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Songs From The Ocean

RAIN was falling in the streets of the city. Cold, hard, yellow rain.

About the buildings, shoppers floated and danced beneath the singing of the deluge. Long, slow monotonous dirge. People flitted about, swaddled in macs, transparent coveralls and army surplus parkas. Rain was falling in the streets of the city. Human flotsam riding out the tide.

Joseph lowered his gaze from the sludge-filled heavens. Wiped droplets of yellow water from his face. Flesh feels heavy about him, today. Garments are simply a burden.

He felt his skin yearning for warmth and freedom. Skin yearning for sunlight and space.

Joseph let out a long breath of moistened air. Looked to the window of the newsagents by him. Headlines tell of: politic this, politic this, politicians this, politic that. Oh, and an invasion somewhere overseas. And crops had failed in Africa. Again.

Heavy cold dankness seeped through the fabric of his parka onto the surface of his flesh.

Down the long grey street, through eternal precipitation, Joseph started. Hunched against the element. Crouched beneath the louring mass.

From the windows of the shops he passed he could witness mirrored images of self glowing back at him in electron synthesis. Glittering across the aisles of nation.

And more headlines on the billboards of the nationals:

Parliament exposed as an empty sham - soporific spectacle to keep you from harm...

Roses looking good again this year; little-known writer simply disappears...

Read all about it.

Joseph passed it all, absorbing vitrified logic. Sub-physiological transference of knowledge.

Violence. Pornographic. Entertain. Instamatic.

Inescapable prevalent global culture. Inescapable in soup of neuro-psychological mire.

He suppressed a cough. But from his lungs, the phlegm came anyway.

Scent of cherry blossoms drifting in the garden. Languid flags sing sun's blood grace. Daylight comes and life will burgeon. Dawn sheds entrails in blessed acid haze...

Joseph hadn't been in the city long. It was a new place to his senses. Its leaden sinuosity. Its decaying, concrete sensuality. A flavour of ages. Like many places he had seen throughout his life, the city had the over-arching, over-bearing sense of uniform. But, like all these places, it held its own particular nuances; its quirks and habits and fashions of spontaneity. Cancerous mutations create specific nature.

Joseph thinks - places can be: neurotic and frenzied; subdued and timeless. Sad and despairing. Holy.

All of these things. Any.

These are insinuations he has felt at various stages in his journey across the globe. These are things impressed upon hominid mind.

The nature of the beast about him? As yet, he has not the necessary information to compute. To equate fashions with geography and category. In time, it will come.

And now, snaking through boulevards, deserted and hollow, he fathoms the route of memory. To lodgings and shelter. Home.

Beasts scour dark the burgeoning skyline... iron reality under phosgene grey...

"Weather still foul, then?" Marise asks unnecessarily as he gets into the lobby from the landing, disgorging drenched vestment.

"Yeah - not pleasant," Joseph grimaces.

The chimes sing...

Marise carries a cooking pan. In candescent whiteness of the apartment. Phonolite fringing at confluence of wall and ceiling. Central facet on wall opposite egress: shibuichi depiction of the Mongol fleet being scattered. Marise's embellishment. The holy wind.

"Heard on the wireless," she's saying, "rain for the duration. Stormfronts - coming in from the east. So I heard."

"Yeah," Phil, from the sitting room, passing, engrossed in broadsheet vivisection, underneath the halberd and dagger adornment - arraigned in propriety fashion.

And just: "Yeah," as he walks on into the kitchen. Swiftly followed by Marise.

Joseph heads for the washroom, eager to be rid of the grime. Twenty first century weather. And our countries. And our little deaths and our victories. Accoutrement.

Creatures of greyness recede in the daybreak. Memory of rebirth decaying, degenerate...

Light. In four walls. Naked skin.

In washroom, man catches reflection. That face in the mirror. Is now: weathered and changeable. Hardened and variable.

Joseph is far from the land of his nurturing. Wrenched from the bosom of hearth and kin. The physiognomy he surveys can seem an alien thing at times. A thing not of his making. But, it is. Of course.

Cropped dirt-yellow hair, somewhat receded. Smudges spread over-large beneath dark blue eyes. Rouged skin drawn tight across narrow bony face.

Frail physique tells of Celt. Hint of Latin in the colouring. A blend of ingredients, is Joseph. A creature of contradictions. He knows it.

Happy enough. And savage. Capable of love. And violent.

But to work.

Razor for the stubble hair. Scour the pores of detritus. Grime and sludge and effluent. Muscle, flesh, blood. Made clear again. In the white room. And stillness, beneath the humming, within the catacomb.

Living creatures...

Beyond, the city breathes heavy rasps, like a black spiralling cancer.

Yes, he feels it.

Beyond, the atmosphere has poisonous redolence, tendrils of vapour from industrial Armageddon.

Yes, he breathes it.

Sustenance.

"Like some?" asks Marise.

"It's good," vouches Phil, still nodding emphatically over journalese logic. "Roses blooming..." he's mumbling.

"Must get some for the vestibule. Sometime..." from Marise. "Look nice in the centre." Blood red in the ether.

"Yeah, roses are nice," agrees Joseph. And thinks: yeah. Roses are nice...

"Sure?" Marise proffers remains of sashimi.

"Huh? Oh, no thanks. I'll do with a sandwich. Thanks."

And makes for fridge. Sets about preparing his repast.

Marise: "Down by the mall, today, there were: charities."

Phil: "Goaders."

"Homeless..."

"Loafers..."

Joseph turns to observe. They are apart, still. Marise in reverence of empty space. Phil perusing his paper.

"Prostitutes..."

"Children..."

"Families..."

"Criminal..."

Joseph, returning his attention to the feast before him. Cheese and chutney. Tomato and cucumber. Grated carrot and cold broccoli.

Asks: "Where did you go?" For something to say. For something...

"Oh..."

"All over..." the voices light, symbiotic paracletes. Indistinguishable to his ear. And the kettle's boiling. Reaching epiphany. And... now quiet again.

Phil skulking at the words before him, slouched over the table in the alcove of the kitchen. For all the world as if the garbage he reads in the newspaper will reveal the secrets of the cosmos should he plumb the sense of the utterances enough. For all the world as if it truly meant something.

In the centre of white space, looking straight at Joseph, stood Marise. Empty. Unwondering.

"Go to my room," Joseph says. "Tired."

Marise looking. Her darkened skin; her liquid eyes. Her violet hair, cropped to the fashion of the age.

"Go to my room..."

Marise just looking.

And is out. And is alone...

In simian twilight...

Joseph flipped on the visiograph. Schlieren reality. Fluid and sonorous about him. Stratification of chromatic language.

And audio...

Pitches of animal. Lost in ineffable. Medium. Slow and moving. Unidentified life-forms... communication from the depths.

"Somewhere midway between California and New Zealand. Thereabouts..." says man.

"Two, three miles down... Maybe."

In darkness, strobosphere. In vivid schizophrenia. This urban mind makes its new reality... Joseph listens. To the creature.

Words are: "No idea" and "What it is."

He switches off the visiograph. And the noise becomes a ghost.

Time...

Motion...

Outside...

The dogs were about, barking. The neon garish, forbidding. Overload senses. Neural fomenting. Meltdown.

Porn palaces and sex emporiums flourished amid bars and low-life cafes in the district of the city known as

Lateran Mansions. Silent apertures, lurking grey faces and financial exchange. Amid these places he would find himself - always. The secret boulevards, the hidden wynds. Avenues of blackness, staring eyes and...

Bar.

The Sangraal.

"What you like?" woman asks.

Joseph: "Beer."

"W... ki..." from within cascading music. Air is blue. Forms are blurring.

"Huh?"

Woman leans over: "What kind of beer d'y want?"

"Oh..."

He tells her and receives purchase.

"Special on tonight," says she. "Gathering..."

Eyebrows raise. A question.

But she just repeats: "Gathering."

And is gone.

On red haze. Indigo distance.

Joseph returns gaze to murk. Of middle ground.

People about. Together. Watching in spaces.  
Appraising.

Reading...

ARTIFICIAL PRESERVATION OF CULTURE IS A WASTE OF TIME  
AND RESOURCES

But within chaos, must be recognition. So moves across.

And now...

Past the mutineers. Past the dark children. Through  
the empty spaces and iron darknesses, he finds Valance.

From his table, the man rises.

"Joseph, how goes it?"

They shake hands.

"Valance. Not bad, not bad."

"Got fixed up yet?"

"Yeah. Got a place. Near the centre."

"Good. That's good." Form within the metallic cadences of music.

Introductions.

"You've met Win. Ezra."

Nodding of heads. Sparse courtesies. Yeah, him. And the Asian guy. Nods.

"And this is Julia," Valance says, nodding to a woman by the periphery of the gathering.

Sallow type by this lighting. Short hair and shrouded eyes. Reserving. Instinct makes Joseph offer greetings; extends his palm. The woman reciprocates. Like her. Trust immediate, he can tell.

"Good," says Valance, "To business. To business."

On the table they dimmed the light, coagulating the gloom further. Set apart on a little dais and shrouded on two sides by plasti-metal filigree. Music provided an additional barrier. This place made a good locus for their head-to-heads. Made sense.

And so, in darkness, the creatures jabbered.

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On Sunday, ambling through the city, away from the commercial centre, by the eastern quarter, Joseph came to a derelict place forgotten by ineffable trends of human. The columns.

He came to it quite unexpectedly, while meandering down crooked, cracked boulevards. It was a neglected piece of green space, left to become overgrown. And poking up from the vegetation: grey-white pillars and withered architecture. Emitting its own natural gravitas.

By its parameters, there were residential areas, yet. Squalid tenements, the designs of long-dead planners. Some landings still bearing evidence of life. A child's pram, here and there. Or a grizzled old face, watching him silently pass across the landscape.

A pocket of societal relegation, Joseph judged.

As he passed into the garden, he found himself being drawn further away from the distractions of the city. Through the decaying iron gates, past the first signs of marble masonry, skewed, here and there, in places. Toppled completely in others.

Over rioting wildflowers and nettles and dockleaves, through which there occasionally peeked the chipped, delicate physiognomies of igneous cherubs. Perched upon monolith plinths, inscrutable and timeless. Past burned-out campfires and empty liquor bottles.

Past all this - and still...

There were arches, first. Singing trees wavered about stained alabaster facades that ran on into reaches outwith the limitations of his eyes. Further in, the sounds of the city completely dissipated and, about him, Joseph spied little black birds perched on the naked branches of deciduous arbours. Above, there was even a hint of azure. Breaking the greyness.

Deeply, he breathed the air. And it was clean...

A libation to this felicity. Embracing ancient flame. Time and memory dissipate. To create sacred oblivion...

Joseph moved beyond the facade, stepped within the boundaries of the gardens proper.

The arches divested their vistas of serried columns which ran away from the eye in unspecific geometric patterns. White walls disgorging plaster, displayed remnants of baroque paintings. Vivid and gloomy and theatre across naked walls.

Within, Joseph found himself moving over cracked paving stones towards the cluster of stone buildings that he supposed were the warranty for the centrifugal frippery. And as he moved across this transforming landscape of civility giving over to wilderness, he became aware of the profound silence that clung about the place. A silence, it seemed, that provided the matrix for latent sonic tapestry.

Gently, like the petals of a chrysanthemum in bloom, the silence of the buildings disgorged their secret music.

Violins and cellos. Low, sonorous movements played counter to a high lament of finer strings. Sadness and fragile. Delicate and humane. This civilisation.

From somewhere, he heard a voice. That said: "I'm just an old man, trying to make my way home..." And I'm just an old man, trying to make my way home...

And then the music faded. Making the emptiness ever more profound by its passing.

Joseph moved further towards the interior. He found himself presented with a monolithic edifice - but, searching this for some sign of egress, he eventually came upon an aperture placed centrally in the portico. Above, there was an inscription. He didn't recognise the alphabet. But understood the information.

#### TEMPLE OF DAWN

Within. And living.

The temple's candescence lifted him and he felt his flesh become vital again. On the lattice floor, he trod delicately. Revering the patterns woven into geographic form. Tribute to human conscience and empathy, it said.

Delving deeper, Joseph found he could hear noises, perhaps emitting from vibrating atoms within the marble. The noises grew more tangible as his senses seemed to stir themselves in this place. And as he listened, it sounded like... it sounded like...

The ocean. In all its undiscovered layers: protozoans and Gulper Eel; narcomedusae and benthic storms. And from the land above - animals of the savannah. Congregating serendipity. All this, information to his ears.

Amid this gentle shushing, he walked past gargantuan depictions, full of savage contrasts of light and darkness:

Naked woman leaning against her broad sword, the light falling upon her body, creating a luminous cradle in the darkness of the painting. She is kneeling and despairing, withered in the rain and muck - her long straggled hair obliterating her features...

And there: dawn breaking through the greyness - over a distant city. In the foreground is a spring arbour in which figures stir, as if invigorated by its coming.

Through such chambers, Joseph found himself wandering, all exquisitely spacious and empty - a cathedral in which the mind and body might blossom, perhaps.

Music and silence by turns. Blankness and depiction juxtaposed in serene contrast on the plaster. All working to some intuitive knowledge of cerebral physiology,

setting the neurons sparking in hitherto undiscovered patterns.

As he wandered further, Joseph found himself being drawn towards the focal point of the temple, ushered by ineffable geometric designs in the architecture.

And, in time, he came to the central chamber. Amid the haze and chimes, the iridescence: a candour.

Set upon a podium, beneath high dome - scripture.

Joseph makes his way to the book, his footfalls echoing sonorously about him. The book is open, somewhat off midway in the text. Leather bound and ancient, a weighty tome.

The alphabet, again, is alien. But from it, logic springs to his eyes, clearing his vision.

From within the unknown bounds of their form, hears: cadences of a child.

That imports...

This, the municipality. Here, the order of governance. This, the den of oppression. Braying. Ignoble. Democracy.

Must perish.

Our bodies of iron; our weapons of steel; our souls of fire. Our willingness.

Attempt to take the reins of power - make. In complete. Seriousness.

Bide the children.

Here, Joseph stops reading. Light dies from the pages of the manuscript. The voices of innocents fade from his ears. A great length of time must have passed, because his wrist watch tells him so. And outside, he supposes, darkness has come.

As he left the interior of the temple, Joseph could feel the silence of night, pregnant in the air about him. The great hush - come to still human hearts once more.

From within the hush came the tolling of distant bells, their music brought to his ears on some vagary of the breeze. A sound of home. A sound he had not heard for a long time. Acting upon some whimsy, he decided to follow it to the source.

Beyond the decades of the marble walls, in the wild garden, in the empty, decaying wash-blue streets. Joseph in motion. Circumnavigating the urban geology to take his senses to the source of sobriety.

Following the toll of summons - calling pilgrims to make their penitence. To extirpate psyches of imaginary demons.

He took some time in his walking. Back streets and cul-de-sacs. Reversions and retracing. But eventually:

The little building stood before him, blue-grey and gemutlich, harbouring the faithful in these dim twilight hours of nostalgia. From inside the church, he could hear the quiet, swirling tones of a chorus. It was a song he was not familiar with but, somewhat to his surprise, he found its low exhortations drawing gently upon his consciousness. Signalling him in.

Joseph looked upon passing worshippers from the opposite side of the street, under the sulphurous illumination of night lights, as they crossed into the little church.

They were: the old, the fragile, the suffering. Those marginalised by machinations of liberal consumerism.

Emotionally, financially, physically - whatever. This made them happy. And that's all right. The sight of their number was both pleasing and saddening to Joseph's eyes at the same time.

Taking a deep breath to set his body in motion, he moved down the street some way. But a poignancy had entered his heart and he found some nascent emptiness within him opening up, devouring will.

Maybe, he thought, he would join the pilgrims at their singing after all. Yes, maybe...

But after pausing on this notion for a while, he managed to pull himself away from the trance of the chorus. And, once more, headed into the dim night streets.

On Monday evening, he wasn't doing much. Bored with the TV and radio, he decided to look up Julia.

"The cinema?" he said over the phone, from the call box.

"We're not supposed to meet outside..."

"Yeah, yeah. But, Christ, what harm can a movie do?"

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Julia calculating.

"All right," she said, eventually. "Where d'you want to meet?"

"Oh? Where's good?"

"The Victory Statue?" she said, "By the House of the Republic. Know it?"

"Yeah, ah, think so..."

"Near Mons Gropius Latitude, on the Seventh Corner," Julia explained.

"Okay, see you there, then." Joseph moved to put the phone down. Then remembered: "Oh, shall we say seven?"

"Half past," from Julia.

"Sure."

"What's on, anyway?" her tone somewhat lighter.

"Christ, no idea. See when we get there, eh?"

"Ah, yeah - sure..."

"See you in a bit, then." And Joseph returned the handle to its cradle, his heart now somewhat happier.

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By the time he found the Victory Statue, he was late. By about twenty minutes. Bad form and he knew it.

So did Julia. She huffed a little as they passed down the broad expanse of Agricola Aspect, with the parkland silent and still to their right and the inky-black Zhulins gliding soundlessly about them on the city prospects.

Over Triumph of Capitalism Boulevard, past the looming edifice of the House of the Republic, massive and illuminated in the electric night air, towards the commercial centre where all the cinemas were to be found, along with the bars and clubs and cafes and night-fare.

"Seven thirty means something else where you're from, does it?" and "Bloody freezing cold night like this" and "Probably miss the film now and..." she says to him.

"Yeah, sorry," he mumbles, inadequately, feeling more amused in a mischievous kind of way than genuinely contrite.

"Should think so, too," she parries.

And on they walk. By the silent brooding trees standing enmeshed in their protecting wire skirts, drooping and bedraggled in the hostile urban atmosphere.

Over cracked cobblestones, past immaculate looming tenements, pristine and silent near the seat of governance. Down dimly lit bi-sections of geometric avenues, Joseph found himself glancing.

Monday night. Was a silent time in the city, it seemed.

Julia was looking good. Even more so than before. As they wound their way through the precincts, he glanced at her diminutive form, striding by him, setting a bracing pace. A hint of make-up, he thought, about the eyes and lips. Nothing flash. Just so. Her red hair arranged somehow differently to what he remembered - in some fashion that he couldn't define; these things were always a mystery to him. And her clothes were... what was it? Good? No... Nice. Yeah, that was it. She was dressed nice. Again, one of those little social mysteries that had always perplexed him.

Walking along beside her, dressed in his usual shambolic thrown-together manner that was the same at work, at home, in the pub, wherever, he started to wish

he had made more of an effort. Perhaps she had been expecting it, he thinks...

Following Julia's lead, they diverted off the main thoroughfare that was Agricola Aspect, over a well-lit four-way intersection, with traffic lights biding over empty asphalt; into gloomy shadows and over a little hump-backed bridge. The sound of water burbling gently in the darkness below them.

Letting out a somewhat petulant sigh, Julia at last broke her aggressive brooding: "So, have you decided what we're seeing yet?"

"Um..."

"I presume there's something worthwhile on? I don't want to sit and watch any old rubbish." She turned, giving him an ominous, threatening look as if to emphasise the point.

He was ready for this. He had checked the evening paper just for this kind of eventuality.

"Well, how about 'Queen of the Iceni'?"

"Seen it."

"Or, 'The Passion of Sisyphus'?"

"Nah, not my cup of tea."

"Well, there's always 'Three Wise Men and e' Bairns Oop North'."

Another withering look. "Get real."

Oh dear. This wasn't at all going to plan.

And now: cinema.

The crowds had dissipated and, here too, the veins of the city were largely empty of life. They went up to the billboards. Looking at the times and schedules.

"Anything you fancy?" Joseph tried.

He waited a while, timorously, as Julia engorged the offerings.

At last: "Well, how about..."

"Yes! Why not?"

So, in they went, Joseph eagerly producing his wallet - at least to show that he was not entirely without social courtesies.

Later that week. In the Sangraal...

"Patriots of the Nu-Nu Government liars and thieves," hissed Valance at their table in the murk of the bar.

"Symptomatic of societal disease. Conspiratorial ignorance, seek to abolish," he enthused, hissing.

By the smallest possible effort - and the greatest possible stupidity...

Valance slammed his fist in the middle of the table. "Must die," he said.

Nods of solemn agreement from around the table. There was no dissension on this.

And now: "We have component A, component B, component D and component E. All that is missing is component C. Once this we have..."

Ezra: "All shall be ready..."

Julia: "Nothing to stop us..."

Win: "From the business of history."

And Valance: "Then to work."

And, then, to work.

After the meeting, as they stepped out of the mechanoid frenzy of the Sangraal, Joseph thought to ask Julia:

"Fancy a drink? Some other place?"

"Nah, I've got stuff on."

"Oh..."

"Some other time, maybe. But tonight's not good."

"Yeah. Okay."

Along the narrow back-ways of Lateran Mansions, pressing a path through the garble of humanity to be found in these parts, they wandered. Away from the Sangraal.

Eventually, the other members of the group having departed, Julia said: "You've come a long way to be here, Joseph."

"Yes, I suppose. It's a tradition of my people."

"To wander?"

"If you like. A latter-day diaspora." He gave a little laugh.

She was silent awhile, assimilating this information, it seemed to him.

"We're a restless sort," he tried, with a little shrug to fend off further analysis.

But, after awhile, Julia said: "It says something, I think."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose it does."

Now, he saw they had come to a crossing of ways. A confluence of river and road, away from the cloisters of Lateran Mansions and its labyrinthine sprawl of bar and brothel.

Before them stretched parklands. Here, they stopped, surveying the dark expanse, still and lifeless at this hour.

Like the surface of the ocean, undulating in darkness, the shape of the land seemed indistinct by night.

"Zlata Nametsi," Julia uttered.

To which Joseph found himself nodding. Zlata Nametsi.

By the bank of the river, weak luminescence emitted from a row of lamps, bleeding into the void.

Across the leaden waterway, the silent expanse of parkland stretched serenely towards distant thoroughfares where, Joseph could see, a trail of vehicles glided slowly along, like fireflies being sucked into the vastness of empty night.

"I leave you here," Julia said to him.

"Across there?" he said, with a nod towards the silent line of cars.

She gave a little nod, a smile. "It's not far. I'm used to it."

"Okay..."

They were still awhile, uneasy. He thought about kissing her. Wanted to; but it seemed yet inappropriate.

"See you next time," she cheeped.

"Yeah. Sure."

With a little wave, Julia was off, into the parklands. Joseph watched her figure recede for a little while. Then, with a small effort of will, he turned back in the

direction of the narrow wynds. To pick his own way through the encompassing darkness.

The next day at the Employment Exchange...

PEOPLE UNDERSTAND MONEY AND PEOPLE UNDERSTAND VIOLENCE  
AND THAT'S ALL THEY UNDERSTAND

Joseph read on a sign as he entered the imposing glass and sandstone offices of the Employment Exchange on Liberation Square.

Set in the grandiloquent splendour of this showcase plaza at the heart of the city, the offices of Employment Exchange were large and roomy and offered up serene vistas of spaciousness to the eye as one traversed across the plush purple carpet.

By display boards and lavish potted plants, people browsed about, searching the advertisements for some credible prospect of making a living.

Rather than waste time searching among the plethora of no-really-this-must-be-some-kind-of-joke jobs on display on the bill-boards, Joseph went straight to one of the desks to ask an officer about anything half decent that might be available.

"Wot koind ov job d'you wunt?" the middle-aged man asked, speaking with a bizarrely inflected accent which Joseph found hard to follow.

"One that pays bills," he replied.

"Wel, we kan opherr jow thees, or thees, or thees..." the man replied, from behind his dark hair, thick spectacles and bushy moustache.

He laid out some dirty white cards on the table in front of Joseph. Jobs like... washing dishes, serving fast food, handing out advertisements and taking money at public lavatories.

"Mmmm... isn't there anything else?"

"R jow kwalified?"

"Yes. Very." Joseph replied after his ears had made sense of what the man had said to him.

The man behind the desk seemed to ponder for a moment. Then, took out a file box from beneath his table and laid it before Joseph.

"Thees r al the secret jobs," he hissed, conspiratorially.

"The... secret jobs?"

"Yas. The wuns wee harrdly tel aniwun about."

"I see."

"Jas giv mee a momonet to see waht iz heer."

The man rifled through the cards for some time, Joseph waiting patiently all the while, watching the drifters and shifters and plant pots and grifters. Eventually...

"Yas. Heer - i chink zo." And the man handed Joseph another card. Only this one wasn't dirty white. No. It was gold. And emblazoned across its saffron expanse:

KEEPER OF THE SACRED SEAL. GUARDIAN OF THE TEMPLE.

Joseph raised an inquisitive look at the man behind the big desk. He said: "Tenn dollars perr howre pluz perks."

Joseph thought for a moment. Then said: "Sure, I'll take it."

When he turned up at his place of work, next day, he found the temple was a piece of waste ground in the dingy southern relegate of the city suburbs.

About him in every direction, for maybe a couple of miles, there was just empty space. In the distance, Joseph could see murky tenements, blue-grey tower blocks and traces of commerce drifting along routes of transmission in an eternal routine of transaction and haze. The wind brought with it distorted sounds of motion, mechanoid life breathing distantly about him.

Exploring this new place of work, he eventually came upon a clocking-in machine set, it seemed, dead square in the middle of the waste ground.

Taking his golden card, Joseph instinctively inserted it into the slot of the machine and...

Nothing. Just the noises of traffic, the squawking birds; the squalling wind.

Somewhat troubled at this non-reaction, he paced away from the clock machine, stumbling over non-descriptive pieces of detritus and waste and... stopped.

Looked about him. The traffic, the sky, the emptiness.

Looked at the clock. Still and stupid in the middle distance.

Then at his watch. Grief! Was that the time?

Have to run for his tram home or he'd miss it...

By the end of the week, having gone through this routine solidly for five days, he was nevertheless surprised to find a pay-cheque drop through the letter box of his rented flat.

Two hundred and fifty dollars recompense for time served. Just the like the man had said.

This, to Joseph, seemed to make the idling about the waste ground a little more worthwhile. So much so, that he decided to give Julia a ring that evening.

"A job?" Her puzzled voice sounded small and distorted in the confines of the call box.

"Yeah. Pays money, which I need. Not a hell of a lot involved in it, either."

"And what job is this, again?"

"Keeper of the Sacred Seal. Guardian of the Temple," he said, reiterating his approved nomenclature with an officious ease that verged on the ridiculous.

There was silence on the other end of the line. A moment, then Julia said: "Yeah, I see..."

"Good, eh?"

"Well..." After some moments, lengthy enough to actually make Joseph uneasy, Julia said: "Listen. Why don't I come with you on Monday? Check this place out for myself."

"Yeah. No reason why not."

"Sounds fascinating from where I'm standing."

"Yeah, 'tis. You'll like it," he said. And really, he genuinely believed that she would.

Then Monday came...

"And you put the card in here, you say?"

Joseph nodded.

"And the card slips back out and you just hang about till it's time to go home, you say?"

Joseph nodded.

"And nothing much happens at all - just, like, birds and traffic and wind and stuff?"

Again, Joseph nodded.

"Jeez. This I gotta see."

Taking the card, Julia looked at it. Turned it over. Looked at it some more. Then, putting the card to the slot, inserted it. Slot disgorges same. And waited.

"Hmpfh," she said, turning away from the machine after a little while.

And hmpfh indeed, thought Joseph.

At first, nothing was different. The waste ground was still silent and flat. The traffic was still distant and eternal. The birds were still wheeling and dancing about their heads.

"See, told you..." Joseph started to say... And then it happened. Subtle, at first, but growing more distinct.

Things were changing. Mutating ineffably from the shackles of form.

The hazy images in the distance grew ever more hazy and blurred; the ground at their feet seemed to swirl a little, disgorging spiralling nebulous shapes which distended from the earth, reaching an apex in their adopted forms, then returned to the flatness once more by process of decay. Daylight grew in candescence and from somewhere, Joseph was sure, music was playing, voices of children laughing...

For maybe a millisecond. Then it was gone again. Quiescent. And everything was as it should be.

"Did... You... See. What I jusss..." Julia was saying, staring at the clock-machine like it was the Grail itself.

Joseph could only nod his head. Very slowly.

"Naa...Naahh..." she said, shaking her head, "I mean... nah..."

"I think we should go," he managed eventually.

Nod from Julia. "I think you might be right."

By a week on Wednesday, they worked up the courage to return to the wasteland. Besides, Joseph needed the money.

Wandering over the emptiness, they came upon an old man. He was tall and lanky and wore dark clothing. His features evaded precise definition. He could have been anyone. Or no one at all.

"It takes you back, see?" he explained to them, "The card - takes you back. In conjunction with the machine."

To what has been and what will be again...

"And forwards," piped Julia, hitting upon intuitive truth, "Forwards as well!"

"Yes, child. It can do. In some hands."

Mind and reality connect as one. Bio-parameters fatally blurred.

Fumbling with the card in her hand, Julia looked at Joseph, eyes meeting, locking a while, then at the old man again.

"Do you want to take the card?" she asked the stranger.

"If you like," he replied in a light voice.

She returned her gaze to Joseph. His silence spoke of acquiescence in the matter.

Turning to the old man again, Julia placed the golden card in his rag-gloved hand.

"Thank you," he said and turned to go.

He walked away from them, some distance, disappearing in the murk of the blue-grey haze.

And traffic.

Soon, he had vanished completely. Silently, Julia and Joseph left the field.

After that, he didn't see Julia for a long time. The group didn't meet.

Then, one evening in the apartment, Joseph was reading...

A living thing desires above all to vent its strength - life as such is will to power...

...is, in fact, garbage. Because, he would appear to be alluding to the principle of domination but if he had been a finer observer of physiological phenomenon (and

we must assume that he derived such a conclusion from his own ocular observations) then he would have realised that it is the desire of any living thing to HARMONISE with its environment - especially given the assumption that all matter derives from the same causal source - rather than embark upon some delusory notion of mastering it... although it could be argued that there is no distinction between the two definitions...

"Phone call, Joseph."

He put his book down. Got up off his bed, went to the door. Marise by the roses. Blown by the nuance of some internal breeze. Briefly. Then still again.

"Phone call," she said, turning to go back into the living room.

"Who is it?" he asked her.

"She didn't say." And Marise was gone. In the flickering blue darkness of the chamber beyond.

Joseph went over to the little table in the vestibule that held the telephone.

The chimes are singing.

Tentatively asked: "Hello?"

"Joseph, it's me. Julia."

"Oh, how you doin'?"

"Fine, fine. What you been up to?"

"Oh, nothing much. Reading a bit."

"Yeah? Listen. Fancy getting out the city sometime?  
Take a day-trip someplace?"

"Ah, sure. Why not?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorr... yeah, no reason why not."

"Good. Let's meet. At the bandstand. We can get the  
metro to the rail station. Take it from there."

"Okay, we'll make a day of it."

"Sure." And, with that, Julia was gone.

Dawn the next day was bright and clear. Morning was cold  
and Joseph felt unusually alive as he invigorated the  
flesh with its customary ritual of cleansing over the  
wash basin.

Every now and then, he glanced at his wristwatch, lying on the ledge beneath the sink mirror. Inwardly, he calculated his route and time required from the house to the bandstand. He at least had a rough idea of where it was and it wasn't that far. But he didn't want to be late for Julia a second time.

As he ran out the door, down the front steps, swaddled in warm vestment of the early year climate, hitting the cold, empty street, his mind felt very sharp and perceptive.

And his thoughts returned to that book. Called "Good-Is-Evil-Beyond-And-Then-Some"...

By what standard could I determine that what is happening is not perhaps "willing" or "feeling"... (as opposed to "thinking")...

Here we see another contradiction. Who is to say that willing and feeling are distinct from thinking? In arguing against an absolute definition of what corresponds "thinking" he would appear to be formulating his own absolute definition of what corresponds "thinking" - by excluding the faculties of willing and feeling...

Joseph puzzles over this a bit. Thinks about it profoundly, he does. Till...

As his thoughts on the book swirled away to the recesses of his mind, he found he had come to the part of the city where the bandstand stood. Sooner than he thought.

The streets were yet empty of people - just the odd car rumbling monotonously through the limpid thoroughfares of early morning.

Things still clung to that clear aspect of night. Forms still made nebulous by the play of the light. But the sun, Joseph could feel, was growing radiant and would soon have life singing under the brilliance of its touch.

Such was the blending of the seasons, Joseph thought, as he made his way from the last of the hard-paved thoroughfares before reaching the stretch of grassland about the bandstand.

Such was the change from winter to spring - ineffable.

And now - the bandstand...

As he turned the corner into Calgacus Way, the stretch of the parkland opening up grey and anaemic before him,

by the uncertain daylight Joseph thought he spied a band.  
Gyrating slowly in the little white metal structure.

The ghosts, Joseph saw...

There was a man, guitar about his squat body, Breton  
cap, raggedy beard, striped shirt and neckerchief.  
Singing a lament. And his comrades: about, separate,  
three of them. Slight specimens; eulogies in human form.

Joseph glimpsed this but briefly. Looked again - and...

...they were gone.

An after vision, perhaps, on retinal memory. An echo  
of their song. Perhaps not.

But now:

Over the green, he advanced. And there, coming from  
the diaphanous midway: silent Julia.

Begluckt darf nun dich, O Heimat, ich schauen...

"Joseph," speaks she. Comes towards him...

Crutches and bandages and dark glasses and sympathy...

"Joseph. You've come on time," with exaggerated surprise.

"Of course."

They reached, touching a little.

"Fancy the beach?" from Julia.

The beach - Jesus, he wasn't even aware there was a beach nearabout.

"Ah, yeah - why not?"

They're in the pavilion now, among the ghosts and memories - they're vivid, a moment, then gone completely. No one comes here anymore. Not even on Sundays...

"Great," from Julia, as something in her seemed to soothe, "That's good." And then she was silent a while. Biding with the melancholia. Before animated again, and: "Let's go."

From the train, they watched the suburbs and granite tenements recede. By increments, city life giving up to the country as the miles flew by. And the metropolis was left behind.

Soon, about them there were only fields and open sunlit places, producing for them both a strange, elusive music that seemed to generate from the flatness, from the discourse between human mind and landscape. It was peaceful and sonorous. And it seemed right.

As the train sped on, they could see occasional villages, passing in a blur of real-life. And, there, the edge of a forest, breaking the curve of the land in the far distance.

Just moments in freeze-frame. Vivid for a second. Then: by-passed and forgotten.

"So, this beach you were talking about?"

"Oh, not so much a beach, really. Just a lakeside. You know - the country resorts?"

He nodded. He knew of them.

"'S nice there," added Julia. "I used to come a lot when I was little. With my family..."

She looked from the window, gazing at him from across the little table. "You really should see it before you move on," she said. And she smiled, gently.

Then Julia was looking out the window again, squinting against the sunlight which was now very clear, bracing everything in its piercing luminosity.

And Joseph followed her gaze from the darkness of the train carriage. To the brilliant white landscape, shimmering effervescently beyond.

"You really must..." he thought he could hear her murmuring.

Away from the train, they paid at the forest gate, walking through the little stretch of woodland, taking welcome shade from the growing strength of the sun.

They walked over a little earthen track that was flanked by wooden banisters on either side and angled sharply in the camber of the hillside.

Till eventually, before them, flat and open, stretched the lake - misty and glass-like it was, the far side of the bank just visible as a wedge of conifer trees stretching into the distance. Beyond, and budding hills broke the sky, shimmering and ghostly in the distance.

As they walked along the gravel, Julia and Joseph could already see on the lake surface, little yachts and dinghies gliding languidly in the mists. Early morning mariners enjoying the freedom of the open waterway.

Underfoot, the gravel gave over to luxuriant sand. And after some time, Julia began to speak...

"I'm leaving the group. I'm leaving the city. I'm getting the hell out. It's decided."

They ceased walking.

This caught him. Completely. After taking it in, he managed: "But... where will you go?"

"The mountains."

"The... mountai..." He had to suppress a laugh. Nearly failed. Julia's face was simple and serene. "What the bloody hell d'you know about the mountains?"

"Nothing. But I'll learn."

Slowly, it dawned on Joseph that this was not some obscure practical joke.

Then, after a time, Julia said, gesticulating: "The air'll be clean, Jo'. There'll be space. There'll be

clarity." She shook her head, as if in disgust: "I'm through with this bloody place. Had enough of its dead laws and dead people. There's got to be..." and she gave a little shrug.

Something better.

Then, from Julia, the coup de grace: "Come with me."

A whisper over the silent lake: come with me...

At that moment, Joseph felt very still. Felt a music enter his being and a light opening up in his mind.

And maybe at that moment, he saw another life. Another reality that, perhaps, once was...

Set beyond the tyranny of ages; set outwith the sterile preconceptions formed by our ancestors...

A place of open spaces. A place where people might learn and grow and associate under the open sky. A place beyond the taint of old cancerous nation state.

Yes, briefly Joseph thought he could envisage such a place. And - just as the light was dying from his brain - in the distance, he thought he could hear...

The sound of the ocean...

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Festival time for the village. The pubs were doing a roaring trade. The hills were adorned with daisies and wildflowers. All was as it should be. This May.

Catherine bade her time on the high street. Watching the tarriers, the revellers and the spirited. Rutting courtships; mating rituals - conducted under the gaze of a clear afternoon sky. Looking upon forever. Before dusk consummations. And ecstasy. And passion...

But a spectator, only, of these rituals, is Catherine. Pining for freedom. For liberation. Of the soul...

Richard sitting in the pub with his Guinness. Supping the liquid as quickly as he dare. Nullity is the promise of the opaque libation. His rationale - his futility. Carousers aplenty, harping about him. Dark oak and redolent interiors. Gloomy silver of ornamentation glinting from the sidelines. Embellishment and frippery. He likes it here. Normally.

But today, somewhat daunted by the partying, sits quietly, bespectacled and introversion.

Time alone in the afternoon - passing like the summer sun. Eclipsing all and sundry with a care - ever so slowly; as if fearful that its blessing might not be ubiquitous.

Yes, this libation for Richard is welcome.

Catherine finding herself getting bored. Waiting for her sister, y'see - but never coming. Younger sibling, the wilder and more giving is Yvonne. Makes big sister slightly envious of her freedom. Longingly, Catherine looks up the high street. An over-generous loyalty factor was always one of her bad points. Old bedraggled bunting drapes the little grey buildings. Boisterous aggression; space conquered through motion. Granite and grimy houses, disgorging desperate citizenry. Fuelled by alcohol and emptiness and that twitching sensation in the groin.

Union means oblivion.

Catherine sighs. No sign of sibling. Her skin, sticky under summer garment. As lightly clad as she dares to be; not happy to go naked. Prudish, she knows, and stupid. Conditioning, one supposes.

She glances at the Grey Mare. Its cool, white-washed walls look unusually inviting. Darkness and respite within her solid flanks; under the hillside, insects abuzz...

Growing and blooming and dying from old age.

Another glance up the high street. And - no sign of her.

Instinct makes Catherine twitch. Gets up off her perch. And heads for a cool drink.

Richard notices the woman enter instantly. He watches her come in, secretly, from within the shade; an opaque corner he has staked out, beyond the illumination of the windows.

He's seen her before, of course. A young woman, ordinary enough. Village lass. Perhaps it's the drink and darkness that conspire to give her features a new aspect. Something different in the gait. Subtle blowing of her blouse. That speaks of womanhood. And flourishing. And glimpses of secret burning. The skin's latent desire.

She's ordering something - orange juice, maybe. Flanked by bleary groups of drinkers. Men and women and some with children...

Solitary, she is the distinct entity. Richard feels his pulse quicken. The need to communicate; something to say to her. As her hair falls around her shoulders. As she searches her purse to make good her purchase.

Now she's moving, quietly, finding a chair by the window, maybe. Yes, so she can see the high street, he thinks.

Something inside makes Richard wince. But, damn it, no matter. Courage from his ardour. Some secret femininity in the woman gives him need. And makes him stupid...

"Can I join you?"

Catherine looks up from the window. Sees nervous young man. Instinct makes her start to brush off enquiry but he's saying...

"Saw you come in and..."

"No, thank you. I'm just waiting for someone..."

"Oh." Stands like a fool. Crouching over the table. Catherine fumbles with orange juice. Looks away.

"Another drink, perhaps..." he tries. Stupid thing to say, he knows, immediately. She's just come from the bar. But...

"Just while you wait?"

Maybe to stop a scene; to prevent further attention. Or maybe some of the bonhomie finding its way into her heart, Catherine manages: "Well, all right, another..."

Looks at her orange juice...

"A vodka. To go with this." Manages a smile.

Richard feels something connect inside him as he steps to the bar. By the door, there are more revellers packing in. Celebrants come for the first signs of summer...

And maybe from within the dying light, words decay in memory. Faces glimpsed in growing dimness - distinct, at first, then...

Knowledge becomes extinction. A failure to comprehend.

ENDS

