

Cain's Book

Alexander Trocchi



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Foreword

A Moveable Void

I remember reading *Cain's Book* in my early twenties and being struck by an almost visceral awareness – the same kind of sensation you get when reading Joyce or Burroughs for the first time – that this was momentous, important stuff. The prose seemed to affirm at every turn the presence of someone who, besides knowing how to write, fundamentally understood and articulated what literature *is*: what it offers, what it withholds, what's at stake in it. Digging out recently my old Calder edition, which I'm delighted to see is now undergoing a timely re-release by Oneworld Classics, I found I wasn't wrong.

“But nothing *happens* in *Cain's Book!*” its detractors will complain. And they'd be right. One of the most striking characteristics of Trocchi's novel (even that label would, I'm sure, be contested by many) is its refusal of story. Narrative in the conventional sense is almost non-existent, and wilfully so. In one of his text's many self-reflective moments, Trocchi compares its progression to a landscape which is not only un-signposted but also, in its very innate formation, devoid of the “natural” contours that we might expect a novel to follow: peaks and troughs, steady plot inclines rising to dramatic summits or climactic cliffs from which whole vistas open up, that kind of thing. Rather, it forms an “endless tundra which is all there is to be explored”. Tundras are bleak, monotonous, quasi-repetitive, the same and not the same at the same time. He adds: “This is the impasse which a serious man must enter and from which only the simple-minded can retreat.” *Must* enter: I'll come back to this sense of obligation later.

But for now I want to stick with the landscape analogy, because it seems to me that Trocchi's sensibility is totally *spatial*. Like Christopher Marlowe in *Doctor Faustus* or Herman Melville in *Moby Dick*, he's mapping a whole cosmogony, intuiting his way towards an understanding of a social, poetic and metaphysical layout. That's the real action of *Cain's Book*, its "plot". To gain the vantage point necessary for this undertaking, Trocchi has to go out to the edge of things. Emily Dickinson often talks about finding her place on the "circumference" – of the globe, of space itself, of life – a limit point from which she can look two ways, in and out. Trocchi is drawn to this circumference, attracted by the view it offers. He finds it, in its most literal form, in a scow (or barge) moored off the edge of Manhattan, a spot from which he can peer back and see the city's celebrated skyline dim and hazy in the distance, "like a mirage in which one isn't involved". On the scow's other side, the black water of the Hudson across which he's towed at irregular intervals by tugs, and the even blacker water of the Atlantic in which he's occasionally deposited for long stretches, "tottering at the night edge of a flat world" (space, for him, is always flat). The question then becomes: where's that edge's edge, the point beyond which you fall off? "I often wondered," he writes, "how far out a man could go without being obliterated."

Trocchi is acutely aware that his sought-after observation post lies somewhere pretty close to the trip line of death – just past it even, by a couple of paces. This inherently unstable set-up is, quite paradoxically, what keeps him steady, gives him purpose: "to be able to attain, by whatever means, the serenity of a vantage point 'beyond' death, to have such a critical technique at one's disposal – let me say that on my ability to attain that vantage point my own sanity has from time to time depended." The label of nihilistic writer so often attached to him is profoundly, not just superficially, accurate: he's nihilistic not so much in the lay sense of having a gloomy

outlook on life, but rather inasmuch as his entire sensibility rests on an intimate relation with a space of annihilation, of becoming nothing.

What's more (and here it gets really interesting), this space is also where writing itself – the act, the practice and the stuff, the matter – comes from. When Trocchi describes the billowing Atlantic as “like a sheet of black ink”, it's not just to be gratuitously poetic: the dark, void-filled liquid, for him, really is like what's inside his typewriter. Tied to Bronx Stake Boat Number 2 in what seems an interminable night, he spends his time re-reading notes whose logic is entirely circular: “If I write: it is important to keep writing, it is to keep me writing.” The other author who immediately springs to mind here is Maurice Blanchot, that writer of infinite night, darkness and disappearance; and in fact some of Trocchi's lines could have been written by Blanchot – not least the one in which he tells us that “the great urgency for literature is that it should once and for all accomplish its own dying”. But where Blanchot's ponderings on literature and the right to death are abstract, Trocchi has willed them into material form off New York harbour, given them concrete embodiment, a *mise-en-scène*: ensconced in what he describes as the “floating coffin” of his scow, with “the emptiness of the night beyond the walls... the trackless water”, he lays out before us, in one of the most brilliantly pared-down passages of the whole book, “a chair, a typewriter, a table, a single bed, a coal stove, a dresser, a cupboard, a man in a little wooden shack, two miles from the nearest land”. Like a tracker dog, he's hunted down literature's ground zero, its primal scene, and set his store up there: here it is, here I am.

When he's not immersed in the black liquid, he's injecting it into himself in the form of heroin. Heroin is an essential weapon in Trocchi's nihilistic armoury: “There is no more systematic nihilism,” he writes, “than that of the junky in America.” If Paris was a moveable feast for Hemingway, junk,

for Trocchi, is a moveable void: taking that void around the city with him, in him, he ensures that he inhabits negative space constantly. This is his poetic project and it's also the way his whole perception system works at its most basic level (the two are the same). I can't stress enough how utterly *negative* Trocchi's negative space is. It's negative in the strict chemical or photographic sense of the word. An early sequence in *Cain's Book* takes us through a kind of Proust moment of perception and recall in which Trocchi, watching a man urinating in an alley, becomes

like a piece of sensitive photographic paper, waiting passively to feel the shock of impression. And then I was quivering like a leaf, more precisely like a mute hunk of appetitional plasm, a kind of sponge in which the business of being excited was going on, run through by a series of external stimuli: the lane, the man, the pale light, the lash of silver – at the ecstatic edge of something to be seen.

Edge again. The sequence kicks off a long analepsis to an Edinburgh pub, then the image of a blade cutting the outline of a woman's body into wood – a loop whose eventual folding-back into the present dictates that Trocchi take the man back to his scow and sleep with him. But their sex doesn't respond to a need which is, properly speaking, sexual: rather, it fulfils the requirements of the perception-memory tip he's launched himself on. Just prior to the seduction, Trocchi tells us:

I experienced a sly female lust to be impregnated by, beyond words and in a mystical way to confound myself with, not the man necessarily, though that was part of the possibility, but the secrecy of his gesture.

This is Phenomenology in action: what drives him is a longing for the world to unpack and reveal itself before us, to take form

Introduction

In 1991 a young Scottish critic, aptly named Andrew Murray Scott, published a biography of Alexander Trocchi entitled *The Making of a Monster*. The book, though riddled with errors of fact and interpretation, nonetheless came as a shock. It reminded me forcibly that Trocchi, who when I first met him was as close to a definition of “life force” as I had ever encountered, was not only dead but virtually forgotten. The man whom William Burroughs had rightly touted as “a unique and pivotal figure in the literary world of the 1950s and 1960s” was, by the time of his death in 1984, hardly remembered even in his native Scotland.

The book was also a graphic shock, for staring out of the dust jacket was a superb photograph of Trocchi: the tousled hair; the thin, angular face with its strong chin and prominent nose; the broad, seemingly guileless smile. But it was the eyes that revealed – or at least suggested – the monster: they smiled, too, but only to seduce, to charm, to cajole and, yes, to con. It is the Trocchi I knew in Paris in the 1950s, then later in New York where he lived and wrote *Cain’s Book*. It is the Trocchi who describes himself in that “novel”:

I also am tall. I was wearing my heavy white seaman’s jersey with a high polo neck, and I sensed that the angularity of my face – big nose, high cheekbones, sunken eyes – was softened by the shadows and smoothed – the effect of the drug – out of its habitual nervousness.

I met Trocchi just after he had brought out the first issue of an English-language magazine published in Paris, intriguingly

entitled *Merlin*. There were half a dozen writers and poets involved – English, American, Canadian, South African – and I became one of them. Ranging in age from our early to mid-twenties, we were all, despite the disparity of our geographies and backgrounds, deadly serious about Literature and Life. Of course we were in Paris for reasons partly romantic, but we differed from the so-called Lost Generation in several respects: Paris may have been our mistress, but the political realities of the time were our master. This was the dawn of the Atomic Era, and the Cold War was upon us: the world was divided into camps no longer armed with simple guns but with the weapons of the apocalypse. Richard Nixon was in Washington, and so was Joe McCarthy, whose unofficial envoys, Cohn and Schine, came rampaging through Europe sowing fear and distrust. Stalin was paranoid, but not, it seemed to us, without some reason. And the first of those seemingly endless wars, Korea, was in full swing, bleeding America of more than its GIs' blood.

There was no way we could remain neutral, for neutrality was the death of the soul. In the debate between Camus and Sartre that rent the European literary establishment in those days, we clearly sided with the political scrapper over the detached philosopher, the *engagé* over the *non-engagé*. We were not just different from our Paris-based elders who had filled the cafés of Montparnasse in the Twenties, we were the extreme opposite: pure literature in the sense that a Joyce or a Gertrude Stein understood it, experimentation as an end in itself, seemed to us impossible.

The first issues of *Merlin* could not have exceeded sixty-four pages, but each bore the weight of the early Cold War world on its meagre shoulders.

In this context, Trocchi struck me, and I believe all of us, as the most talented and prepossessing writer on the scene; the one who, had a straw poll been taken, would have been voted most likely to become our generation's Joyce or Hemingway or – more likely – Orwell. Compared with Trocchi, who was

only a year or two older than most of us, we were babes in the woods, fumbling towards knowledge or the hope of knowledge. He on the contrary was sure of himself, and his writing reflected it. He had already been married and divorced, was the father of two beautiful (albeit abandoned) daughters. He had already published stories and poems and was putting the finishing touches to his first novel, *Young Adam*, in which several British and American houses had expressed interest. That existentialist novel, as grim as the times in which it was written, was an exceptional first work, written from the same viewpoint and suffused with the same fervour that motivated *Merlin*: man is alone, and though he may not be responsible for what Fate has meted out to him, that does not mean that responsibility can be sloughed off like some reptilian skin.

During those *Merlin* years I was as close to Trocchi as I have ever been to any friend or colleague. We talked endlessly about every subject, serious or frivolous; we sweated the publication of the magazine, always short of funds; we launched an ambitious and monetarily mad book-publication venture. We worked together closely, and always in harmony.

Why then, rereading *Cain's Book* thirty-plus years after its original American publication, do I have such a feeling of pleasure on the one hand and anger on the other?

Explanation of the pleasure is easy. In 1960, Norman Mailer, never a pushover for compliments to competitors, wrote of *Cain's Book*: "It is true, it has art, it is brave. I would not be surprised if it is still talked about in twenty years." How does it stand up, not two but three decades later? How many books can withstand the erosion of time, the weight of their own shortcomings, the change of interests and sensibilities, the ever-evolving political realities? *Cain's Book* does stand up, amazingly well. The prose is taut and still fresh; the metaphors are striking and accurate. One can open the book to almost any page:

Fay's face was more reserved. Swinish? More like a pug than a pig. Her untidy dark hair tumbled into her big fur collar. A yellow female pigdog, her face in its warm nest beginning to stir with knowing.

But the inauthenticity was in the words, clinging to them like barnacles to a ship's hull, a growing impediment.

Tom Tear... was leaning backwards against the wall and his soft black eyelashes stirred like a clot of moving insects at his eyes. His face had the look of smoke and ashes, like a bombed city.

Jody loved cakes. She loved cakes and horse and all the varieties of soda pop. I knew what she meant. Some things surprised me at first, the way for example she stood for hours like a bird in the middle of the room with her head tucked in at her breast and her arms like drooping wings. At first this grated on me, for it meant the presence of an element unresolved in the absolute stability created by the heroin. She swayed as she stood, dangerous as Pisa.

Other qualities: Trocchi has dealt with the tough subject of drugs and the junkie life with rare truth and candour. There is no romanticism here – although several reviewers have likened *Cain's Book* to De Quincey and Baudelaire – the addict aware that he is “the loneliest man in the world”. Honesty toward oneself is the linchpin of this clearly autobiographical work: Trocchi/Necchi isolated from the world; the outsider by choice but now, through drugs, by necessity; Cain, the violent and inviolable; the mole who burrows beneath the surface of the “normal” world, like Sade, the eternal *homme révolté*, yet as harsh and unrelenting about himself as he is about the bourgeois society he detests.

Only the proselytizing strikes me today as heavier and more obvious than I had remembered it, but thirty years ago I had

Cain's Book

...Their corruption is so dangerous, so active, that they have no other aim in printing their monstrous works than to extend beyond their own lives the sum total of their crimes; they can commit no more, but their accursed writings will lead others to do so, and this comforting thought which they carry with them to the tomb consoles them for the obligation death imposes on them of renouncing this life.

– D.-A.F. de Sade

MY SCOW IS TIED UP in the canal at Flushing, NY, alongside the landing stage of the Mac Asphalt and Construction Corporation. It is now just after five in the afternoon. Today at this time it is still afternoon, and the sun, striking the cinder blocks of the main building of the works, has turned them pink. The motor cranes and the decks of the other scows tied up round about are deserted.

Half an hour ago I gave myself a fix.

I stood the needle and the eye-dropper in a glass of cold water and lay down on the bunk. I felt giddy almost at once. It's good shit, not like some of the stuff we've been getting lately. I had to be careful. Two of the workmen in wide blue dungarees and wearing baseball caps were still hanging about. From time to time they crossed my catwalk. They were inquisitive. They had heard the noise of the typewriter during the afternoon and that was sufficient to arouse their curiosity. It's not usual for a scow captain to carry a typewriter. They lingered for a while, talking, just outside the cabin. Then, a few minutes before five, I heard them climb back onto the dock and walk away.

Lying on the bunk, alert to the sudden silence that has come over the canal, I hear the buzz of a fly and notice it is worrying the dry corpse of another fly, which is half-gouged into the plank of the wall. I wonder about it and then my attention wanders. A few minutes have passed. I hear it buzz again and see that it is still at its work, whatever it is, settled on the rigid jutting legs of the corpse. The legs grow out of the black spot like a minute sprout of eyelashes. The live fly is busy. I wonder if it is blood it wants, if flies like wolves or rats will eat off their own kind.

– Cain at his orisons, Narcissus at his mirror.

The mind under heroin evades perception as it does ordinarily; one is aware only of contents. But that whole way of posing the question, of dividing the mind from what it's aware of, is fruitless. Nor is it that the objects of perception are intrusive in an electric way as they are under mescaline or lysergic acid, nor that things strike one with more intensity or in a more enchanted or detailed way as I have sometimes experienced under marijuana; it is that the perceiving turns inwards, the eyelids droop, the blood is aware of itself, a slow phosphorescence in all the fabric of flesh and nerve and bone; it is that the organism has a sense of being intact and unbrittle, and, above all, *inviolable*. For the attitude born of this sense of inviolability some Americans have used the word “cool”.

It is evening now, the temperature has fallen, objects are growing together in the dim light of the cabin. In a few moments I shall get up and light my kerosene lamps.

– *What the hell am I doing here?*

At certain moments I find myself looking on my whole life as leading up to the present moment, the present being all I have to affirm. It's somehow undignified to speak of the past or to think about the future. I don't seriously occupy myself with the question in the “here-and-now”, lying on my bunk and, under the influence of heroin, inviolable. That is one of the virtues of the drug, that it empties such questions of all anguish, transports them to another region, a painless theoretical region, a play region, surprising, fertile and unmoral. One is no longer grotesquely involved in the becoming. One simply is. I remember saying to Sebastian before he returned to Europe with his new wife that it was imperative to know what it was to be a vegetable, as well.

...the illusory sense of adequacy induced in a man by the drug. Illusory? Can a... “datum” be false? Inadequate? In relation to what? The facts? What facts? Marxian facts? Freudian

facts? Mendelian* facts? More and more I found it necessary to suspend such facts, to exist simply in abeyance, to give up (if you will) and come naked to apprehension.

It's not possible to come quite naked to apprehension and for the past year I have found it difficult to sustain even an approximate attitude without shit, horse, heroin. Details, impressionistic, lyrical. I became fascinated by the minute-to-minute sensations, and when I reflected, I did so repetitively and exhaustingly (often under marijuana) on the meaningless texture of the present moment, the cries of gulls, a floating spar, a shaft of sunlight, and it wasn't long before the sense of being alone overtook me and drained me of all hope of ever entering the city with its complicated relations, its plexus of outrageous purpose.

– The facts. Stick to the facts. A fine empirical principle, but below the level of language the facts slide away like a lava. Neither was there ever a simple act; in retrospect I couldn't isolate such a thing. Even while I lived in my act, at each phase, after the deciding, it unfolded spontaneously, and frighteningly, and dangerously, at times like a disease run riot, at times like the growing morning sunlight, and if I find it difficult to remember and express, and difficult to express and remember, if sometimes words leap up, sudden, unnatural, squint and jingling skeletons from the page, accusing me and amusing me with their obscene shakes and making the world mad; I suppose it is because they take a kind of ancestral revenge upon me who at each moment is ready to marshal them again for death or resurrection. No doubt I shall go on writing, stumbling across tundras of unmeaning, planting words like bloody flags in my wake. Loose ends, things unrelated, shifts, nightmare journeys, cities arrived at and left, meetings, desertions, betrayals, all manner of unions, adulteries, triumphs, defeats... these are the facts. It's a fact that in the America I found nothing was ever in abeyance. Things moved or they were subversive. I suppose it was to escape this without going away, to retreat into

abeyance, that I soon came to be on a river scow. (Alternatives: prison, madhouse, morgue.)

I get up off the bunk and return to the table where I light an oil lamp. When I have adjusted the wick, I find myself fumbling again amongst the pile of notes, extracting a certain page. I hold it close to the lamp and read:

– Time on the scows...

Day and night soon became for me merely light and dark, daylight or oil lamp, and often the lamp became pale and transparent in the long dawns. It was the warmth of the sun that came on my cheek and on my hand through the window which made me get up and go outside and find the sun already far overhead and the skyscrapers of Manhattan suddenly and impressively and irrelevantly there in a haze of heat. And as for that irrelevance... I often wondered how far out a man could go without being obliterated. It's an oblique way to look at Manhattan, seeing it islanded there for days on end across the buffering water like a little mirage in which one isn't involved, for at times I knew it objectively and with anxiety as a nexus of hard fact, as my very condition. Sometimes it was like trumpets, that architecture.

I find myself squirting a thin stream of water from the eye-dropper through the number 26 needle into the air, cooking up another fix, prodding the hardened cotton in the bubbling spoon... just a small fix, I feel, would recreate the strewn ramparts of Jericho.

*Tout ce qu'on fait dans la vie, même
l'amour, on le fait dans le train express
qui roule vers la mort. Fumer l'opium,
c'est quitter le train en marche; c'est
s'occuper d'autre chose que de la vie,
de la mort.*

– Cocteau*

AT 33RD STREET is Pier 72. At the waterfront there are few buildings and they are low. The city is in the background. It has diners at its edge, boxcars abandoned and stored, rails amongst grass and gravel, vacant lots. The trucks of moving and storage companies are parked and shunted under the tunnels of an area of broad deserted shadows, useful for murder or rape. The wharves jut forward into the Hudson River like the stunted uneven teeth of a prehistoric jaw. The George Washington Bridge is in the north. After eight, when the diners close, the dockside streets are fairly deserted. In winter the lights under the elevated roadway shine as in a vast and dingy shed, dimly reflecting its own emptiness. An occasional car moves in from the dark side of the crosstown streets, turns into the feebly lit dockyard area, travels ten or twenty blocks south, and then moves out, outwards again into the city. Walk three blocks east to 9th Avenue and the lights get brighter. A woman bawls her husband's affairs to a neighbour in the street from the window in which she leans thirty feet above your head as you walk along.

Pier 72 is the one immediately north of the new heliport which lies in the southern end of the basin formed by Piers 72 and 71. The remainder of the basin is used to moor the scows of a stone corporation with quarries at Haverstraw, Tomkins Cove and Clinton Point on the Hudson River. Piers 72 and 73 are close together. Nine scows at most are moored there. Looking in from the river you see the gabled ends of two huge and dilapidated barns perched on foundations of stones and heavy beams, with a narrow walk round three sides of each. The gable end of Pier 73 is a landmark from the river because it is painted

with red, white and blue stripes representing American Lines. At the end of Pier 72 there is a small landing stage set with bollards and cleats of cast iron. A little wooden box painted green is nailed to the gable end of the shed. It houses lists from the dispatcher's office of the crushed stone corporation, lists which pertain to the movements of the scows.

An hour ago I smoked some marijuana which came from Chile. It was particularly good. But for me it is an ambiguous drug. It can induce control or hysteria, and sometimes a terrifying and enervating succession of moods, new beginnings, generated spontaneously in the unwatched part of oneself... slow, quick, switchback, tumbling away from oneself in a sickening fashion, and then, suddenly, being in control. This can be exhausting. Intense concentration on an external object suddenly shatters, and one has a fleeting, ambiguous glimpse of one's own pale face. The cause of what is to be shunned is the junction of the seer and the seen. The ordinary logic of association ceases to be operative. The problem, if one takes the trouble to pose it at all, is to find a new criterion of relevance. Understandably, at such times, the list in the box at the end of Pier 72, indicating as it does the hour at which a tug will arrive to take one's scow in tow, has a fatality about it. One had hoped to go into the Village on arrival at the pier but on reading the list one finds one's scow amongst those to be picked up immediately.

This particular night – it was in the middle of winter – I was not on the list. I went over it twice very carefully, running my finger down the column of scows, O'Brien, Macdougall, Campbell, O'Malley, Matteotti, Leonard, Marshall, Cook, Smith, Peterson: Red Star, on arrival; Coogan, Baxter, Haynes, Loveday: Colonial, with the tide. There were a few scowmen hanging around the end of the pier, mostly those who were going out at once.

I went back to the scow. In the cabin I stowed away some things that were lying about, my hashish pipe, a bottle of

Benzedrine, locked the cabin and climbed over four scows and onto the pier. I walked along the huge beam which provides the narrow footpath parallel to the shed as far as the dock. I walked slowly, using a flashlight to guide my feet. On my left the corrugated iron of the shed, on my right, about fourteen feet below me, the still dark water of the basin reflecting a few naked lights. Its surface was smeared with oil and dust. Finally I reached the dock and walked between some parked boxcars to the street under the elevated road. I cut diagonally across town and at 23rd Street on 8th Avenue I took a taxi to Sheridan Square. I telephoned Moira from the drugstore that sells all the paperbacks. She told me to come over.

She was glad to see me. We hadn't seen one another for over two weeks. – Have you taken dope? Nope. – Our conversation was sometimes limited. She had smoked pot for some years but her attitude towards heroin was rigid. It made our relationship tense and hysterical. Sometimes I wondered why I bothered to go to see her, and that was the way it was with most of my friends who didn't use junk. "It's none of my business," Moira said. "I've got no sympathy for them."

It would make me very angry when she said that. I wanted to shake her. "*You* say that! Sometimes I think of all those ignorant cops, all those ignorant judges, all those ignorant bastard people committing bloody murder like they blow their noses! They think it so fucking easy they can stamp it out like syphokles, whatever it is, jewelry, heroin addiction, like some kind of streptococcus, and getting high an un-American rabies, Jesus, to a healthy paranoid like me who likes four walls and police locks on all doors and a couple of good Frankensteins to draw off the mob with their flaming torches, it looks like anyone who depicts you, dear Saviour, with a beard will be dealt with cold turkey until they take him before a judge and then, because it can't stand, being bestial, scarcely human, the quivering, blubbering, vomiting mass is given half a grain of morphine ten minutes before he is arraigned so that they won't

have to take him in on a stretcher and run the risk of having some irresponsible goon send for a doctor!”

“It’s none of my business!” Moira screamed.

“Whose business is it? What are you going to do? Leave it to the experts? Tomorrow, the Age of the Doctors! They’re already challenging the taxmen and the FBI for a profitable monopoly. Let’s put it on prescription, eh? Confine it to the laboratories for more tests. They’re always talking about a lack of scientific evidence, about its being unsafe to make it public! They’re scared the public will find out it ain’t that fucking horse after all!”

“*They’re* scared! Who’s *they*?”

“You! Dammit to hell, Moira! You!”

“I don’t want to discuss it! I won’t argue with you!”

At that moment the telephone rang. She was grateful for the distraction. But it was Tom Tear. As welcome as a newborn Mongolian idiot. He had heard I was in town and wanted to know if I wanted to score. She held her hand over the mouth-piece of the receiver and her face became angry as she became aware of my hesitation. She spoke coldly into the telephone: “He’s here now. You’d better speak to him yourself.” As she handed me the telephone she said she didn’t want him telephoning me there. She avoided my disbelieving eyes and her face became set and hard. I could see only the back of her head now, the long blonde hair in a smooth bell. – I remember the first time I smelt it; her cheek was cold; it was the middle of winter and in Glasgow there was snow in the streets. By the time I turned my attention to the telephone I knew I would score, that it was only a question of arranging the time and the place. The thought of an evening with her in her present mood was stifling. Tom’s voice, because he had been sensitive to the tone of Moira’s, was apologetic, almost wheedling. “Don’t be so fucking sorry,” I said to him, watching her overhear. “Where’ll I meet you?” A place at Sheridan Square in half an hour’s time. I put down the telephone. Moira was pouring coffee.

I had to say something. I said: "Look, Moira, I know what I'm doing."

"I don't want to talk about it," she said dully.

And we didn't. I wanted to explain and not to explain. At the same time I considered her attitude impertinent. I drank my coffee and left.

Fay was with Tom. Tom made the run alone and Fay and I walked over together to his place from Sheridan Square. We walked quickly so as to get there by the time he returned with the heroin.

"It's going to be good, baby," Fay said.

The room has a low sloping ceiling with two small windows on one side and a fireplace with a raised brick hearth in an opposite corner, at the far end of the adjacent side. Sometimes Tom Tear burnt a few sticks in the grate and we sat with our knees at the level of the fire which cast shadows on the dirty ceiling and walls and on the bricks of the fireplace, the three of us on a small, backless couch spread over with a fawn blanket, looking into the fire, Fay in the centre, still wearing her moth-eaten fur coat, her arms folded, her head sunk on her chest, her slightly bulbous, yellowish eyes closed. We sat there after we had fixed and watched wood burn. The white boxwood burnt quickly. Tom Tear leant forward and added a few sticks to the blaze. He is a tall man in his late twenties, lean, with a beautiful, pale, lean face expressionless often as porcelain, the nose long, the eyes half-closed and heavily lidded under the drug.

I also am tall. I was wearing my heavy white seaman's jersey with a high polo neck, and I sensed that the angularity of my face – big nose, high cheekbones, sunken eyes – was softened by the shadows and smoothed – the effect of the drug – out of its habitual nervousness. My eyes were closed. My elbows rested on my thighs and my hands were clasped in front of me. Tom Tear is a Negro who sometimes speaks dreamily of the West Indies.

At that moment I felt impelled to speak and I said: “My father had false teeth.”

I was aware that I flashed a quick, intimate glance first at Tom, across Fay’s line of vision, and then, turning my head slightly, I caught the glint of appraisal in her pale protruding eyes.

“Yes,” I said, and my face grew radiant, encouraging them to listen, “he had yellow dentures.”

Tom’s teeth – they are long and yellowish and give his mouth a look of bone – were clenched in a tight smile, the pale lips falling away, exposing them. It was almost a mask of ecstasy, *part of the game*, I might have said in some contexts, in some rooms.

Fay’s face was more reserved. Swinish? More like a pug than a pig. Her untidy dark hair tumbled into her big fur collar. A yellow female pigdog, her face in its warm nest beginning to stir with knowing.

“He was outside in the hall, spying on the lodgers,” I said. “My father was a born quisling, and he had false teeth.”

Tom Tear’s face was patient and serene. The flicker of the fire stirred in the sparse black stubble on his lower face, making the hairs glint.

I went on for the friendly silence: “While he was in the hall his false teeth were squatting like an octopus in a glass of water on the kitchen dresser. The plates were a dark-orange brick colour and the teeth were like discoloured piano keys. They seemed to breathe at the bottom of the glass. The water was cloudy and tiny bubbles clung to the teeth. That was the kitchen where we lived, and they sat there like a breathing eye, watching us.”

Fay’s bluish lips had fallen apart in a smile. She made a grunt of understanding through her decayed teeth. Fay is forty-two. She has lived all her life in this city.

Tom Tear leant forward and threw more wood on the fire. Wood is plentiful. We gather it, when we can be bothered, on the streets.

“He went on tiptoe about the hall for nine years,” I said. “In tennis shoes and without his teeth. The hall was no-man’s-land.”

Tom Tear nodded as he leant back again away from the fire. His right cheek, which was all I saw from where I sat, was impassive, long and smooth.

“If someone came to the front door he came flying back into the kitchen for his teeth. He came in puffing and blowing with his hand on his paunch. He wore a collarless shirt with a stud in it and he went round in his shirtsleeves and this old grey, sleeveless pullover.” I paused. A white stick darkened and burst into flame. “When he grew older he became less frantic about the teeth,” I said, smiling. “He slipped them into his mouth furtively in front of the visitor as though he suddenly remembered and didn’t want to give offence. Perhaps he no longer needed defences.”

“He’d given up by that time,” Fay said. She looked straight into the fire.

We were all silent for a moment. I felt I had to go on. I said: “I’ll tell you a story...”

The others smiled. Fay touched the back of my hand with her fingertips. I remember noticing she had prominent eye-teeth.

“It’s not really a story,” I said. “It’s something I read somewhere, about a river bushman. This man wanted to track down some bushmen and he went to a place called Serongo in the swamps. One day he caught sight of a bushman paddling alone in a boat and he asked his head bearer if he would speak to him and get him to lead them to his tribe. The bearer told him he had known the bushman for thirty years, that he lived alone on a termite mound in the middle of the swamps, and he was deaf and dumb as well.”

The others looked at me. I moved my clasped hands forward and stared at the thumbs. They were dirty at the knuckles and at the nails.

We were all silent.

“It’s necessary to give up first,” I began tentatively, “but it should be a beginning...” I sensed an ambiguity, something not quite authentic, and stopped speaking.

“Go on,” Tom said after a moment.

But the inauthenticity was in the words, clinging to them like barnacles to a ship’s hull, a growing impediment. I shook my head, closed my eyes.

Again we were all silent. The smoke from the burning wood wound its way towards the chimney, some of it spilling outwards into the room where it clung to the low ceiling.

“Does anyone want to go out?” Fay said.

When neither of us answered she made the motion of snuggling inside her warm fur coat. “It’s cold outside, too cold,” she said.

I was sitting hunched forward with my eyes closed, my chin deep in the high woollen collar. The phrase “*ex nihilo nihil fit*”^{*} had just come to me. It seemed to me that nothing would be beginning, ever.

Tom Tear, who a moment before had moved to a stool at the side of the fireplace, was leaning backwards against the wall and his soft black eyelashes stirred like a clot of moving insects at his eyes. His face had the look of smoke and ashes, like a bombed city. It was at rest, outwardly.

There is a bed in the room, a low double bed on which three dirty grey army blankets are stretched. On the wall between the two square windows – they are uncurtained and at night the four panes of glass in each are black and glossy – is a faded engraving, unframed. It curls away from the wall at one corner where the Scotch tape has come away. There are two similar engravings on two other walls, both of them warped and one of them with a tear at the corner. On the fourth wall there is an unskilful pencil sketch of some trees and a watercolour of a woman’s face, vague and pink, and painted on flimsy paper. This is the work of Tom Tear’s girlfriend. A self-portrait. He

talks of her now and again, always vaguely. She is kicking her habit in some clinic out of town. The last piece of furniture apart from the backless couch and the stool on which Tom Tear sat is a draughtsman's table which tilts on a ratchet to any required angle. This is the table on which Tom Tear will work if ever he becomes an architect. At that moment the table was horizontal and there was a clock on it, and an electric lamp which didn't work, and a burning candle, and a radio with a plastic cabinet in which another clock was inlaid. Both clocks said twenty-five past nine. That was all there was on the table, apart from the spike, and the glass of water, and the spoon.

We had fixed over an hour ago. We had used all the heroin.

Each of us was conscious of the well-being of the others. The blaze of wood in the fireplace made our cheeks glow. Our faces were smooth, and serene.

"I can't do with it and I can't do without it," Fay had said earlier as she prodded the back of her left hand – the flesh was thin there and waxy – in search of a possible vein. At the third attempt she found a vein and the blood rose up through the needle into the eye-dropper and appeared as a dark red tongue in the colourless solution. "Hit," she said softly, with a slow smile. When she put the eye-dropper with the needle attached back into the glass of water and dabbed the back of her bluish hand with tissue paper there was no longer any fear in her eyes, only certainty, and in their yellowish depths ecstasy. I knew at that moment she was impregnable. I laughed softly at her and touched the slack flesh of her cheek lightly with my fingers. At that moment I was happy for her and I knew that she, when she watched me fix a moment later, would be happy for me.

Each of us was conscious of the well-being of the others. The sense of well-being in each of us was reinforced by that consciousness.

I said suddenly that the wheel hadn't been invented yet.

"What's a wheel?" Tom Tear said.