seen butchered bodies, and tasted the stink of blood and offal, and I have to listen to this rubbish? Lord, make haste to help me, for I see such sights! Lord, let your servant depart in peace, for I am very weary. Oh, Lord, shut the mouth of this chattering fool. But no, the mouth stays open, far open, it yawns like a cavern till its jaws crack, and the office, the health, and the marital problems piddle down like petty dreary drizzle upon me.

What prevents me from talking? I think I have blood in my mouth.

I am out of place here. This is the world of celebrity. It boasts its successful people. It is not for me.

Sometimes I think the opposite—that all is all right with the world, and I alone am base and rotten. At other times I feel that I am Christian walking through the Valley of the Shadow with night horrors and monsters all around.

I look at a crowd of people—idle people, safe people, laughing, ignorant people—and I think what a machine gun would do to them, raking from side to side. I see a pompous face yapping on a screen, I point a finger and—bang!—it goes.

Violence is so easy.

I look at the people we glorify, the thugs, the killers, the gangsters, the mercenaries, and I see the men who did it.

And when I think of love, and making love, I think of that appalling cruelty, and of the blood, the sticky mess that the flies settled on, and I don't want to live any more.

I want to hear her voice, not in memory, but carried on breath.

I like to play the pretend game: pretend I have talent; pretend I am a prodigy, a new Beethoven, a second Shakespeare, a Dickens come again; pretend I am Jesus, pretend I can work wonders, raise Svetlana from the dead, and bid Ludmilla to come onto me; pretend I am brave, resourceful, the man they needed, the one who should have been there, who caught the bullets, who gave his life; pretend I am anything other than what I am.

And sometimes it almost works: Svetlana and Ludmilla rise from the ditch, the earth and stones I scattered on them fall off their chests, the bullets fly backwards out of their bodies, their eyes open, they smile, they raise their arms, they greet me; and there is peace in Bosnia, there is no war, it is all a bad dream.

And then I wake up.

I could weep; I could weep; my name is not Ugolino.

But my weeping has no purpose.

I feel myself to be like Gulliver, a Yahoo in the land of Yahoos, a base, vile creature walking in blood.

This country has become strange. Its people neither need nor want me. Not long after I came back I realised that they spoke a different language, and that the only woman who ever said that she loved me had done so in Serb.

This is the land of the Grin. This is not my land. I don't want to live here.

Now I walk like a shadow along these streets that I once knew. I feel that I am becoming insubstantial as a ghost. Perhaps I am a ghost; perhaps that is why only the dead can see me. What are my books but the minds of dead people?—and the dead people I found in that field walk with me wherever I go.

I walk at night watching the window lights till my head is half-turned with loneliness and my heart burns.

I stand in the shower, and let hot water run over my shoulders. I don't know how long I stand there. I think about things that are of no consequence. I think about David and Alan Breck in the mountains of Appin; I hear the breakers on the shore. My skin is soft when I come out.

I do not hear my footfalls on the street; I hear the beat of her heart.

And those to whom I say this look at me curiously, and think that I exaggerate, or lie, or am mad, because they are tied up in their own worlds, which are not my world, and none of them saw those bodies rotting in that field.

I refuse to let the grass grow over these atrocities.

The dead are gone. They don't wait for you anywhere, except in your dreams, or your nightmares—and I have such nightmares.

They leap through doors shouting, and as they leap and

shout sometimes they make sense, but more often they do not.

This is a requiem for a dream.

I hear the death call. Oh, Bosnia, will you torture me forever? Will I never cease to be burned in your fire?

Without are dogs and murderers. Without is a land full of cruelty. Without is the ruin of a place I once loved.

This is the labyrinth I am locked in, and no medicine or counselling will get me out of it, just someone who knows. But no one knows, and I have no cosmic hero to turn to, neither Jesus, nor Buddha, nor the feathered gods of Yucatan. Suicide is the only way that will not entirely rob me of my dignity.

I see murderers and rapists wherever I look. I see evil faces softened with hypocrisy, and I do not want to make excuses for the human race any more. I do not want to be part of this degraded species.

The Manichaeans had the most sensible attitude: better to think that the world is evil, and be pleasantly surprised by goodness when you find it, than think that the world is good and have evil break your heart. But when I looked at that field which could have been so beautiful, when I think of it now, when I walk again through the blood and entrails with which it is strewn, every system of mine comes crashing down and leaves me numb. No book I ever read, except the Bible, makes sense in that sight. No existentialist in a cafe, no Marxist in a classroom, no hedonist at the dinner table, nor Epicurean walking in a garden, neither shallow optimist nor cynical pessimist could breathe that air. Only Jeremiah lamenting among the ruins of Jerusalem had a faith strong enough to withstand such knowledge.

I am merely numb, and through that numbness rushes a roaring hurricane, and when it has passed nothing remains

of my former certainties. Not just my heart lies broken beside Svetlana's body, but my hope also, my faith and charity. After that sight, I began to see people as slavering fiends, and of course I have to smile blandly and pretend otherwise, despite the darkness that I carry inside me.

And yet ....

Sometimes, thinking that the world is a terrible place, I go out for a walk and see women who look so young and beautiful that I get to thinking, oh, the world is not such a terrible old place after all. And then I say to myself, "It can't be all that bad if you can laugh." But it is bad, nevertheless.

The blood clots my mouth and I cannot speak.

And though I cannot talk, I sit with people hoping again and again that some spark of human empathy will lead to understanding, that someone will take my hand, that someone will look at me with eyes that are not those of a stranger.

But no one does.

I came home, and there followed dark days, and the Bible gave me comfort—not because it is the Word of God, but because it is the faith of my fathers, and I found solace in its words partly because so many other men in so many other centuries had found solace in them also, and I felt that I was at one with them, and wished that I could believe in Christ because my brothers had believed in Christ.

And so often I tried to make myself believe. Holy Jesus, I cried, Merciful Redeemer, turn these waters of tribulation into the sweet wine of love! And it struck me that for many years I had sought the World Beyond, the transcendental reality, the place on the other side, and I had not found it, and the only clues to its existence are in the beauties of nature, those same blue and yellow flowers that are now

trodden down and stained with blood.

During this time I did not have a life. I had two half-lives inadequately joined together.

I cannot stand cigarette smoke. I think of that room, and everything that must have happened in it, and I cough and feel sick and my head aches.

Loud noise is an affliction. In a place where people yell and music thuds, I have to hold myself in the seat because I want to throw myself flat on the ground, as you do to avoid flying splinters, and my hands flap and grasp at my knees, and anyone who sees thinks I am a neurotic, a hypochondriac, or a fool. And in the street there are car engines barking like machine guns, and hurtling chassis that scream past like shells.

And love just seems like an invitation to more pain.

Many times I have thought that I should go back there. This is a thought from the bustling daily world. But what would I be doing if I went back? Seeking salvation? And should I ask it of the air? Those wretched people deserved so much better than to be the playthings of my vanity. Practical help is being given to them by workers better equipped than I, and braver, and dearer than I in the sight of man, woman, and God; and not useless. What could I do? What is there that I could do for them?

Write!

Let it be known. Tell the towers thereof. And in writing will be my witness, and I will burn my vanity away in that pure flame of truth.

What had been a hope now became a necessity. I knew I had no gift for the spoken word—surely I had some for the written? I could not draw, nor could I paint; I could neither film nor sing; musical notes are a strange algebra: what else could I do?

So I wrote.
Well ...

I never want to see blood again, even if it is green. I became a vegetarian because I could not abide the idea of having blood in my mouth. Some people call themselves vegetarian and eat fish, but they are not, because no vegetarian can eat an animal which has been killed. Should I be a vegan, then, and refuse to drink milk, because milk is from a cow whose calf has been killed? Yes, I suppose I should—and yet I have never felt that dairy produce is flecked with blood. Maybe this makes me no better than the fish-eater who does not believe that a creature with a cold body and unblinking eyes is truly a living animal like himself.

Who am I to condemn? Every time I put my foot on the ground I crush some invisible body. Every time I walk I leave footprints of blood across the floor. I do not want blood on my hands, even if it is that of the greenfly on the lavender.

For a long time this thought has tormented me; and its logical, inescapable, conclusion is that the only way I can live a life that is innocent is to kill myself and commit the greatest crime of all. And I wish I had the intelligence to be a philosopher and discover the way out of this impasse, but I have not.

I wish I had a faith which stood upon a rock of celestial excellence, but I have not.

I wish for so much.

Say this, of course, and the grinning people come leaping out the shadows shouting that I am an American agent and a right-wing imperialist. They shout, the grinning people. They shout and shout. But I think of the dead lying there in that bloody field and their shouts are just the

yappings of dogs, the hoarse cries of crows. Say this, of course, and the grinning people come leaping out the shadows shouting that I am guilty of bourgeois sentimentality, and sentimentality, they will say, sneering and wagging their fingers in my face, is masked brutality. But the dead are still with me, the misery of their deaths, the injustice of it, and the stench.

Shalamov says in his 'Kolyma Tales' that even if your writing is destined not to be read by anyone, it is still easier to bear a grief if you write it down; and that is true. He adds, "then you can forget". He did not. He had seventeen years of horror. I had as many hours. I cannot forget either. Why should I complain? What are my hours compared to his years?

But I don't have the talent, seemingly. The people who died in that field deserve so much better. Why could not some genuinely talented person have been their witness? Why this fool?

As the years passed, the horror blurred, I forgot what I thought I could never have forgotten, and now instead of that sharp stabbing knife, I feel a dull constant pain, and a great sadness and a weariness. I feel a longing to shed my life as a snake might shed its skin. To be at peace, to know an end to this unquiet and doubt seems very sweet, like a long drink of clear, cold water on a hot day.

My father used to say that Burton's 'Anatomy of Melancholy' would cure anyone's melancholy, though it did not cure his. After 1945 {said my mother}, after he had seen what had been done, he was in such a state that he threatened to commit suicide if she did not marry him. He seemed to dream of Hecate, Burton or not, and though he hoped a woman's love would keep the hobgoblins at bay, yet he died lonely, diseased and demented. Had a bullet found

him half a lifetime earlier, perhaps his life would have been a more cheerful song.

Now I am in that same place, and for me, as for him, loneliness and uselessness hang overhead like two black clouds that threaten to burst, and never do. But he, at least, was spared the picture of his own father dying horribly. I have not been. Nor was I spared my mother's slow death. Nor even the crime of Orestes. They too are with me every day, and point a road down which I shall not go.

I can find no peace. Although I keep a placid face, it is merely a mask of comedy and behind it all is accusation. Hideous thoughts like muggers come at me. I walk through streets of uncaring people whose concerns seem so petty, so base. Are they all wrong, and am I alone in being right? I cannot be so vain. They must be right. Their concerns are human and everyday, and I must be suffering from a fever that manifests itself in visions of butchery.

Did I see these things?

Yes!

Then why is it that people nod their heads, and grin, and do nothing? Why is it football that excites their passions? Why adultery, when sex steams from the ground? Why money, when they already have all that it can buy?

Why?

Friends are mere bland masks of self-importance, and teachers and prophets wallow in conceit. And again I think, no, it must be I who am wrong. The world is in a universal state of grace, and I am alone in being a sinner—alone in being the victim of God's wrath—alone in ignorance —malice—despair—vanity—alone in every way. But then, when I have nearly convinced myself that I am alone, I look over my shoulder and see my ego's bloated, leering carcass

lumbering after me; and look over my other shoulder, and see her, with her sad, sad eyes, and her chest stitched with bullet holes. And I pray, please God, let me go mad. But God does not, and my remorse is terrible.

For years I had to speak softly, and smile, and walk about the world, and be mild, and never complain, while my mother, Margaret, yelled at me from the pit of her dementia, and people at work squabbled about their overtime. And I could share my fears with no one.

So I had my two half-lives.

In one, I lived in the world of a suburban street, earned my living, and did my best to look after my mother who was suffering progressive mental and physical decline.

In the other ... I will not talk about the other.

In one, I tried to describe what I had seen, but wherever I went those terrible sights went with me. Whenever I wrote, they spilled across the page. Whenever I spoke, they filled my mouth. Whenever I tried to reach out to another, it was a corpse that I embraced, a cold, rotten corpse.

In the other was a fire that burned all before it. A freezing fire, if such a thing is possible. A fire of pain and sorrow.

In short, the only way I can stop seeing corpses is to turn myself into one.

This lasted for twelve years. Margaret died two years ago. Now only my cat depends upon me, and I have made good provision for him. So this year is the last. It will be the last year of my life.

In five weeks time I shall kill myself.

Six
Four weeks

And five weeks become four, and the clock ticks on.

How will it fare with the dead when God has shut the doorway of my mind? Happy? When my head is finally dreamless and I am nothing?

I never thought my pilgrimage would end like this. I always pictured it as a book that someone might want to read one day, and therefore I hoped to write a good ending for it; but no one will read my story no matter how it ends, so the ending does not matter.

Sometimes, when I lie awake in the morning, I find myself thinking, "Oh, God, please stop me—please don't let me do it!" Is this resignation, is this fortitude, is this the thought of a Roman? I wonder what Mishima felt when he woke up on that last morning of his life—was he tormented as I am?

There must be some place where I could go, where I could live until peaceful old age claims me, where no rejection would penetrate, where I could hide from failure, where the Grin is not known. Where I could—what? ... grow my lavender, watch the sun sink into the clouds of evening, and dream of immortality with my cat curled up on my knee, while a new day dawns round the other side of the world. That is all I would want; that would content me. Were my books so bad? I promise I will never write any more. I will live in a cottage in the country, far away, and no editor will ever hear from me again.

But the Grin is ubiquitous. It has rejection in one hand, and failure in the other. There is no place left that its noise and squalor cannot reach. It is the triumph of democracy, admit it. The democracy I have always believed in has defeated the excellence I have always longed for, and no Patmos remains in this world, nor any garden where wit and good fellowship are inscribed over the gate.

More and more I have come to the conclusion that loneliness is the bane of the human race. More than anything else on the dear earth you want to feel that you are not alone; and if you are Time's fool, at least you want to feel the comfort of having a companion in your folly.

I have patrolled an empty building all night, talking to myself. I have had wonderful conversations with myself. I imagine a friend who is wise and thoughtful and older than I am; then another who is young and tempestuous and full of generous mistakes; another still who has seen horrors. These phantoms walked beside me and I am sure our conversations were noble and profound. And then I cycled home in the cold morning, probably in the rain, perhaps in the dark, and there I found my cat, who was solid and warm-blooded as my phantom friends were not, and I talked to him as well.

So I have lived my life in a well of loneliness. My cat, Max, means more to me than anyone else in this world. He is my family and my best friend. I have confided things to him that I have told to no human. No living human. He is my cherry blossom, my pumpkin, my little sausage, and when I look at him I say to myself, "You are caring for him, and providing for him. You see to it that he is comfortable, and well fed, and—God willing—healthy, and warm as toast in that armchair by the fire with his white toes gathered

together under his chin. So you are not entirely useless, are you? No, not entirely."

We have been happy, he sitting in his armchair and I in mine on opposite sides of the hearth, the two of us looking at each other from time to time as he dozes and I read. I could live on here with him, and comfort myself with books; but what horrors are to come? In the two years since Margaret died, dreadful as it is to say, I have been more tranquil than ever before in my adult life. I think how wretched she was at the end, how wretched Hugh was, how wretched everyone is who dies demented; and I know that, for me, things can only get worse. What monster is in my body's labyrinth? Is the minotaur of cancer stalking me, perhaps? The dragon of heart disease readying itself to roar out its fire and demand sacrifice? I must end them before they do. I will die sooner or later—so let it be sooner, while my will is strong. Before I decay, before I enter my eclipse.

Alone in the world, I sit and read the thoughts and deeds of great people possessed of great minds; look up at the gentle moon and think that she is my lady; talk to her —talk to the moon—yes, I do—talk to my cat, and hold him, and treat him as though he were the child I never had. That is how I try to fill up the well of my loneliness.

And all these people I read about are dead too.

You are no less lonely for being one of humankind than the world is for being one part of the traffic of the Milky Way. You may cast your love abroad, and up to the very stars, but the stars are not affected in the least, and all that you are doing is loving yourself and making a great noise about it.

When a lonely man dies he loses nothing but his loneliness. So I tell myself. My life is precious to no one. Being precious to no one, it is not precious to me—so I tell

myself, but I think that is just consolation for lost joy.

I am not a handsome man, I am not charming, I never have been, and I know it. For a long time I thought I must be repulsive, ugly; plain, at the very least; boring. And yet I am not an ogre either. I look about, and see that other men no handsomer than I have lovers. So I would say to myself: "Just be patient. You can be loving, you can be gentle, you can be loyal. Surely someone will let you show it?" And I was patient, but the answer was always, "No. No one."

Until one day there came a woman—and she was murdered in a field full of flowers.

I have no children. When I was a boy I used to think, one day a girl will fall in love with me and that will be so wonderful. It will come like a bolt from heaven, it will catch us unawares, we will look at one another {perhaps across a crowded room} and we shall know, our hearts will sing, and the voice of the turtle will be heard in the land, and we shall have children together, a boy and a girl—won't that be miraculous? But for a long time that day did not come. And I did not know why not, because it happens to so many people; rumour has it, it happens to most people, all the animals go into the ark in twos. "Why has it never happened to me?" I asked.

And then one day there was a woman, and she had a daughter—my step-daughter as could have been—and they were murdered together in that field full of flowers.

I wondered if I was a disease that they had caught. Why was I alone in being alive on that wretched plain? Why was I untouched?

Then I thought—I truly thought—perhaps I am not. Perhaps I am a ghost. Perhaps I am just a shadow in the corner of the eye, and people look at me, and look through

me, and do not see me, though I know I am standing here, and have so many interesting things to say, and hopes to share with them, and witness to give.

So I have no children, no son, no daughter, my name dies with me. But descent through blood is less important than descent through common struggle. To whom, then, shall I pass the torch? Who shall lift up my sword, my tarnished, battered sword? Who will understand what happened in that field of flowers?

I did write about Bosnia. I wrote a series of articles for the press—but they were rejected. I wrote a travel book about the experience—and that was rejected. I turned it first into a collection of stories, and then into a novel—and both were rejected. And then, thinking to leaven the gloom with a little humour, I rewrote it as a humorous novel—and that was rejected too. Oh well, no matter.

I wrote many things. They were all rejected.

Of course, rejection is part of the risk you run; but with rejection I cannot exorcise that bloody field.

With rejection I can do nothing.

With rejection it clings to my head.

I contacted agents, journalists, people of the Grin.

They grinned.

Tell me I am not insubstantial nor alone in this world, and I'll accept being dull, ugly and boring.

Writing this makes me feel that I am not alone; that everything is not futile. I feel that I am creating something, even as I walk to my own destruction. Perhaps I am deceiving myself, but the deception has beauty, and I feel that beauty fortifying me like wine, like faith, like hope and love. And I am an aristocrat going to the guillotine with panache, making the last exquisite gesture, even as I write

on sand.

Writing is the breath of life, but it is not enough that I breathe alone, for I am not alone, I am human, and no human can be truly alone. No, I want to breathe that life into other people. I want to say, "Here, sister, take this sweet gift. Take this, brother, because it is beautiful."

But the truth is that each thing I write is a message in a bottle. I throw them out onto the sea thinking, each time, that it will be found, but it never is. Each time the bottle sinks. I am not radical, just lonely, and each time the bottle sinks, my heart sinks with it. Each time.

Perhaps one day someone will read my books. Perhaps one day I shall cease to be a ghost. Perhaps when I am long dead I shall finally become alive. Perhaps the dolphin will carry Arion to the shore at last.

Meanwhile I am condemned to solitude. That is the fate of the lonely man. I walk through crowds, and no one sees me. I enter rooms, no one is aware of my coming, and when I leave, no one notices that I have gone. Day after day I talk to no one but assistants in shops who forget me as soon as I leave. Perhaps I am a ghost. Yes, I did think that for a while, after I came back from Bosnia. How else could anything make sense?

Much of my life, it seems, has been spent being there for other people; but who is there for me, now, when I need companionship so badly? I have gone with others to the port and to the station, waved them through the doors, and watched them depart, and they gave not a backward glance. They were beautiful, with the sun on their wings, and I was not. They had regained hope, and I had not. I had only pretended. I am the man who watches the planes go by.

From the top of the Hill called Clear you can see the walls of the Celestial City shining in the distance. So did

Moses look at the Promised Land.

Everyone I have ever loved is dead and I long to follow them, even if there is no where to follow them to, and they no longer exist anyway.

Comes the midnight moment. Comes fear and doubt. I can't really be going to do this? Not really—not this? Life is so precious. As four weeks become three to the date of my projected suicide, I rehearse the scene over and over again. The neighbour who believes that I have a terminal illness, and who is going to adopt Max—I will tell her I am going away for a couple of days and ask her to feed him. She has my key. I will show her where the cat food is, I will show her where his basket is. I have left her a letter.

What should I do with my life if I lived? Devote it to the cause of the Green Party? Perform Good Works? Take an interest in the parish kirk? Become an enthusiastic attender of lectures and cultural events?

I am not the lion who roars in the desert, just a plodding donkey, and I am tired of it. My grandfather plodded up the line to face horror, but he was young then, and life was something rare waiting to happen to him when the war and the horror were over.

Very well, what shall I do?

I sleep long hours these days. It is as though my body is anticipating the Big Sleep which is to come. Perhaps this is wrong; perhaps I should not sleep at all. My irreplaceable life is numbered in weeks, days and hours: I should drink every minute of every one of these hours down to its last second.

I should, and that is what I thought I would want to do, but, strangely, I find that I am much calmer. I believe, in a condemned cell, I would sleep the night before my

execution and eat a hearty breakfast.

Why?

Suicide is victory over delusion: my delusion that I could help the creatures of this world; my delusion that I had something to give to this world. I once thought I had worth and courage and talent. That was my delusion.

It was a sweet delusion. I hear its voices in the dark, the voices that tell me I am a fool.

Shall I revisit past scenes? The house where I used to live? The street down which I used to walk to school? The corner where I played my childhood games?

No! The trick is not to prepare, not to count the days, not to take farewells of the places known, not to wonder how many more moons I shall see. The trick is not to fall into resignation like the prisoner awaiting the gallows. I am not in the hands of another. I shall go when I choose to go. And I must hold fast to the belief that I shall not be in death: that where death is I shall not be. Meanwhile, I am, and death is not. Why should I go sight-seeing?

I shall not play the game of superstition.

And yet ...

How easy it sounds to push open the door and step through. The very easiness of it is the difficulty. You suspect a trap. What lies on the other side? Can I step back? If it were harder, you would worry less.

Perhaps everybody has the fearful dream of suicide at some time or other. For every one who takes his own life, there are ten who wish it was done to them, a hundred who make feeble and insincere efforts crying "stop me! stop me!"—and a thousand who talk, and do nothing.

Napoleon, on Saint Helena, lamented the fact that he had not died in battle—at bloody Borodino, perhaps, or the Beresina, Leipzig or the field of Waterloo. Significantly, he

wanted someone else to kill him; his attempt to kill himself was a failure. Murat, evidently, spent much of the year 1812 failing to find death in battle. Frederick failed at Kunersdorf, and his suicide attempt did not work either. Tojo inspired thousands to their own ends, yet failed to follow them. Fritsch succeeded—a death in battle which was truly suicidal. Did Nelson do the same?

None of them fell on his own sword like a hero from Plutarch; but I am going to—this timid man, this failure, this coward; he is going to do it!

I feel strangely rather proud of myself. Yes, I am going to do it. I shall not fail, neither shall I falter. Nothing shall cause me to swerve from the path. I am a Roman.

I shall not die whispering "rosebud", nor to glorious music like the Swan, but I shall die nevertheless when I will it, like a devoted man. My body shall lie there in the place of my duty.

And yet ...

Suicide is not something that you make up your mind to do in one single move, and then do it. It is something that you keep on making up your mind to do, and slowly the truth sinks into your mind that, yes, you really are going to do it, and everything that is warm and living screams out at you—no!

It screams; yes, it does. I repeat "Where death is, I am not" like a mantra, but that unreasoning scream still pierces the midnight air.

You tell yourself, the whole world will die one day, and everything in it. You tell yourself, the alternative is worse, the alternative is mere existence—without freedom, without health, without self-respect, sanity, honour, without whatever is dearest to you. And still that voice screams—no! Mere existence is wonderful because it is, and death is

terrible because it is not. And I remember something that my father told me; how he lay on the beach at Salerno with the bullets lifting up the sand and throwing it over him; and knowing that he might lose his life at any moment, it was suddenly so sweet and wonderful that he wanted to live it forever.

The end of life is life itself. So ending your life is the most terrible, unnatural thing that you can do to your sweet life, unless—unless your life is no longer sweet. Indeed—no longer sweet. Failure, disappointment, frustration—how wounding they are; what bitter blows they give to your pride. My wounded pride is a souring agent, and I was so proud of Britain, so proud of humanity, so proud of the race of paladins to which I belonged—so proud to belong—so proud that I was going to give something. What will the future hold for me, belonging to nothing, and giving nothing? Self-loathing? Bitterness? Failure without the hope that made failure endurable? That is not attractive. Better to seize the flower of forgetfulness and enter the night that knows no end. Spin off cold and empty through soundless space.

Turn myself into rotting meat.

This soon-to-be-rotting meat liked Christmas trees, and carols; Viennese waltzes, military history, and classic rock and roll; Tchaikovsky, the King James Bible, and all the great Westerns; romantic comedies, and the ethics of Epicurus. This walking corpse was a patriot who was proud of his country.

After I knew that I was going to be dead in one month's time, there was no boredom any longer. The days burned brighter. Life became altogether more joyful.

How often I have sung for the pure joy of being alive!

I am about to kill myself, and I say that. There is no contradiction in this now, not standing where I do. Part of me shivers at the notion of seeking my own death. Part of me wants to leap forward and embrace it this very minute. Death is both the cold stranger, and the long lost friend: the place of annihilation, and the warm house where comfort awaits. Contemplating it makes me feel both joyful and wretched: so joyful that I have never loved life as much; so wretched that I wish I were dead now, this minute. Isn't that odd?

At the same time I am possessed by a sense of fatalism. I can see my death at the end of the road like the concrete wall I am bound to crash into at full throttle.

There is nothing I can do about it. Somehow my decision has become inevitable. It has become that black hole, drawing me. It has taken on the mantle of fate. My fear is that I will fail and cripple myself instead. I must plan this. Napoleon pouring over his maps did not plan his campaigns with more attention to detail than I am giving to this last scheme of mine. It must work.

Surely Death the destroyer of all worlds will not reject me.

Meanwhile, I repeat my doubts until, with familiarity, they will lose their power. I admit my weaknesses.

No one will stop me. There is no one to whom I mean enough. Who could there be? God? Isn't this why people called forth their gods? Please God be there, God of my fathers, God of mercy, help me now. Take this pain away. Fill this loneliness with your love. But is there a God dwelling any more in Zion, and is there a trumpet to be heard any more in the land of the holy mountain?

No, I do not fear God, because there is no God; consequently, I do not fear death. But sadness sits beside

me. It is like the rain that falls, regardless of all things, and I am saturated with it.

Yet, how beautiful life is! When the evening wind is blowing clouds across the sky like red leaves, I want to touch the world with my hands and ask deep, unanswerable questions. Questions whose beauty may soothe a lonely heart; questions without answers, wandering like nomads of the winds; questions that never find a home.

And I sit, and look at that realm of glory, and think the sad thoughts of a lonely man.

In August Edinburgh will wear its Festival like a garment for three weeks, like a coat of many colours, like a vessel with radiant sails. I do not want to be alive to see that beautiful ship pass by again and know that there is no place on her for me. I stand here on the desolate shore, and I see her lights and hear her music, but she does not know of my existence, and I am so weary of being unknown.

Wouldn't it be fine, just for once, to waste the lamps of night in revel?

I'll never see the sun of Austerlitz again, nor hear the words of Goethe upon the field of Valmy. I never saw nor heard them in the first place, but in my imagination I did. I sat and listened to the sage of Weimar, I followed the Little Corsican to the beat of a drum. All that will end, I will not be, and no one will know I was. How horrible that is, how incredible, how unjust. And yet I do not want a life that is waterlogged by the continuous dismal drizzle of rejection, disappointment and failure. If I don't have the ability to live the life that I want to live, then I would rather not live at all. Perhaps I don't know what real suffering means. Perhaps my misfortunes have been so commonplace they have not welded me to life the way that those who have suffered far

more than I ever have are welded to life.

Yet I have the feeling that I am letting so many people down. As the weeks pass, it does not leave. I am letting down my father who wanted to live through the war just so he could create me. "There, you see! {he might have shouted at Hitler's ghost} I'm alive! you didn't kill me! I've fathered a boy!" A boy—the thing all men want—me. He told me the story of the King of the Golden River one night when I was afraid, and the thunder was roaring at the window.

I am letting down my mother who carried me for months. Does she know what I tried to do?

Dear people, I am so sorry for what has happened, and for what is about to. I remember the care you used to take of me, and the stories you used to tell me. I remember Tammy Troot and Christopher Robin. What was it all for? I am letting down the little boy I used to be, who loved the blue sky and the wandering clouds and the sparkling sunlight, and thought the world was such a wonderful and exciting place.

I am turning my back on it all, and what am I embracing instead?—a skeleton? No. The Shadow which dissolves the bonds of friendship, the Dark Minister, the Spoiler, the Destroyer of all earthly pleasures, the Annihilator of men. And this makes it seem mysterious, and somehow rather more acceptable, as though destruction were a dark lover wanting to shelter me in her arms.

I longed so much to touch the face of the world, but the world turns its face away from me. I am a door that no one wants to walk through; a shadow that has not made contact with the substance of creation. I have spent my life standing outside the door, looking at others enjoying life's passions, its hardships, its companionships, its joys, and I have held

out my hand and said, "I am your brother. Don't you know I'm here? Don't you want to know?"—but no one took it.

I sit in this house full of books like the ancient priest whose faith has become quaint. I try to believe in my God, but I feel him sliding out of my hands. I perform the rites, which secretly I doubt. I wait for the Voice, and, when I do not hear it, I tell myself that this is to test my trembling faith, and I try to believe. But no one comes. No one hears. The world is somewhere else.

I am alone. I look at my bath, that green, plastic, commonplace thing, and think—is this to be my Masada? It is not much to look at, neither a bitter joy, nor a sweet path to paradise. In fact, it seems slightly ridiculous. When I was a little boy, I used to play in the bath—not this bath, of course, the big white one in our old flat in Haddington Place, above Leith Walk. I used to take soldiers and boats in there with me and splash about. I used to make believe the bath was a boat slowly filling with water. But then it was the boat of life taking me to the land of my hopes. Now it is the boat of death. It is not myself I feel sorry for any more; it is that boy who was so full of hope.

What shall I do on the day that I have decided to kill myself? What will it be like on the morning of that day when I awake and know that I shall not sleep again because I am going to sleep for ever? On that last day what shall I think? Will I be determined?—will I be brave? What shall I do?—watch a film? read a book? weed the garden? On that day I shall say farewell to Cadmus of the golden prow, and never see sweet Argos again. I hope I find Roman courage.

And what will be said of me, should anyone say anything of me? What would I have someone say, should someone wish to say anything at all? Perhaps friend Ovid will lend me a line: Here lies Phaeton, the driver of his

father's chariot, which if he failed to manage, yet he fell in a great undertaking.

I will not see the dead any more. I will not be horrified by them, because I will be one with them. They will no longer stand and look at me with blood on their faces. I will no longer see their staring eyes. Oh, what a relief that will be! I will go into I know not what, but surely not that bloody field. Surely Svetlana will not reproach me, surely Ludmilla will forgive me, surely I will be with them forever.

Today begins the first week of July. I will die on the 26th. My birthday. A Roman, like Cassius. Then I shall begin my ascent, and perhaps one day I too will find my place in the holy mountain.

In these last three weeks I am playing the "what if?" game.

What if visionary, charismatic Alexander the Great was succeeded by a practical, realistic younger brother, called Demetrius, who handed India over to Chandragupta, circumnavigated Arabia, established a frontier on the Caucasus, and an imperial capital at Alexandria the Metropolis? What if Greek and Iranian were brothers, if democracy flowed east and Buddhism west, unhindered?

What if Alexander of Russia, having captured the remains of the Grande Armee at the Beresina, after the death of Napoleon in battle there, had been able to dictate peace to Europe based on the principles of La Harpe? What if Ney had kept his head at Quatre Bras; what if D'Erlon had marched on Ligny?

What if Wilhelm II had pledged himself to the liberalism of his father, sought an alliance with the Social Democrats, national socialism evolved democratically and without intolerance and murder, imperial Berlin flourished,

and the names of poets and musicians adorned its well-planned streets?

What if the First World War had ended in 1916, or '15? What if it had never begun?

What if ...?

I look back down the long years and wonder what I have done with my life. It is a crop which has gone to rot, unharvested. And through it, the blundering path I made where my footprints are filling up with water.

Perhaps death will be like falling down a well that is deep, dark and cold; but that does not deter me—I want to find out. Perhaps it is a ship that will take me to a far green country under a swift sunrise.

The loneliness of the deathbed is not an evil, for the great mystery cannot be shared. Would I die less if I were surrounded by tears? No! Then be brave, man, and face what comes, for to do otherwise is neither a proof of wisdom, nor a way to be wise.

I worry about my poor Max coming back into the home we have shared together and finding that I am not there.

Without me the greenfly whom I have persecuted will flourish in the garden. Perhaps Anatole France will come again, and perhaps he will write 'Greenfly Garden'. Perhaps there will be a Napoleon of greenfly; a greenfly Dreyfus ...

I am just a little boat looking for a harbour, but the seas are high, the storms are very wild, and there is no help in sight. I can only pray to the God I don't believe in that somehow I shall find peace at last, even if it is at the bottom of the ocean.

I don't want to die. I want to live forever. Perhaps I shall live forever when I sleep with my ancestors in the kingdom of the dead.

Seven
Three Weeks

Mercy and pity are what I feel now, as the clock ticks away.

I cannot hope to die with joy, but I think I have banished fear, believing that I and death will never coincide. What remains?—peace? Say calm, rather, because a sad and lonely man is not at peace. Calm, that is what I will be as the long blue solemn hours file past.

It is not always bad to be so saddened by life, for sadness brings mercy and pity, and I do feel both—mercy for all who live, pity for all who shall come to this place where I am now. And is not this the message of the Gospels?

I once pitied myself alone, and then I was a child. It is the realisation that all are to be pitied which has made an adult of me. For my pity has spread out into compassion for all living things, whether they walk or fly, swim or crawl, stand seemingly immobile or wave in the passing wind, because they are passing, like the wind that passes and leaves no trace.

This is the name of the Lord that I would declare in Zion, and praise in Jerusalem; whose song I wish to sing for as long as I am.

In time everything becomes a detail, every atrocity fades into the past, the shouting dies away, the captains and the kings depart. Perhaps time is like a surgeon, after all. It cuts, it hurts, it mutilates, it uses; but it also heals—if the numbing of pain is to heal.

Evil likes to cast itself as beautiful and brave and daring, arrogant, intolerant, and in love with itself. It wants to be the fallen angel, the apostle of pride, the radiant one, the shining morning star. But I have never found it so. The deeds of the totalitarians and the people of the Grin have always seemed, not just selfish, but petty and squalid too, full of childishness, but without real pity, without compassion, and knowing not mercy. Such people are unable to understand or accept that the world is not their plaything, that other creatures existed before them, exist with them, and shall exist after them. They must carve their names on everything that is so that it shall either stand as an enduring monument after them, or fall down in ruins with them. That it could exist without them is inconceivable.

This is the pride of Narcissus, the masochism of the great outlaw. I want your fear, he says, I want your hatred, I want your contempt. If Hitler were in Hell, would he leave it, given the opportunity? Would he escape? Consider the exchange between Hitler and Satan on the day that Satan becomes bored with this one prisoner and his squeaking torments.

"Go."

"I won't."

"The door is open."

"I will not leave."

"You will."

"You don't understand. I am Hitler."

"I don't care who you are. There is the door."

"You still don't understand. I am Hitler. My crimes were abominable. Because of me, people saw that God had failed them. Because of me, they lost their faith in progress. Because of me, the laboratories of science became torture chambers. Because of me, reason lost its mind. I am Hitler.

Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair. I am Hitler and this is my punishment."

"You had some people killed who would have died anyway. You gave your name to some events which would have happened even if you had never been born. So what?"

"But I am Hitler."

"You were Hitler. Today no one remembers you. Hardly anyone could place Auschwitz on a map. Your crimes are incidents that no one cares about. The world has forgotten you."

"But I—"

"Enough. Go."

And so, in a sudden, Hitler's ghost vanishes from Hell. For that is the true, lasting, worst of all punishments, to exist no longer, not even as a note on a page in a book which someone threw away. Not even as an echo. That is what it truly means to be one of the lost ones, one of the dammed. Better to be never-born and not have tasted the sweetness of life, even for a moment, than to have tasted it and then be conscious of having lost everything.

I will not be conscious.

Where death is, I am not.

No consciousness. Nothing.

Ragnarok, the darkness ahead of us. The Nothing we pick at continually, as a man might at a sore.

I will not let it trouble me. The darkness behind does not trouble me; why should the darkness to come?

I repeat this like a charm, and maybe in time I will believe it.

I don't hate anyone any more. For years I thought about meeting Svetlana's killers. I thought about what I would do

to them, about the tortures, the unspeakable, sadistic tortures, I would inflict. My thoughts were childish and full of malice. For years I warmed myself with cruelty. I nursed my bruised manhood with all the appalling acts of violence that my imagination was capable of inventing. I hope there is no court in Heaven; I hope there is no God to read my mind; I hope I do not have to answer for what I wanted to do to those men.

What they had done was no more cruel than what I wanted to do. And had they read Shakespeare? Did they like Beethoven? How many of them spent their afternoons happily pottering in the garden, tending to their lavender bushes? Perhaps their excuses were better than mine.

The law is made for people, and not for angels or devils. Bring an angel before the law and you will punish him, because anything less than glory is punishment, and the law does not know glory. Before the law devils will not be punished enough, because they merit damnation, and the law does not comprehend what damnation can be.

Pity, however much Nietzsche might despise it, is the sun of my sky now, three weeks before my death, and mercy is its moon.

It rose out of that field in Bosnia like marsh gas, like steam, like a will-o'-the-wisp ... like the flies.

It is a feeling for that ape-descended animal that is man. For someone dies in this world every second, some bright star ceases to burn. The world sheds human life as the human body sheds its skin. And though each one of us is a stranger, occasionally comes the one in whose face I see my brother, my sister, my lover, my friend. The kind breeze who will touch me in the night. And yet these faces too will gradually slip away and nothing can help them.

"Till we meet again," say our lips, but our eyes say

"Farewell."

And what remains? Just the hope that they will sleep peacefully in the hereafter, perhaps.

I cannot refuse the cup from which my sister has drunk; I cannot reject the plate from which my brother has eaten.

Compassion abolishes the barriers between human beings. Compassion brings heaven and earth together. It ends loneliness. It is the mercy seat—for if passion is the ability to suffer, then compassion is the ability to suffer for others. And the man who has truly overcome is no SS trooper, but a saint, a compassionate actor, a man of pity, hope and prayer.

Pray, and you talk to your conscience—but what is conscience?

It is my creature of right and wrong, the angel of good and bad that stands beside my shoulder, the fire of truth and falsehood, mercy and justice, the shadow of how I would be treated, and of how I should treat others. And it comes from —? God, say the believers. What should an unbeliever say? "I do not know, but I know that it is there"? That is so inadequate an answer, and yet it is true. It may just be a part, and yet that part is true; and the part which is beyond my comprehension—maybe one day I will discover it, and find that it is also true, and the traffic on Jacob's Ladder shall pause and wait for me.

Be calm. Remember you are a pitiful creature, and you are surrounded by other pitiful creatures.

The pity which understands is without condescension. It feels for all individually, and not as an abstract mass; it loves people, and not The People. To feel for the abstract mass is merely to feel for myself without honesty, for the abstract is my reflection. It is my self-pity, my passion which

has not found a fellow, my loneliness crying in a cave.

I must not die hating any one. Everyone comes from somewhere, and is somewhere bound; I must remember that. Everyone is precious, every single one. Even the killers.

{What would I do if I had the men who killed her in front of me now, and a gun in my hand? Would I still think like that?}

People, be kind.

I think it is more important that people are kind than that they adhere to some orthodoxy. There are those who would shout at me with hatred and rage for saying this, they would sneer and roll their eyes and call me sentimental for failing to appreciate the sublime beauty of large numbers of executions, and endless amounts of imprisonment and suppression, and they are right.

Throughout history, beautiful abstractions have turned into murderous practicalities, and the path to understanding is slippery with the blood and tears of the unwise. Whether the 'Sermon on the Mount' has spilled more blood than the 'Communist Manifesto', both have been used to dignify heartless butchery by those who like their creatures lifeless.

And who are they, the ones I call evil? Any one who sees with his imagination rather than his eyes, who looks in a mirror and pretends it is a window, who sees what he would like to see rather than what is, and who is prepared to sacrifice the life of a warm animal to a cold ideal, whatever that ideal may be.

Freedom is the length of the chain between the range of your imagination and the stake of reality. Who said that? Thoreau? Emerson? And did he add that freedom can also be a cold ideal?

I did not try to forget, and I have not forgotten. But I

did acquire some degree of freedom the day I ceased to thirst for revenge.

{Did I?}

What is the faith of the faithless? The world needs a new faith. The Indian summer of religion is grotesque; it is history repeated as farce. It is the new intolerance which breeds hypocrites as of old. It is not what is wanted. What is? I do not know. But I do know that generations of honest and fearless workers will have to strive courageously to shape it. I cannot imagine what the world will be like then, and yet there will surely be people ready to receive it and bear it forward with firm step and steady purpose.

None of them will know that I existed. But I believe that they will exist. I believe that they will prosper. That is my faith. Do not scoff at it. Faith can work true miracles, even while believing in false ones. And Socrates heard heavenly voices, no less than Joan of Arc.

The evil people have no faith. They have no faith for the same reason that the Spiritualists have no faith. They do not need it. They know. They have no wonder, because they have evidence. Their evidence is that they are right about all things. They know this. They know it because they know it. They know, and having knowledge, faith is unnecessary. They talk with such simplicity and certainty of immortal things that they are like God's People whom Princess Mary invited into Bald Hills, and I secretly wish I could share their assurance that the air is full of ministering angels.

Perhaps to fall into evil is to know, and have no faith. Perhaps that is the lesson of 'Genesis'.

Life owns no master; no one controls it. No human mind can foresee its courses; no human hand can ward off its

sudden storms. Probably this is why our ancestors conceived of deities who were all-seeing and all-knowing, who could control the elements and transcend death, like the rainbow, soaring to the place where the shining ones are. Doubt is a poor defence when the hurricane rages. For my own self-esteem, if for no other reason, I want so much to believe that, though my intelligence does not have the necessary power, yet somewhere there is an intelligence which does —that of a super-being, flawless, deathless, radiant as the morning, of whom I am a part, and whom I can address as Father.

I want that so much, and yet I must not have it, because I know that I do not believe it to be true.

Be calm, be kind. Have faith in that which is, and pity that which must endure it, because we must all endure the unendurable.

Eight
Two Weeks

Be calm.

It is so difficult to let go of life. You prize yourself loose, one finger at a time.

Hope clings to you like a shipwrecked sailor to a rock covered in seaweed.

Hope, that thin ghost who has survived so much misfortune, who persists in being cheerful, despite everything; who pushes the boulder up the slope, in the knowledge that it is going to roll down again.

Hope, the clown.

Hope, that wanders the graveyards where life once walked.

A world of obstacles may suit an active creature, but a world of insurmountable obstacles will break all but the steeliest heart.

I long so much for human warmth in these last weeks, and there is none. My acquaintances are polite and uninterested. They talk about themselves, and I listen. They talk about their offices, their health, their marital problems, and I listen. They talk about their achievements, and I listen. They talk about their successes. They talk. My purpose in life is to listen to other people talking about their successes. They drink and smoke and eat well, and no one says the magical word that would open my blood-clotted mouth.

I see jobs advertised, and I still think, yes, I could do that—and then I remember. Why? You intend to kill yourself. Ideas come, begging to be written, and I think, yes, what a novel that would make, what a story, what a poem! —and then that voice says, Why? It would be rejected, of course; it would fail, of course; everything you do fails.

Of course.

I am alone in the time of twilight, in the long evening. The midnight stars are beautiful, and I feel less alone, watching them. But I know that the day is closing on everything I have not done, and that I will never return to do it.

So I stand on the platform looking at yet another train full of successful, talking people receding into the distance. It rains and no one waves.

Now that hope has abandoned me, I feel calm as I never did before. Discontent with the world comes of the hope for a better one. What do I hope for now? Nothing. My world is a hopeless place. The Manichaeans would have understood what happened in the Drina River valley. The red earth of Bosnia would have held no revelation for them. Their strength was in their hopelessness. So let mine be.

And yet ... And yet, what a wonderful place the world is, and how sweet it is to be alive! Determined to expect the worst, I keep on being pleasantly surprised by the beauties this little planet still has to show, and the goodness, kindness and courage of so many of its inhabitants. The Manichaeans may have the key to happiness after all. Perhaps the disappointed God of Genesis felt something like this when he held his hand and let imperfect life continue.

Be calm in the face of failure.

Who cares now about Clive at Arcot and the voyage of

the Kon-Tiki? I can name the Waverley novels and the moons of Jupiter, but what does that matter? Thor visited Jotunheim, the Argonauts passed the Clashing Islands, and the Seven stood at the gates of Thebes. All gone. So will I be soon, in two weeks time.

Quite how I have come to be a resident in the flatlands of mediocrity I do not know, unless, quite simply, the god who gave me ambition forgot to give me the ability to fulfil it.

So I have always told myself that one day the bells will ring for me, one day all my efforts shall be repaid, one day victory will come like a saviour on a white horse; but that day has never dawned, and slowly, so slowly, hope has run out, and I think the poisonous thought, what is the point? What is the point of anything? After all, the world spins by, full of fellow creatures to whom my thoughts mean nothing, my hopes, fears and memories mean nothing, and I mean nothing. And I am so tired of meaning nothing, because the man who means nothing, is nothing, and might as well not draw breath.

If only I could light the sacred fire! If only I could create the work that is worthy, how happy I would surely be, what tranquillity I would know. Why have I never managed to do this? Why has the shadow always fallen in my way? Why have I never been able to share the sweetness of life with another?

And so it has dawned on me slowly, like a bad smell originating in the drain, and working its way though the house, that I have just enough talent to know that I do not have enough talent, that I am fated to be just another leaf fallen from a tree in autumn, a dreamer whose dreams do not come true, who was once foolish enough to imagine his caprices were of significance to the turning of the world.

Foolish—that is what I have been. I am a foolish man.

So the sorrow which does not look forward to any state of being in death looks back to what I was in life, and how I failed life—because I do think of life that way, as a vocation, and not a mere drawing of breath. And I fear I was like the foolish servant who buried his talent in the ground. Nothing grew there. Life did not flourish around me. I was cold as January, a bed-fellow of creaks and groans.

The thought of what I wanted to be, and was not, is a comfort.

What ambitions I had! To be the new Stevenson, the new Buchan; to write a chain of books that would delight and exhilarate. To expose Communism and the evil pack; to make light in the darkness of hypocrisy; to make the great work about Bosnia, and show the true horrors of civil war without excuse. To write children's stories, and find in their readers the children I never had. To demolish this wall of ice that surrounds me and give myself to the world, because I believed with my heart and soul that I had something to give to the world. Those were my ambitions; they were before me all the time, dancing like motes in the sunshine. ... Ah, well. I have nothing to give. I was deceived. I deceived myself.

I am like the gambler who cannot cure himself of his addiction, whose every word is war, whose every resolution deceit and longing.

I could write one more book, just one?

Travel and write a travel book. A book of essays. I know—another collection of poems!

After all, there must be somebody in this world who would want it.

Somebody?

Fool, says the Grin, and grins.

I once hoped that a certain poet would ask me to join with him in a combined venture; that a certain producer would want to produce my plays, and a well-known agent find interested publishers for my novels. They had all said that they would, and I, being a fool, believed them. I once hoped to find that garden in which I would be a welcome guest. I once hoped to have faithful friends. I once hoped for so many things.

I unbury my life with those words, "I once hoped."

Fool, fool, fool.

I suppose if I were to explain my failures I would have to say that I was capable of occasional bursts of poetic impulse which then trickled away through the porous vessel of commonplace ability in which I sought to concentrate them. I stammered in long speeches like an embarrassed lover, and struck poses of which a clumsy actor would have been ashamed.

So I stand outside a door that never opens. Everyone else seems to walk through it, but I never do. Everyone else is greeted with pleasure, but I never am. I just stand there, without, and it rains, and the cold comes, and I stand there, and the door never opens.

You can't get through the door alone. You need somebody to help you, but nobody helps you, and the people who could, don't, because you haven't got through the door.

The cold comes, and it rains.

Well, I tried; I failed; leave it at that. I was just another homeless wanderer trying to escape the rust of time.

My building materials have been bricks without straw, and the result does not stand. No one's fault but mine.

Fool!

During my search for human warmth someone said to me that I was prying into the lives of other people to make up for the inadequacies of my own. When I heard this I felt as though I had been slapped across the face with a wet hand. Is this right? I thought. Am I merely a voyeur? Is my curiosity about people so base, then? And, yes, I daresay it is, because I have come to where I am without child or lover.

But yet, is it entirely base, I wonder, to contemplate the face of humanity, because it is the fingerprints of God I am looking for, even in the mucus, the wrinkles, and the bad breath. Perhaps I love everyone because I love no one —perhaps that is true—but does it make my feeling any less real because it stems from such a human flaw? A beautiful flower may grow from a crack in the concrete, and I'm sure the roses of Sharon and lilies of the valley smelled no less sweet for being fertilised with excrement.

Yes, I have spent my life trying, and achieving nothing. Years of frustration have gone in pursuing something for which I did not have enough talent, and I have failed in all that my life seemed meant for. I exemplify Maugham's maxim that nothing is more terrible than the pursuit of art by the untalented—even though I have seen things far more terrible than that, I think. Yet it is true; the glass has always been between me and my dream. I have stood outside the window in the cold, and no one has ever said "Come in, friend."

Now I realise that in trying to reach the heart of everybody I have reached the heart of nobody, and that is my failure.

These thoughts scald like tears.

I am so tired of my own ineffectuality, of knowing that there is not one soul in this world to whom I mean

anything, who thinks the air is sweeter because I breathe it, or the world a better place because I too walk upon its surface. If this is selfishness, then so be it; I no longer care. My days are vanity, as the preacher said, the days of a silly man, without hope, without faith, and without dignity.

Five words, lighter than shadows and faster than a madman's thought: there are too many people.

In eliminating one, perhaps I am even doing something patriotic.

One fool less.

It is easy to look back on my life as one of waste and disappointment, and yet ... Supposing I had told myself right at the start, "You have no talent for writing. Do something useful and practical instead." Supposing I had taken a full-time job as a joiner or an accountant; supposing I had become a supermarket manager, or sold cars; supposing I had an office and a secretary and a salary to match—would I have been happy?

No, oh no!

I remember life's first disaster, forty-five years ago, when my Peter died, and we buried him in our favourite spot in the hills by the bank of the Monks Burn below the Font Stone, where I once made a dam of stones, using one of my father's tobacco tins as a coffin. I wonder if it is still there in the earth? I know I cried for my friend Peter so much, I didn't think I could live another day without him.

I think from that moment I wanted to create something that would last, that death would not sully with its clammy touch. Could I have done this, selling cars?

I haven't done this writing: but I have tried.

And I have enjoyed trying; but now it is time to go —while it is still enjoyable to dream, and entertain hopes

that will never be satisfied, and before the bitter years come and I stare out over the waters and think of what might have been.

I am like the Psalmist; by the waters of Babylon I sit and weep for my remembered Zion. There did the righteous flourish, and an abundance of peace. Perhaps peace shall wait for me in Zion, the place where the angels are.

I hope still.

I hope that I may leave a tiny legacy. I hope it wasn't all for nothing. I hope someone will think of me occasionally, and believe that I was not the worst of men, that I was decent, and gentle, and that I dealt faithfully with my conscience and with my fellows. God knows, it is this faithfulness which is drawing me to do what I am doing now, and where will my fellows be when I choke in that rubbish bag and all these volts torch my brain and tear out the roots of my heart? I will die alone, and I suppose unremembered, and my legacy will be a monument that no one will visit. Ah well, I have pretended all my life, and in death I will pretend that darkness shall veil the face of heaven until the ninth hour, and the trumpets shall call for me upon the other side.

So I will walk towards the fate which I have determined on with as serene a composure as I can muster, and that fate is my own destruction. Success or failure? Whichever, it is my determination to embrace it.

And perhaps the cosmos will be a Russian doll. Perhaps there is another world in which I exist, and in which people love me and are happy to see my face. Perhaps in this other world I am doing all the things that God meant me to do. In this other world I saved Svetlana's life, and together we watched Ludmilla grow up to be a beautiful, talented young

woman. In this other world I became a great writer and used my fame like Solzhenitsyn to expose the atrocities of the Drina valley. In this other world I achieved things and made a difference. Amnesty International knows me in this other world, and I am valued by many charities.

In this other world.

Meanwhile, I advance towards my death in this one like the Greeks at Thermopylae, without fear, and if with hope, then with very little. I will die serving the truth, and let that be the last full measure of my devotion. I will look down from the height of my sanctuary, and hear the groaning of the prisoner, and release those that are appointed to death.

I have glanced at death often enough. Now I am compelled to stare in his direction. This is my death, and not someone else's. Mine. For the first time.

Let me be like Jesus; let me die for the sins of the world! The world which does not know of my existence will not know of my sacrifice. Very well, I shall die with fortitude. I refuse to live a life of indifference.

I don't fear death any longer. Now I stare at it with cold eyes. The door is in front of me. One more step. What will happen when I go though it? I will be in eternity with Shakespeare and the Venerable Bede, with Einstein and Marco Polo, with everyone I have ever loved, hated, or thought about. With every nincompoop who ever lived.

Just think—personal immortality after all! I shall be wiser than all the philosophers put together. I shall know what death means; I shall know the meaning of life! Oh, life is wasted on the living—what an obtuse crew they are! But just think—supposing I am immortal, and supposing my eternity is a cold cellar full of spiders, what then?

Perhaps he who believes in God goes to God, and he who believes in reincarnation is reincarnated, and I who

believe in nothing will go to nothing, and be dissolved like a corpse in a bath of acid, and leave nothing behind.

I do not believe there is an individual soul, I do not believe in consciousness after death, in the sixth realm. I do not believe in any spirit world beyond, in the place of green pastures and still waters. I do not believe. I wish I did, but I do not. I am an atheist. When my breath ceases, I will cease, and it will be as though I had never been. And if that is too desolate, then the vision of peaceful sleep, and the fateful hope that this torment will finally be over, they comfort me like the balm of Gilead.

But then again, perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps eternity will be a sweet place. Perhaps it will be fun. Angels will be singing there, and it will be full of loving kindness. Perhaps I will recur as a hero, and find the happy islands of Zarathustra. Perhaps I will find the Golden Road to Samarkand and the Mountains of the Moon after all. Perhaps I will find the house that is waiting for me, and there will be kindness there, and gentleness, and rest, and everything lost shall be found.

Now Death comes. Advance to meet him. Say, Yes, this is my time, I choose it, I go now! I will not wait to rot away into oblivion; I will not fade in the darkness like a bad smell. I refuse! Here is my door; I will open it, whatever is on the other side.

I see a beautiful sunset. Now, moon of my delight who knows no wane, how often shall you look for me in this same garden, and will anyone know that I too was here? The world is full of glory. It is still a beautiful place that I am leaving.

"I will never ..." How these words echo! I will never travel with a donkey through the Cevennes, or see the light of glory shine upon ancient Rome.

But also, I will never again feel ashamed to be human.

Never hear Beethoven, the 'Scene By The Brook', 'Egmont' and the 'Eroica'.

But also, I will never feel that degrading stab of jealousy when talented people reap their rewards.

What does the pass look like, where Leonidas stood, and can you trace the steps of Jesus by the shores of Galilee? When I die these questions will still be enigmas, and I wonder if I shall be poorer for their being so. It may be that the answers painted in my mind are richer than those which the world has to offer.

Where is the man who wrote these things? Reader, I am about to murder him.

And when I am done with life? Perhaps I shall wake, and—lo!—it was all a dream.

Be calm, even if hopeless, in the face of everything.

Nine
One Week

Be calm. Give yourself to the unfairness of life, and forgive yourself for being so much less than you had wanted. Embrace the injustice of it all, and love it anyway, because it is sweet to breathe.

Love life, even when it seems to give you nothing. In the midst of a waterless desert, hope for water, and when there is no hope, love the beauty of the sand.

In this twelfth year of my flight from Bosnia, however, my life is out, and death will surely not be unkind.

I feel quite tranquil, but unhappy and alone. I will die of suffocation, or of electrocution, or possibly strangulation; but whichever trap I fall through, the executioner's name will be Neglect.

My vision is clear. My thoughts are in harmony. Frightened, but facing my fear—weak, but determined —wanting to weep, but not weeping—and not just pitying myself any more, but everyone who comes to this pass, when the dear world slips away and you can no more hold it than you can catch the wind in your hands.

The talentless fool is going.

What am I thinking about in these last days? My books, of course, these vestiges of the forgotten religion, which have nevertheless taught me how to untie the knot of life.

Here is fair Byblos, the City of Books, where voices do not speak unasked, and thoughts do not come till they are

bidden. It was built in the quiet of the world, when there was more time and thought was green. It is the Forest of Arden whose trees flower into words. It is *Unter den Linden* and *Unter den Eichen*. There are miles of novels in long boulevards, gardens of philosophy, walkways of poetry, essays in suburbs, an old town centre rich in history, and ornate squares of memoir and drama. Each door has a name: Don Quixote lives here, beside Robinson Crusoe; Wordsworth walks with Aristotle in that garden; over there is Hitler explaining his motives to Freud as they sit together at a coffee table, while in the shade of those trees Sheherazade tells her stories to Immanuel Kant.

Now I look at these shelves of books and think: my father spent years collecting them, my mother added to them, and so did I. To what end? To whom shall I leave them? No one cares for books now. It seems such a pity that they will all be thrown to the winds, and yet that is inevitable. After all, I am going to throw myself to the winds, and for the same reason—that I shall go there in the end, and I would rather walk than be dragged.

This remains Hugh's library, more than mine, more than Margaret's. He gave as much love to it as any Alexandrian. He caressed the books, they gave him sensual pleasure, he even wrote poems about his books—naïve, rhyming poems of great sincerity.

I swear these books look at me with sad faces. They know I am the unworthy successor of the man who loved them so much. They know that when I am dead their great family will be broken up. They have sat there through the years like mossy stones. 'The Gentle Shepherd', Boccaccio, and the Tusitala edition beside the bay window; the historians of Ancient Rome; John Cowper Powys {has anyone heard of him now?}; Margaret's detective and

gardening books; the many sets of Shakespeare. They have heard the chimes at midnight, they have seen us into the dark.

Hugh grew frustrated, and ill, and mad, and then fell to pieces—so, in an even more squalid and horrifying way, did Margaret—and they still sit there, those silent witnesses. They will see me depart too. I wish I had an inheritor, but I do not. Some barbarian will dump them in a charity shop where they will be sold off for pennies beside discount clothing and old articles of furniture; and the library my father gave his life to will be a brief rumour, and then not even that.

Still, I have fond memories of them. Here is Froissart, two volumes dating from 1839. I remember finding them in a second-hand shop, which was little more than a junk shop, lying on the floor without any covers, and Hugh took them to the book binder in the public library and had them cleaned, and trimmed, and rebound—and how glad they made me. That was nearly forty years ago—'63 or '64—long enough ago for me to write about them in a school essay {'My Most Treasured Possession', or some such title} to the mystification of the English teacher. They still sit there, on the shelf in my bedroom. What will happen to them when I am gone?

And here is 'An Infamous Army', one of Margaret's books. I read Georgette Heyer when the sun had left the sky and things were so wretched I wished that I would die in my sleep. That must have been '66 or '67. Why was I wretched? School, I suppose. It baffled me. It was a prison and I did not know why I was there.

Here is 'Prester John'. How many times did I read it? And each time I rode with David Crawfurd to the store at Umvelos, and sought the jewels that once gleamed in

Sheba's hair. The incorruptible jewels which I must now seek are in the deep deep water where it is cool and quiet and a man can forget his hunger and his pain.

Here is, and here is. This is the port from which I will set sail for the undiscovered country. In my way I too will follow Drake and Cabot, Hudson, Cook and Raleigh. I too have Eldorado in my mind; a place like the moon, of hope and faith, beauty and kindness, where is treasured everything wasted on earth; and I shall walk the path of Astolpho, seeking what is lost.

Now I look back over these pages I have just finished, and think: these are my pleasant voices, my nightingales; these death cannot take. These things I will hold up against my ruin.

Untrue, of course. I know it. I think it anyway.

And what else?

Oh, the films I've seen. I am lucky to have been a watcher of the Golden Age. John Wayne and James Stewart, Cary Grant and Marlene Dietrich, Douglas Fairbanks, Senior and Junior both, James Mason {the noblest Roman of them all}, and the Hepburns, Katherine and Audrey.

The last thing I saw on television was 'The Hunchback Of Notre Dame' from 1939. Then the machine gave up the ghost, and I did not replace it, because I decided that I would rather spend my final months with the memories of what I have seen. They are evergreen, those memories, but when I see a film again, and I think of the time before —thirty years, forty—and the hopes, and the excitement, and the company I was in, then I am saddened, time tramps over my grave with heavy boots, and the faces of actors —probably long dead—whisper to me that I too will soon be gone, and leave nothing behind.

I know it.
The voice tells me so anyway.
"I know," I repeat, again and again.
The voice is insistent as the ticking of the clock.

And what else?

My garden. I am sick at heart, but work in my garden like Candide.

I plant seed which I will never see flower; bury hope in the soil for a future I will not know, but in which I have faith. I hope I will be followed by somebody who appreciates gardens.

Every gardener is a John of Gaunt. His is a natural patriotism. It does not wave a flag or blow a trumpet, scream hate nor shudder with lies. I feel a part of the democracy in my garden which I do not feel anywhere else. The Grin is alien in this place, and the totalitarians have never strode this way. It is not even a place to make the big money. Gardeners do not readily go to war. They are not given to marching in step and singing in chorus. Flowers do not grow to order, nor do greenfly come in conspiracies. Gardening is the art of observing evolution, and with the earth in my fingers I feel something in common with Copernicus charting the progress of the stars.

God Almighty first planted a garden, and perhaps every garden is an echo of that First Garden where two walked in paradise. It must be, because here I feel that life is graceful as birds in flight, and constant as the rolling waters.

A colony of ants is slowly destroying my house. And seeing these ants, I think that perhaps existence is that Russian doll of infinite proportions; perhaps there is something which looks to the ant the way the ant looks to me; perhaps I look like an ant to God Almighty, who looks

like an ant to some other Greatness yet; perhaps there is something that regards the atom as a universe, and perhaps the universe is itself an atom of some vaster whole. Ending nowhere.

Ants too are time's fools. For ants also existence is sad and lonely, perhaps.

Where in all this am I? I do not tell myself that I am insignificant. I tell myself that I am a very significant part, along with all my kindred, a unique and glorious part—and I exonerate myself of the coming sin of murder. I go, that is all, and who knows where? Either God does not exist, or God is all that is. I will not weary my head with further speculation. I would like to return to the earth of my garden, but I know that will not happen. Perhaps I shall return to the earth of the cosmos, and find that the Nothing itself is merely a part of all that is. And perhaps I shall be immortal, because that which I am a part of is never-ending.

We walked here, children of time, without clouds on our faces. And life was sweet.

Now—all I can hope is that death will have a certain gloomy dignity.

And what else?

My cat, of course; Max, the enemy of all constraint. He is very dear to me. He was liberty to the Romans, and in Egypt sacred to Isis of the moon.

He is my little one, my wee man. He has a white upper lip, and Margaret used to call him our butterfly boy, because it looked as though a butterfly had landed on his mouth.

I have arranged my death to suit him. The 26th, my birthday, is a Saturday. I will tell his family-to-be that I am going away for a couple of days on Sunday morning, and ask them to come and feed him at his usual time, 4.00 pm. On

Friday night I will not sleep. I will eat my own dinner at midday on Saturday, five or so hours earlier than usual, feed Max when his dinner hour comes round, eat a light snack, run the bath, and hope to be dead by five. I will leave two bowls out for him. One, with his late-night snack, where he will find it on the bunker; and the other, with his breakfast, in my bedroom, where he will go to wake me, as is his wont. And of course his cat flap will be open so he can come and go as ever.

Ask Isis to be kind to me, Max. Tell Diana that her forester is returning. The minion of the moon is coming back home.

Be happy without me, my little man.

And what else?

Nothing. Nothing at all.

That is freedom of a sort.

Well, here I am, ready for my trip to the distant shore.

I had expected to die with a mixture of resignation and defiance, but I realise now that I am not without faith, nor without hope either. For I have faith that there is good in the world, and that it is worth sustaining, and cherishing, and protecting, and fighting for if needs be. And I have hope that there will be others to do it who will be better than I am, stronger and braver, more talented and less clumsy, and that they will succeed where I did not, and that the good will flourish, despite everything. And if anyone, man or woman, ever thinks of me, I hope it will be with a little charity, because I was not the worst of men, just feeble, and silly, and sometimes rather uncertain, and capable of talking nonsense, and a little bit confused. My own fate no longer troubles me, and after all the defeats I have known,

that is victory, I think.

Doubts still come at me, barking, whining, scratching for attention. Why am I doing this? And is it really going to be this easy? Maybe the bags won't work—maybe I'll give myself brain damage instead—maybe ...

Should I turn back even now? Part of me longs to do so. "Stop!" it cries. "Don't waste your life! Surely you can find something to give to the world?" Perhaps Bosnia is just an excuse. Perhaps failing to write worthy books is just an excuse too. But the answer comes with ponderous inevitability: "You have nothing that is of value to anyone. Everything you ever tried to do failed. All your life has been a waste. End it now." And so I will. I shall not live on under the fading trees of a land I no longer know, and die at the end, sans everything.

If in birth I proved to be stronger than Death, now in choosing Death I am proving to be stronger than Life, stronger than the voice which coaxes me to wait and see the sun rise just one more time, stronger than the hope that my ill fortune is about to change, stronger than the faith that a good God will make it so, stronger than the charity which forgives me my many weaknesses, stronger than the memory of Svetlana and all those bodies in that field.

Life's hold now is in the thought that my cat will miss me, that the birds and the hedgehogs whom I feed will miss their breakfast, that the fox who comes to drink at night will miss his water, and no one will give nuts to the squirrel in the tree.

It will not take the sword of Alexander to cut that knot.

So my time is come to be gone. I go to my death. The long day's task is done, and I have nothing to show for it. Lord, now let your servant depart in peace for he desires to be dissolved. Nobody knows that I am going to do this.

Yards away, on the night of my suicide, there will be people sleeping for whom the morning will come, as it shall not for me. Yes, I feel lonely, bitterly lonely—but determined.

If it all goes as planned I won't die by any act of sudden violence. My body shall not lie bloody on any valiant field. No Edith of the Swan's Neck shall weep for me. Instead, a sleep without a waking—and if something does wake it will not be me, it will not be this talentless man; it will be something that knows nothing about what was, just as I know nothing. But if I wake—I, this fool—how will I know whether I am alive or dead? And if alive, how will I end myself except by violence?

No, when I die I shall cease to be. I shall be a bridegroom in my death, changed utterly. Abandon all other ideas. Nothing awaits me. Nothing is my future. I shall not be, nor shall I come again. But perhaps I have left something to the world of life, perhaps I have fertilised the soil in just one little place so that another flower, a brighter flower, a stronger flower shall blossom where I fell, and it will be good. This is my hope, the one hope that has not left me, that stands beside me now like the Roman soldier, faithful onto death. This is my all, my Everlasting Home.

We must love and die, but we are destined only to die. We could live without love. It is our choice whether we love or not. This is the destiny which we make for ourselves. We must remember our common humanity and overcome the rest. We must remember that we are only part of creation and not its sole achievement. Set aside everything that is dusty and harsh and driven by trivial ambition. Remember that the Nothing is also the Everlasting, as the visible rises from the invisible like a white cloud of breath on wintry air.

Right to the very end I love words and the power of them.

I am reading 'Antony And Cleopatra' for the first time; likewise 'Micah Clarke', and a life of Raleigh. Re-reading —how many things am I re-reading? ... Aeneas's entry into the Underworld. Polybius. Plutarch. The ancients seem attractive. For them, suicide is dignified and natural. No panel ordered Socrates to have counselling. No one told Brutus he was just being selfish, or dismissed Cassius's act as that of a neurotic.

I will run a bath, the sort of bath my grandfather used to dream about, route-marching across the weary roads of France in 1916, and in this warm, wet place I will execute myself. If the sedatives and bags do not work, the hair dryer will be plugged in to the mains. There should be enough electricity to kill me, quickly, with only a second or two of pain. It will be like a pistol shot, and the hair dryer is shaped rather like a pistol. I will reach for it like Young Werther. How strange it all appears. I never thought that my pilgrimage would end like this.

When I was that little boy who felt loved and never thought once of killing himself, the bath was a place I played in. These past months I have found myself thinking daily about the toy soldiers with whom I played all those years ago, and about whom I have not thought consciously since. Is this a well-rounded circle? Is this the world serpent that eats its own tail?

Well, I warmed both hands before the fire of life; it sinks, and I, like the poet, am ready to depart; but, unlike the poet, I do not leave a clutch of evergreen lines behind me. I can only hope that soon I shall be beyond trouble and sorrow, and the words "sad", "cold" and "alone" will cease to have meaning.

When I was a very little boy I wanted to touch the

moon, and now I am going to kill myself with a rubbish bag tied over my head.

My home looks so pleasant. The clock ticks quietly. My books gather dust by the hour. The garden, where I didn't succeed in growing anything very impressive, is still a gentle place. And most of all, Max, my family and my friend, who likes to sleep in the armchair by the fire—God, even though You don't exist, please don't let anything bad happen to him.

In a story, I would meet someone in these last days who would give me a renewed sense of purpose in life; but I know that no one will.

Farewell books, pages of long-forgotten lore.

Farewell sweet life that I have loved so.

Farewell pretty women. Yours be every joy and treasure.

Farewell failure.

Go forth into the open day, and live when I am dead, whoever reads this.

Farewell, and be kind.

I feel as though I am about to start on a long journey, even though I don't consciously believe it. How difficult it is to part with the idea that I shall no longer breathe between the heavens and the earth.

Perhaps I will go to the spaces between the stars where the indifferent gods have their home.

Perhaps I will stand in a meadow of blue and yellow flowers, and there shall be no suffering, and all things will be peaceful.

Perhaps angels will sing for me.

God, if You exist, have mercy on whatever soul of mine exists.

And now I shall prepare to kill myself.

A second or two of pain, probably rather excruciating

pain, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.

The righteous shall flourish, and there shall be an abundance of peace, so long as the moon endureth.

And then?

Appendix
The Last Day

Well, here I am. It is the morning of my last day on earth. It promises to be a nice day, this 26th of July, 2003. I wonder what it was like, this day in 1951 when I was born at ten something in the morning, according to the birth certificate?

I feel quite composed. I have a sense of anticipation, of suppressed excitement, but no real regrets for my lost life. I haven't visited old haunts. I haven't passed Haddington Place for several months. I went out walking last night to keep myself awake, and my feet took me through Ramsay Garden to Castlehill and Cannonball House by the entry to the Castle esplanade. I sat on the steps there awhile, thinking of many things.

When I left for London in the summer of '73, thinking that I was going to make myself a famous writer, I felt much the same. I stood for a long time at the big window of Lady Stair's House looking over the city to the hills of Fife. It was raining, as I remember. It would be.

Where is old Edinburgh, the place that I remember?

"Praised Be The Lord My God, My Strength And My Redeemer. Anno Dom. 1638."

Major Weir did not manifest himself, nor Kirkcaldy of Grange, nor did I see Randolph's men scaling the rocks. No shouts of "A Douglas!", no "Gardyloo!", no "Cleanse the Causeway!" I wish it wasn't all nonsense, but I think it is all nonsense. Why should I be disappointed? But I am. Part of

me is still the little boy who wanted to cock the bonnet of Bonnie Dundee.

Nothing stirred on the High Street. In another week's time the successful people will be performing here on Arts Council grants. Some of it will be good, some of it will be cynical propaganda. The totalitarian stink will be there, and the wet teeth of the Grin.

I alone won't be there. The shadows will do without me.

Nothing waits for me. I will not be in a few hours time. And for that reason I am not afraid.

Not happy, no. But not as sad as I thought I might be.

Determined. Calm.

Disappointed.

But not afraid.

"Fear The Lord And Depart From Evil. 1622."

I don't think of my parents any more. I don't think of Svetlana and Ludmilla. They are all in the house of eternal sleep. {I don't believe that they are anywhere, and yet I say that. Who knows?—it might be true.}

I think of Max. I wish I could explain to him. It will take him a little while to get used to the fact that our house is no longer his house. I would accept a thousand years of damnation to be certain that he is going to be happy.

I think of the neighbours. They will need to find someone else to look after their hedges now. I hope they keep their hedges. I hope the garden stays green. I hope whoever comes to the house will value the garden, and look after the lavender. And the lilac at the back. And the poppies where the cats are buried.

I am quite content to die. However, I am as useless and impractical as a chocolate teapot, and I know it. All this past week I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I am

going to make a hash of things. What could go wrong? The bags seem sound enough: they are 'heavy duty' sacks. They seem air-tight. The fastening, then? The rubber band, though the biggest size I could get, is uncomfortably tight round my neck. I have dug a long stretch of elastic out of Margaret's old sewing box. {When did she buy it?—and for what purpose? Could she have foreseen the use it would be put to?} Which should I use? The elastic would be more comfortable, and therefore less likely to wake me—but less secure. The band more secure, but more likely to wake me. I will use both.

Even though the plastic bag has a capacity of 120 litres, the air changes quickly when my head is inside it. In little more than a minute my breathing accelerates, my heart starts to pound, and I am seized by a dread which is difficult to describe. What can it be, this apprehension? I am welcoming death, but my body is not. All existence is mental, of course, but ... But what? I am a single entity, but whereas my noumenal aspect wants to die, my phenomenal aspect dearly wants to live. Suppose, no matter how tired and drugged I am, this animal keeps on waking and fighting for breath?

I could resort to electrocution, but supposing that caused an electrical fire? Max would escape through his flap, but it would be inconvenient for the neighbours, to say the least, if my last act on earth was to reduce their habitation to smoke and ashes. So much for making assurance doubly sure. My hope had best be that the two bags will suffice to choke the life out of me if I am soundly and deeply asleep, and no air slides past the fastening.

And if I am conscious, will I have the devotion to let myself smother, and do nothing about it?

Yesterday morning, Friday, I woke up at seven, and I

have kept myself awake since. When I shuffle off my mortal I will have been awake for thirty-four hours. Hopefully, I will be so tired already when I take the sedatives and pull the bags over my head, that I will not wake as friend suffocation starts to dig his fingers into my throat and suck the oxygen out of my lungs. And if I do? Then I must be like Cato's daughter, Portia, who stifled on the fumes of burning coals ... Or for that matter like every other wretched character who has choked himself to death at the end of an exhaust pipe or a rudimentarily contrived noose when life's door was still within his grasp and ready to open for him once again whenever he reached for it. I am only now beginning to realise how much determination it takes to will yourself to die, and how much courage you need to do it, and say no to the life that beckons and promises you just a few more seconds of sweet, sweet air.

Be determined, find that courage, and—it should work.

In twelve hours time I should be a gone goose.

Should?

There is still uncertainty. I am a fool and a failure, after all; it is impossible to believe that I am finally going to succeed at something. Suppose I fail to destroy myself, what then? I get woken up on Sunday, when the police come a-calling, and have to do it all again. Inconvenient, no more; but suppose I wake up in hospital, brain-damaged, blind, paralysed—bed-ridden for the next thirty years? Dear God, anything but that! The worst succession of secret, black and midnight hags that my imagination can conjure, but not that! That is Room 101.

Now it is six o'clock in the morning of my birthday, and I am writing this, partly to analyse my thoughts for that fabulous beast, the reader, who is as likely to encounter

them as I am a unicorn; and partly to keep myself awake, because I am very tired, and if I were to sit down in my nice, comfortable, seductive armchair I would fall asleep within the minute, which I must not do—and how I long to do it!

Sometimes I take breaks from this writing and walk up and down, because the day has risen over the curve of the world, Max has had his breakfast and gone out for his morning stroll, and I talk to myself, as I do every day, and constantly, in any case.

Sometimes I sit in a hard-backed chair and read Polybius's account of Hannibal's campaign in Italy. I have endured the crossing of the Alps, the tribal ambushes, the skirmish on the Ticinus, the battle of the Trebia, and the destruction of the legions by the mist-shrouded shore of Lake Trasimene. Cannae is yet to come. I wonder what chapters Brutus was reading, that night before the battle?

Now it is seven. Ten hours to go, and I am longing for my bed. I tell myself that soon I will sleep for ever—because whatever my mind tells me, however convincing the logic is, I can't believe that there is not even nothing ahead. I can't believe that I shall never see Sunday. I know this is just my human vanity. I want to continue in existence so much that I have hallucinations in which I do continue to exist, either in this world because of my failure, or in the next because there is a heaven after all.

Can I deduce, then, that the concept of heaven exists because of human failure?

Well, soon I'm going to find out.

I have just spent an hour in the back garden. Here my ghost will go its silent walks.

This week I have trimmed the hedge for the last time.

Mowed the lawn for the last time. Weeded the earth for the last time.

{I don't want to die. I don't want to die. I don't want to die.}

The bees have come to the lavender. I'm so glad. Lavender-flavoured honey.

I should have trimmed it back a bit further. It overhangs the path so much you can't walk up it without the lavender brushing your trousers, and you have to be careful not to bring a bee into the house with you, hanging to the hem of your jacket.

The sorrel is beginning to spread in the front again, and probably it is going to be some time before the front gets weeded properly.

{Could I write about my garden?

Don't be stupid. Nobody wants anything that you do.

Why not?

Because you are useless.

I know.}

The morning is passing. Not long now.

Most of these last 72 hours I have spent indoors. My house has never seemed so pleasant, so comfortable, such a glen of tranquillity, such a place of peace. How nice it would be to live here for thirty more years and then die in my sleep. I could. I could change my mind. Why should I give this pleasing abode to some drunk who swears and smokes too much? Why shouldn't I live here with my cat, doing harm to no one and tending to the lavender? Why not?

I know the answer, of course. The question is just like chewing on a sore tooth. Failure, you will never catch me alive any more.

On Tuesday I took a number of letters to the lawyer that he will pass on after the police tell him about my death. I have bought the last bottle of milk I will need to buy. The 28th of July is its use-by date. It will outlast me by two days. It will still be fresh when I am corruption. Every little step is a Rubicon. With every little step what I am going to do becomes more and more irrevocable. I want to put my face in someone's lap and cry. But there is no one.

Nearly fifty years ago I sat cross-legged on the floor of what we called the turret room at the end of the long corridor above McDonald Road, and read about Everest in 'The National Geographic', and wanted to be a mountaineer. Nearly fifty years ago I sat there and read about Kon-Tiki, and wanted to be an explorer. I wanted to be so many things.

Now I sit and look at my bookcases. I have read several stories these past hours, while Hannibal rests his weary head. I wish I could write like Somerset Maugham. 'Rain' is his most famous story, though 'The Outstation' deserves to be. I wish I could write like H.E. Bates. 'The Gabriel Hounds' was my 'Flying Officer X'. Failed, of course; failed, failed. I wish I could write.

Damn, why can't I?

I dropped into Ottakar's on Wednesday. There is a new, and very big, book out about the Gulag. When I wrote a book about this, nobody wanted it. When I offered to write a Big book about this, nobody wanted that. Everything I say is trite and foolish and interests no one. Ah, well. So long as the book is written—and read—that is all that matters. I tell myself. But jealousy stabbed me in the eyes like a sharp green needle nevertheless.

So I admit my bias and my mixed motives, and having admitted them, state frankly that the Nurnberg of

Communism is yet to come.

Will it ever?

One day, one day, God willing, there will be a great reckoning, a great washing of all the dirt that has stuck to the face of humanity. And when the idols of state power are finally overthrown, when that savage and sadistic rite is finally one with Moloch and Baal, then Sartre, McDiarmid, all those pornographers of violence, those vicious old men slithering in blood, and their craven hordes, hands dripping with secret murders, will stand accused of crimes against people, nature and language.

I won't see it, but I believe that truth and decency will be victorious, and when I am long dead the lies that smell worse than corpses will haunt the evil mouths that voiced them.

I have no logical grounds for this belief either, except my faith that there is such a thing as goodness fighting against all the odds, and my hope that one day it will prevail. Then will the Grin be wiped away at last, and the totalitarians will become a footnote to a story telling how cruelty and deceit once strode the world wearing the mask of love.

I won't see it, but others will. This is my belief, and my hope.

But I could live to see it, couldn't I?

"You?" says the Voice.

I don't want to do this. I don't. I want to live happily, and look after my cat, and look after my garden, and have lots of friends, and talk about life and literature, and do things, achieve things, help people, fight for the truth, create fine works!

"You?" says the Voice.

Yes, I say. And the Voice laughs.

"You are talentless, and useless, and nobody likes you, and people only want to talk about money and football anyway. Well, fighter for the truth—why don't you admit the truth of that?"

I know. It is true.

Is there no place in the world for me?

No.

Is there no one? I want somebody human, not just a cat. {Sorry, Max.}

No, there is no one.

Die, you fool.

So I have hope. However hopeless I am, I have hope. I can say that as this last afternoon begins.

I have said that I am faithless, but that is not true either. I know that now, on this day of my death. I have a faith. It is that the good which I remember happened, it was: it was not invented by my mind in a fit of longing, or pleasing nostalgia. I have faith that my senses do not altogether deceive me, and that a world without certainty still abounds in probabilities.

I have faith that what stands in front of me is there indeed, and that the sounds which come to me from outside are not just the buzzings of my own insanity, but are the stirrings of creatures full of life.

I have faith that I am not alone in thinking that murder is wrong; that suffering should not be; and that the people I once knew were worthy, that the fate which befell them was undeserved, and that it should not have come.

I have that faith, rooted in past decency.

For the present, that impossible concept, this world which is such a fair and foul place—I find that it is rich in

love, and I am disappointed, not ultimately in it, but in myself for failing it so.

And the people I pity, the people of the present, I pity them because they turn their houses into castles, and fear the streets, and hate each other, and lie to themselves. I pity them because their frigid desires hang like icicles from a rone, and they are so brittle, and when they fall, what remains?

It is so easy to philosophise in a garden, and yet how important it is to find the philosophy that will carry you through the places where the monsters are, and the dead, and the depths of hell. And in the foul of the present are all those things.

I think we must have faith in the past, love of the present, and hope for the future. Against all logic. With these we will shine like the stars of heaven, burn like candles on the altar of God.

Meanwhile I go to my death with all my immortal longings.

In a rubbish bag.

It is two o'clock already.

I will kill myself at five because that is after Max's dinnertime, and I don't want him to be hungry. And I want to die in daylight, and I want to hear children in the streets, and I want to know that life is going on around me. I want the sun to be shining when I go into the dark.

Oh, that I might know the end of this day's business 'ere it come!

And if I do not suffocate, I must destroy this mortal house of mine somehow. I don't have the brutal courage to stick a knife in my guts, or slash my wrists, or cut my throat. But whatever happens, I must not let my fears make a prisoner of me.

I think about the birds, too. They will miss their bath. And the fox who likes to drink out of it from time to time. And the squirrels. And the hedgehogs. Two come together; I don't know if they are husband and wife. One snuffles loudly, while the other seems to have a silencer at the end of his snout. Take care, all of you. Be happy.

Wouldn't it be nice to meet you all again in the everlasting mansion?

Day-dreams.

The dreams of a fish who looks at the sky.

Now is my time to play the Roman.

The children are playing outside, the way I used to do. How I wish I could tell them ... Tell them what? Oh, how good it is to be alive, and feel the sun on your skin.

That thin shade comes and cries in my face: "Stop! Stop! What are you doing? Don't throw your life away! Maybe you do have something to give to the world. Perhaps your luck is just about to change!"

I know your face, failure; all your arguments, cowardice.

I'm not afraid. Just sad and lonely. I'm only tearful when I tell my little Max that I love him.

If I had a daughter I would call her Rosemary—oh, rose of May!—it is such a pretty name. Rosemary for remembrance. I would remember ... all the things that are going to be destroyed in an hour's time.

In London I used to walk in Kensington Gardens in the early hours when the dawn was coming up and everything was still. I hadn't been in bed. I felt that I was a sentry, guarding the city from all evil. I remember that I sheltered under a tree from the rain one morning, and a fox trotted

along, and stopped, and stared at me, and his coat was sparkling with raindrops like jewels—and nobody knows that happened.

Rose of May!

I have faith, I have hope, I can even muster some charity. I wasn't the worst of men. Just weak and foolish —very foolish.

I have given Max an early dinner. He has gone out for his late afternoon stroll. I will put two bowls of food where he will find them, one on the bunker and one in the bedroom. His water is fresh. All the doors are open. Please don't miss me, Max. Please be happy, my little man.

Now my own final arrangements. They won't take long.

And then—talentless, useless, friendless.

Time to kill the fool.

It is four o'clock in the afternoon of my fifty-second birthday. Outside my door the lavender is in blossom. Hopefully, in an hour I will be dead. I will cut just a little bit of lavender and put it in the bag with me, and we will rush into the secret house of death together, my blossom and I.

It is time.

I hope my little book is seemly. It is my cloak. I draw it around me to cover my body and my sprawling limbs.

Sad. Lonely. Determined.

At this moment a beautiful morning is dawning over the Pacific. Goodbye brothers whom I never knew.

My day ends, and soon the end will be known.

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