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Pleasure Beach

VOICE	Olga, Rachel, Treesa
SCENE	The Roads
HOUR	8 a.m., 16 June 1999
PLEASURE BEACH RIDE	Alpine Rallye
SUBSTANCE	Chips, Cigarettes
ORGAN	Kidneys
SYMBOL	Triangle
COLOUR	Lichen
FORMULA	$P = 3a$
ART / TECHNIC	Remembering, Forgetting
HORMONE	Antidiuretic hormone
HOMERIC TITLE	Telemachus

Olga

Sea is to sky as sigh is to sea. See is to sigh as sky is to sea. And what a sea, what a scene, as if seen from above, seen from above and not from inside these eyeholes. But the cider inside her inside these eyeholes we sadly now are stuck. Head hurts. Brightness hurts. Noise hurts. The wind is nice though. Carefully, now, weaving one's weary way around pavement crawlers, morning drunks and druggies, stepping over windwhipped dervishing plastic bags and scrunched-up chippy paper, splats of sick, upended boxes of unfinished doner kebab and chips. Seagulls squawk and circle above. Take me away, O monstrous inhuman weirdos, and drop me in the cold grey sea/sigh/sea?

Please?

One gull perching on the railing stares directly at us out of its immovable lichen-coloured dinosaur egg eye. Ei, aye, bataille, dabei. The Eye. Unblinking, unflinching. I know what you did last night, says the Eye. I saw it all because I'm prehistoric, see. It sees all. Seas all. All seaing all knowing.

Squawk.

Some early boyracers are beeping from the wheel of a souped-up red Renault, driving comedy-slow along the prom road. The bass from the subwoofer drills its way directly into the centre of our shrivelled brain. *Drive boy, dive boy / Dirty numb angel boy*. Blissed-out echoes, pools of euphoria, smacked-out messianic Trainspotting hands-aloft sweating. Inside the sound. *She was a lipstick boy / She was a beautiful boy*. Four lads, all strapped in with red racing harnesses, mega kinky in another possible world, hooting and laughing, making wanking motions.

–Give us a nosh, love. Blowjob for breakfast?

The driver is leaning out of the window as they pass. Flash of gingery shaved head and a pair of sticky-out ears. Red face and pink eyes. A comforting smell of weed and KFC wafts from the open window. All four lads in the car seem to be making identical blowjob gestures with hand and mouth. They're almost perfectly in sync. Like the boy band. Ha. Amusing how much they would hate that comparison. So bellow your lungs out at the receding Renault, words thrown right back at you by the wind. To be drenched in your own words. Like sea spray. Or pissing in the breeze.

–State of you lot. Go fuck yourselves! Go home and have a wank!

Fuckinell what cocktail of stuff was consumed last night? Hands feel like wonky starfish. Can't hold things properly. Nothing for it now but to flick the remainder of our last delicious Richmond Menthol in the direction of the receding sounds of the *fart-vroom* of the double exhaust and the *fart-hiss* of the dump valve, fiddle in our stupidly tiny pink PVC handbag for the work keys and gaze reluctantly at the frazzled figure reflected in the glass. How should I love thee? Let me count the ways. Plump and pockmarked, pale of face, wild and dark of hair, woven with one strand of itself into a knot on the top of the head, and crinkles of days-old mascara in the lines under the blackpools of the eyes, some of which two forefingers had rubbed away in a ten-second attempt to make oneself presentable after waking up in Lee Dunton's bed on Topping Street some thirty minutes since. A black shirt, waitressing standard, too small with its buttons almost bursting, encases one's upper half for the third day in a row, heavily infused with a triad of odours: chip shop grease, stale sweat and sweet perfume. Quiddity by Chipie.

Quiddity. Comes from a Latin word. *Quidditas*. And just as scents unfurl to open dusty chests of memories unbidden, so this ancient word is the creaking hinge of a door that opens up a portal to Last Night. Quidditas. Some kind of talisman. No idea what it means. But the word is a like a diamond. It shines in other languages.

She knew what it meant. *She*. Her. Look, she's standing at the portal to Last Night, beckoning. Gatekeeper to everything from Last Night, striped tigerish girl with lamplights for eyes, gleaming. But we cannot go there right now. Gleaming in the present, in the disappointment of the door's reflection, that insolent stripe of white stomach flesh. Gleaming between the waistband of the too-tight trousers and the bottom of the too-tight shirt. Visible whenever we stretch in any direction. Eyesore. Spray on more Chipie. A haze, surrounding us.

Armour, that is.

Once inside, the soothing repetition of the morning takes over: don stained black pinny, stuff hair into holey hairnet, roll up sleeves and start filling up the salts and vinegars. The music begins as soon as the lights are switched on. 'I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)'. Pan-pipe arrangements of Meat Loaf's greatest hits has been in the CD player for eleven months. Freshly sprayed and wiped down with sweet pink DIO fluid, nectar of the gods of hospitality, the place mats and coasters slide softly and greasily back onto the black wooden tables. Rising up, the same warm scent emanating from the damp cork of their undersides. The tang of vinegar battling with the soft beige odour of stale grease. Everything in order, clean-ish, ready.

The sound of footsteps. Andy, tramping in from the chipping shed. Today he is wearing Merrell sports sandals

over white Fila socks pulled halfway up his calves. Stretched over his thighs, faded Mr Motivator cycling shorts with pineapples and palm trees on them. Stretched over his paunch, a tie-dye vest that says FAT WILLY'S SURF SHACK. The hairs on his legs stand out about an inch off the skin. They add fuzz to the edges of his shadow when he stands outside in the sun. Nestled in the fuzz of his chest, a medallion. Andy's glasses are the kind that react to the light outside, but the reacting element seems to be broken because they are always just a bit dark.

–Tie this pinny on for me, will you.

So leave the tray of salts and vinegars and gingerly, reluctantly tie the stained apron loosely round Andy's middle.

Andy and Scott would have been in for hours. Chipping potatoes and baking bread and pies. They hadn't laughed at the Chipie joke last night. Hadn't even got it. Or maybe they hadn't heard? It was witty but no one had laughed. Chipie and chippy. Of *course* they sound the same if you're from round here. *Homophonous*, you could say, if you were clever and went to sixth form and did your exams and moved away and went to university. *Chipie*. It's a fucking French brand. Sheepy. Shippy. Schippee. She-Pee. But of course everyone says it like it's 'tch', like 't'Chipie', the same way everyone round here says the 'ch' in fucking Michigan where our brother lives now. MITCHigan.

Let's all go t'fucking t'Chippy.

The Quiddity perfume, having just been reapplied and stowed in the coat cupboard, was the first item to have been purchased from the Duty Free shop in the Houndshell shopping centre that actually smelled the way it was supposed to smell, had really been purchased for seductive

means, and was designed to be sprayed daily liberally and directly onto the brassiere in order for the scent to radiate continually outwards from the breasts. But the shirt and knackered self it encases always smell like chippy not Chipie no matter how many times we go through the wash.

Rachel

This is how it goes. Step carefully on every sleeper of the abandoned railway line, running through Poulton-le-Fylde station heading north towards Fleetwood. We are heading back towards danger. But what is we? A disembodied inventory of viscera maligned. Every part a Cheshire Cat frown. How then should we categorise thee. Let me count the ways.

A traumatised gut, the seat of emotional activity, mistrusted, misused and quarantined. A liver straining to process a high volume of intoxicants. Kidneys in need of hydration. Stabbing pains towards the lower back. A pair of staring eyes with swollen pupils and a forehead scored with lines like a musical stave. A tired, dried-out washing machine brain. Lines of poetry and songs flitting constantly across a sickening internal microfiche screen. Thin wrists and forearms patterned with a network of scratches and cuts from assorted stationery implements: compass, broken pen lid, snapped ruler. Long straight dark blonde hair. Eyeliner, smudged. Green hoodie, dubious skater brand with a bright orange cartoon impish devil on the front, purchased from the ground floor of Afflecks Palace in Manchester. Flared cords, £3 from Steals on Abingdon Street, too long. At some point last night it had rained;

trouser legs are stiff and dusty. Tide marks of dried muddy water. *I am large, I contain multitudes*. Of course it was a white American man poet who said that. Of course it was. A sizeable ball of world-weary cynicism, lodged inside us like a ball of undigested chewing gum. An actual ball of undigested chewing gum, amassed from schooldays, lodged inside us like a sizeable ball of undigested chewing gum. The metaphor and the real: both equally useless paperweights lining the cavern where the bleeding pumpbag should be. Yawning ribcaves, and (of course) the bloodhungry sawdustheart.

Keep a tight hold of the plastic Safeway bag and its contents. Check inside. One summer dress. Some small coinage, just shrapnel, weighing more than its worth. A Nokia 3200 phone with a plastic cover, pink with yellow flowers, battery low. Birds chirrup insolently in the sweetness of morning. What bucolic bastardry is this. Grasp at nameless white flowers and tall blades of grass with vague fingers, nearing the bramble-flanked entrance to the park between The Avenue and Poulton Road. What was someone saying last night about acid being laced with strychnine? Digital semi-paralysis is undeniably present – fingers half-frozen into gnarled claws, the shapes of which carry significance unknown but perceived. Still the legs drift on. Simpler beings to operate, legs. Scrambling up the bank to the bridge that goes over the railway line and leads on to The Avenue, then through quiet detached houses towards the main road leading up to Carleton. Birds continue their obscene and absurd concordances. Like butter wouldn't melt.

Focus attention downwards and the activity of stepping. Best foot forward. Spit spot! Play the childhood game

of only stepping on the dark spots of chuddy on the pavement. Half scuffing, half hopping along Tithebarn Street, past the corner of Arundel Drive and the hairdresser's, past the bike shop and the newsagent's and the chippy heading for the bus stop, waiting for the number 14 bus that will take us back towards people and shops and space and sea, because there is nothing better to do, because we are meant to be taking it easy, taking care, not thinking about the mess of a first year at MMU, the last-minute train ticket, the possessions still in the room of the student halls, the confused roommate, the posters on the wall, the glow-in-the-dark stars and moons still on the ceiling, the CDs still on the windowsill. But that seed of a thought, the world left behind, crush it now. Look, here we are. After one year of living in the big city everything here seems tiny. Or I am now a gargantuan bodypopping robot like the one in the Beastie Boys' 'Intergalactic' video. Foreboding orchestral music fades to gentle hip-hop, and one stride takes me directly from Poulton to Carleton. Every step a different colour, a different galaxy. Interstellar striding. To the left on the horizon lies the Tower. Three miles away as the crow flies. A few wisps of cloud hang higher. *I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink / But that I would not lose her sight so long*. Ha. Little do they know the Tower is actually a huge fucking aerial, both receiving and transmitting signals in languages not yet conceived. No, that's not quite right. It's actually a huge fucking magnet drawing us therewards. Wherewards? Herwards. Whowards? Herwards. My lodestone love. What the? Oh fuck. There's a her.

But hang on. The legs seem to be slowing of their own accord. The 14 is right there, waiting at the Castle Gardens traffic lights. But the legs don't want to go. The bodily

inventory screams itself out again: brain, heart, liver, kidneys, every cell in fact, hurting now, needing rest. As if conjured from particles of dust, a woman's gentle voice – mother earth? Gaia? guardian angel? – mouths softly into the morning breeze two words:

Go home.

And you know she's right. As the lights go green and the 14 moves ahead to the stop, one woman bent over a wheelie trolley takes about an hour to get on, fiddle for money, pick up change, get her ticket then shuffle along to a seat, we are stuck, rooted to the spot, standing gormlessly at the corner, staring, unmoving. That sinking feeling when you decide *not* to do something. Either the heart is sinking or the entire world is sinking and the heart is standing still. But the world appears entirely oblivious. Look, there's the sun. *Busy old fool, why dost thou thus.* There's a dog walker, a runner, the odd car, someone whistling somewhere, a lad scuffing his way down Fleetwood Road with his bright orange newspaper bag. The whirring sound of the milk van can also be heard, though it's unclear from which direction exactly. Fuck. And here it is, emerging from Maycroft Avenue. Has he seen us. Fuck. Fuck. He has. From the milk van an overalled arm is raised and a head nods, somewhat formally. You could transplant Mr Mallinson into any previous decade of this century and he would be more suited than the current one. Exactly the same clothes all year round. Navy overalls over a knitted jumper over a collared shirt. Whatever the weather. Whatever the weather we'll weather the weather, whatever the weather it is.

–I thought you students were meant to stay in bed until the afternoon!

Can't seem to speak, so it will have to be enough to

smile ruefully, woefully, spread arms and shrug. But what is a rue and how does one become full of it? Does it have something to do with chimneys? Rue, flue. The tightrope between the metaphor and the real. Now there's an essay title. Did we just think of chimneys because Mr Mallinson is from the same era as chimneys? And what era is that? An era we are about to leave, here at the arse end of the millennium. But such grandiose theorisation is more than the brain can take right now, so just stay frozen in the smile and the shrug until the van is way past, turning right down Poulton Road, and then concentrate in order to relax the face and shoulders into something resembling normal and not this demented mime artist. Turn that frown upside down! Enough. Time to hide. Back to the bedroom we go.

Treesa

Don't go chasing waterfalls

Please stick to the rivers and the lakes that you're used to

A skip, a little bounce on the heels, waiting on the stretch of grass on the corner of Draycot Avenue and Rodwell Walk, humming the best TLC song, pushing Lulu's buggy back and forth slowly. Wednesday morning treat. Swimming and slides at the Sandcastle with a McDonald's breakfast on the way. Then Lulu goes to Mum's until teatime. Bliss. Lulu is wriggling in the buggy, excited. Knows where we are going. Holds her pink singing horse in one hand and a blue plastic spoon in the other. She likes to have something in each hand at all times.

Smooth hair against the wind and pull the ponytail tighter. Poor hair, flattened to within an inch of its life and pulled up high. Every day the same for the past few years, maybe apart from the odd night out. Against gravity though. And all the kinks ironed out. Not literally ironed out anymore, thank God. No more aching neck from sessions crouched over at the ironing board when Mum used to iron it straight for us under greaseproof paper, half-strangled head forced horizontal. No more, since Lulu and since getting our own flat, and finally we saved enough to get the amazing GHD ceramic straighteners from Argos. Make sure you put Frizz Ease on first or your hair might catch fire. But they really do get it all done in five minutes flat. Flat hair in five minutes flat. In our own flat. Flat, flat, flat yellow hair in a high ponytail pulled and smoothed and hairsprayed so tightly it feels like our eyes are pulled slightly upwards and sideways apart from the two carefully arranged front fringe pieces framing the face. The wind jangles the hoops in our ears. It's fresh, fresh enough to send goosebumps up the spine but not from coldness exactly. More from the pure freshness of the morning in the sun, chilly even in the warmth but also exciting, all mixed up together.

–Look, Lulubelle! Nana's here!

There's the knackered Polo. *Beep-be-be-beep-beep* – *BEEP BEEP!* At the wheel, Mum has my old sunnies on – the Miss Selfridge faded pink-to-blue aviator-style ones with the tiny diamante star in the corner. Trying to look cool in a *Top Gun* woman style. Funny that underneath I will always know that her blue eyes are our eyes and Lulu's eyes in turn. Mum's hair is freshly cut, the tips freshly frosted. Always the same do: no-nonsense highlighted short back 'n' sides, just like Scottish mums all over the world, probably. She is more

tanned than ever today, partly from summer, partly from the sunbed in the back room. Every few days she lies down for exactly the length of the Hanson album *Middle of Nowhere* and tops up the colour. A long, tanned arm extends out from the open driver's window in an elaborate and regal wave. Clearly in one of those embarrassing moods where she thinks she's like a cool funny person.

–Milady, your carriage awaits.

–Muuuuuum!

–What?

–Stop being weird!

–What, don't you like the royal treatment? You can sod off, then. Me and Lulu can go to Maccy D's without you, can't we?

Lulu squeals at her name, and double-squeals at Maccy D's. Mum swings up out of the car to unbuckle Lulu. Swings out like it's a dance move. Every time, though, such graceful movements. This grace lives inside her. Muscle memory. Remember it from GCSE PE. Inside that movement is history, or herstory, or mumstory, whatever. Tells the story that Mum used to do gymnastics too, up in Glasgow. Can't believe the stories she tells about Glasgow back then. And we think it's rough here. Those stories about men who went to the dancing to murder women. Don't go doon that alley or Bible John will get ye. Even now, another shiver in the sun. What was the name of the place where she competed up there? Kelvin Hall, that's it. Place for gymnastics *and* athletics. Remember, we had the chance to go there too, before Lulu. With a Scottish mum you can enter the Scottish championships even if you live in Blackpool and were born in Blackpool Vic. Imagine that. No idea what the Kelvin Hall looks like but in our

imaginings it has the same shining letters outside as that famous place that seems to be a market and a music venue all together, Glasgow Barrowland, all glitz and glam and neon lights, just like our Lights, you can see why they like it down here, all the Scots who come pouring in every September weekend. Glazvegas to Blazvegas, get pished and eat chippy chips, home from home.

Kelvin Hall. Sounds so impressive. But. Best not think about gymnastics and athletics right now. Got to keep watch for the sadness. Shut it away quick. Look, Lulu's glasses are wonky and smudged. Straighten and wipe glasses, and nose too. Even doing that, and imagining the state of her face later after an ice cream, it's enough to make you cry. Or laugh. Or both.

–How's she doing?

–Bit sniffly still, but she's alright. She's dead excited about today.

Buggy in boot, Lulu strapped in bumper seat, radio on. The only station it plays is Atlantic 252.

*Lookin' back over my shoulder
With an aching deep in my heart*

Lookin' back over my shoulder at Lulu strapped in, happily banging spoon and horse together. Lookin' over my other shoulder at Mum, whose mouth has curled up a fragment as she drives along St Walburgas Road. I know what she's thinking. Dad's song. Dad's song, because he's also called Mike and he's a mechanic, but also Dad's song because he whistles it all the time and sometimes plays it on the guitar. Even sings it sometimes, especially when pissed.

*Lookin' back over my shoulder
At Lulubelle and Mum and me
We're going swimming at the Sandcastle
But first we're gonna get a Happy Meal*

–Such a voice! Where's *Stars in Their Eyes*? Get Matthew Kelly on the line! Our Trees can stop traffic with her dulcet tones –

Ignore Mum because the whistling bit is coming up and that's the most fun bit, but annoyingly I can't whistle like Dad does it at all. His whistling is professional whistling – it kind of wobbles like he's playing an instrument professionally. And he can whistle through his teeth. You can only get that level of whistling after decades of practice, I reckon. Must be. It's like getting thousands of hours in at the gym – but no, again, no gym thoughts this morning. Look at the sunshine. Could even get our feet in the sea later.

I never dreamed it could be over. A happy-and-sad song. Both at the same time. Over there at the sports centre in Stanley Park someone is probably flipping right now. Tumbling. The feeling of being a rocket hurtling through the air. Defying gravity. But look – there's Lulubelle's little face in the rearview mirror. A weight in the heart. Nothing except love but it's heavy. Gravity's got me now alright. But look now – as if she could read my mind, Mum is shoving her second pair of sunglasses in my face, the stupid ones that came free with the *Sugar* magazine bumper holiday issue which Kayleigh had left round ours the other day. Thick black plastic rectangular frames and yellow lenses. Fuckin hippy shades.

–As if I would ever wear them!

–Alright, alright, calm down, I think only dogs heard

you. Here you go, and I think Lulu's Mickey Mouse ones are in the glove compartment. Don't want you to be left out, do we Lulu?

Lulu squeals and squirms at Mickey Mouse.

Sunglasses are thrice donned, I am *Top Gun* woman, Mum is a hippy, Lulu is Mickey Mouse, the windows are down, the roads are quiet, the sun is baking, the tune is cheerful but also sad. Sad in the happy. Wonder is there a word for that. But listen, here's the whistling bit. Give it your best shot. Can't do it like Dad does but most of it sounds okay until we get to the high bit. *I never wanted to say goodbye.*

–Pack it in, Trees. You're doing my head in.