



BEAT THE DUST

December 2008

Featured Writer, Steve Finbow

Introduction

Beat the Dust decided to subvert Christmas this year, starting it early and lopping four days off it. Why? To celebrate the Third Coming of our Featured Writer slot. We don't do lords a-leaping or maids a-milking at Beat the Dust but what we do do is great underground literature, and December is no exception. We are pleased to have a feature length short story from our third Featured Writer, Steve Finbow. By way of background, Steve once worked for the poet Allen Ginsberg. He has also helped or hindered Victor Bockris, Barry Miles, and the artist Richard Long. He is an editor with 3:AM Magazine, proprietor of body-conscious litzine Red Peter, a some-time writer for Quarantine Theatre Company and a book reviewer for The Japan Times. Steve has also lectured at the universities of Liverpool, Newcastle, and Northumbria in the UK and at the universities of North-West, KwaZulu Natal, and Venda in South Africa. His novel *Balzac of the Badlands* will be published by Future Fiction London (Creation) in October 2009. He is currently working on a new novel, a critical and cultural biography of Sergeant Bertrand, and a collection of unpublished short stories.

Beat the Dust is very pleased to add Steve Finbow to its collection of Featured Writers, which to date includes Mark SaFranko (May 08 edition) and Brutalist Adelle Stripe (August 08). Big thanks to Steve for agreeing to take the hot seat at Beat the Dust for December. We were keen to give short fiction room to stretch its legs and serialize a longer story over a period of eight days. This chapbook gives you the chance to read the whole piece all in one place. Alternatively, if you'd like to have the story read to you, Steve has recorded an audio version of his story, which you can play or download as a podcast.

Kevin O’Cuinn, writer, architect of Kevsville & man about Frankfurt asks Steve three questions:

1. How did/Did working for Allen Ginsberg change how/what you wrote?



It didn't. Not really, Kev. To be perfectly honest, I admire Allen the man more than Allen the poet. I'm more influenced by Clark Coolidge, Charles Bernstein & Bruce Andrews. I suppose what I did learn was that if you call yourself a "writer" then you must spend the majority of your time/life writing, thinking about writing & reading. Hard work – Allen worked harder than any writer I know/have known. Bob Rosenthal said to me, "The world's become a lot worse since Allen died" – or something like that. & I agree. We need someone like Allen to bravely confront the bullshit.

2. 20m squid for Robbie Keane, you must be sick as. If you could replace him with anyone, who'd you pick?

Lionel Messi, (if we had a footie Tardis) Diego Maradona or Peter Beardsley – all perfect foils for Torres' genius.

3. You're an en dash type of fella. Why not the em?

I am, aren't I? I prefer the en dash – I like the gaps either side, that microscopic expansion of time & space. The near death of the long sentence upsets me; I enjoy the expansion of thought semi-colons allow, the rhythmic pulse of the comma & the ability of the en dash – delicate but forceful – to slow the reader down, make them think about what they're reading; whereas the em dash—big & brutal—slams home the point that we're digressing somewhat. Make a new sentence.

down among the dead - part 1.

Like bombs going off in my chest. Once, I would've bounded up two, three at a time. Not now. It's not like then. Now is not like then. It's not now. Morning, and it's already too hot. Got two bags of groceries and I'm panting half way there. No railing. Keep going, lad. If I put the bags down, I've just got to bend over and pick 'em up again. I can feel this ba-booming in my chest. Listen to it. It's like a big brass band in there. I don't want it ba-booming any louder. Cough's not too clever. I try and swallow as it comes up. I don't want Mrs. Quinn to hear me. She'll come out, blather on for hours. I wanna get in so's I can get something to eat before I go down the Coopers for a drink. Should've gone shopping last night on my way home but I'd had a skinful. Done well this morning. Got milk, bread, cheese, can of sardines in tomato sauce, bacon, tinned potatoes, and treated myself to a bottle of Jameson's. Bloody heavy, an all, the bag is. Packed it myself. Put heavy and light stuff in both bags. Or so I thought. Hips are bloody killing me. And my back. Should've got the bus but it's only two stops. Got to keep fit somehow. Cough's coming up again. I close my teeth and my lips. My eyes water with the strain. I can't hold it in. It's out. Loud and echoing in the hallway. I get my keys out of my pocket. Juggle the bags so's I'm holding 'em both in my left hand. Open the door just as Mrs. Quinn opens hers. I go in and I hear her say, 'Mr O'Con – .' I close the door behind me. I hear her walk up the first few steps. Stop. Turn. Walk back down and close her door. Have to be careful on the way out, now. It's not a bad place this. Bedsit I'd call it. Overlooks the High Road but that's all right. Traffic's not too noisy. Sometimes I can hear people after the pubs have chucked out. Then, most of the time, I'm one of 'em. Got a kitchen with a two-ring gas hob, an oven I never use, a fridge, and some cupboards. There's a toilet and shower room. Can't be doing with baths at my age. By the time I'm in, the water's cold and I have to get out again. By the time I'm out, the water's ice and I could skate on the bugger. Shower's all right by me. It's got a seat in it. I can sit down and wash. In the main room, I've got a bed, a sofa, and a fold-up chair. Next to the sofa is a bookshelf with books from the local Oxfam – mostly history, biographies. No novels. I can't be doing with them these days. Mrs. Quinn came up first week I moved in, put some curtains up she said she had lying around. At least they cover the grey nets – looked like they'd been soaked in porridge. I put the groceries away except for the bread and sardines. I open the fridge to get the margarine out and remember I forgot to buy some. I open the sardines and tip 'em on a plate. Take out the crusts from both ends of the loaf and use 'em to soak up the juices. Oily red sauce runs down my chin. I wipe it with the bread, then fold the slice in four and push it into my mouth. It'll sponge up the beer. I wipe the plate clean, put it in the sink. Lived here three years now, since I moved from Hammersmith when they sold the council flats for redevelopment. It's not Liverpool, now.

Liverpool was home from home. Second capital of Ireland they call it. Aye. Lived in the Dingle. Then Manchester. Then Glasgow. Then abroad. Then London. Would've been nice to stay in one spot. Always on the move. Just in case. I forgot to buy a bloody newspaper. I'll get one on my way to the Coopers. Wanted to put a bet on. I'll have a swift half while I look at the form. I can nip down the bookies after. I brush my hair in the bathroom mirror. Take my shirt off, get a fresh one out of the cupboard. My trousers are a bit creased. Ach, they'll do. I put on a blue sports coat. On the lapel is a Leinster flag. It's ten to twelve. By the time I sneak past Mrs. Quinn's door, buy a newspaper from Mr. Gill and walk down the High Road, it'll be time for a half. I never drink before noon, now. Never. I could do with a hair of the dog. Never meant to stay in the pub that long yesterday. I got talking to Liam, Joseph, and that. Then those fellas came in, aye, I remember now. I think I went on a bit. I'll have to ask Liam what I was saying. I'll be right, now. I know when to keep a tongue in my head. To think of it, they were well dressed, I mean, for fellas who were just passing. I asked what brought 'em to the Coopers. One of their brothers was a barman years back. I asked Jane but she couldn't remember him. It was before the Poles, before the Kiwis, before the bloody Aussies even. Too far away, too long ago, she said, poured a large gin, sat on her stool, and smoked one of her little cigars. Generous, those fellas. Stood me a few whiskies and says they wanted to hear about the old days. I'm not sure but I think I'd've tapped my nose and said something like, You wouldn't believe me, lads. No. Ach, Liam and Joseph would've rolled their eyes and gone to play on that squawking pest of a fruit machine. Aye. Can't remember leaving. Can't remember getting home.

There's me thinking I'd spend the weekend fishing or something, maybe go to the football, and I get a call from your man and he says how would I like a trip to Spain? No danger. A wedge in it for me. And I says, Well, you know I've been trying to ease back a bit what with the blood pressure and just turning fifty and that. And your man makes some crack about half a ton and I laugh but I think he can hear me force it. And so he says, Well, Michael, what do you think? Do this for me and I'll leave you be as much as I can – you know, maybe you'll get time to make things up with the missus. And I says, OK, all right, and he says, Have you got your passport? And I says, My real one? And he says, Aye. And I say, Yeah, and he says, You won't be needing that then. I'm to go to – and he names this place off the Falls Road – and he says a taxi will pick us up and to wear a shirt and tie because I'm having my picture taken. The flight to Gatwick leaves tomorrow at nine a.m. and I'm to change there for Malaga. And I say, I've never been to that part of Spain before and he says, Good, because you're not staying there long. When you get to the airport, hire a car, pay cash, and drive down to Gibraltar. And I says, Don't I even get

to drink sangria and eat paella and he goes quiet. After a while, he says, You'll find out more when you get to the house. Return flight's on the ninth. So I shave, change into my best suit, run a glob of Brylcreem through my hair, comb it, and just as I'm doing that I hear a car pull up. I step out of the bathroom and from behind the bedroom curtains look out onto the road and see this battered old black taxi. I can't see the driver's face. The wife used to say I had the ears of a cat and the nose of a bloodhound. I was always looking out of the windows at cars and passers-by. I should call her before I leave, I suppose, and ask about the girl. Ach, her da will probably hang up on me, no good that I am, or so he says. The taxi spews black smoke over the privet hedges and the driver's just sitting there. I put my coat on, slip a little something into the right pocket, a book into the other to even up the weight, and I close and lock the door. I bang on the taxi's back window and the little shite jumps and says Mr O'Connor? And I says, Aye, and you can put that out an' all. And he does and I get in the back, and he pulls away. I can smell stale clothes, rollies, and he leans back and asks if I want a bite of his Wispa bar. I shake my head, reach into my pocket and take out my book. The driver looks at me in the rear-view mirror and says, Book, is it? And for some reason I hold it up and say, Aye. After 20 minutes or so, the taxi pulls to the kerb and the driver says, You're here. And I look up at a terrace house and I say, How much? And he says, Not a thing and I'm to wait for you. I get out, put the book back into my coat pocket, give the other pocket a squeeze. I look at the driver and he winks as he lights up the stump of a rollie and winds the window up. I'm just about to knock on the door when a young girl, not more than my daughter's age, opens it, stands to one side, and looks back along the dark hall. I step in, ruffle her hair and say, Is your da home? And she points along to where I can see light coming from a doorway. The house smells of wet clothes and wetter dogs. I tap on the doorframe. A man in his late fifties turns, beckons me in and then mutes the television that was blaring in the corner. He asks for my coat but I take it off and fold it in two and then again and lay it on a chair. He looks me up and down and takes me into the kitchen where he asks me to sit on a stool. He draws a grey curtain across the back door, leaves the room and returns with a camera and tripod, asks me to stay still and to not smile, which I'm not, and he takes four photographs. He gestures for me to go back into the front room, he follows and turns up the television volume. I sit down and he leaves the room. I switch channels and then turn the television off. The young girl is standing in the doorway staring. I ask for a drink of water and she brings me one from the kitchen. The water is warm, cloudy, and tastes of washing-up liquid. The man reappears, hands me an envelope and says, Sorry, I forgot. This is for you. He leaves and this time the girl goes with him. I cross to the sofa and turn on the standard lamp. The envelope is sealed with Sellotape. I run my finger underneath the flap. I open it.

Toby Litt, author of *I Play the Drums in a Band Called Okay, Hospital, & deadkidsongs*, asks Steve: I know you knew Allen Ginsberg. I'm interested whether or not you'd go along with his teaching – "First thought, best thought"? Do you think that rewriting detracts from the purity of original intention?

I worked for Allen Ginsberg in the late eighties/early nineties, as a researcher, archivist, & editor, writing (with Allen's constant input) some of the prose (blurbs, references, short essays) that people, institutions, & publications asked Allen for. I also typed up Allen's poems onto the computer. In so doing, I realized that Allen's "first thought, best thought" – although technically correct (Allen would usually compose short poems in one sitting & longer ones over a period of time with very little editing) – was not strictly true, he would edit & make notes & corrections before being happy with a final draft – as one can see in the original manuscript of *Howl*. The spontaneous mind is important to Beat creativity: the texts of *On the Road*, *Kaddish* – written over a 40-hour period – *Naked Lunch* – assembled from letters & routines – are all works of primary spontaneity. But the Beats knew they were the butt-end of high modernism & they were all very aware of their literary roots & of their part in history in the making (Allen saved everything, & I mean everything). Editing & revising poems (Allen also helped to edit *Naked Lunch*) does not distract from the basic tenet: "first thought, best thought." Edits & revisions are appendages to the original principle. Fellow Lower East Side poet Ted Berrigan said something like, "Get it down," & so the answer to the second part of the question is, I'm not sure any of my or any other writers' thoughts are pure, I'm not sure we intend to think that way, & I'm certain that none of our thoughts are original. Rewriting and editing are means to recover vision, imagination, & inspiration in logic – translating those spontaneous & personal thoughts into a communicative language understood by others, not just by the poet/writer. Don't forget Burroughs considered himself a host for the word virus, a communicating vessel.



down among the dead – part 2.

I creep down the stairs and tiptoe, well, shuffle, past Mrs. Quinn's door. Her television's on so she probably can't hear me but I don't want to chance getting stuck jawing with her for an hour or more. She's not a bad biddy, now. Brings me cakes and biscuits. Sometimes, I'll have a cup of tea with her and she'll rabbit on about her sons and daughters – not that they ever visit. But not today. No. Mail still not been. Lazy so and sos. Won't be nothing for me, though. Friday morning. It was quiet earlier but now the street's busy with shoppers and office workers taking early lunches. There's loads of kids – fucking terrors – chasing each other through the crowd. Nobody says a thing. Nobody'd dare. I nod to a few people I know. Not to talk to, now. Can't get too friendly. Never had anyone in my digs, 'cept Mrs. Quinn. There's a man on the street ahead of me looks like he's praying but he's fixing a padlock to his bicycle. A young fella, whippet-thin, is outside Barclays trying to sell one of those Big Issues 'cept he's falling asleep on his feet and keeps jolting up like he's dancing or a puppet or something. When I moved here, this area was rundown, grubby with black bricks, piss stains, and pools of vomit outside kebab shops. Now it's dolled up and clean and though it's not what it was I've got to say it's not at all a bad place. I buy a Daily Mirror from Mr. Gill who is busy keeping his eye on two kids. On the way out, I spot a copy of The Irish News and buy that along with some Extra Strong Mints – for some reason the touch of 'em makes my teeth go on edge – you know, like chalk on a blackboard – but I like 'em and always try to have a pack handy. The kids look harmless to me, more interested in magazines than thieving. I look at my watch – twelve o'clock. I tuck the papers under my arm, put the mints in my jacket pocket – nothing worse than drinking Guinness with taste of mint on your tongue – and push the doors open to the Coopers Arms. Smells of polish and cheap detergent, floor's still wet from mopping. Nobody's switched the fruit machine on yet. Good. I can't be doing with its yapping. Sounds like a flock of parrots trapped in a combine harvester. Old Sandy's at his table nursing half a lager. Jane's nowhere to be seen. Behind bar's this new fella from Brazil. He wears trousers that come just below his knee and on his right calf he's got a big tattoo. Lad's all right. His English is not too bad. Don't smile much. But then, would you if you'd swapped Ipanema for the Kilburn High Road? Before I can say anything, he's pulled my glass – an old Harp lager one – from the hooks above the bar and is pouring me a Guinness. I only wanted half. Ach, the nags can wait. It's a Friday so it'll get busy in here. Office workers slumming it for a taste of Jane's Irish stew or Irish pizza – margarita (so the sign says) with a bacon and potato topping; cheese an extra 50p. I'll make sure I get to the bookies and back before 12:45. Before the rush. I sit at the bar – far end – as far away from Jane's moods as I can get. The lad – Sergio? Silvio? Celio? – I can't remember. I nod and hand him money and he says, Thank you, Martin, and I'm about to correct him but can't give a fuck and I say, Thank you,

Umberto. He doesn't say a dickey bird. I take a sip of the cold dark stuff and the foam tickles my nose and it tastes smooth flowing over my tongue and I swallow slowly, wanting it to last. I intend to stay here best part of the day. Most days, I'll go home about four for a nap. Have something to eat for my tea – beans on toast or soup – and then come back about six or seven and stay until ten or closing time – if someone's buying or the craic is good. Sometimes they'll have a band. If it's Irish folk and not them loud guitars I'll maybe sing along. On my way home, some nights, I'll have a fish supper. They don't do anything near as good as Leo Burdock's chipper now. Times I staggered out of The International, or Grogan's, and waited in all weathers for haddock and chips, eating it on my way back to my digs in Dolphin's Barn. The grease would drip down my clothes and I wouldn't notice it till morning. My room would stink of fish and I'd find cold chips squished into the carpet and a bottle of pop flat and warm by my bed.

A map of the Malaga to Gibraltar road, £500 in used tenners, two return tickets, and potted bios of three people I'm to watch. Just watch now. This has nothing to do with mistrust. These fellas – and I include the woman in that description – know what they're doing. I am just added security. They'll arrive on the sixth. I'm to be there on the fifth. The night before. In place. Ready. Safe hands. No trouble. Invisible. I slip the documents back into the envelope, take out the money and fold it into my wallet. The young girl pokes her head around the door and says, Da'll be down in a minute. Would you like some tea? No, thanks, I say, thanks. She smiles. The room is hot. The room is stuffy. Closed curtains. I walk into the dining room through a homemade arch covered with woodchip wallpaper painted a matt magnolia. The living and dining room seem to exist in their own atmospheres. The living room oppressive and airless, the giant dark eye of the television, the shelves heavy with sombre-spined histories. The dining room, with its teak table and chairs, its rows of decorative china plates, its crystal animals on every surface, has a woman's touch, a lightness that defies the stifling living room, defies the grim reminders of the terraced street, the inconsolable outside world. Where is she? I look out of the back window onto a small concrete yard. Neat. The floor swept. A girl's pink bicycle. Done, a voice behind me says. The man crosses to the table and fans out three documents – a British passport in the name of Albert George Griffiths, a UK driving licence, and an international driving permit. According to the passport, I'm 51. In the past year, I've visited the USA and Morocco. He puts the documents in a folder he takes from the dining-table drawer. Thanks, I say. The girl'll see you to the door, he says, and walks out and I hear him climb the stairs. I gather my coat from the chair, pat the pockets, drape it over my arm. The girl is in the hallway. She skips to the front

door, opens it. I can see the taxi waiting, the driver's right hand on the roof drumming along to something on the radio. Thanks, I say to the girl, take care now. She closes the door without a word. The road is quiet. It's nearly teatime. There are no army patrols. No police. It could be anywhere. I open the back door, get in. Turn that off and take me home, I say. The roads are busy now and I feel drowsy from that living room. No names, I think. Never any names. The taxi's stopped at traffic lights. The driver turns, his left arm forming a triangle on the headrest, The name's Damien, Mr O'Connor, he says, Damien O'Hara. Pleased to be doin' business with you. I stare at him and point at the green light. Just get me home, I say. Fifteen minutes later, we're there. I'm to see if you want me to take you anywhere else, Damien says. I'm fine, I say. You go on home now. I'll be working the nights, Damien says, if you don't need me. No, I say. Thank you. I get out and tap the roof. As I'm about to open the front door, I hear the car horn scream the opening notes to a cavalry charge. I walk up the stairs to the bedroom, pull from the wardrobe a small suitcase and start to pack – lightweight trousers, shirts, spare jacket, underwear, and socks. At the last minute, I add a pair of swimming trunks and sunglasses. You never know, I think. You never know. The phone rings and I answer it. Done? The voice says. Aye, I say. Done, I think. Make sure you're in Gibraltar by the night of the fifth. I know, I think. I can read, I think. Better the night before. I know, I think. They won't be crossing until after midday on the sixth. You never know how busy the border will be. I know, I think. Don't carry on. I know. If you need anything... but you won't. Just watch. I know, I think. How's your memory, Michael? Good, I think. Good, I say. Good. Good, he says. Don't write anything down. Throw that fucking diary away. What diary? I think. No cameras, no tape-recorders, nothing. Just your head, Michael. Just your head. I'll call when I know you're back. OK, I say. Bye now. How's your memory? He asked. And I said good. To tell you the truth, it's far from good. There's nothing good about my memory. My memories. My memories are the opposite of good. My memories are bad. Bad memories. Ach now, if I could just forget the done things and remember all the things I was supposed to do and if all those to dos became the done things then I would have good memories. Ach, how round the houses is that bollocks? I stare at my face in the mirror. Albert Griffiths, I think. Albert George Griffiths. Not Michael O'Connor. No longer Michael O'Connor. Goodbye, Michael, I say to my reflection. Should've said it a long while back now. And I look at my face, the red eyes, the puffy jowls, the pale pink wattle, my teeth a car wreck of bad dentistry and broken promises. The shadows beneath my eyes are a dark grey-green, as dead as the television screen in that too-hot and murky room.

Stephen Barber, author of *Antonin Artaud: Terminal Curses, Tokyo Trilogy, & Projected Cities*. asks Steve: What kind of sensorial & ocular impact would you like your readers to experience in their contact with your writing – & what kind of in-built survival strategy do your writings have in order to endure a coming apocalypse?

I want people to smell the words. I enjoy writing that is physical in its effect – Pierre Guyotat’s relentlessness, the poetry of Charles Reznikoff & Louis Zukofsky, or the theoretical writings of Gilles Deleuze. I like sentences with heft, paragraphs with brute force, a chapter that smacks you in the mouth, a book that bludgeons you with its genius. Sentences are visual – whether Hemingway’s minimalist masterpieces, Proust’s epic wordscapes, or the brain worms created while reading the works of Alain Robbe-Grillet. Chew them over. Sometimes they’re as light as gossamer sorbets, sometimes it’s like chewing toffee laced with cocktail sticks. In-built survival strategy? Humour, a commitment to now, a tanker full of Stella, & a gold-plated Purdy for those pesky post-apocalyptic critics. I’m waiting for you, Michiko Kakutani.



down among the dead – part 3.

I open the Mirror and look at the day’s races. Just a bit of fun. 50p here. A pound there. I used to go to Leopardstown, Naas, out to the Curragh. Most days, by the end of the meet, I’d be whistling for my next drink. Not now, though. In the first, I fancy Oedipus in Boots at 4/1. In the second, Dartagnan’s Boy 3/1. And in the third, Indifference – the long shot if the others don’t come in – 12/1. I look at front page of the News. Aye. All right there, Michael? Liam says as he leans on the bar and asks for a pint of Stella. Liam, I say, rough? Aye, says Liam. Just let me get this down me. He reaches for the Stella and drinks half of it, nearly spilling the other half because his hands are shaking. Where’s Nora? I say pointing at the floor. She’s at home with me

ma, Liam says, she's getting too old to come to the pub every day, and she can't be living on beef crisps and pork scratchings. How you doing today? He says. His eyes sunk and grey-rimmed, his shirt frayed and in need of a wash. Not bad. Not bad, I say. You were banging on something rotten last night, Michael, so you were. Was I? I say. And what was I talking about? Your past. Joe and I walked away cos we'd heard it a million times before. I never did, I say. At first, you were like edging around it but after they'd plied you with whiskies, you were on your way. I thought you were gonna sing *The Fields of Athenry* but you'd scoffed so many packets of crisps it would've been heresy. You were Giblartaring this, and Belfasting that all through a spray of whiskey and McCoy's salt and malt, so you were. And those fellas were lapping it up. Who were they any roads? I dunno. They started talking and buying drinks, next thing I know I'm a bit pished, I say. We tried to get you to join us but you were going on like you were the Irish fucking Godfather. You shouldn't be shouting your mouth off, Michael, not over things like that. Aye, I say, aye, you're right. You want another? I say. Aye, Liam says, go on, then. I order, and when the beers arrive, I ask Liam to keep an eye on my pint while I nip to the bookies, Won't be more than ten minutes, I say. I didn't know anyone when I moved to Kilburn. It took about three months to get talking to Liam and Joe. I didn't say much about my past when they asked. Then this Pat fella says he thought he remembered me from his Belfast days. I says, Well, you could, you could, and we started reminiscing. He knew some faces. I let on that I might have known a bit more than a face. And one night, after the pub closed, we all went back to Liam's. Liam put on some old rebel songs, we sat and listened, sang along. Pat leans forward and says, Come on now, Michael, tell us something about your past. I says nothing. And then they're all asking and I says, Well, I'll tell you what I can, but after that I'll have to shoot the lot of you. And they laughed and I says, Fix me another whiskey and I'll let you in on a secret. We were there until four a.m., glued to their seats, so they were. And I thought, fuck it, it's nearly twenty years ago, and if any bugger was gonna do anything they'd've done so by now. Last night... Ach! No harm in it. Them fellas were just after a talk and a bit of local character. In the bookies, I write my slips out and give them to the young girl behind the counter along with £3.30. That pint's done me the world of good and I'm looking forward to the one waiting for me on the bar. Too late. Mrs. Quinn stands in the street holding out her shopping bags as if to block my way. Mrs. Quinn, I say. Mr. O'Connor, she says. A good morning to you, I say. Afternoon, she says. So it is, I say. She says, Would you be going to the Coopers? I will, I say, just after a walk around the shops. And will you be back for your tea? She says. I'm not sure about that, Mrs. Quinn, I say, I may have to see a man about a thing. A thing? She says. Aye, I say. She says, Would it be the same thing the men who called for you earlier were after? Men? I say. Aye, men, she says. Just after you left, she says, two men, well dressed. What did they want? I say. They left before I got to the door, she says. Probably Jehovah's Witnesses, I say. Or Mormons. You get a lot of them

around here. I'm making a shepherd's pie, she says, do you want me to save you some? No, I'll be right, I say, I went shopping this morning, Mrs. Quinn. It's there if you want it, she says, if you change your mind. Aye, I say. Right, I say, rubbing my hands together. Off on my walk. No rest for the wicked, I say. Aye, Mrs. Quinn says. I walk past the Coopers, turn the corner and wait for Mrs. Quinn to get far enough away so that I can turn back. I count to one hundred and walk back to the Coopers. I can see her headscarf bobbing along the High Road. She doesn't turn around.

That no-mind Damien is waiting outside when I leave for the airport. He waves to me as I lock the front door behind me. I called a mini-cab but look what's turned up. I get in, pushing my suitcase to the far side so I'm sitting directly behind him to minimize any conversation. He says, Your man said to pick you up and make sure you got to the airport in plenty of time. I ordered a mini-cab, I tell him. Sure, and they called us. You all set? Yes, I say. Miraculously, we drive to the airport in silence and he refrains from blasting his horn as he leaves. I check in and buy The Times, flick through it while I drink a cup of lukewarm and piss-weak tea. The flight is on time and I land at Gatwick and have a two-hour wait for my connecting flight. I eat an English breakfast and go to the duty-free to buy a bottle of Jameson's. At the check-in desk and passport control, they barely glance at my passport and I'm feeling more like an Albert as the minutes tick by. There are holidaymakers escaping the March weather and a team of basketball players with oversize luggage. The plane is not too full and the flight slips by in no time aided by countless cups of coffee and a novel I bought at the airport. Spanish immigration is a breeze. I walk into the arrivals lounge, hire a car, pay in cash. I'm feeling tired and for a second wish a Spanish version of that dip-shit Damien would drive me down to the Rock. While I'm waiting for the hire car, I study the map. A highlighted line traces the coast from Malaga to Gibraltar. Costa del Sol. Torremelinos. All that. It looks as though there's a more scenic route but the red marker is vibrating with imperatives. Sod it. If I have to, I'll take the scenic route back. Looks like it'll take me ninety minutes or so. Two hours tops. Should get there by seven easy. Bit of dinner – fish maybe. Small glass of wine and bed. Ach, it'll be easy. Five days away from the rain and the cold. Five days of not seeing the girl. I forgot to call the wife. Bollocks. The car arrives. It's small, although small is OK for what I need. I put my suitcase in the boot. I adjust the rear-view mirror and I'm off. There's a radio-cassette. I turn the dials but all I get is static. I decide to drive for an hour and then stop for a bite to eat. Marbella looks like a good bet. I park near the sea front, find a small café, order a coffee and a pastry. I take the bios from the documents folder. I know them all by reputation. I've seen them at meetings. I've even sat at the same table as one of them.

Ach, she won't remember me. Nobody ever does. The first one – born 1965, Belfast. A volunteer since he was a teen. Aye, you could say that. West Belfast boy through and through. Spent time on remand, so he did, before your man had a word with the fella who fucking grassed him. Clever boy he is. Clever with the old tick-tock, if you know what I mean. Fuck. I've got to drop the Irish before I get to the border. Ach, the Spanish can't tell if I'm a Paddy, a Kiwi, or a Martian. Second one's 31. Bit of a naughty boy – committed, mind – and I mean to the cause. He was on the blanket along with the other fellas back when. Knows his way around the system and likes the old fireworks. The woman. Would not like me calling her a fella, so she wouldn't. Dirty protest, hunger strike, you name it. Cool customer. I reckon I'm here to keep an eye out because your man's worried she's after his job. Wouldn't want her to find out I'm spying on her, now. She'd've sorted it whatever it is. No problem with her about. No problem. I really don't know what I'm doing here. But £500 is always handy. Wonder if I'll get time to see the monkeys? And I'm not talking about the Brits. Ach, now, the pastry's a bit stale and too sweet for me but the coffee's strong and perks me up. I should still get there by seven. I tear the bios into four pieces, take a book of matches from the table and set fire to the paper. The waiter rushes over with a carafe of water and I hold my hand up as he approaches and take some pesetas from my wallet, pay him, and he retreats to the doorway still watching me. The paper blackens and shrinks and collapses in on itself, the words becoming first ash and then smoke, and the smoke in turn is caught by the wind and sucked into the sky where it drifts for a while and is lost.

Stewart Home, film-maker, artist & author of *Red London*, *Blow Job* & *Memphis Underground*, asks Steve: Do you think the quality of English language fiction writing has declined in comparison to the mid-to-late twentieth century? & if the answer is yes, is this because there is a freer availability of other material (computer games, films & music on download & DVD) or do other factors play an important role? If the answer is no, how do we find that good writing because it seems difficult to locate?

Woah! Maybe the standard of publishing has declined. I've said before that I doubt very much whether Samuel Beckett, BS Johnson, or Ann Quin would find a publisher if they were writing today. I'm going to say 'no'. If there is more 'media' availability, such as computer games etc., then that has to be included in the writing process – fiction writing didn't all of a sudden lapse into retardation after the invention of the steam engine or television. The end of the world for me is always the conclusion to *Mill on the Floss*: "Nothing else was said; a new danger was being carried toward them by the river. Some wooden machinery had just given way on one of the wharves, and huge fragments were being floated along. The sun was rising now, and the wide

area of watery desolation was spread out in dreadful clearness around them; in dreadful clearness floated onward the hurrying, threatening masses.” Published in the same year as the first sound recording of a human voice was made, this paragraphic deluge heralds the oncoming industrial age, the introduction and urbanization of the working classes, the invention of childhood, the commodification of leisure and pleasure, yet it didn’t retard the development of Henry James, DH Lawrence, Henry Miller, or Alain Robbe-Grillet. As for locating good writing, well, unfortunately in this era of mass communication it is mostly through word of mouth, & follow-up research, & referencing. Through your own work, I discovered the aforementioned Ann Quin, plus Pierre Guyotat & Dennis Cooper. From the suggestions of others, I’ve read Tom McCarthy, William T. Vollmann & Kenji Nakagami. & then there are the small publishers who have the balls to publish “good” inventive & experimental fiction writers – publishers such as Alma, Book Works, Creation & Wrecking Ball Press.



down among the dead – part 4.

Liam says, You back them horses? I did, I says. Not that they’ll win now, but it’s just a bit of fun after all. Your drink’s here, he says. I sit down and take a big sup and look at Liam and I’m about to tell him about those two fellas but think better of it. Nothing to worry about. And all Liam’ll do is stare into his drink until I buy him another. We both turn as the door opens and lets a draught in. Someone has their back to the door and you can see through the warped glass that whoever it is has his hands in the air and he’s backing into the pub and saying, ‘Not me, mate. Honest. You got me mistaken there, mister, so’s you have. Joseph. Shut that fucking door, Liam says, before we all catch our deaths. Sorry, Joseph says. Some fella reckoned I’d tarmaced his drive and wants his money back. Nothing to do with me, I says. Sure it was you, he said. Not me, I was back in Sligo then, sir, so I was. Must be mistaken, I says. And he looks at me. I remember the fella. Tight with the readies and even tighter with the tea and biscuits. Kept his missus inside so’s none of us could see her. Grand job, so it was. Guinness, please, Pablo, por favor, and

whatever these two reprobates'll be drinking. Liam pushes his empty Stella glass at the lad and I say I'll have a half and Joseph says, No, you'll have a pint and like it. And I says, OK, but keep it in the pump. Joseph turns to me and puts his hand on my shoulder as he passes his Switch card to the lad and says, Put it behind the bar. So, how's our national hero this fine blustery day? What? I says. Now don't be shy, Michael, why last night you were telling those fellas – the ones in the expensive suits flashing the cash – what was he saying, Liam? You were telling them fellas you were a cross between Lugh Lámhfhada, Cathal Brugha, and Liam Neeson, s'that right, Liam? Aye, Liam says, I've told him already. You didn't half down a few whiskies, there, Michael, stocious, I'd say, stocious. You were telling those fellas things you haven't even told us, s'that right, Liam? Aye, says Liam. Harmless fun, I says. They knew I was bollocksed. Pinch of salt. Off a duck's back. The old blarney. They weren't listening half the time. They was eyeing up them two young girls sitting by the jukebox. Eating outta your hand, s'that right, Liam? Aye, says Liam. No harm done. No harm, I says. They probably don't know what I was blathering on about. Nobody remembers nowt about those days. Aye, you might be right, says Joseph, might be right. An old soldier, I says, nobody listens to an old soldier these days. Old sod ya, Liam says. And Liam and Joseph laugh and Joseph turns to the lad and says, Old sod ya, Carlos, s'that right? The lad smiles and goes back to reading the 'What's on' section of the Kilburn Times. Just having the one, Joseph says. Liam says, same here, even though he's on his third. I fold the Mirror in two and then again and smooth it out on the bar, take out the small red plastic biro I got from the bookies and suck the white-ribbed end while I look at the crossword clues. Liam and Joseph crane their necks to see what I'm looking at. One down, says Liam. And Joseph says, Two to go, says the SAS man. I don't look up. What goes backward at ninety mile an hour full of Tommies with pricks for brains and shit in their pants? Four words beginning with A. I don't know, says Liam. A silver Volkswagen Passat, says Joseph. Corporal punishment and all that, he adds. I look up and try to smile. Enough there, lads, eh? You've had your fun. No need to speak ill of the dead. No need to speak of the dead at all, says Joseph. I get your point, I say. It won't happen again. Now, lads, can I get you a drink? Liam's glass is empty and Joseph's barely touched his. Liam says, Aye, and Joseph says, You can get me one tonight, Michael. I'm bringing Keshini in before we go for an Indian. Where's Nora? Joseph asks looking down. Just noticed she's not here licking the floor. With me ma, says Liam. I'll bring her in later. Grand, says, Joseph, she can keep Kesh company. Joseph claps his hands together, makes a swiping motion with his right hand, and says, Fifty on top, please, Miguel. Liam looks at Joseph and makes a nodding gesture at Joseph's pocket. Joseph pulls out a ten-pound note and puts it on the bar next to Liam's fresh pint of Stella. Cheers, says Liam. And buy Constance Markievicz here a drink on me. Liam looks around, and Joseph points at me and says, Your man Walter O'Mitty. Ole' blowin Billy

McfuckingLiar there. I roll up my Mirror and take it with me to the gents. A draught of air follows me as Joseph leaves.

The place is a shitehole. Dusty. Flyblown. Full of fish and chip shops. English bars run by fucking miseries wishing they were back home in Kent or Yorkshire – how would they know the difference? It looks like there's been an outbreak of Union flag disease. The bastard things are everywhere. Might as well be in the Shankill `cept this is a bigger pile of piss. I book into the Bristol Hotel. Not a bad place. Not a bad room. The bloody restaurant's shut. I don't fancy the toasted cheese sandwich the barman offers me. I find a local place and order a plate of fried anchovies and then some kind of small pork sandwiches. I wash it all down with something that looks and tastes like sangria. I try to read my book but I'm distracted by the days to come. Your man never let on what they were going to be up to in Gibraltar. With the woman here it's got to be something big. But what? Who cares? I'm here to observe, report back. I can spend the time looking for that paella and drinking this sangria stuff. Soon as they're done whatever it is they're doing, I'll head back to Spain proper. I'll buy the wife something and get the girl one of those stuffed donkeys you sees everywhere. Maybe the fellas are just reconnoitering and your man wants me to check they're not sunbathing or on the razzle – not likely with the young one along – he makes George Bernard Shaw look like Brendan Behan. But there's something wrong here. I just can't help but think it. Why me? I didn't really have a choice. But then, I didn't really think about it. Until now. I was wanting out of Belfast, out of Ireland, out of my fucked up life with the wife and the girl – fucked up life without, I should say. Ach, I've been trying to get out for years. Always on the fringe, mind, never with the pearl, as I say. But I get sucked back in. I can't say no. This time I needed the money, needed the distance. Maybe, when I get back I'll ask your man if I can go to the British mainland for a while – Liverpool, Glasgow, maybe even London – do a bit of what I'm doing now – watching, reporting. Keeping tabs. Aye, I can't see why they wouldn't agree. 30-something years I've been in. I smile to myself and order another drink. Ach, I'll be right. I'll get to the frontier – frontier? I ask you – by midday. Your man said they won't be crossing before then. Maybe I could do a spot of sightseeing. I sip my drink and think how far I've come from running errands for the men back in the fifties. Take this to such and such, lad. Drop this off at whatsitcalled. Make sure whatshisname gets this. And my da would ruffle my hair and slip me a coin or a boiled sweet. I saw it as a bit of fun. Excitement. Razzle-dazzle on a grey rainy day. Standing by tables full of Guinness and overflowing ashtrays, my clothes steaming and stinking of smoke, the whiskey-breath of the red-faced men, them shouting at each other and slapping backs, tables and thighs. It was never the politics with me. Never. It was the being part.

The wife never understood that. Let's move to the south, she'd say, County Cork. Her sister lived near Maidenhead in England and she was always on to us to visit and when we did we'd walk through the town and she'd stop and look in estate agents windows. Dream on, I'd say. What do you expect me to put on the mortgage application form where it says occupation? Freedom fighter? IRA volunteer? Bagman? And she'd turn and say, My father offered you that job with his company. And I'd look at the floor and say, I'm not a clerk, love. I'm not. And we'd walk on not talking. And here am I wanting to move to the British fucking mainland – fucking Liverpool, fucking Glasgow. I pay the bill and walk back to the hotel. I am out of breath and slightly drunk and I stop to look at the outline of the Rock darker against the night sky. I am waiting. I am waiting for three people. I am waiting for three people to cross from Spain. To cross from the neutral zone into this British mockery. This grasping at past triumphs. This sad hope of returning glory. I am who I am and all I have ever amounted to standing here alone waiting to observe unobserved for a cause I no longer and have never fully believed in, under orders from a man I no longer and probably never did trust. I am without my wife and daughter, waiting to see what unravels, whether it be the pale drift of nothing or the sharp tang of violence. And I will live with whatever the consequences, for now and ever after, under the shadow of this fucking rock. How far have I come? How fucking far? I put my hands in my pockets and walk on. I sit at the table by the window in my hotel room. What a load of bollocks goes through my head at times, I think. What a load of bollocks. It's just a job, Michael, I say. Just a job, Albert, I say back to myself. Griffiths. Albert George. British Citizen. Born Liverpool, 23rd January, 1937.

Chris Killen, author of *The Bird Room*, asks Steve: Please describe an 'average day' in the life of Steve Finbow if Steve Finbow was a cat.

I wake around 6 am & nuzzle my mistress' thighs. Reon Kadena – for it is she who refreshes my kitty litter – rises, slips on her dressing gown, drops me into the silk holster of her pocket as if I were some furry pistol, & prepares me a breakfast of scrambled eggs, smoked salmon & truffle oil. I prowl around our roof garden in Rio de Janeiro, cruelly dissecting but not eating any small birds stupid enough to land there. While marking my territory, I occasionally sip imported Sapporo Classic from my platinum drinking bowl. Later, I slink up onto the Le Corbusier two-seater sofa & into my mistress' lap, let her long carmine nails tickle my taut belly. I rub my head on the underside of her black lace bra, sniff the air for the tang of leather from her black knee-length boots & purr, "Just a bit lower, Reon. Bit more."



down among the dead – part 5.

I close the cubicle door and sit down. I don't want to go or anything I just need to get away from those boys for a while. Ach, they're harmless but they take it too far sometimes and I try to keep my temper but it's hard. I know they're only having a jest and I know they're looking out for me in a way, but it annoys me they know nothing about the past. Not real stuff. They only know what they've seen in films and read in books. Well, Joseph, anyway. Doubt Liam's read a book in his life. I'll just sit for a while and gather my thoughts, get my wits about me. You'll see, Joseph'll be right as rain later, sweetness and light. He'll ask me to tell his girlfriend – Indian she is – tell her about the old country, tell her about the struggles and the troubles. He'll want me to make it sound romantic. Not violent stuff, just general, like. And while him and Liam are playing on the fruit machine or that general knowledge thing, I'll tell – can't think of her name, right now – what she wants to hear and I'll buy Nora a packet of pork scratchings – she likes to open the packet herself – and let her drink the last dregs from my Guinness. It'll all be forgotten by tonight. Probably jealous I was telling them new fellas stuff I hadn't told them. Twisted as they say in Belfast, full to the gills. I was probably pushing the truth, so I was. Had those young fellas eating out of my hand, I did. All ears, they were. Aye. I look up at the toilet door and someone has written in black marker pen 'IRA scum'. Someone else has tried to score it out with a key or a coin. And there is 'Roy Keane is God' and 'Bono for president'. On the left side of the wall, in red felt pen, in a hand that looks steady – and I can just imagine a Scouse lad, kecks around his ankles, Liverpool shirt hiked above his beer belly, tongue out in concentration, inscribing:

Outside the Shankly Gates
 I heard a Kopite calling
 Shankly they have taken you away

But you left a great eleven
 Before you went to heaven
 Now it's glory round the Fields of Anfield Road.

I remember my days on the Kop. I fold my paper and leave the cubicle, flushing the toilet for no reason. Wash my hands, dry them with paper and walk back into the bar. Will you be wanting another? I says to Liam. Aye, he says, go on, then, feeling human... nearly. The lad is at the taps before I finish. I sit down and say, Liam, have I told you about the time I lived in Liverpool? Grand city. Grand people. Used to spend Saturday afternoons watching the Reds, so I did. We'd start the day in the Albert on Lark Lane and then jump a taxi to Doctor Duncan's for a quick game of pool or drop in to Ye Cracke – fuck that hopscotch for a laugh – and then back in a taxi to Cabbage Hall or King Harry's for a few more be vies. Grab a burger or a sausage on the walk to Anfield. And Liam says, I thought you supported Man U. Feck off, will you, I say. Ach, I was there 1988-1989 – Houghton, Beardsley, Whelan, Aldo, Rushie, Jan Molby fecking Dick – more Scouse than Jimmy Tarbuck. Not forgetting your man John Barnes. Heard of him, like, says Liam, he's on TV. Black geezer. Talks too fast. Can't understand a word. Loud suits. You've not heard of Peter Beardsley, I say? Go on with you. Great player, says a voice behind me. Before his time, says another voice. Drink, pops? I turn around. Liam finishes his pint and excuses himself. Two of the fellas from last night. I'm OK for now, I say. And what about that Barnesy goal against Brazil, eh? Better than Maradona that. What d'you say, pops? Sure you don't want another pint of the black stuff? Suffering are we? What brings you back to Kilburn now, lads? Thought you were just passing last night? I say. Passing again, ain't we? Says the smaller one. Mind if we pull up a pew? The lad is holding two pint glasses and wagging them in front of the Stella tap. Just mineral water for us, mate, says the other fella. Fizzy, ice and a slice. And chuck us a couple a packets a dry-roasted peanuts. Don't want any more of them pork scratchings. They were rank. Up all night, I was. That'd be that kebab you had, the smaller one says. Chili sauce, innit? I had tahini on mine, says the other fella. The smaller one says, tahini sauce, innit? Here, pops, you won't remember this, funny, though, you were well gone by then, but Eddie here's wolfing down the pork scratchings, and Charlie, you know the one with the tatt of the bluebird on his hand, he says, Eddie, they've got other types of them scratchings behind the bar, not pork. And Eddie he says, Oh yeah, I'll go get some, what are they? And Charlie, he says, chicken – chicken itchings, and Eddie only goes and asks for `em, don't he? Don't ya? He says to Eddie. And he, he says pointing to the lad, only starts looking for `em, don't you? The lad smiles. Then the smaller one turns, holds out his right hand, Michael O'Connor, wasn't it? S'right, I say. Tony, he says. Tony.

I can't sleep. I never can. If it's not the memories, it's the doubts, and if it's not the doubts, it's the future, and, if I really think about it, it's the doubts about future memories. Ach, here we go again. And I lie here in this bed hundreds of miles from home – ach, home – a small flat outside the city proper, no neighbours I know, no pubs to drink in, miles away from the wife and the girl. More bollocks. The sheets are clean and smell vaguely of bleach and the thoughts in my head and the smell of the sheets and the light trickling in through the curtains and the flowers on the table all conspire to keep me awake. I switch on the bedside lamp and reach for my book. I read a sentence, read it again, and realize I am too tired to take anything in. I get up and cross to the curtains, part them with two fingers, and look out onto the pool's blue shiver and the trees' intricate twists. Out on the road, I see a man light a cigarette and look up to what must, for him, be a thin line of light on the hotel's dark façade. He stares up at my window, draws on his cigarette and, for a moment, I can see his face. He extinguishes the match between his thumb and forefinger, takes the cigarette from his mouth, and walks away, a stream of smoke marking his route. What if your man has sent someone to watch me? Watching the watcher. He arrived yesterday and is staying at another hotel and there is someone who arrived the day before watching him and on and on until everyone on this hunk of limestone is watching each other. What if the three who arrive tomorrow are here to watch six who arrive the next day and those six are here to watch twelve who arrive the next until the Rock is swarming with watchers and the watched? Watching. Watched. Watching. Watched. I step into the bathroom and splash cold water on my face. Take a drink. Rub my eyes. Climb back into bed. Turn off the bedside lamp. Pull the covers up to my chin. Close my eyes. I picture the wife at her parents' home. Her ma fussing over her. Her da all pipe and told you so's. The girl asleep in the back bedroom. The magical wardrobe straight out of a fairy tale. When we'd visit the wife's family, the girl would run upstairs – a blur of skinny legs and pompoms – and hide in the wardrobe. We'd follow her up, pretend we couldn't find her. She'd jump out on us, her tiny heart thumping in her chest, her knees knocking together as she leapt up and down with excitement shouting, Couldn't find me, Da. Couldn't find me. I won. I won. And I'd hold her and tell her, You always will, mo chroí. You always will. Ten she'll be soon. Double figures. We thought it was too late to start a family. We were all set for it to be just the two of us. Ach, I got ribbed something rotten by the lads. Call yourself a Catholic, Mikey-boy? Give Michael a big red hand for keeping down the world's population. Michael, where's your sash and drum? Don't want the Pope to catch you with them condoms, now, Michael. Then visits to the hospital and tests and more tests. The girl born just after my fortieth birthday. A bundle of smiles and jet-black hair. Things would be different. I held the wife's hand and told her so. Promised. I promised to get out and take the job her da offered me. Promised to stop going to the club, stop running errands for your man. But I didn't. I

couldn't. I told her I had, mind. Trips to the south were business now. I was a salesman. I sold plastic things to engineering companies. Always kept a few in my briefcase. Strange little nubbins of hard plastic, brightly coloured, as intricate and mysterious as seashells. The girl liked playing with them until the wife got the frights she might swallow one and choke on it. Salesman? Ach, bagman, messenger, smuggler and minder. Minder? I needed someone to mind me, so I did. I can understand why the wife went home. I can understand why she took the girl. The fucking Brits kicking our door down. What I can't understand is why I can't say no. Why yes? I don't need it. I don't need the hassle. I don't need the sweats. I don't need my heart drumming. It used to be the rush that saw me through things. No more. This is it. The last time. They owe me that. I turn on my side away from the window. The furniture in the room begins to soften and dissolve into a leaden nothingness. Just before sleep, I can hear my breath quicken in the still air of the room, beat against the walls, ricochet off, never settle. I jump. My feet slip from the edge of the Rock. I'm falling. I sit up and stare into the room. There is nothing, just the known world whispering through the curtains.

Paul Ewen, writer of *London Pub Reviews*, asks Steve: Have you had any interesting dreams lately?

I dream a lot. I have recurring dreams in which I am unable to call people on the phone. The phone is made of jelly, or it is so large I don't have the power to press the keys, or its dial is a starfish, etc. Communication issues, I'm sure. I dream about cities & moving about them. I hover a lot in my dreams. Rarely fly. I have long, narrative dreams that stop & start either side of getting up to go to the toilet. The other night, I had a dream about ladyboys & Chihuahuas – nuff said.

David Peace, author of *Tokyo Year Zero*, *The Damned Utd*, & *GB84* asks Steve: What book will you buy me for Christmas?

Ooh, cheeky. Well, that's a hard one because I know you have a lot of books. My first instinct says, *Violence* by Slavoj Žižek or Julian Cope's *Japrock Sampler* but it will probably be a toss up between Roberto Bolaño's *2666* & *50 Drawings to Murder Magic* by Antonin Artaud. Or both.



down among the dead – part 6.

I've got a head for faces but not for names, I say, shaking his hand. S'all right. You were well out of it by last orders, weren't he? He says nodding back to his friend. Yeah, singing all those rebel songs and trying to get those young birds to sing along with you. We just dropped by to see if you were OK, like. One of the lads saw you stumbling up the road. Followed you. Make sure you got home all right. Waited to see the lights come on. That's very kind of him, I said, but he shouldn't have bothered. I'm old enough and ugly enough to look after myself now. Sure you are, pops. Good Samaritan, wan' 'e? Was it you two who were ringing my bell this morning? Too old to ring your own bell, eh, pops? No. Only kidding. Yeah. As I say, see how you were. That landlady of yours looks like a right ol' dragon, don't she? Scared me, the other says. Anyway, Tony says, thought you might be in 'ere so we dropped by. Liam comes out of the toilet, picks up his pint on the way, drinks it in one and says, I'll be off, Michael, things to do, people to see. I'll catch you later if you're in. You sure you don't want another? I say, and Liam puts his arm in the air, back of his hand facing me, and waves. 'Nother paddy? Tony says. Lots of 'em round 'ere. What they call it? Little Limerick? Eddie laughs. So, how can I help you fellas? I say, staring down at my newspaper. Just being social, Tony says. What you were saying last night. Ach, you don't want to listen to me after a few pints. Years get blurred. I might've said a few things that weren't strictly true now. Sounded true, says Tony. Sounded like you knew what you were talking about. IRA this. Provo that. Told us all about running guns across the border. Gibraltar. That cemetery. The two soldiers. Come on, pops. Tell us some more. Either of you got any Irish blood in you, I say. Not me, says Tony. English through and through. Eddie, you Irish? Me mum's part Welsh, Eddie says. Nah, not us, pops. I'm sure I remember one of you fellas saying his brother worked here years ago. Don't remember, says Tony. Memory like a whatsitcalled. My mistake, I say. Your mistake, Tony says, putting his hand on my shoulder. The best bit, right, the best bit was when you told us about the army kicking your door down and making you lie down on the floor in the

hallway and one of the Tommies had his dog-shit covered boot on your face and your missus and daughter were hiding in the kitchen sobbing their eyes out and pissing their panties. And you all brave. When they got you up you spat in the officer's face. Five days, you said they kept you for and you didn't say a dickey. Trouble was, when you got home, your wife and daughter – what was she, nine? – they'd done a runner, right. Scarpered. I told you that? I say, not remembering. Yeah. Big hero, you said you was, big hero. Didn't grass. Cos of that they trusted ya, gave you that Gibraltar job. That right, Ed? S'right, says Eddie. Saw it coming, you said. Not like them other eejits. Serves 'em right. Now, if you were in charge... I don't remember, I say. Worse for wear. Tall tales, lads. Aye, tall tales. And we believed you, didn't we, Ed? Thought it was gospel, says Eddie. Come on, pops. I tell you what, I'll buy you another drink, loosen the old tongue, and you can tell us more about the old country, and all those Micks with the berets and the sunglasses and all that. I'll break the habit of a lifetime and join you for one. How's that sound? Thanks, but no thanks, fellas, I say, looking at my watch and then at the clock behind the bar. Going to the bookies to see how the nags are running and then it's home for a nap and a night in with a good book and myself for company. That right? Tony says, looking back at Eddie and smiling. Eddie ignores Tony, bewitched by the fruit machine's flashing lights. Tony turns to the lad and says, Another one for pops here, mineral water for him, he gestures back at Eddie, and I'll have a half a Stella. I stand. No, thanks, Tony, I have to be going. I shake my head at the lad. I reach to pick up my newspapers and as I do so Tony slaps his hand down and says, I thought you Irish were supposed to be friendly, enjoy a chinwag, shoot the breeze. Heat rises from my ankles, through my calf muscles to my knees and, although I want to leave, I sit back down on the stool. I have to go, fellas, I say. Mrs. Quinn'll have my lunch ready. She'll start to fret if I'm not back in time. I look at the lad. He's about to say something and I shake my head. What is it you want, fellas? Tell us again what you told us last night, Tony says. Ach, I don't remember, I say. It were the demon drink talking. Tony pushes a pint glass toward me. 'Ere you go, pops. This'll help. The lad takes a ten-pound note from the bar, opens the till and brings the change. I really should be going, I say.

Voices wake me. Hotel workers on the terrace. Their voices amplified by the garden walls. A smeared sound. Nothing discernible. A low hum. I look at my watch – 6:45. I roll back the covers, rub my forehead, open the curtains and look out the window. A man rakes leaves from the pool. Another scrapes the edge of a flowerbed with some kind of tool. A woman, dressed in black, covers the four poolside tables with cloths and arranges on them cutlery that glints and throws quick messages in the morning sun. I turn on the shower and step in. The water tastes

metallic and salty. I have to bend to get my head under the shower. The hotel soap smells of rotten roses and has the consistency of marshmallow. My hair refuses to lather. I rinse off, dry myself, clean my teeth and brush my hair. I dress in beige chinos, a pale-blue cotton shirt, brown moccasins. I drape a dark-blue sweater over my shoulders. At the last minute, I decide to wear sunglasses. I wasn't going to bring them, thinking they'd make me look too conspicuous but everyone here wears them. While I'm dressing, I make a cup of instant coffee. The kettle refuses to boil and the water is cooler than the shower and tastes about the same, the saltiness undercutting the cheap coffee's ripe bitterness. I take my camera case from my hold-all. Your man would have a fit if he saw it, but there's no camera. I carry the case because it's handy for holding my book, passport, and wallet. My stomach feels hollow and I don't know whether it's nerves or I'm hungry. I walk down to the breakfast room. I load my plate with ham, cheese, fruit and a bread roll. The coffee is much better than that shite in the room so I help myself to two cups. On a chair by the door, someone has left an old Daily Mirror. I read it while I drink my coffee. The pool looks inviting but I think I'll walk around the town and maybe go to the top of the Rock, have a look at the view, maybe get a glimpse of the apes. I've got a bit of time on my hands. I drink one more cup of coffee, get a map from reception and head out into the streets. People are on their way to work. Tourists head to the seafront while waiting for the museums and shops to open. I look at the map and decide to walk through the streets, taking my time to memorize the buildings. Getting my bearings. I've been to New York, Chicago, Boston. Spent a week in bed with food poisoning in Florencia, Colombia, another week twiddling my thumbs in a hotel room in Tripoli, and three weeks in Donostia-San Sebastián eating tapas, or whatever they call it, talking up revolution and mayhem with mad Basque bastards. And here I am on the other side of the country waiting to follow three youngsters with more guts than I've ever had. I am always the go-between, the smoother, the oiler, the one with the ready smile, the unsweaty handshake. Want someone to look normal – send Michael. Want someone who won't start a fight in a local bar – send Michael. Never a problem. Dependable. Look like what I pretend to be – a salesman. When the Brits searched me – which they did on a regular basis – they found pamphlets for the wee plastic thingamies. Your man had had his brother-in-law print the pamphlets up for me – made a change from Chinese take-away menus. Wellington Front, past the cannons overlooking the harbour and down to the Ragged Staff Gates, cut past John MacKintosh Hall and back again through the Grand Parade and into the Alameda Gardens scruffy and overgrown, with its jasmines and jessamines, wisteria and wild olives, thin feral cats slinking through the undergrowth. And over the songs of the birds and the scurrying of the lizards it came to me that this place was the British Empire in miniature with its cannons and guns, the Iron Duke's memorial, the Trafalgar cemetery, Nelson's anchorage. That's what they're doing here. Jesus, don't tell me they actually have a purpose. Ach, your man wouldn't like me thinking

that way. It's ten a.m. I'll take the cable car to the top of the Rock – have a look at those Barbary apes or whatever they're called, then I'll take a slow walk back to the hotel, pick up the motor, drive to the border and wait. A cable car is just about to set off for the top so I get on and stand by the window. I've not got a head for heights. Ach, these days, I've not got a head for lows. I can see the taut cables and the blue sky beyond. And I think of the girl and how she'd love to be with me now on her way to see the monkeys, maybe even feed them, and I know I should be back in Belfast in a black taxi on my way to Malone Park to beg and plead for her and the wife's return. But I'm not. I'm in a cable car on my way to look at some mangy monkeys shitting and pissing on a rock that's one of the last outposts of the British fucking Empire. No one knows I'm here. Except your man. Your man knows. Your man always fucking well knows. Fucking gobshite.

Hillary Raphael, neo-geisha & author of *I (Heart) Lord Buddha & Ximena*, asks Steve: Why are such a disproportionately large number of literary theorists into sadomasochistic sex?

Yeah, why is that? Let's see. Well, theorists create a power exchange through text – their text subverts & supplants the master text. Some critics – Dale Peck for example – inflict pain & humiliation on their subjects – poor Rick Moody. Jacques Derrida's work is almost algolagnic in its enjoyment of literary and generic dissection – look at *The Post Card*. Both literary theory & S/M (S/Z – Barthes) are means of control. The theorist/critic treats the author/work as if they/it were a masochist. The original master text rejected in favour of the slave-now-master text. Critic as sadist – the deferred death of the author. Look at the complementary relationship between critic & writer, theory & text – violent love – a transformation from slave to master. In Deleuzian terminology: The Contract: how one person controls the other, sexual enjoyment through delayed gratification – or *Différance* in Derridean terms – the infinite delay of the signified – master/slave, signifier/signified, author/theorist. The perfect fit is in Sartre's theories of sadism & masochism: the work of the author subjected to the "abyss of the Other's (i.e. the theorist's) subjectivity" – *Being & Nothingness*. Or the ultimate sadomasochistic/theoretical acts – Maurice Blanchot's escape from a Nazi firing squad in 1944, Michel Foucault out for the night in San Francisco (*Death and the Labyrinth*), or Nietzsche eating his own faeces.



down among the dead – part 7.

I didn't notice until now – just goes to show how bollocksed I was last night – but Tony only has four teeth – upper ones. His mouth looks like a neon advertisement for TEETH but with one blinking out so it reads TEE H. The rest of his mouth is a purple hollow where the tongue freely fucking roams. While I'm thinking this, Tony is asking me a question and I don't quite catch all of it and I say, Sorry, fella, what was that you were saying? I need to get this over with. Fucking eejit I was last night to go shooting my mouth off. Getting old, Michael, I say to myself. Past it. Tell us about the funeral again. The second one, Tony says. Ach, it was a long time ago, so it was. I can't remember. You remembered last night, all right, didn't he, Eddie? Yep, right down to the make a the underpants those army guys was wearing. Ah, fellas, I say. An old man's imagination. I was there or thereabouts but had nothing to do with the goings on. I was home with my feet up by the fire by then with the wife and the girl. Thought they'd bugged off by then, says Tony. Done a runner to her parents, that's what you said. Some swanky place. You said you'd gone round, kicked the door in, and threatened to kneecap her old man if he didn't let you see your daughter. That's what you said. An old man's dreams, Tony my lad. It was the drink talking. I'm mixing in my mind things that happened and things I'd like to have happened. Do you never daydream, lad? Oh, I daydream all right, pops. I daydream all the time – house in the country, yacht, gorgeous bird. But I don't think it's real. I don't go down the pub and tell everyone I meet that I'm a fucking millionaire when I ain't. So, let me remind you. Look, Tony, Eddie, fellas, I've really got to be going. Mrs. Quinn will have my guts for garters if my food is spoiled. She'll be looking down the street after me, wondering where I've got to. Thirty seconds and I'll let you go, Tony says, it's just been bothering me since last night. Not you going on about the cause and the old country – I dunno why all a you bastards don't fuck off back there, you go on about it so much – no, it was that last thing you told us. I'll start. You interrupt if I'm wrong. I hear footsteps coming from out back and see Jane, dressed to the nines, behind the bar, the lad

whispering in her ear. She looks at me and mouths, Everything all right? And I half shake my head, half nod. My stomach feels hollow, not sure if it's because of this fella not six inches from my face or the fact that I need to get some air, go to the bookies, eat some food. Jane opens the till and pretends to check the takings. Second funeral you'd been to that week. First one, some nutter shoots the fucking thing up – some balls he must've had – he kills three people right and he was aiming for that geezer who looks like a bearded ferret – Adams, that's right – and so the next funeral for one of them that got shot, two army guys are spotted by the crowd – including you – and you chase 'em, corner 'em, drag 'em out of their motor, drive 'em to a sports ground – very fucking sporting – where you strip 'em, torture 'em, throw 'em over a wall – brave, brave – drive 'em in a taxi to some wasteground, and then some of you – and you didn't say who, no matter how many drinks I bought you, I'll give you that – some of you shoot and knife the poor fuckers and leave their bodies there – rotting in puddles, I think you said, s'that right Eddie? Rotting in puddles, something like that, Tone. I was just telling you a bit of history, lads. Nothing more. I go to get up but Tony puts his hand on my chest and I can feel my heart thump. I begin to sweat. Jane says, You OK, Michael? About time you were getting home, love, innit? You're probably right, I say. Jane says, You fellas want another or are you on your way? Tony looks at me, his lips thin, pursed. We're OK, he says. Just having a chat with Michael here about the old times. Seems he's a bit confused. That, or we got the wrong end of the stick, like. Jane puts on her coat and says, I'll walk you down the street, Michael. It's on my way. Tony and Eddie leave. What was all that about? Jane says. Were they in here last night with you? Aye, I say. Let my gob and my imagination run away with me. Learned my lesson, I say. You're too old for that, you old sod, Jane says. Come on. We leave. Tony and Eddie outside, leaning on a black car, arms folded, watching the pub. Jane takes my arm. We walk along the High Road and I forget to call in the bookies to check my bets.

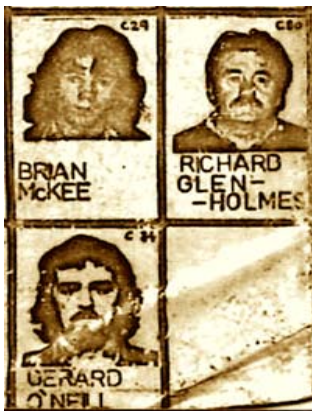
The apes doss around, lazy and surprisingly fat, waiting for food, staring, and baring their teeth. They're not apes at all, it says in the brochure, they're monkeys, macaques to be precise. Ach, like most Irishman. Not Irish at all, half-English, half-Scots, half-bloody-Spanish some of 'em. To tell you the truth, the monkeys are better looking. Harder working as well. And I'll have to remember this one to tell the girl – what language do the Gibraltar monkeys speak? Gib-berish – d'you get it? Ach, I'm kidding. I stroll around for a bit and look at the view – the sea, Africa... Pillars of fucking Hercules. I check my watch and take the cable car back down to the Grand Parade and walk back to the hotel, pick up my car and drive to the frontier. Gibraltar – a UK overseas territory, ach, so's the fucking six counties, mind. The neutral zone – my mind, more

like – yes, sir, no, sir, three fucking fellas full, sir. Then La Linea – Spain – the way home and back to what? I get to the frontier at midday and find a café with a good view. Not much is happening apart from a stream of people crossing the border and planes landing at the airport. No added security as far as I can tell. I order a cold drink, position my chair so I can look out the window, and pretend to read my book. Pretend. Ach, that's what I'm always doing. Pretend to be a husband. Pretend to be a father. Pretend to give a shite about the cause when all it is is a means to an end, but what that fucking end is I'll never be sure. My end – Michael O'Connor – big man. Irish Republican Army volunteer. Seen things that would make you sick to your stomach. Make your knees wobble – if you had any left. But this is it. After this, I'm out. Whether the wife and the girl come with me or not. Ach, they will. They will. Maybe I won't catch that return flight. Maybe I'll drive up into the mountains. Visit Granada – the Alhambra Palace. Then drive on through Spain. Stop off in Barcelona. Visit a few civil war sites – Jarama, Madrid, Ebro, finish off in Guernica. I wonder if those mad Basque bastards are still around. Then drive into France, call the wife and the girl from there, ask them to come over – the wife knows where the money is. I don't want her asking her da. Stay in a little village – drink some wine, take the girl horse riding. Ach, there's loads of churches in France – the wife loves churches. Lourdes is just over the Pyrenees – we could meet up there. Now, that would be a fucking miracle. What I can't understand is why the Brits didn't come for me sooner. Surely, those brochures didn't fool them. All they had to do was stick a few plainclothes boys on me, follow me for a day, they'd have seen me meeting with known fellas in known places. I mean, you can't be so thick as to watch me go into a house on Beechmount Avenue, the walls painted with murals of an Irishman hand in hand with a member of the PLO, sharing a fucking rocket launcher for fuck's sake, or one of your man James Connolly staring out at you from between the tricolour and the starry fucking plough. Why wait and come for me then? Why wait until I'd decided to get out? Why kick my door down in front of the wife and the girl? Shove me to the ground. Filthy fucking boots on my face. And I could hear the wife and the girl crying in the kitchen. Then they hooded me – right there in my own home, tied my arms behind my back, and carried me out to the fucking Saracen. Then those cold brick walls – that fucking chair. They kept me hooded. The odd drop of water. No food. I lost all track of time. Thought I'd been there a day. I'd been there three. The fella who questioned me had an Irish accent – Dublin, maybe – but I could hear English voices as well, in the background, just out of reach. I wasn't allowed to sleep, or piss. Once, they soaked the hood with water and I couldn't breathe. Choking. Gagging. Suffocating. I said nothing. Then the whispering started. In my ear. Close up. Intimate. About your man. About the wife. About the girl. He kept it up for hours. I'm not sure if there was one or two of them. Soft voice. Soft voices. While you were gone, Michael. Soft. While you were in America. Whisper. Why do you think they make you run errands? Softer. Out of Belfast a lot, aren't you, Michael? Whispering. Where to

next? Voice. Palestine? Voices. When it was all over, when they stopped with the whispering, the voices, they drove me to waste ground not far from the house. The Saracen stopped. I could hear the engine running then the doors opened, and I felt a shove or a kick on my back and I was on the floor still hooded, my hands untied. The Saracen pulled away and I tore off the hood. I was sobbing, spit running down my chin, snot in my mouth, my eyes red and streaming. I staggered back to the house. I knocked. The lights were out. I saw curtains twitch in the houses opposite. They'd changed the lock. They'd changed the fucking door. They were gone.

Oliver Harris, author of *William Burroughs & the Secret of Fascination* & editor of *The Yage Letters: Redux, Junky: The Definitive Text of 'Junk', & The Letters of William S. Burroughs 1945-1959* asks Steve: How much of your writing/ideas – & what kind of writing/ideas – come(s) to you in that special interzone just before sleep?

I fall asleep quickly. I sleep well but I don't sleep for long – six hours – it used to be four or five. But there is that period just before sleep – & also just before going under a general anaesthetic – where reality blurs, & that is an important source of images – after all, Andre Breton claimed a hypnagogic experience as the basis of Surrealism. I'd say about ten percent of my interzone experiences make it into my writing: that vision of a city which is always New York City, Liverpool, & the Thames at Staines. The roads leading down steep hills to the river. But the majority of my writing comes to me on walks, daydreams, snippets of dialogue, overheard conversations, strange sights, things found in the street, matter reconstituted into anti-matter – the very stuff of ideas. I'm an "autistic realist".



down among the dead – part 8.

I open the front door and walk past Mrs. Quinn's flat. Where is she? I'm not gonna knock. I cough. Nothing. I put my ear to the door. Nothing. Not even the television – she leaves it switched on sometimes when she goes to the shops. I'm finding it hard to breathe and I take my time climbing the stairs. I feel tired. I need a nap. Forty winks will set me right. Forget about those fucking eejits. Bullies. Ach, like all Brits. Light is streaming in through the window. The room is warm. I look out from behind the curtains onto the street. People going about their business. No sign of those fellas or their car. Probably winding me up, so they were. My chest aches and I sit down on the bed. I can feel a pulse beat in my neck. Hear it. I open the bedside table drawer looking for something but I'm not sure what. I hear the front door close and I listen. Keys. A door closes. Mrs. Quinn. I take out a mobile phone and turn it on. I never use it. There are two numbers in its memory. I get up and look out of the window. The sun is shining. I pull the curtains to and turn on the light. I pull books from the shelves and look in the indexes: O'Connor, Bernard; O'Connor, John; O'Connor, Joseph; O'Connor, Laurence; O'Connor, Pat; O'Connor, Thomas. Book after book after book. And I'm looking through them at the photos of men in berets and sunglasses; army patrols on Belfast streets; photos of dead bodies covered with jackets lying in cold puddles. I pull all the books onto the floor. They look like building bricks in a child's bedroom. I remember a small café in France. Tired after two weeks of driving along Spanish roads, over mountains, not stopping anywhere I'd planned to stop, just driving, sleeping in the car, driving again. Using a mixture of bad French and Irish charm, I'd asked a waitress for change and if I could use the telephone and she'd pointed to the back of the café. I'd dialled the number and a phone rang hundreds of miles away and a man I once knew answered and said, If that's you, Michael, and if it's your wife and daughter you're after, you can forget them, they've gone away, leave them be now. And if I were you, and I'm glad I'm fucking not, I'd not be coming back, you hear me, Michael? And I'd slammed the phone down, jumped in the car and drove on through France, crossed the Channel, kept on going until I'd reached Liverpool. The closest I'd ever get to going home. I rub the side of my head. I never... Never planned. Scared. Always. Always a lickspittle, a flatterer, a yes man. Then the phone call. The phone call to Mrs. Quinn's. Six months ago. A woman's voice. I didn't recognize it. Not saying how she'd found me. And I'd asked her questions and she wouldn't say anything, just stayed quiet. We'd spent a while just listening to each other breathe. And I'd asked if she wanted to know what had happened. She'd said nothing. I'd changed the subject and asked after her. Did she have any children? She'd said it was best to wait. To take it slowly. And she'd said, Is it you, Da? Is it really you? And I couldn't say anything, just broke down in tears. She'd waited for the crying to stop. Then she'd hung up. Always the same, the more I talk the more I have nothing to say. I'd taken

everything away from me and mine. Given it a-fucking-way. All of it. Ran. Had nothing. Lost it all. None should be mine. Talked it all away. Never learned the lesson. Head up my own arse, mouth al-fucking-mighty, mouth full of my own shite, full of lies, full of leave-takings and longings. Mighty fucking mouth. Damage done. Couldn't keep it shut, keep it quiet, keep it in my head. Ask and I'll tell you. Whatever you want to hear. Michael's got a story to tell. Listen to me now. Here's a good one. What do you want to know? Want it with knobs on? All done up with ribbons? What colour? Have your cake and eat it? Ach, no, I'm a salesman, a traveling fella, a shooter of the breeze, a wisecracking son of the emerald fucking isle, the craic, ach, none better, I'll make it up as we go, in the wink of an eye, a nod of my head, the tip of my hat to a stranger, here's one before you go. I jump as the doorbell rings. It rings again. I close my eyes. Ignore the ringing. Downstairs, Mrs. Quinn's door opens. A pause and I hear voices. I turn out the light. The front door closes. I hear footsteps on the stairs. There's a gentle knock on the door. My breathing heavy, a cough crackling under the surface. Who is it? I say.

At 12:50, a man in a white Renault pulls into the assembly area and parks. He sits in the car for a few minutes then gets out and heads down Winston Churchill Road. I follow him for a bit. He's jittery, keeps looking over his shoulder. I decide to wait. He's not going to do anything without the others. What was your man thinking? Course they weren't going to come across together. They're fucking professionals not idiots. Maybe he's got someone watching this fella. Ach, no. Don't start that again. It's the paranoia. Always the paranoia. Am I being left out? Do the lads not trust me any more? I can do that, I says. Leave it to me. Nah problem. Brits are gobshites, the lot of 'em. I return to the café, order coffee this time, and continue to watch. It's nearing 2:30 and I've had to order food so as not to look suspicious – I'm waiting for someone – what's the problem? A sandwich – if that's what they call it. The bread is so dry it crumbles as I bite into it, showering my book and dusting my coffee. I pull out a thin strip of ham, wrap it in a sliver of sweaty cheese and eat it in one go. As I'm swallowing, I see the two others walk though the border control, past the Customs House and into the car park. Fuck, they're on foot. The first fella's returning from his jaunt around town. The three of them stand and talk, occasionally glancing at the white Renault. I look at the motor. It doesn't look out of place. Just like an ordinary car. The fellas look suspicious to me and in my mind I urge them to move on or at least split up. It'll make my job more difficult but we don't want them getting fucking arrested already, do we now? They look at the car some more then walk towards the town. I pay and leave. I follow them at a distance. I remember to put on my sunglasses. They walk south along Winston Churchill Road and then cross onto Winston Churchill Avenue. They stop at an intersection and

start talking. They're nervous. I'm fucking nervous. I stop and take out the map I picked up at the hotel reception. I hold it up, peering over the top of it to get a look, like some fucking B-movie spy – Jesus, get a fucking grip, Michael. Ach, what the fuck are they doing now? They're playing pass the fucking parcel with newspapers, so they are. They're splitting up, the first fella peeling away and heading south towards the tunnel, the other two turning north again up Winston Churchill Avenue. They're only fucking walking towards me. That's all I fucking need. I walk on south. I'll walk past them. They're not gonna be looking out for some old Irishman when the place might be swarming with police and army, now, are they? The first fella keeps looking behind him, as he does so he nearly walks into two men walking north. He brushes shoulders with one of them. I'm sure the fella is about to say something – Get out of the way, you fucking eejit, would be my guess – but he doesn't. He walks on. The two men increase their pace, they look like they're trying to catch up with the man and woman who have just passed me. I see another two men cross the road and follow the first fella heading south. What the fuck is going on? Not fucking now. Not fucking already. Shit. Mary mother of fucking God. I look across to the man and woman as they walk towards the Shell petrol station. The man looks over his shoulder. He's clocked them. I turn and walk back. I want to shout. I want to warn them. There's nothing I can do. Not now. Not then. There's nothing I've ever been able to do. Not then. Not ever. I walk on. I walk towards the border. Toward my car. I hear Pop! Pop! Gunshots. They sound puny, not capable of heat and light, not capable of piercing flesh, sheering bone. I hear one, two, three, four. I lose count... eight maybe nine... ten, eleven, twelve... thirteen. Then sirens and the screech of car tyres. From further off – echoes. But it comes again, again the pop. Pop! Pop! One, two, three... and I'm still not sure if the sound is real. And then six, seven, eight, nine. People running. People hiding. I walk back to the assembly area. I get into the hire car. I wind down the window. I put my forehead on the steering wheel. Quiet. I open my camera bag. I check I have my passport. I flick through the pages and stare at the photograph. I am fifty years old. I look at the name. My name. I turn the ignition. I put the car in gear. I swing the car north. I head for the border.