M. John Harrison is the author of, among others, the *Viriconium* stories, *The Centauri Device*, *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again*, *Signs of Life*, *Light* and *Wish I Was Here*. He has won the Boardman Tasker Prize, the James Tiptree Jr Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Goldsmiths Prize. He lives in Shropshire.

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Novels

Viriconium

Climbers

The Course of the Heart

Signs of Life

Light

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Short Story Collections

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Things that Never Happen

You Should Come with Me Now

Settling the World

Anti-Memoir

Wish I Was Here

The Course of the Heart

M. John Harrison

—

Introduction by Julia Armfield

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Introduction

by Julia Armfield

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'YOU'RE ALWAYS WAKING UP,' says Lucas Medlar, in the days before his ex-wife's death, 'at the exact moment your life goes away from you.' He is speaking, here, about the transience of consciousness, the points at which we recognise the strange totality of life before the pull of dailiness asserts itself, distracting us again from the whole. For a fleeting moment, we grasp *everything*, then once again we don't. 'You're forever catching its last signal: the urge to laugh or fuck or give your money away which you've just ignored.' To live, Lucas seems to say, is to exist in a twilight of semi-awareness, waking at times to a greater truth only to watch it slip away. It is a theory that also holds for readers, whose experience of *The Course of the Heart* is one of perpetual misdirection. From time to time, one is treated to glimpses of a brief but tremendous clarity, quickly replaced by the nagging sensation that this was not information intended for you at all.

The anticipation I tend to bring to M. John Harrison's work is one that makes allowance for my own smallness – I come to his novels knowing that I will not understand. This is not a bad thing. The project of understanding the world is one in which we all partake, but to act as though this project is one that can ever be truly completed is a sort of shared delusion, one rooted in the idea of the world as a single, intelligible thing. In Harrison's work, often even in his most realist fiction, we find the flipside to this impulse: his fiction speaks to something numinous and ungraspable about the universe, something that cannot, and will not, be readily understood.

I came to *The Course of the Heart* in what might be termed the wrong order, having already read *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again,* and *Climbers*, and *Light* and various pieces of Harrison's short fiction besides. What I found was of a piece with my earlier understanding: a sensation of vastness disguised as something ordinary. At first glance, *The Course of the Heart* could be seen to function as a kind of primer for Harrison's general body of work. Similarly to *Sunken Land*, we are first lulled into the relative comfort of realism – in this case, in the guise of a kind of *Secret History*. Three students and an enigmatic elder are about to do *something* in the Cambridge meadows and that *something,* we know from the conventions of the literary thriller, will haunt them for the rest of their lives. What follows, however, is not a mystery novel but instead a long unspooling; a novel that moves back and forth both in time and in genre. We follow Lucas Medlar and Pam Stuyvesant, along with our unnamed narrator, through the years subsequent to an act which, while crucial, is never explicitly revealed. This

misdirection, of course, is part of the point. As in much of his work, Harrison leads us carefully up to what any more conventional novel might assume to be the Whole Big Deal, only to dart away again, proving that we have not been listening or that we have not understood. In the place of a concrete reveal, there is to be found a greater richness, one which rewards close attention and which almost demands rereading.

Genre, in *The Course of the Heart*, is a shifting thing – the novel moves from kitchen-sink gothic, to realism, to dream logic and back again. Harrison's skill has always been less that of chameleon than cuckoo; smuggling one genre in beneath another and wreaking quiet havoc in the process. Lucas, Pam and our unnamed narrator are intimately concerned with the Gnostic concept of the Pleroma – the realm of highest perfection – and it is this which we assume them to have been summoning long ago in the Cambridge meadows. *Plēroma*, in the original Greek, translates to 'fullness', and it is this fullness – this totality – that teases but evades us throughout much of *The Course of the Heart*. The Pleroma and the long shadow of its influence are transfixing aspects of the novel, yet ones which we, and the characters alongside us, consistently fail to grasp. There is a frequent sense that we are approaching something too great and too close for us to fully perceive it, though, at times, we can comprehend the fringes of it through symptoms of the ritual that haunt the three friends. *Haunting,* as a concept, is key – the novel is unquiet, the characters marked both by the things that seem to hound them and by their own inability to understand. Likewise, the fringes of the supernatural haunt the reader, with hints occasionally

coalescing into set pieces where what has hitherto only been suggested crystallises into something more complete. A scene in which the narrator perceives, or dreams he perceives, a godlike figure at the river Thames is reminiscent of *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn,* the transcendent (and transcendently unexpected) chapter in *The Wind in the Willows,* where the characters briefly encounter Pan. Elsewhere, a late sequence involving Lucas and the narrator's mystical encounter with a green woman made of flowers falls right out of the Mabinogion; a scene made all the more effective through the way we simply stumble into it. We are in a cafe, then we are in a car park, then we are folded into the heart of a rose. Once and again, there is a sense of something cracking through the shell of accepted reality, of a presence becoming manifest, stepping ghostlike through a curtain, then just as swiftly back. Whether the philosophy at the heart of all this is Gnostic, or Pagan, or simply fabular is barely the point; what is important is knowing it's there.

As much as it offers us its sly glimpses of fantasy, so, too, *The Course of the Heart* has a foot in gothic horror, though it is a horror that is most effective for its griminess in contrast to the more baroque elements found elsewhere. The more horrific aspects of *The Course of the Heart* are often to be found within the novel's most commonplace settings. Butting up against luminous flights of mysticism, a woman chokes to death on a Mars Bar, whilst two men discuss incest in the lugubrious setting of a Pizza Express. A vital scene in which Yaxley – the self-styled magician who led the original rite – facilitates the incestuous assault of a young girl, is at once reminiscent of Arthur Machen's masterful gothic short story *The Great God Pan,* yet also markedly realist in

its Peckham setting. Meanwhile, Pam's eventual cancer diagnosis and long illness unfolds along a relatively unbroken and brutally realistic timeline. Over this sequence, the starkness of the hospital setting and the trappings and bureaucracy of anticipated grief act as a kind of weight, dragging the reader back into specifics in the face of the novel's more overt eccentricity. This juxtaposition of the banal and the fantastic is a Harrison staple, of a piece with an oeuvre replete with decrepit cats, exhausted Northern towns, conversations overheard in steamy cafes and, like it or not, south-west London. His landscapes and embellishments are habitual, as vital to his style as his grander philosophy: the world's very ordinariness is what allows us to interact with it, yet even its most humdrum elements allow the mystical to invade. Certainly, via apparently realist notes, we become aware of the web of the world – its 'fullness', again – as background characters seem to recur, and seemingly innocuous snatches of overheard conversation may appear to connect to other things, heard later, inferring a greater significance. Straddling realism and fantasy, the novel dances between what is trivial and what is overwhelming; between the fullness of the world and the sliver we are able to comprehend. In that liminal space lies the game that Pam and Lucas play together; a travel-narrative-cum-history of an imagined Middle European country. This country is the *Coeur,* an interstice between the world and the Pleroma, albeit one which recedes the more you look towards it. It is here that much of the novel's most compelling strangeness resides, for the *Coeur* is at once opaque conceit and coping mechanism. It is a story Lucas persists in telling Pam during her illness, an act that bears

the hallmarks of affection whilst simultaneously communicating a certain bullheadedness, an insistence on adhering to a set of rules in the face of total disorder. As Lucas struggles with his mixed emotions towards Pam, her illness and their broken marriage, he can no longer continue laying out a functioning fictional history. As a reader, the fiction of the *Coeur* is both enthralling and almost startlingly abstruse. It is a narrative tool with the impact of a spinning telescope, bringing us further away from the core of the novel even as it drags us in. To Lucas, it seems to work as a way of perceiving the Pleroma through the guise of something more discernible, an act that is not far from what *The Course of the Heart,* as text, is doing itself.

The Course of the Heart is, in truth, less primer than prism through which Harrison's writing might be usefully viewed. Much of Harrison's work is the act of warming to a theme and, in *The Course of the Heart,* we find many of his key concerns: the distinction between the world of facts and the world beyond them; the sense that everything, whilst vast and interconnected, may also be wholly arbitrary. In response to Lucas's claim that life is aware of itself and that to fail to act spontaneously is to become a kind of fiction, our narrator objects that 'we're free to change our minds'. Herein, I think, lies something of the novel's philosophy. I said that I come to Harrison's work to be reminded of my own smallness and so, too, Harrison's characters are tasked with their fundamental insignificance – dwarfed by the forces and desires of an overarching universe. There is, at base, the question of whether people own themselves, of how responsible anyone might be when at the mercy of the fullness of the world. At times, a sense of some

more irresistible force becomes palpable: characters are frequently left blinking in the wake of events that unfold without any sense of ownership – when Lucas and Pam divorce, it barely seems to happen at their own behest. In the fact of even unimaginable tragedy, our narrator responds only with the faintly dismissive sense that 'the goddess gives, the goddess takes away'. What, after all, are any of us, in the face of something too large to be seen? It is this argument, perhaps, that allows the novel to resonate, and to keep on resonating. In an increasingly fragmented age, *The Course of the Heart* is at once a startling reflection of our own insignificance and a welcome invitation to cede our claim to full understanding. It is a novel both hopeful and exacting, allowing the reader a sense of both smallness and fullness, sublime and grotesque all at once. We have been told that *the world may be everything that is the case*, but in Harrison's hands, it is also many other things besides.

The Course of the Heart

Was man nicht erfliegen kann, muss man erhinken.
– Ruckert, *Die beiden Gulden*

…She hath yielded herself up to everything that lives, and
hath become a partaker in its mystery.
And because she has made herself the servant of each,
therefore she is become the mistress of all…
– Aleister Crowley

PROLOGUE

Pleroma

—

WHEN I WAS A TINY BOY I often sat motionless in the garden, bathed in sunshine, hands flat on the rough brick of the garden path, waiting with a prolonged, almost painful expectation for whatever would happen, whatever event was contained by that moment, whatever revelation lay dormant in it. I was drenched in the rough, dusty, aromatic smells of dock-leaves and marigolds. In the corner of the warm wall, rhubarb blanched under an upturned zinc tub eaten away with rust. I could smell it there.

Some of the first words I heard my mother say were, 'A grown woman like that! How could a grown woman act like that?' She was gossiping about someone in the family. I can't remember who, perhaps one of her younger sisters. It was the first time I had heard the phrase. 'A grown woman.' I imagined a woman cultured like a tomato or a potato, for some purpose I would never understand. Had my mother

been 'grown' like that? It was an image which ramified and expanded long after I had understood the proper meaning of the phrase.

My mother loved films. She loved the actresses Vanessa Redgrave and Glenda Jackson as much as the characters they played. She was a tallish, thin woman herself, but otherwise nothing like them. Against their grave and bony calm, always breaking out into rage or delight, she could set only the tense provincial prettiness shared by nurses and infant teachers. Her name was Barbara, but she had her friends call her 'Bobbie'. When I was older I found the effect of this as sad as her neatly tailored trouser-suits and deep suntan. She was frightened the sun would make her haggard but she sat out in it anyway, in the garden or on the beach, turning up her face in a static flight reflex of vanity and despair.

The women she liked Redgrave and Jackson to play were queens, dancers, courtesans, romantic intellectuals determined to batter themselves to death like huge rawboned moths inside the Japanese lamps of their own neuroses. Sexuality seemed to be the strongest of their qualities, until, at the crux, they diverted all the sexual momentum of the film into some metaphor of self-expression – an image of dancing or running – and gave the slip to both the filmic lover and the audience. Much more important was to remain at the focus of attention, and for this they were in competition even with themselves. Having captured the centre stage they were ready to abandon it immediately, dance away, and still ravenous, demand:

'No. Not her. Me.'

*

The year I was twelve, my mother was thirty. I remember her walking up and down on the lawn at the front of the house shouting, 'You bloody piece of paper, you bloody piece of paper,' over and over again at a letter she was holding in her right hand. It was from my father, I suppose. But clearly something else was at stake. 'You *bloody* piece of paper!' Eventually she varied the emphasis on this accusation until it had illuminated briefly every word. It was as if she was trying for some final, indisputable delivery.

Her sense of drama, the transparency of her emotion, unnerved me. I ran round the garden pulling up flowers, desperate to offer her something in exchange for whatever loss she was suffering. 'Have my birthday,' I remember shouting. 'I don't want it.' She looked puzzledly at the broken-stemmed handful of marguerites. 'We must put them in a vase,' she said.

My role was the role of Vanessa's male lead, Vanessa's audience. I was to follow my mother's retreat through the diminishing concentric shells of her self. The layers of the onion, peeled away, would reveal only more layers.

'A birthday's the last thing I want, darling.'

The letter was left out on the lawn all afternoon, where the rain could pulp it. When my father stayed away for good, she took to saving her skin, carefully applying a layer of honey-coloured make-up every morning, only to remove it even more carefully at night. Liberated perhaps too late by best-selling feminist novels, she wore wide American spectacles with tinted lenses to protect her eyes and emphasize the fine, slightly gaunt structure of jaw and cheeks.

'I am a sadder but a wiser woman,' she wrote to me from

a holiday villa in Santa Ponsa, perhaps overestimating the maturity of a boy seventeen years old. 'We never get to know people until it's too late, do we?'

I was flattered by these sentiments which, unfinished and adult, implied but somehow always evaded their real subject. Long after I had given up trying to puzzle out what she meant, I was still able to feel that she had confided in me.

'But there you are, my dear. As you grow up I expect you're finding that out.'

By then I was already playing truant two or three afternoons each week from the grammar school. I couldn't have explained why. All I ever did was walk about; or sit hypnotized by the Avon where it ran through the local fields, watching the hot sunlight spilling and foaming off the weir until a kind of excited fatigue came over me and I could no longer separate the look of the water from its sound and weight, its strange, powerful, almost yeasty smell. This I associated somehow with the 'grown woman'. She had developed with me. That yeasty smell, that mass, was hers. She didn't so much haunt as stalk my adolescent summers, which were all rain and sunshine and every minute the most surprising changes of light.

My mother, unaware of this, told people I was young for my age; and indeed during my first term at Cambridge I spent most weekends at home, travelling by rail on Friday evening and early Monday morning. The train often stopped for a few minutes near Derby. I don't remember the name of the station. Two old wooden platforms surrounded by larch, pine and variegated holly gave it an air at once bijou and mysterious: it was the branch-line halt of

middle-class children's fiction forty years ago. Sitting in the train, you had no idea what sort of landscape lay behind the trees. The wind rushed through them, so that you could think of yourself as being on some sandy eminence away from which spread an intimately folded arrangement of orchards and lanes, of broad heathland stretching off to other hills. Afternoon light enameled the leaves of the holly. Everything was possible in the country – or garden – beyond. Foxes and owls and stolen ponies. Gorse and gypsy caravans in a rough field. Some mystery about a pile of railway sleepers near the tracks, shiny with rain in the green light at the edge of the woods!

I wanted it desperately.

Then the light passed, the wind dropped and the train began to move again. The trees were dusty and birdlimed. All they had hidden was a housing estate, allotments, a light engineering plant. A woman with a hyperactive child came into the carriage and sat down opposite me.

'Just sit down,' she warned the child.

Instead it stared defiantly into her eyes for a moment then wandered off to make noises with the automatic door.

Early in my second term I bought a stereo. I quickly learned to put on the headset, turn up the volume and listen again and again to the same piece of music, each repetition of a significant phrase causing soft white explosions all over the inside of my skull.

Whether the music was the first movement of Bruckner's Fifth or only the Bewlay Brothers, the result was the same. The actual cortex, the convoluted outer surface of my brain, was somehow scoured and eroded by these little

painless epiphanies. I half-hoped that if I listened long enough or got the volume high enough, it would be worn as smooth as a stone by them, so that I would never be able to think again. My ideal at that time was to remain conscious – perceptive, receptive – while no longer conscious of myself. I never achieved that. The music always lost its effect. The explosions ceased to scour. My brain began to grow itself again. I woke up to myself, staring out of the window at the green light rippling through the trees.

Girls eighteen or nineteen years old swam down towards me through it, their arms and legs moving in lazy, thoughtless strokes. When I thought about them they were red-haired, smiling, sleepy-eyed as a Gustav Klimt. A year later I lay on the floor with one of them.

It was early June, bright but humid. The air had been like a hammer for days, the streets stunned and dazzled into silence. She lived with some other people, but the house was empty all through the week. Her room, which was at the front and shaded by the great canopy of a horse-chestnut tree, stayed dim and cool for much of the day. For an hour in the morning the shadow of the slatted blinds moved across the sofa with its Indian cushions, on to the fringed maroon and orange rug and then on again, to dwell over her parted legs and scattered underwear. A little after two o'clock a thin, incandescent line of sunshine sliced into the upper part of the room, caught the dusty paper birds of a cheap mobile and flared them briefly into enamel and gold. That was it.

'This room reeks of sex.'

'It reeks of us,' I said.

I had known her for a week and two days. Half awake

alone in my own bed I would catch the smell of her, and in a moment of shocked delight, remember her whispering, 'Fuck me! Fuck me!' in the middle of the night. Wherever I was I could close my eyes and visualize precisely the curves at the base of her spine where it seemed to hold its breath before it arched out into the smooth, heavy muscles of her behind. I loved her contact lenses. I loved the way she had to stop in the middle of the street to slip one out into the palm of her hand then lick it up into her mouth like a cat to clean it.

'Perhaps we should have a bath.'

At three o'clock, someone manhandled a bicycle up the steps outside and came into the house. We heard footsteps on the cool tiled floor of the hall. By then we were restless, a little tired, sticky to touch. Whoever had come in knocked first hesitantly then determinedly at the door of the room. A voice I knew asked for me.

'Don't answer,' she mouthed.

'Yaxley's ready to try,' said the voice at the door. There was a pause. 'Are you there? Hello? Yaxley says he's ready. This weekend.'

'Don't answer!' she said, quite loudly.

I sat up and looked at her. I had known her for a week and two days, and I loved everything about her.

'Shh!' I said.

She pulled me down again. 'Go away!' she shouted.

'Are you in there?' said the voice at the door. 'It's Lucas!' 'Hang on, Lucas—' I answered.

Would anything have changed if I hadn't, if I'd stayed there quietly with my hand between her legs, trying not to laugh?

'—I'm coming.'

PART ONE

In the Wake of the Goddess

1

Misprision of Dreams

—

PAM STUYVESANT TOOK DRUGS to manage her epilepsy. They often made her depressed and difficult to deal with; and Lucas, who was nervous himself, never knew what to do. After their divorce he relied increasingly on me as a go-between.

'I don't like the sound of her voice,' he would tell me. 'You try her.'

The drugs gave her a screaming, false-sounding laugh that went on and on. Though he had remained sympathetic over the years, Lucas was always embarrassed and upset by it. I think it frightened him.

'See if you can get any sense out of her.'

It was guilt, I think, that encouraged him to see me as a steadying influence: not his own guilt so much as the guilt he felt all three of us shared.

'See what she says.'

*

On this occasion what she said was:

'Look, if you bring on one of my turns, bloody Lucas Medlar will regret it. What business is it of his how I feel, anyway?'

'It was just that you wouldn't talk to him. He was worried that something was happening. Is there something wrong, Pam?'

She didn't answer, but I had hardly expected her to.

'If you don't want to see me,' I suggested carefully, 'couldn't you tell me now?'

I thought she was going to hang up, but in the end there was only a kind of paroxysm of silence. I was phoning her from a call box in the middle of Huddersfield. The shopping precinct outside was full of pale bright sunshine, but windy and cold. Sleet was forecast for later in the day. Two or three teenagers went past, talking and laughing. (One of them said, 'What acid rain's got to do with my career I don't know. That's what they asked me. "What do you know about acid rain?") When they had gone I could hear Pam breathing raggedly.

'Hello?' I said.

She shouted, 'Are you mad? I'm not talking on the phone. Before you know it, the whole thing's public property!' Sometimes she was more dependent on medication than usual; you knew when because she tended to use that phrase over and over again: 'Before you know it—'

One of the first things I ever heard her say was, 'It looks so easy, doesn't it? But before you know it, the bloody thing's just slipped straight out of your hands,' as she bent down nervously to pick up the bits of a broken glass. How old were we then? Twenty? Lucas believed she was reflecting in

language some experience of either the drugs or the disease itself, but I'm not sure he was right. Another thing she often said was, 'I mean, you have to be careful, don't you?' drawing out both *care* and *don't* in such a way that you saw immediately it was a mannerism learned in adolescence.

'You must be mad if you think I'll say anything on the phone.'

'I'll come over this evening then.'

'No!'

'Pam, I—' She gave in abruptly.

'Come now and get it over with. I don't feel well.'

Epilepsy since the age of twelve or thirteen, as regular as clockwork; and then, later, a classic migraine to fill the gaps: a complication which, rightly or wrongly, she had always associated with what Yaxley helped the three of us do when we were students. She must never get angry or excited. 'I reserve my adrenaline,' she would explain. It was a physical, not a psychological thing: it was glandular. 'I can't let it go at the time.' Afterwards though the reservoir would burst, and it would all be released at once by some minor stimulus – a lost shoe, a missed bus, rain – to cause her hallucinations, vomiting, loss of bowel control. 'Oh, and then euphoria. It's wonderfully relaxing. Just like sex,' she would say bitterly.

'OK, Pam. I'll be there soon. Don't worry.'

'Piss off,' she said. She was dependent on reassurance, but it made her angry. 'Things are coming to bits here. I can already see the little floating lights.'

As soon as she put the receiver down I telephoned Lucas. 'I'm not doing this again,' I said.

Silence.

'Lucas? She isn't well. I thought she was going to have an attack there and then.'

'She'll see you, though? The thing is, she just kept putting the phone down on me. You've no idea how tiring that can be. She'll see you today?'

'You knew she would.'

'Good.'

I hung up.

'Lucas, you're a bastard,' I told the shopping precinct.

February. Valentine's Day. Snow and sleet all over the country. For thirty minutes or so, the bus from Huddersfield wound its way through exhausted mill villages given over to hairdressing, dog breeding and an under-capitalized tourist trade. I got off it at three o'clock in the afternoon, but it seemed much later. The face of the church clock was already lit, and a mysterious yellow light was slanting across the window of the nave, as if someone was doing something in there with only a forty-watt bulb for illumination. Cars went past endlessly as I waited to cross the road, their exhausts steaming in the dark air. For a village it was quite noisy: tires hissing on the wet road, the bang and clink of soft-drink bottles being unloaded from a lorry outside the post office, some children I couldn't see, chanting one word over and over again. Quite suddenly, above all this, I heard the pure musical note of a thrush and stepped out into the road.

'You're sure no one got off the bus behind you?'

Pam kept me on the doorstep while she looked anxiously up and down the street, but once I was inside she seemed glad to have someone to talk to.

'You'd better take your coat off. Sit down. I'll make you some coffee. No, here, just push the cat off the chair. He knows he's not supposed to be there.'

It was an old cat, black and white, with dull, dry fur, and when I picked it up it was just a lot of bones and heat that weighed nothing. I set it down carefully on the carpet, but it jumped back on to my knee again immediately and began to dribble on my pullover. Another, younger animal was crouching on the windowsill, shifting its feet uncomfortably among the little intricate baskets of paper flowers as it stared out into the falling sleet, the empty garden.

'Get down off there!' Pam called as she hung my coat up in the tiny hall. Both cats ignored her. She shrugged.

'They act as if they own the place.' It smelled as if they did. 'They were strays. I don't know why I encouraged them.' Then, as though she were still talking about the cats:

'How's Lucas?'

'He's surprisingly well,' I said. 'You ought to keep in touch with him, you know.'

'I know.'

She smiled briefly.

'And how are you? I never see you.'

'Not bad. Feeling my age.'

'You don't know the half of it yet,' she said. She stood in the kitchen doorway holding a tea towel in one hand and a cup in the other. 'None of us do.' It was a familiar complaint. When she saw I was too preoccupied to listen, she went and banged things about in the sink. I heard water rushing into the kettle. While it filled up, she said something she knew I wouldn't catch: then, turning off the tap:

'Something's going on in the Pleroma. Something new. I can feel it.'

'Pam,' I said, 'all that was over and done with twenty years ago.'

The fact is that even at the time I wasn't at all sure what we had done. This will seem odd to you, I suppose, but all I remember now is a June evening drenched with the half-confectionery, half-corrupt smell of hawthorn blossoms. It was so thick we seemed to swim through it, through that and the hot evening light that poured between the hedgerows like transparent gold. I remember Yaxley because you don't forget him easily. But what the three of us did under his guidance escapes me, as does its significance. There was, undoubtedly, some sort of loss: whether you described what was lost as 'innocence' was very much up to you. Anyway, that was how it appeared to me: to call it 'innocence' would be to beg too many questions.

Lucas and Pam made a lot more of it from the very start. They took it to heart.

And afterwards – perhaps two or three months afterwards, when it was plain that something had gone wrong, when things first started to pull out of shape – it was Pam and Lucas who convinced me to go and talk to Yaxley, whom we had promised never to contact again. They wanted to see if what we had done might somehow be reversed or annulled, what we'd lost bought back again.

'I don't think it works that way,' I warned them, but I could see they weren't listening.

'He'll have to help us,' Lucas said. 'Why did we ever do it?' Pam asked me.

*

I went down the next day. The train was crowded. Across the table from me in the other window seat, a tall black man looked round smilingly and cracked his knuckles. He had on an expensive brown silk suit. The seats outside us were occupied by two middle-aged women who were going to London for a week's holiday. They chattered constantly about a previous visit: they had walked across Tower Bridge in the teeth of a gale, and afterwards eaten baked potatoes on the north bank, admiring a statue of a dolphin and a girl; they had visited Greenwich. On their last day it had been the zoo in Regent's Park where, gazing diffidently into the little heated compartments of the reptile house, they were surprised by a Thailand water lizard with a skin, one of them said, 'like a canvas bag'.

She relished this description.

'Just like an old green canvas bag,' she repeated. 'Didn't it make you feel funny?' she insisted. But her friend seemed bored.

'What?'

'That skin!'

At this the black man leaned forward and said, 'It only makes me feel sad.'

His voice was low and pleasant. The women ignored him, so he appealed to me, 'I couldn't say why. Except that a lizard's skin seems so shabby and ill-fitting.'

'I don't think I've ever seen one,' I said.

'What if evolution were ideological after all?' he asked us. 'With aesthetic goals?'

The women received this so woodenly that he was forced to look out of the window; and although he smiled at me once or twice in a preparatory way, as if he would

have liked to reopen the conversation, he never did.

Later I went down the carriage to the lavatory, and then on to the buffet. While I was there the train stopped at Stevenage; when I returned to my seat I found that the women had moved to an empty table, and the negro had been replaced by a fat, red-faced man who looked like the older H. G. Wells and who slept painedly most of the way to London with his hands clasped across his stomach. He had littered the table with sandwich wrappers, plastic cups, an empty miniature of whisky, the pages of a newspaper. Just before the train pulled in, he woke up, glared at me suspiciously at this mess, and pushed something across to me.

'Last bloke in the seat left this for you,' he said. He had a thick northern accent.

It was a square of folded notepaper, on which had been written in a clear, delightfully even hand, 'I couldn't help noticing how you admired the birch trees. Birchwoods more than any others are meant to be seen by autumn light! It surprises them in a dance, a celebration of something which is, in a tree, akin to the animal. They dance even on cold still days when the air leaves them motionless: limbs like illuminated bone caught moving – or just ceasing to move – in a mauve smoke of twigs.'

This was unsigned. I turned it over but nothing more was written there. I laughed.

'Was he black?' I asked.

'Aye, kid,' said the fat man: 'He were.' He hauled himself to his feet and began, panting, to wrestle his luggage off the rack. 'Black as fuck.'

As the train crawled the last mile into London, I had seen three sheets of newspaper fluttering round the upper

floors of an office block like butterflies courting a flower. The Pleroma demands of us a passion for the world which, however distortedly, reflects it.

I still remember the intelligent eagerness of the man's smile – how he always had to talk about the world – the way his sharp-edged elegant cheekbones seemed, like tribal scars or a silk suit, to be more designed than organic.

Though he hated the British Museum, Yaxley had always lived one way or another in its shadow.

I met him at the Tivoli Espresso Bar, where I knew he would be every afternoon. The weather that day was damp. He wore a thick, old-fashioned black overcoat; but from the way his wrists stuck out of the sleeves, long and fragile-looking and dirty, covered with sore grazes as though he had been fighting with some small animal, I suspected he had no jacket or shirt on underneath it. He looked older than he was, the top half of his body stooped bronchially, his lower jaw stubbled with grey. I sometimes wonder if this was as much a pretence – although of a different order – as the *Church Times* he always carried, folded carefully to display part of a headline, which none of us ever saw him open.

At the Tivoli in those days they always had the radio on. Their coffee was watery and, like most espresso, too hot to taste of anything. Yaxley and I sat on stools by the window, resting our elbows on a counter littered with dirty cups and half-eaten sandwiches, and watched the pedestrians in Museum Street. After ten minutes a woman's voice said clearly from behind us: 'The fact is that the children just won't try.'

Yaxley jumped and looked round haggardly, as if he expected to have to answer this.

'It's the radio,' I reassured him.

He stared at me the way you would stare at someone who was mad, and it was some time before he went on with what he had been saying:

'You knew what you were doing. You got what you wanted, and you weren't tricked in any way.'

'No,' I admitted.

My eyes had begun to ache: Yaxley soon tired you out.

'I can understand that,' I said. 'That isn't at issue. But I'd like to be able to reassure them somehow—'

Yaxley wasn't listening.

It had come on to rain quite hard, driving the tourists – mainly Germans and Americans in Bloomsbury for the Museum – off the street. They all seemed to be wearing brand-new clothes. The Tivoli filled up quickly, and the air was soon heavy with the smell of wet coats. People trying to find seats constantly brushed our backs.

'Excuse me, please,' they murmured. 'Excuse me.'

Yaxley became irritated almost immediately.

'Dog muck,' he said loudly in a matter-of-fact voice. I think their politeness affected him much more than the disturbance itself. 'Three generations of rabbits,' he jeered, as a whole family were forced to push past him one by one to get the table in the corner. None of them seemed to take offence, though they must have heard him. A drenched-looking woman in a purple coat came in, looked anxiously for an empty seat, and, when she couldn't see one, hurried out again.

'Mad bitch!' Yaxley called after her. 'Get yourself reamed out.' He stared challengingly at the other customers.

'I think it would be better if we talked in private,' I said. 'What about your flat?'

For twenty years he had lived in the same single room above the Atlantis Bookshop. He was reluctant to take me there, I could see, though it was only next door and I had been there before. At first he tried to pretend it would be difficult to get in.

'The shop's closed,' he said. 'We'd have to use the other door.' Then he admitted:

'I can't go back there for an hour or two. I did something last night that means it may not be safe.'

He grinned.

'You know the sort of thing I mean,' he said.

I couldn't get him to explain further. The cuts on his wrists made me remember how panicky Pam and Lucas had been when I last spoke to them. All at once I was determined to see inside the room.

'We could always talk in the Museum,' I suggested. Researching in the manuscript collection one afternoon a year before, he had turned a page of Jean de Wavrin's *Chroniques d'Angleterre* – that oblique history no complete version of which is known – and come upon a miniature depicting in strange, unreal greens and blues the coronation procession of Richard Coeur de Lion.

Part of it had moved; which part, he would never say.

'Why, if it's a coronation,' he had written almost plaintively to me at the time, 'are these four men carrying a coffin? And who is walking there under the awning – with the bishops yet not a bishop?'

After that he had avoided the building as much as possible, though he could always see its tall iron railings at the

end of the street. He had begun, he told me, to doubt the authenticity of some of the items in the medieval collection. In fact he was frightened of them.

'It would be quieter there,' I insisted.

He sat hunched over the *Church Times*, staring into the street with his hands clamped violently together in front of him. I could see him thinking.

'That fucking pile of shit!' he said eventually. He got to his feet.

'Come on then. It's probably cleared out by now anyway.' Rain dripped from the blue-and-gold front of the Atlantis. There was a faded notice, CLOSED FOR COMPLETE REFURBISHMENT. The window display had been taken down, but for the look of things they had left a few books on a shelf. I could make out, through the plate glass, W. B. Yeats's *The Trembling of the Veil* – with its lyrical plea for intuited ritual 'Hodos Chameliontos' – leaning up against Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. When I drew Yaxley's attention to this accidental nexus, he only stared at me contemptuously.

Inside, the shop smelled of cut timber, new plaster, paint, but this gave way on the stairs to an odour of cooking. Yaxley fumbled with his key. His bedsitter, which was quite large and on the top floor, had uncurtained sash windows on opposing walls. Nevertheless it didn't seem well lit. From one window you could see the sodden facades of Museum Street, bright green deposits on the ledges, stucco scrolls and garlands grey with pigeon dung; out of the other, part of the blackened clock tower of St George's Bloomsbury, a reproduction of the tomb of Mausoleus lowering up against the racing clouds.

'I once heard that clock strike twenty-one,' said Yaxley.

'I can believe that,' I said, though I didn't. 'Do you think I could have some tea?'

He was silent for a minute. Then he laughed.

'I'm not going to help them,' he said. 'You know that. I wouldn't be allowed to. What you do in the Pleroma is irretrievable.'

'All that was over and done with twenty years ago, Pam.'

'I know. I know that. But—'

She stopped suddenly, and then went on in a muffled voice, 'Will you just come here a minute? Just for a minute?'

The house, like many in the Pennines, had been built right into the side of the valley. A near-vertical bank of earth, cut to accommodate it, was held back by a dry-stone revetment twenty or thirty feet high, black with damp even in the middle of July, dusted with lichen and tufted with ferns like a cliff. Throughout the winter months, water streamed down the revetment day after day and, collecting in a stone trough underneath, made a sound like a tap left running in the night. Along the back of the house ran a passage hardly two feet wide, full of broken roof slates and other rubbish.

'You're all right,' I told Pam, who was staring, puzzled, into the gathering dark, her head on one side and the tea towel held up to her mouth as if she thought she was going to be sick.

'It knows who we are,' she whispered. 'Despite the precautions, it always remembers us.'

She shuddered, pulled herself away from the window, and began pouring water into the coffee filter so clumsily

that I put my arm round her shoulders and said, 'Look, you'd better go and sit down before you scald yourself. I'll finish this, and then you can tell me what's the matter.'

She hesitated.

'Come on,' I encouraged her. 'All right?'

'All right.'

She went into the living room and sat down. One of the cats ran into the kitchen and looked up at me expectantly. 'Don't let them have milk,' she called. 'They got some this morning, and anyway it only gives them diarrhea.'

'How are you feeling?' I asked. 'In yourself, I mean?'

'About how you'd expect.'

She had taken some propranolol for the migraine, she said, but it never seemed to help much. 'It shortens the headaches, I suppose.' As a side-effect, though, it made her so tired. 'It slows my heartbeat down. I can feel it slow right down.' She watched the steam rising from her coffee cup, first slowly and then with a rapid plaiting motion as it was caught by some tiny draught. Eddies form and break on the surface of a deep, smooth river. A slow coil, a sudden whirl. What was tranquil is revealed as a mass of complications that can be resolved only as motion.

I remembered when I had first met her:

She was twenty then, a small, excitable, attractive girl who wore moss-coloured jersey dresses to show off her waist and hips. Later, fear coarsened her. With the divorce a few grey streaks appeared in her astonishing red hair, and she chopped it raggedly off and dyed it black. She drew in on herself. Her body broadened into a kind of dogged, muscular heaviness. Even her hands and feet seemed to become bigger.

'You're old before you know it,' she would say. 'Before you know it.'

Separated from Lucas she was easily chafed by her surroundings; moved every six months or so, although never very far, and always to the same sort of dilapidated, drearily furnished cottage, so you suspected she was looking for precisely the things that made her nervous and ill; and tried to keep down to fifty cigarettes a day.

'Why did Yaxley never help us?' she asked me. 'You must know.'

Yaxley fished two cups out of a plastic washing-up bowl and put tea bags in them.

'Don't tell me you're frightened too!' he said. 'I expected more from you.'

I shook my head. I wasn't sure whether I was afraid or not. I'm not sure today. The tea, when it came, had a distinctly greasy aftertaste, as if somehow he had fried it. I made myself drink it while Yaxley watched me cynically.

'You ought to sit down,' he said. 'You're worn out.'

When I refused, he shrugged and went on as if we were still at the Tivoli: 'Nobody tricked them, or tried to pretend it would be easy. If you get anything out of an experiment like that, it's by keeping your head and taking your chance. If you try to move cautiously, you may never be allowed to move at all.'

He looked thoughtful.

'I've seen what happens to people who lose their nerve.'
'I'm sure,' I said.

'They were hardly recognizable, some of them.'

I put the teacup down.

'I don't want to know,' I said.

'I bet you don't.'

He smiled to himself.

'Oh, they were still alive,' he said softly, 'if that's what you're worried about.'

'You talked us into this,' I reminded him.

'You talked yourselves into it.'

Most of the light from Museum Street was absorbed as soon as it entered the room, by the dull green wallpaper and sticky-looking yellow veneer of the furniture. The rest leaked eventually into the litter on the floor, pages of crumpled and partly burned typescript, hair clippings, broken chalks which had been used the night before to draw something on the flaking lino: among this stuff, it died. Though I knew Yaxley was playing some sort of game with me, I couldn't see what it was. I couldn't make the effort, so in the end he had to make it for me. He waited until I got ready to leave.

'You'll get sick of all this mess one day,' I said from the door of the bedsit.

He grinned and nodded and advised me:

'Have you ever seen Joan of Arc get down to pray in the ticket office at St Pancras? And then a small boy comes in leading something that looks like a goat, and it gets on her there and then and fucks her in a ray of sunlight?

'Come back when you know what you want. Get rid of Lucas Medlar, he's an amateur. Bring the girl if you must.'

'Fuck off, Yaxley.'

He let me find my own way back down to the street.

That night I had to tell Lucas, 'We aren't going to be hearing from Yaxley again.'

'Christ,' he said, and for a second I thought he was going to cry. 'Pam feels so ill,' he whispered. 'What did he say?'

'Forget him. He could never have helped us.'

'Pam and I are getting married,' Lucas said in a rush.

2

N'Aimez Que Moi

—

WHAT COULD I HAVE SAID? I knew as well as they did that they were only doing it out of a need for comfort. Nothing would be gained by making them admit it. Besides, I was so tired by then I could hardly stand. Yaxley had exhausted me. Some kind of visual fault, a neon zigzag like a bright little flight of stairs, kept showing up in my left eye. So I congratulated Lucas and, as soon as I could, began thinking about something else.

'Yaxley's terrified by the British Museum,' I said. 'In a way I sympathize with him.'

As a child, I had hated it too.

Every conversation, every echo of a voice or a footstep or a rustle of clothes, was gathered up into its high ceilings in a kind of undifferentiated rumble and sigh – the blurred and melted remains of meaning – which made you feel as if your parents had abandoned you in a derelict swimming