

ALMA DE GROEN

Available Light

(A radio play in two acts commissioned by the ABC)

Characters: Rose Shelley, a poet
 Mary Shelley, her daughter

Act One: Invisible Sun

*A LECTURE ROOM IN AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY.
Applause as ROSE comes to the centre of the dais.*

ROSE:

Thankyou, Ron, for that flattering introduction — although I should point out that your description of me as “one of Australia’s leading women poets” was a little unnecessary. Just “poet” will do. It’s evident even at my age that I’m a woman. At least I hope it is.

Aside from that, thankyou ... And all of you for the lovely lunch — the sweet-and-sour fish balls, and the pancakes with icecream and maple syrup.

SHE POURS HERSELF A GLASS OF WINE FROM A BOTTLE

... One of the penalties of age — the drop in the quality of the wine. I’m strictly cask variety now, so this is a treat. I’ll just have a final glass to remember it by ...

SHE TAKES A DRINK

That poor writer-in-residence you had here from England. The playwright. Who locked himself in his room for a week and drank French champagne and wouldn’t come out. I understand him completely — except the champagne would be beyond my means. Sometimes in Sydney food seems beyond my means and I

have to sell some books. Then I find I need to look something up and have to buy them back again, which is not good economics in the long run, is it? Quite the opposite, in fact.

I've seen the University calendar: you have pay-days marked for a year ahead. That must give you a nice warm feeling. It would me — provided I didn't have to write about the lavender-coloured dough in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness", and things like that. You have my sympathy.

Now. You want me to talk about myself and my work. That's difficult at present — for reasons I probably shouldn't go into.

TAKES ANOTHER DRINK

You may find this difficult to understand, since talking is something you do as academics. But you talk about other people's work: you don't have to talk about yourselves. And you have ideas you can hide behind. Including other people's. You're not exposed the way a poet is. The poet is naked before you ... At least that's the way it feels standing up here with everybody ... well never mind —

DRINKS

So I'm going to follow your example. I won't just talk about Rose Shelley. I'll summon another presence — a higher authority. In other words, I'll hide behind someone else.

I don't know if any of you read Sir Thomas Browne any more. Sir Thomas was one of my mentors. You can make a note of that if you like: I'm trying to think of ideas that might be relevant to English tutors dealing with my work — but since even I don't know what's relevant to it any more, that's something of a problem. And I hate dwelling on the past. I like to look ahead. Especially since I've been assured that I've another twenty years in which to do so. As Sir Thomas said in "Urn Burial" in 1658. Or was it "Religio Medici"? ... I think it was "Urn Burial":

"If the nearness of our last necessity, brought a nearer conformity unto it, there were a happiness in hoary hairs, and no calamity in half senses. But the long habit of living indisposes us for dying."

I'm working on the hoary hairs, you may have noticed — around my forehead, if you can see ... If any of you noticed when I arrived seven weeks ago — though probably not, because today's the first time I've met any of you, except Ron here — the hairs were quite grey. Much lighter than they are now. That's zinc, and a touch of uva ursi and vitus agnus castus. And if you're worried about hair loss — please — don't hesitate to come to me. Room 422 in the English Department. I'm here two more weeks.

I'm sorry. You want to hear about poetry, not hair loss — though it's possible the two are connected. There may be a thesis in it. I suspect poetry protects against hair loss, when you think about it. Most of our truly greats

have had a good head of hair: Judith Wright. Henry Lawson. ... Les Murray's a worry ... I think we'll forget about hair and move on.

I read "Religio Medici" and "Urn Burial" when I was sixteen, and they were of such a beauty ... "Life is a pure flame, and we live by an invisible sun within us" ...

Now, at sixty-seven, I know about the pure flame, and I know something about the half senses too.

SHE DRINKS

There's some noble rot involved in this ...

A FURTHER TEST

Delicious ...

In the words of Sir Thomas, "Who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried?" It seems I was taken from my urn and my ashes spread abroad and re-examined. The verdict? "Rose Shelley is in the unique position of a poet who was dropped and now needs to be picked up again."

Astonishing. You dropped me, and I didn't know! If I fell through space, other than by my own volition, I was unaware of it!

And now you've picked me up again.

DRINKS

Do you know what it is to drop? ... Really drop? ... Falling helplessly, endlessly, out of the sky, like the air hostess in that terrifying poem by James Dickey? You might want to make a note of that — James Dickey: a poem called "Falling".

I wrote a poem. A long poem. A great poem. I don't need to qualify that. We poets know when the machinery's in order. Presumably that's when you retrieved me after my unsuspecting drop. One has a life to lead, you know — hoping not to run out of typewriter ribbon before pension day — so we're not always au fait with our current standing in the charts.

My current standing with myself I'm always au fait with. When it comes to being dropped, no one does as good a job on me as I do.

SHE POURS HERSELF MORE WINE

I dropped, as I said, endlessly ... And then I picked myself up. And, when it seemed I was all right again, I cracked, as Scott Fitzgerald said, "like an old plate."

DRINKS

I wrote poetry because that was how I planned to communicate. The rest could be, "I'll have a dozen eggs, please, and some butter." I wanted to be in another

time and place. I wanted it from childhood, with a longing that was physical — as if I'd been shut out from home.

But home, the home I wanted, was an unknown place ... And when I found it, it wasn't somewhere outside me, it was inside. But I couldn't always gain access. Ninety-five per cent of the time I was shut out. And then I sat outside the door and howled like a dog.

DRINKS

I felt guilt. They say women feel this anyway; that it gives them a sense of importance in the world — that their actions matter enough that they could have something to feel guilty about.

I felt guilt when I heard the news. Any news. Or when I read the news. Any news. It's always bad. Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" is now upon us. The good doctor in "Religio Medici" speaks of the oracles' prediction of the world's destruction by fire, and quotes Lucan:

"There yet remains to th' World one common Fire,
Wherein our bones with stars shall make one Pyre."

Browne goes on to say: "I believe the world grows near its end ... What force should be able to consume it thus far, without the breath of God, which is the truest consuming flame, my Philosophy cannot inform me. Some believe there went not a minute to the World's creation, nor shall there go to its destruction."

Guilt. What was I doing, with this common Fire almost upon us, writing poetry that took longer and longer to come out — better each time when it did — but taking so long that between-times one had to be considered defunct. Dropped.

DRINKS

"Religio Medici" was the good physician's private exercise and satisfaction. It had no purpose of education. According to his biographer Edmund Gosse it was a sort of "diary of the author's soul, a note-book into which he jotted his spiritual symptoms."

These symptoms melted at times, in Gosse's words, "into the pure frenzy of beauty."

My soul's note-book was a criminal case-book. The frenzy of beauty was my crime.

But without poetry, who was I?

In my forties it became all too obvious, and I never quite grew used to it: my lack of authenticity as a female. For most of our lives we're the genuine article. Then one day our provenance is questioned and we're declared fake. Quietly, of course. We're still there on the wall, but not looked at in the same way. If at all. At the slightest excuse we'll be thrown out and replaced with a real work of art.

Poetry was my protection. My racket. My criminal excess ...

Then one Friday night in Oxford Street about a year ago I caught a cab. The driver said, "Would you like me to tell you how you can move through time and space?"

"I can do that already," I said, "I'm a poet. Slow down." The plate had already cracked. I'd been picked up without knowing it by you academics, but that was neither here nor there. As far as I was concerned, I'd smashed.

The driver had a friend. The friend conducted seminars. The first was free.

POURS MORE WINE

So much has opened up for me — because I hailed a taxi on a rainy night.

Nobody at the seminar held my hand, or looked into my eyes, or made me repeat my name over and over, or stopped me going to the toilet, or demanded my name and address. There were simply beautiful sounds, and colours and scents.

And for the first time in as long as I care to remember, I wasn't a poet.

This may come as a shock to you, especially the ones who've put me on a syllabus. It was a shock to me too.

SHE DRINKS

But I knew that first night it was over, and my adventure had begun. We were told, all of us who were there, that whatever occupation we currently held, it would no longer be a part of our lives. If we could not accept this we were to leave right then. A few people, who I imagined might be lawyers or in real estate, left. I was in my smashed plate phase so I stayed.

Of course, there are other ways of being a poet than putting pen to paper — but I'm not sure any of you would want to write a thesis on it.

Unless you're into Spontaneous Divination.

So what am I doing here, posing as a poet? ... taking your money when you could have had a real writer-in-residence?

We're taught not to refuse a request or invitation, since to do so may have karmic consequences. There's a reason for my being here. I don't know what it is yet and neither do you, and in this incarnation we may never know — but there is a reason — and they'll be different for every one of us.

My being here means something. Your being here means something.

It's not up to me to convince you of anything. That would be karmically incorrect. You have to come to Spontaneous Divination of your own volition.

But it is poetry. Believe me.

So much is breaking down, and we feel we're breaking under it: but there's a metaphysical reason people now spell strawberry with two "r"s instead of three and avocado with three "a"s and potato and tomato with an "e". Our education system hasn't let us down, it's simply a step in our evolution, which may seem like a step backwards, but ultimately isn't. I can't elaborate further, although I know it would comfort you. You will simply have to trust me — and S.D. We have to let our children go. We have to trust them to the cosmos and know the cosmos is taking care of them — even the ones who can't spell. The

human mind is still evolving. There are large areas of the male brain — which is more lateralised than the female — the right brain — which are scarcely used at all. It may be being used, but so far we haven't been able to pin-point what's going on in it.

DRINKS

There's no Rose Shelley any more. No provenance. No authorisation. No reason to spend a lunch-hour in the Staff Club together, enjoying Chinese and Canadian cuisine.

"You can't lose it", says my daughter — herself burdened with an artistic temperament — "It's always going to be there. You'll never be free of it" ... But I AM free. For the first time in sixty-seven years I have no excuse for the fact that I'm alive. I don't need one. And that's what it's all about.

DRINKS

Women in this society, say the feminists, of whom I was one — I'm not now — I'm not rejecting it, I've simply stepped beyond it — women in this society are encouraged to confess — to doctors, to psychiatrists, to police — and I've done my share; but this is not a confession. This is an ending. I shan't be invited to a tertiary institution again — unless it's somewhere word hasn't reached — and that's the way I want it.

We're warned that spiritual growth can be inconvenient sometimes, especially financially — and I accept that.

How many of you can say you're truly serene? Even when I'm unwell and arthritis keeps me awake half the night I know it's a result of my own program, the one I've chosen for myself. I can accept that now. Even if I end up on a urine-soaked mattress in an old folks' home, I'll know that in this incarnation, it was my choice to be where I am.

DRINKS

Certain monks, in the Middle-Ages, kept a human skull in their cell as an object of contemplation — to remind them of their mortality, and their humility before God I doubt they were the skulls of other monks, and I doubt they were female, since a living monk would not have contemplated even the **bones** of a woman — the very **cause** of death, as it was believed ... so I wonder, incidentally, from where so many skulls — one per monk — were dug ... however, now — it is possible for **me now** — to regard with similar serenity, a newspaper photograph of a peasant woman contemplating the skull of a murdered relative from a mass grave in Lithuania; prisoners of war frozen to death in measured doses; plane-loads of lethal gases; forests burning; mirrors in space; Radon; a mother sued by her daughter's murderer for bringing up a child who could inspire him to rape and kill her.

DRINKS

Accidents. Fires. Murders — all part of a pre-ordained plan. Starving children in Ethiopia: they **want** to die and go on to their next incarnation; we're not doing them any favours by prolonging this one. I'm happy to report that the "News" isn't the news any more: it's part of a cosmic certainty — a belief that all is well. One of the things we're encouraged to do is record the news, then play it again two months later, backwards. In my case this meant purchasing a video recorder, which I did, and I advise any of you who are becoming over-identified with events on the earth plane — and I acknowledge that in the case of academics this would be to a lesser degree than with most people — to see them for what they are, which is simply negativity. We watch these events, these train crashes, axe murders, sieges, and fires, and we know that they happened, and that we watched them only weeks ago, **but we've already forgotten them**. Forwards, or backwards, they've passed out of memory — and we watch them going backwards when before they had been happening **forwards** and we comprehend the absurdity of our beliefs, and we realise that time doesn't exist. We only think it does. And we realise that the program for this dimension is simply that — a program — and we can change the nature of the program — because we created it in the first place. The fact that I'm standing here today is a puzzle, but as I said before there's a reason, even if it seems incomprehensible at the time.

A SCRAPING OF CHAIRS

I see a few of you are getting up. Possibly you have a class — in which case I won't keep you.

FOOTSTEPS RETREATING

The richness of life now ... It occasions not the least unease that the good doctor, Sir Thomas Browne, "intoxicated", in Gosse's words, "with a newborn sense of loveliness", his style "tottering with ecstasy", was able to condemn two women to be hanged as witches.

Rose Cullender and Amy Duny were almost home. No one in the court wanted to condemn them, not even the judge; but he appealed to Sir Thomas as a final authority. "Pins," said Sir Thomas, "With needles and nails ... conveyed into the afflicted persons by the Devil, co-operating with the malice of the witches." It had happened this way in Denmark, he said, where four women had been burned for the same offence.

But I'm here to tell you, there are no evil men — merely choices made for a higher purpose, which only a metaphysician could reveal. The rest of us are not at liberty. We're warned that careless speech can lead to accidents on the physical plane. I could topple off the stage and break my neck if I said too much.

DRINKS

Silence is the hardest discipline of all. In lieu of poetry one wants desperately to offer something!

So let me see what I can do for you ... Where have I put my bag? ... Ron?

*SHE KNOCKS OVER HER GLASS.
WINE TRICKLES ONTO THE FLOOR*

Thank you so much, Ron ... No, don't take it away. It's not broken. You can easily fill it up again.

THE GLASS IS HALF-FILLED BY RON

Thank you. Now, my bag ...

SHE UNZIPS THE BAG AND RUMMAGES INSIDE

I offer what little I can of the beauty of S.D. ... It's not the "Opiate of the Misses", as my daughter claims. There are a lot of women at the meetings, but they're at all sorts of things like that, not just Spontaneous Divination.

And who wants to be that cliché — an angry old woman? You won't find any anger in me ... dry hair springing up like tinder, cardigan buttoned up wrong, stockings bagging round the ankles —

SHE ZIPS UP THE BAG

I share this with you: it may look like a balloon, and it is a balloon, but it's more: something which took many hours of effort, and hundreds of dollars to acquire, but I give it freely — although I know I probably shouldn't. It's important to visualise a pink aura as you breathe into the balloon and ask the cosmos to meet your needs. Don't ask me why it has to be pink — that's a more in-depth workshop — however: what we're aiming to attract on this occasion is a two-bedroom weatherboard cottage in a small mountain community near the sea, where my daughter can come and relax — if such a word can be applied to her — within walking distance of the shops, including a video store and a good patisserie; a female G.P. not more than twenty years younger than I am; a dentist who gives gas and plays the theme music from "Out of Africa" through headphones, and a beach people can still swim in.

SHE BLOWS UP THE BALLOON. IT BURSTS

So much for a healthy old age.

SHE TOPS UP THE GLASS, DRINKS

Sometimes at night here I think about my mother. I wake at three in the morning, in Fitzgerald's "dark night of the soul", with the chapel overhead and the college girls away on mid-term break and endless dark corridors

outside, stretching to infinity and the night porter, and I imagine I hear footsteps. And I turn on the light ... and I'm aware that I'm lying on my narrow college bed, the fluoro overhead, staring at my suitcase on the top of the wardrobe ... I'm aware that I'm just this body on the bed, with one leg stretched out, and an arm behind my head, and nothing else. I've gone through all the books I have and found nothing I wanted to read, turned on the T.V. I hired and turned it off again unsatisfied, listened to the darkness and the silence and known I could be anything, just flesh and bone, waiting, lying here, for what? For it to be late enough in an hour or two for dawn to break and for it to be safe to try and sleep. No thoughts worth thinking, no sense of anything beyond textures. Wood, cloth, bone, and skin.

And there's nothing I want; and there's nothing I am. There's nothing ...

SHE DRINKS

I would advise you all, particularly those in line for one, to avoid a Catholic funeral. I'm at pains to do so myself — and I hope my daughter understands this. To die and have a priest apologise for one's life seems to me to have misread the situation on a fundamental level — “a wrong reading of the world”, as my Marxist ex-husband used to say — though he was hardly in a position to comment.

My mother died and the priest apologised. Apologised for her life. Her sin. There was no sin. Except her unending unhappiness.

“Man is a Noble animal,” said Sir Thomas in “Urn Burial”, “Splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave.”

Not any more. We're graved into the ground like shit. The bulldozer moves in ... yellow, inexorable. Yorick never knew such ignominy. Shakespeare saw to that. Was able to see to that. But I couldn't see to anything for her.

Anything.

“Who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried?” ... Who cares?

ANOTHER SCRAPING OF CHAIRS AND FOOTSTEPS EXITING

If we're correctly aligned we don't come within a cooe of negativity. The axe murderer passes us by, and so does the Vice Chancellor. It's important to think positive thoughts. We don't want to manifest colds or flu. It's important not to worry about our children — as I said earlier — otherwise we'll bring down what we fear upon their unsuspecting heads. I try to do as little thinking as possible these days, especially regarding anyone I care about.

Listen to the whispers, we're told. That way we can avoid hearing the screams. That's local screams, screams in Africa, and even screams in the next dimension, where I suspect my Higher Self is yelling its head off.

DRINKS

... Of course, we're warned, as I said, that spiritual development can be inconvenient.

... If one can describe happiness as an inconvenience.

POURS MORE WINE

... And you see, I didn't believe I was doing any good as a poet. Not the kind of poet you thought you knew — and dropped and then picked up again. There was too much pain that couldn't be dealt with.

DRINKS

My usual subject matter's out of bounds now in any case — even if I **could** deal with it. Much too dangerous — given the boomerang nature of metaphysics.

And one can't write anything true without an edge to it. And my edge is gone ... Long gone.

You try writing a poem with nothing but positive imagery. It's not easy to sustain a feeling of relevance. Emily Dickinson wrote the odd greeting card style verse:

If I can stop one heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one life the aching
Or cool one pain
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again
I shall not live in vain.

But it's not what we remember her for. Except to wonder how on earth it could have happened. What we remember is:

This is the Hour of Lead
Remembered, if outlived
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow —
First-Chill-then Stupor-then the letting go —

DRINKS

I'm into fainting robins myself these days — if ever I dare put pen to paper. I can't seem to help myself. Out they bloody hop.

Everywhere I look, a pattern forms. Every leaf, every branch, every tree, every human being, according to S.D., is part of a pattern and conforms to a pre-ordained function and meaning.

A finite pattern: suitcases, balloons, buses and tombs, bulldozers and robins, all waiting to be replaced — so splendidly — twenty years from now, when the earth re-incarnates ... and "our bones with stars shall make one Pyre".

Who can write poetry now? Who can? They say tragedy can't be done. In this twentieth century of ours, life has usurped all forms.

And I can't laugh either.

I used to laugh.

So what can we do? What is to be done? What is there to be done?

DRINKS

I'll tell you.

There's no need to write poetry any more — because there's nothing to write about. There's no mystery. And poetry requires mystery. I wrote poetry in order to solve a mystery for myself and now it's been solved. End of story.

*SHE PUTS THE GLASS DOWN UNSTEADILY SO
THAT IT CLINKS AGAINST THE BOTTLE*

I don't know if I dare move from here ... I've said too much.

Ron ...? Could you be an angel and help me down?... Thank you...

*A PAUSE AND THEN SOMEONE BEGINS TO CLAP
TENTATIVELY. AFTER A MOMENT OTHERS
JOIN IN WITH POLITE APPLAUSE*

END OF ACT ONE

Act Two: Available Light

MARY walks in with her camera equipment. She puts her camera bag and tripod down.

Okay, Doctor — you don't want a photographic demonstration, but I'm going to give you one anyway because I don't have much choice.

SHE UNZIPS HER CAMERA BAG

Going on past performance you probably won't understand what I'm on about, but what the hell — I have to try.

SHE LOADS THE CAMERA

I see cameras haven't changed much, which is a surprise. You're probably using something else these days and had to hire this stuff from a museum, right?

Anyway: light hasn't changed. Or has it? Maybe it has. We'll see.

SHE BEGINS TO SET UP THE TRIPOD

I don't know if you've noticed this, but a lot of women who take pictures apologise for it by acting like the equipment's something alien to them — they'll drop a lens cap, or their tripod collapses — it's not alien to me. It is me. It's a marriage of flesh and machine. It's like the camera decides. It's like the medium has its own mind and I give myself over to it.

What you have to understand is that there's another world going on around us, and most of us are unaware of it. It's not until you take the camera and go and study it that you realise it's there.

I'm talking about light of course: obviously it's there — but we don't notice it.

During the day you can take the same picture every hour and it'll be a different picture each time. I'm not saying you'd want to take the same picture every hour, but I've been known to do that — I mean you never know, do you?

Another person might look at this room and think there's nothing to photograph, it's so bare. But if you understand light the possibilities are infinite.

SHE ATTACHES THE CAMERA TO THE TRIPOD

It's pointless pretending you're not there. I know about being looked at because I'm a photographer. And I know how people feel about being looked at.

It's too much like a room my friend Sharon was in at Ryde after she cut her wrists. They had group therapy in there, with the doctors watching through a two-way mirror. The patients called it the Monkey Room because it made them feel like they were in a zoo.

SHE ATTACHES THE CABLE RELEASE

You understand what I'm getting at when I talk about light? You find the source of light and you build your picture around that. You can't do much at all without it.

I'm focusing on a section of the lamp base against the white wall, so you get the light from the lamp shaping the composition. It's beautiful. Very abstract ... Mysterious.

SHE TAKES THE PICTURE

Is anyone getting the point here? I'd like a little light in a dark world too.

I've tried to find Sammi, but she doesn't seem to be around anymore. She seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth, which I don't understand because Sammi Hardie's my best friend. She's ten years older than me and I tend to look up to her because she's got more sense than my mother, who's not too smart on occasions.

The last time I saw Sammi was about three weeks ago. That's about as far as I can estimate it in my terms. She can't seem to keep away from the laboratory even on weekends, so that's where I went and saw her.

You're getting me on tape, right? I hope you are.

Sammi's like me, she's got too much energy to sit around and chat so she asked me if I wanted to see how my pictures looked now that they'd been added to the experiment. There are four so far: a tomb in Egypt that I photographed for one of the universities, the gardens at Versailles, and two others of mine that Sammi chose — a swimming pool, taken under-water, and one from Taronga Zoo: the monkey cage. You put the helmet on and you're completely surrounded by monkeys. I hate that one. It gives me the horrors. When you put the data glove on you can even make the monkeys come towards you.

I picked the Egyptian tomb — even though a lot of people won't like it — because it was special to me, and as Sammi said, I'm part of the Virtual Reality experiment because I've contributed the images. You think you're in the tomb because the helmet has two small television screens, one for each eye, so it shuts out information from the real world and the image becomes three-dimensional. You can even zoom up to the ceiling and look down on where the sarcophagus would have been. It's a bit like I imagine sky-diving must feel. Or being in your astral body.

They'd taken her away by the time I came to photograph, but it was as if she was still there. As if I somehow breathed her in. She was a mystery. The tomb had no inscription and so she had no name. She'd been found lying on her side, wrapped, not mummified, in a poorly made coffin that was so small her knees were drawn up. And there were no tributes: no furniture, no jewellery, no statues, not even a pottery jar. I thought the tomb had been robbed, but it was sealed with blocks of stone and plastered. We were the first human beings to set foot in there in almost four thousand years.

I'm telling you this because I think she had some bearing on my state of mind. Afterwards I found it hard to take pictures. The world's crammed with images in any case. It's turning us into amnesiacs. There's an American painter who says he has no subconscious left. He says it's all on television. Now, if I see a shot and I know how to take it, a lot of time I can't get interested. I need evidence of something else — of things unseen. And I think maybe that's what photography was invented for: not for the real world, but for something else. And until I find that something else, all it means to me is an absence of something.

Anyway, I hovered above the tomb and looked down at where she lay for so long, and then I took the helmet off and I remember that I felt a bit sick. It's disorientating anyway being part of a Virtual Reality experiment, but there was a kind of psychic depletion too. Then Sammi said, "Let's try running it a t random so we don't know which reality will be coming up next."

The thing about this, as you may already know, is that when you use a random event generator, the radioactive substances decay and emit particles at rates that can't be predicted, or affected by outside factors — like temperature, pressure, electricity, magnetism, or chemical change. The only thing that could possibly affect it is us — I mean the human mind.

I let Sammi talk me into going through a random sequence of images, but the weird thing was it didn't seem random. I knew what the machine was going to throw me into next. That's the feeling you get when you put the helmet on — of being thrown into something. Sammi didn't believe me and started punching my predictions into the computer before each new change and I kept coming up correct. In the end she got freaked out and disconnected the generator so the next sequence I went through was a repeat of the one before.

I'm trying to remember exactly what happened so I can explain it to you. I know you have people who think their wives are hats, but listen to how calm I am.

The pre-recorded sequence was:

GARDEN

TOMB

MONKEYS

and WATER.

I went into the garden and there was a fountain playing and the statue of the woman against the blue sky looked golden and the sun shining on the mist of water as it shot up around her made it seem as if she was being showered with diamonds. It was better, more beautiful and more real than when I'd really been there. I love statues, but sometimes I hate their surroundings. I can photograph a statue and the people around it seem like litter. In my environments for Sammi there are no people.

I went into the tomb next, and that's shocking after the garden. What had she done that was so terrible she could be sent into the after-life with nothing? I knew the zoo was next and I couldn't face it. A voice said no, and it was my voice, subconsciously, saying, "I don't want that, I want to be in the pool." The pool is like going back in the womb, except that you can move around, from light to dark and back to light again.

I knew what I was doing. I was changing something that in the laws of science couldn't be changed — something that had already happened. I was changing the past. But I wanted the monkeys out. And I got them out. It happened so fast, I was in the pool so fast I was stunned. All my senses went into shock and I lost it. I lost myself. I was the machine. I became the machine, or it became me. I remember — because I still remember things — that I've been treating myself like a machine for some time. I go to a hypnotherapist to get my mind reset and I go to an acupuncturist to get rewired. Nothing on the scale of my mother, of course, but there's a chance I've been overdoing it, what do you think, doctor?

Maybe I need to sit down.

I still feel a bit sick. I've been feeling sick a lot since it happened. I must have scrambled something getting here. I know where here is. I recognise quite a bit of it. In fact surprisingly little has changed. I'd like to say the future

doesn't work, but I think that would be premature. And unfair. I haven't seen enough yet. If I could see my mother it would help.

My mother's sixty-seven. She knows she's getting on and sooner or later she's going to die, and she tries to figure out ways to make sense of that. Some of her ways are pretty bizarre. I went round there recently and she was dedicating a crystal. It had to be left in the garden in the sun for five hours after being dedicated to her creativity — sanity would have been more to the point — and I got there almost at the end of five hours, just when the next door neighbour turned the sprinkler system on.

My mother's a fruitcake but everyone has their way of coping, and I think my mother's way is possibly better than mine which, in terms of what I can self-administer, really doesn't get much past alcohol at the best of times. My mother believes she was one of the last inhabitants of Atlantis and that she's back for the Apocalypse, that dogs take on our illnesses for us, and if you give someone a plant and it dies, the friendship's over. But all plants die. Sooner or later. I don't think I ever gave Sammi a plant, but I can't find her all the same.

SHE GETS UP, WALKS TO THE MIRROR

Are you still there? If I put my face up to the glass like this, how far away are you? ...

MOVES AWAY AGAIN

I didn't much like the dot in my forehead when I woke up. It's white now, and almost invisible, which you say is a good sign, but when I woke up it was blue. When I complained all they did was put me back to sleep. It could have turned all the colours of the rainbow while I was out of it but no one tries to explain what's going on, do they?

Why should it be up to me to talk about the last twenty years? Why don't I look any older? And why is it just me? Or is it just me? When I met you I thought you looked fifty and you're probably more like seventy. Maybe you've had one of your own injections. Is that how you do it? And Sam — she'd be sixty-nine. Retired. Is that why I can't find her? There was no lab any more either. How do you explain that? Nothing's there any more that used to be there.

SHE SHAKES OUT SOME PILLS

I need a tranquilliser. I'm getting in a panic again. I was on the freeway recently and I felt myself going numb — first my feet, and then right up my legs and my chest and down my arms so that I couldn't grip the wheel. I tried slowing down, but even then I still couldn't breathe. My chest wouldn't expand. I had to pull over and stop and put on my hypnotherapy tape until I could get air in my lungs.

SHE POURS SOME WATER AND SWALLOWS THE PILL

I wake in the night with my heart pounding, drenched in sweat thinking there's something I've forgotten to do, or something I've done wrong and it's too late now, it's terminally too late and I'm trapped and I'm going to die if I don't get out.

SHE PUTS THE GLASS DOWN

I'm sorry to keep on about my mother but she's not dead. The last thing she wants is to miss the end of the world, which she says won't be until she's in her 80's. Even so, I can't help worrying about her. She has a melanoma on her nose which she says she's getting rid of through visualisation. She believes she can make anything she wants go away just by thinking about it. That doesn't include the end of the world, which she says is probably not up to her. She says we're all on a giant clock and not a sparrow falls ... whatever happens to us — whether it's a cut finger, or getting blown up in a fish and chip shop — was part of the mechanism from the beginning of time. It means that if she doesn't eliminate the spot on her nose, then somewhere back at the cosmic outset she chose not to.

SHE TAKES A PICTURE

You saw what was happening there? ... The light catching the glass?

SHE TAKES ANOTHER PICTURE

The New Age has ruined my Mother. Her guru's an ex-cab driver who tells her she's the writer, director and star of her own video, and she can have her life any way she wants it. All she has to know is how the mind works, and he can help her with that. None of this leaves much room for poetry — in my mother's case, none at all. Creatively she's had it. She's given away her angst and replaced it with herbs. If she planned all this at the beginning of time then she really did a number on herself. I look at her and I think, "Please, God — whoever's running the program — don't let me believe what she believes." To believe that every photograph, every one of Cartier-Bresson's decisive moments, was waiting in the cosmic clock since the demiurge is like committing artistic suicide. I know when I take my ultimate picture it's not going to be a set-up. I said, "Mother, you've gone all the way back to Leibniz" — which is what the New Age is — and she said, "Yes, dear, I have."

I prefer Sammi's theory: she says it's important for women not to take this reality too seriously — because it isn't necessarily the only one. We've always had a sense of being part of the wrong meaning. She says it's clear to her that the Great Computer misinterpreted some digitally unreadable words, not to our advantage.

I'm not a scientist. I can't pretend to understand what's happened to me — scientifically, philosophically, psychologically, or any other way. The day's not real to me until I've looked at it through a lens. Phillip Dick defined reality as something that doesn't go away when you stop believing in it. I wake

up every morning praying I'll find myself back in my own world, but the reality I don't believe in is all around me. What am I supposed to do?

My home isn't my home any more. The key wouldn't fit in the lock. I pulled the louvres from the bathroom window and climbed in and someone else is living there. It's a mess. Whoever's living there doesn't seem to care. I'm the opposite. I can't go out without straightening everything and making sure it's going to look the way I want it to look when I come back.

SHE PICKS UP THE LAMP AND BLOWS DUST OFF IT

Someone should have a word to your cleaners.

SHE REPLACES THE LAMP

It was a nightmare in Egypt ... dust on the lens, dust everywhere.

I felt like cleaning the house for them. I actually started to tidy up. Imagine if I'd done that? — "Oh, look: someone's broken in and vacuumed!" I'm ashamed to say I let myself out the front door and forgot to replace the louvres. I hope nobody else got in.

SHE TAKES ANOTHER PICTURE

That first night of not being able to get in my house was terrible. I tried to find Sammi, but as I said, there was no lab and no Sammi. I went to my mother's and there was a "For Sale" sign out the front. There were people living there. They'd just moved in and hadn't taken the sign down. They said they'd bought the house at auction and didn't know anything about the woman who'd lived there before.

SHE TAKES A PICTURE

This is not a bare wall, by the way — look at the shape the light is making on it.

SHE TAKES ANOTHER SHOT

I know I should have tried to find Ross. In the light of what happened on the train it was stupid. But how would you feel? We've been together on and off since the Seventies, without ever actually moving in, and suddenly I realise he doesn't really like me at all. And I've no idea how long he's felt this way, or whether he's always felt it and I never knew. I've had problems with work, but that goes with the territory —

ANOTHER SHOT

— and suddenly he's going on about my negativity and always having to prop me up. I've put up with his pathological optimism for years. Ross is the only

zoologist on the planet who thinks things are getting better. If the planet breaks down we dismantle the moon for silicon and create a new one, because crystals are purer and stronger when they're processed without gravity. He says we have to stop believing we're part of a heat engine that's running down; the defining technology at the end of the 20th Century is the computer, and sooner or later we're going to have faster-than-light communication between here and the moon, with computers responding instantaneously to a change in the state of a single component. He says, "Wouldn't you like to live on a beautiful planet made of crystal?"

I think Ross has some of his bytes in bad sectors. Either that or somebody bumped his hard disk. But there's a perverse kind of pleasure being friends with someone everyone else thinks is weird — until you discover it's exactly what he thinks about you.

The truth is, I'm afraid to look for Ross. I haven't been able to find anyone who's important to me. What you're looking at now is Mind at the end of its tether. If I come up blank again I think I really will go nuts. I tried calling him at home and there's no answer, and of course the lab's not there any more.

TAKES ANOTHER PICTURE

I tried to get out the first time I was here. Did you know that? I got up in the middle of the night and found my clothes and got dressed. I was pretty scared, but I wanted to see where I was because I was unconscious when they brought me in and when I woke up they wouldn't let me out of the room. I was expecting miles of corridors and stairwells and lifts like a scene in the movies, and it was a shock finding this is just a house. I mean, judging by what I've seen out there, you must need a lot of hospitals. What have you done? Decentralised? Turned every second home into an emergency ward?

Nobody stopped me. I couldn't believe it. The door was unlocked and I could have walked out into the street, that dangerous street. I mean, doesn't anybody care what happens to the patients? We can just come and go as we please? What is it? Reverse psychology? No way I'd put myself at risk out there knowing what I know now. But I didn't know then, did I? I could have gone out there and bam! There was nobody at reception. Not a soul. Just that damned machine. So you know what I did? I went back to my room, got undressed, and climbed into bed. My acupuncturist says the reason I wake at three in the morning feeling terrible is because my liver's under stress. But he doesn't moralise, and I think: "Yes. I will cut down on drinking." And I do. For a night or two. He's a good psychologist. But you don't need psychology here, do you? Nobody in their right mind would go back out there once they'd seen it!

Ross has this rat he calls Scheherazade. The others are all dead in the morning and she's still running round. The facility in America that breeds them burned down and half a million rats died. Ross is congratulating himself because now he's got one of the world's top rats. But who wants to be a freak and take everything that's thrown at them? If this is an experiment I want out. I may look the same, but I've lost twenty years of my life somewhere.

Why do people keep talking as if they know me? It isn't me they know. You're supposed to be helping! I don't have amnesia. I don't have a past to have amnesia about! — or not the past you say I'm supposed to have. It's no good saying I'm emotional — anyone who'd been through what I've been through would be emotional.

Would you believe he gave me his name? As if I'd want it? Except to report it. He seemed to think he owed it to me, that it was part of the deal. As if there was some AGREEMENT between us. His name, place of work, and extension number. He kept saying he wasn't really raping me and it was my idea. He kept asking why I was acting so strange and upset. I said I was trying not to be sick and he said that was rubbish I was enjoying it. He thought I should spend the day with him, that he'd take the day off work and we'd go back on the next train to his place — which address he gave me. I began to wonder why he didn't have printed cards.

If this were a movie I'd walk into a lab and reconstruct what happened. I'd go back through the garden and the tomb and that moment where the zoo was coming up and I side-stepped it. Or tried to.

When I got to the police station they had nothing about Mary Shelley in the computer. It meant they didn't have to record an assault because there was no victim. The victim was unknown. I said, you do have a victim. You've got me. How did I get these injuries?

They said, "Please try to think. If you don't know who you are we can't help you."

Think? ... Who can anymore? Who dares? And what about? I need to know what's going on. You have to put a respectable case for your reality, just like I'm putting a respectable case for mine.

SHE PICKS UP A PAPERBACK

I open the drawer by my bed and "Lo!", I find Charles Fort, not the Gideon Bible — it's like a virus where I come from, it's in every hotel room — but Charles Fort: "There came coldness so intense that it destroyed the Grand Army." It's beautiful! I say it over and over. I can't get it out of my mind. "There came coldness so intense that it destroyed the Grand Army."

SHE FLICKS THROUGH THE BOOK

I've been on a trip with this book. Who needs alcohol? Jesus! Who needs Jesus? There's a meaning and a purpose in the emblem of events that has nothing to do with a Creator. It's Nature. Or "a" Nature. Napoleon, when his work was done, was simply removed by snow. Was I meant to end up here without a home or a past? Is that my function?

Everything has a plan, according to Charles Fort — there's a fortune-teller in every womb. ... Stones falling on Alabama may not mean anything this minute, but in centuries to come they will ... Likewise frogs appearing on the streets of London in 1927 may mean something any day now. ... He's simply removed the data from zoologists and established his own logic —

teleportation as a means of distribution. It makes perfect sense to me to close the front door on Einstein and Christ and open the back door to frogs — but it doesn't solve everything. It leaves a big question: what happens in the living room?

It's the kind of determinism that seduced my Mum — funny how it's always the women who fall for it.

Ross's mother spends all day cleaning out cupboards and then cries because there's nothing left to clean. Sharon stood in a room like this and apologised for being born.

The information's wrong. It's wrong and I've always known it was wrong. How can you say my mother died? Did I have a mother? Who's to say we're not hallucinating? It could all be fiction — your own baby shots included!

*SHE LIFTS THE TRIPOD TO MOVE IT
TO A NEW POSITION. ONE OF THE LEGS
SLIDES DOWN AND SHE SLAMS IT
BACK UP AGAIN AND TIGHTENS IT*

You can't systematise an entire world! I think what you've done with the Collective Unconscious stinks! There's got to be a better way of making sense of things.

"Drab personalities can scream themselves vivid", says Charles Fort. How? I tried that in the ward and got an injection.

Let's see how vivid I can still get.

SHE SCREAMS

It should be obvious by now there's nothing wrong with me. I'm as sane as you are, and I'd like to get this over with.

But there's no way I'm going back out there, I don't care what kind of assessment you give me. Only a lunatic would even consider it. I've seen it, I've tried it, and believe me you've got aversion therapy down pat. There's got to be another way, because out there is no solution. Try getting rid of me that way and if you think you've heard screaming you're wrong.

I've told you over and over what the solution is. Just help me and I'll stop bothering you. I won't be here. The lab'll be there if you just help me get the helmet off. Sammi will be there. Or nothing will be there, and that'll be hugely preferable to here!

You're the one who claims to have sanity at their fingertips. Show some rationality. Get this thing off me. It's obvious you have the technology to do it. Or am I talking to myself? If you can see me why don't you speak to me? Have you heard anything I've said? Are you with me? Are you there?

What are you afraid of? Coming too close? Breathing the same air and thinking the same thoughts? If it happened to me it could happen to you? Talk to me and be changed forever? Why not? Why not be changed forever? I was. I am. I knew that in Egypt. In the tomb. I knew nothing would ever be the same. Is it so wrong to want to change reality? Photographers do it all the time. It's not

the end of the world. Just a different one. Only children and dogs are punished for things they don't understand.

I want to go back. And I can't unless you help me. Just because you can't see it doesn't mean the helmet isn't there. I can't see it either but I know there's something in the way of me and where I want to be.

When the machinery fails, what do you do? I can't be numb. I've fought to be crazy. To scream. I called it photography. Photographers go on a long time. They start young and end old. Why should it be different for me? Because I looked for things no one else looked for? And ended up photographing my living room walls?

I'm not stupid, you know. I know it has limits. But I thought I could push it further than anyone had pushed it before. Yes, it was hard to take pictures after Egypt; but that doesn't mean you stop. You go further, push harder, get somewhere. Anywhere. Keep screaming. The truth has to be somewhere. It's in the light. That's the only place it can be. The light, not the dark.

SHE BEGINS A RAPID SERIES OF PICTURES

You throw a light on a section of the wall and it's so beautiful you know it's mocking you ...

... that there's a secret you can't get to because it won't let you or you won't let yourself but you have to get to it you have to see what's there. Is there anybody there? Is there anyone out there? Am I alone in the universe? Or can I put two colours together and get a mind and a thought? A glass, a lamp, and the shadows of leaves above them ... a shape that won't go away, that's clean and perfect and unprofitable. A yes shape. A cushion. The curve of the sofa, the edge of a frame, a row of books, envelopes on a desk. My keys, the way they fan out. My watch.

SHE STOPS. A SILENCE

I want something that isn't there, that's never been there in any picture I've ever taken, or anything I've ever looked at without a lens. I can't photograph what's there anymore. Or what people think is there. I want to photograph what isn't there. I want to photograph something I've never seen, and probably never will.

END OF PLAY