He sets out for the place as an animal might, as though on some fated migration. There is nothing rational about it nor even entirely sane and this is the great attraction. He's been travelling half the night east and nobody has seen him – if you keep your eyes down, they can't see you. Across the strung-out skies and through the eerie airports and now he sits in the back of the old Mercedes. His brain feels like a city centre and there is a strange tingling in the bones of his monkey feet. Fuck it. He will deal with it. The road unfurls as a black tongue and laps at the night. There's something monkeyish, isn't there, about his feet? Also his gums are bleeding. But he won't worry about that now he'll worry about it in a bit. Save one for later. Trees and fields pass by in the grainy night. Monkeys on the fucking brain lately as a matter of fact. Anxiety? He hears a blue yonderly note from somewhere, perhaps it's from within. Now the driver's sombre eyes show up in the rearview –

It's arranged, he says. There should be no bother whatsoever. But we could be talking an hour yet to the hotel out there? Driver has a very smooth timbre, deep and trustworthy like a newscaster, the bass note and brown velvet of his voice, or the corduroy of it, and the great chunky old Merc cuts the air quiet as money as they move.

John is tired but not for sleeping.

No fucking pressmen, he says. And no fucking photogs.

In the near dark there is the sense of trees and fields and hills combining. The way that you can feel a world form around you on a lucky night in the springtime. He rolls the window an inch. He takes a lungful of cool starlight for a straightener. Blue and gasses. That's lovely. He is tired as fuck but he cannot get his head down. It's the Maytime – the air is thick with and tastes of it – and he's all stirred up again.

Where the fuck are we, driver?

It'd be very hard to say.

He quite likes this driver. He stretches out his monkey toes. It's the middle of the night and fucking nowhere. He sighs heavily – this starts out well enough but it turns quickly to a dull moaning. Not a handsome development. Driver's up the rearview again. As though to say *gather yourself*. For a moment they watch each other gravely; the night moves. The driver has a high purple colour – madness or eczema – and his nose looks dead and he speaks now in a scolding hush:

That's going to get you nowhere.

Driver tips the wheel, a soft glance; the road is turned. They are moving fast and west. Mountains climb the night sky. The cold stars travel. They are getting higher. The air changes all the while. By a scatter of woods there is a medieval scent. By a deserted house on a sudden turn there is an occult air. How to explain these fucking things? They come at last by the black gleaming sea and this place is so haunted

or at least it is for me

and there is a sadness, too, close in, like a damp and second skin. Out here the trees have been twisted and shaped by the wind into strange new guises – he can see witches, ghouls, creatures-of-nightwood, pouting banshees, cackling hoods.

It's a night for the fucking bats, he says.

I beg your pardon?

What I mean to say is I'm going off my fucking bean back here.

I'm sorry?

That's all you can be.

He lies back in his seat, pale and wakeful, chalk-white comedian; his sore bones and age. No peace, no sleep, no meaning. And the sea is out there and moving. He hears it drag on its cables – a slow, rusted swooning. Which is poet-ical, to a man in the dark hours, in his denim, and lonely – it moves him.

Driver turns, smiling sadly -

You've the look of a poor fella who's caught up in himself.

Oh?

What's it's on your mind?

Not easy to say.

Love, blood, fate, death, sex, the void, mother, father, cunt and prick – these are the things on his mind.

Also –

How many more times are they going to ask me come on The *fucking* Muppet Show?

I just want to get to my island, he says.

He will spend three days alone on his island. That is all that he asks. That he might scream his fucking lungs out and scream the days into nights and scream to the stars by night – if stars there are and the stars come through.

The moon browses the fields and onwards through the night they move – the moon is up over the fields and trees for badness' sake but he cannot even raise a howl.

*

Radio?

Go on then.

Will we chance a bit of Luxembourg?

Yeah, let's try a little Luxy.

But they are playing Kate Bush away on her wiley, windy fucking moors.

Question, he says.

Yes?

What the fuck is wiley?

Does she not say winding?

She says wiley.

Well . . .

Turn it off, he says.

Witchy fucking screeching. The hills fall away and the darkness tumbles. Now in the distance a town is held in the palm of its own lights – a little kingdom there – and after a long, vague while – he is breathing but not much alive – they come to an old bridge and he asks to stop a moment by the river and have a listen.

Here?

Yeah, just here.

It's four in the morning – the motor idles at a low hum – and the trees have voices, and the river has voices, and they are very old.

Driver turns -

Hotel's the far side of the town just another few miles.

But John looks outside and he listens very hard and he settles to his course.

You can leave me here, he says.

*

He planned to live out on his island for a bit but he never did. He bought it when he was twenty-seven in the middle of a dream. But now it's the Maytime again and he's come over a bit strange and dippy again – the hatches to the underworld are opening – and he needs to sit on his island again just for a short while and alone and look out on the bay and the fat knuckle of the holy mountain across the bay and have a natter with the bunnies and get down with the starfish and lick the salt off his chops and waggle his head like a dog after rain and Scream and let nobody come find him.

The black Mercedes sits idling and lit by the bridge that spans the talking river.

John walks from the car in a slow measured reverse – one foot backwards and then the other.

He is so many miles from love now and home.

This is the story of his strangest trip.

*

And the season is at its hinge. The moment soon will drop its weight to summer. The river is a rush of voices over its ruts and tunnels into the soft black flesh of the night and woods, and the driver leans at rest against the bonnet of the car – casually, unworried, his arms folded, if anything amused – and as the door is open, the car is lit against the dark and the stonework of the old bridge and the small town that rises beyond by its chimney pots and vaulting gables. John steps another foot back, and another, and he laughs aloud but not snidely – the driver is getting smaller; still he watches amusedly – and the town and the river and bridge and the Mercedes by stepped degrees recede and became smaller

what if I keep going without seeing where I'm going what if I keep going into the last of the night and trees

and he steps off the road and into a ditch and his footing gives and he stumbles and falls onto his backside and into the black cold shock of ditchwater. He laughs again and rights himself and he turns now and walks into the field and quickens.

He does not answer to his name as it calls across the night and air.

*

It is such a clear night and warm. He walks into the fields until he is a good distance from the road. He can speak her name across the sky. Feel its lights again in his mouth. Fucking hell. He is so weary, and fucked, and Scouse -a sentimentalist. The ground's soft give beneath his feet is luxurious. He wants to lie down into the soft rich cake of it and does. It is everything that he needs. He turns onto his belly and lies face down in the dirt and digs his nails in hard -

Cling the fuck on, John.

The sphere of the night turns by its tiny increments. The last of the night swings across its arches and greys. He can do anything he wants to do. He can live in a Spanish castle; he can run with the tides of the moon. He turns his face to settle his cheek on the dirt. He rests for a while. Mars is a dull fire in the eastern sky. He lies for a long calm while until the hills are woken and the birds come to flirt and call and he feels clairvoyant now and newly made.

John lies saddled on the warm earth and he listens to its bones.

He's been coming loose of himself since early in the spring. He knows all the signs of it. One minute he's lost in the past and the next he's shot back to the now. There is no future in it. The year is on the turn and greening and everything is too fucking alive again.

*

And he has been haunted by his own self for such a long while, he has been endlessly fascinated by his own black self this long while – he is aching, he is godhead, he is a right bloody monster – but now he is thirty-seven –

I mean thirty fucking seven?

– and he wants at last to be over himself – he's all grown – and he looks out and into the world and he can see it clearly and true for the kip it is and the shithole it is and the sweet heaven – the mons – of love and sex and sleep it is, or can be, and he is scabrous (there's a word) and tender – he is both – and there's a whole wealth of fucking mother-love – even still – being the sentimental Scouse – her death's gleam his dark star – and the old town that was coal-black and majestic – wasn't it? – or at least on its day and the way it was giddy by its night – alewaft and fagsmoke, peel of church bell – and a rut down an alleyway – wasn't there? – midnight by church bell, cuntsmell –

oh my sweet my paleskin my soft-lipped girlie

– and now he's got a throb on, and he's coming down Bold Street, and it's the city of Liverpool, and he's seventeen years old, and he's a North-of-England honky with spud-Irish blood and that is what he is and that is all that he is and inside him, deep down – *listen* – the way the drunken notes stir.

*

He sits up in the field. He looks around himself warily. Jesus fuck. He sits in the raw grey light and the cold damp air. He has inarguably placed himself in fucking Ireland again. He has a think about this and he has a fag. A whip of cold wind comes across the field and the tall grasses flex and sway – he sneezes. They say that your soul stops, don't they? Or at least fucks off for a bit. He stands up for a coughing fit. His poor lungs, those tired soldiers. He proceeds on walkabout. Listen for a song beneath the skin of the earth. Seeing as he cannot fucking find one elsewhere. He aims back for the road again. Panicky, yes, but you just keep on walking. And maybe in this way, John, you can leave the past behind.

*

He finds his own trace back through the long grass. He crosses the bridge in wet light. A sombre friend, a heron, stands greyly and still and what's-the-fucking-word by the edge of the river and town. He walks on up the town. Sentinel is the word. His words are fucked and all over. Weeks of half-sleep. Weeks of night sweats and hilarity. Except this time with no fucking songs in tow. The little town is deserted as a wartime beach. He sits down on a bench in the empty square. Have a breather, Missus Alderton. He has a look around. Okay. He must look like one half of a Pete-and-Dudley routine. Why exactly is he here in this nothing town in this nowhere place and on the wrong side of the ocean and so far from those that he loves and home? Maybe he knows that out here he can be alone.

It's the earliest of the morning and still but for the leaves. He walks the edges of the square under the moving leaves. He goes by the sleeping grocery and the sleeping church and there's a smug little infirmary, too – he thinks, that'll be me. His empathy – to be old and sick, how would that be? Stout matron smells of talc and jam tarts. A last shimmer in the throb department? Ah but forlornly, yes. Okay. Move along, John. Keep it fucking cheerful, let's. Random words appear on his lips as he walks the few and empty streets of the early morning town. Here's a new entry – woebegone. But that's quite lovely, actually. He doubles back to the square again. Senses a half-movement down below: the heron, as it turns its regal clockwork head to watch him now from its place by the river. Bead of eye from one to the other. News for me, at all? Nothing good, I expect. The metallic gleam of its grey coat in the cold sun. Otherworldly, the sense of it - something alien there. Walk the fuck on again. He sees a fat old dog having a snooze down a sideway. Ah sweetness. He watches for a moment and he gets a bit teary, in fact, about the juddery little sighs of the dog's breathing – he is out in the world now – and his fat sleeping belly and he can see his doggy dreams of bones and cats and flirty poodles smoking Gitanes and perking their high tight poodle asses in the air.

The air is thick and salty. You could bite a chunk off. Sniff out the sea-bite's hint-of-vulva, John, mummy-smell. He has a tricky five minutes but he comes through. He turns up a display board for tourists. The board has a map on and now all the names from nine years past – his last visit – come rattling again. Newport, Mulranny, Achill Island and there's the great jaggedy bay, Clew Bay, with all its tiny islands. There are tens and dozens and hundreds of these islands. He reads that there are three hundred and sixtyfive islands all told; there is an island for every day of the fucking year –

So how will he tell which island is his?

There are rustles and movements. He is alone but not – he can hear the shifting of the town ghosts. Clocking off from the night shift. He blinks three times to make those fuckers disappear. He has his ritual things. He has a fag and listens. He inhales deep, holds it, and his heart thumps; he exhales slow. He wants to make a connection with you now. He is thirty-seven years along the road – the slow-quick, slow-quick road – and he lives in a great fortress high above the plain where the fearsome injuns roam – those bold Manhattoes – and now if he whispers it, very very softly – a particular word – and if you listen for it – very very carefully –

Do you think you can hear him still?

The fat old dog moseys out from the sideway. There is evidence here of great male bewilderment. It's in the poor bugger's walk; it's in his carry. He looks down the length of the town and shakes his head against it. He looks on up the town – the same. He does not appear to notice yet the presence of a stranger. He sniffs at the gutter – it's not good. He has a long, slow rub off the grocer's wall – it's still there,

*

and the pebbledash gets at the awkward bits nicely. He edges onto the square on morning patrol but he's hassledlooking, weary, and the fleshy haunches roll slowly as he goes. He stops up in the middle of the square, now in a devout or philosophical hold, as the breeze brings news to twitch the bristles of his snout, and he growls half-heartedly, and turns to find the line of scent and a tatty man in denims on the bench.

Good morning, John says.

The dog raises an eye in wariness – he is careful, an oldstager. He comes across but cautiously and he looks souldeep into John's eyes and groans.

I know exactly how you feel, John says.

And now the fat old dog rests its chin on his knee, and he places a palm on the breathing warmth of the dog's flank, and they share a moment's sighing grace.

Never name the moment for happiness or it will pass by.

The dog lies down to settle by his feet and sets a drooly chin on the toe of a fresh purple sneaker.

Those are not long from the bloody box, John says.

He reaches down and lifts the dog's chin with a finger and he finds such a sweet sadness there and a very particular handsomeness, a kind of gooey handsomeness, and at once he names the dog -

Brian Wilson, he says.

At which the dog wags a weary tail, and apparently grins,

and John laughs now and he begins to sing a bit in high pitch -

Oh it's been buildin' up inside o' me For oh, I don't know, how long . . .

The dog comes in to moan softly and tunefully, in perfect counterpoint to him – this morning's duet – and John is thinking:

This escapade is getting out of hand right off the fucking bat.

A brown car rolls slowly from the top of the town. John and the dog Brian Wilson turn their snouts and beady eyes to inspect. The car has a tiny pea-headed chap inside for a driver. He's barely got his eyes over the top of the wheel. He stalls by the grocer's but he keeps the engine running. He steps out of the juddering car. There is something jockey-like or Aintree-week about this tiny, wiry chap. He fetches a bundle of newspapers from the back seat of the car and carries them to the stoop of the grocer's.

Well? he says.

Well enough, John says.

He places the bundle on the stoop and takes a pen-knife from his arse pocket and cuts the string on the bundle and pulls the top paper free and he has a quick read, the engine all the while breathing, and Brian Wilson scowling, and John sits huddled against the morning chill that moves across the town in sharp points from the river.

I'll tell you one thing for nothin', the jockey-type says.

Go on?

This place is run by a pack of fucken apes.

Who're you telling?

He sighs and returns the paper neatly to its bundle. He edges back to the verge of the pavement and looks to a window above the grocery.

No sign of Martin? he says.

And he shakes his head in soft despair -

The misfortune's after putting down a night of it, I'd say.

And with that he is on his way again.

John and the dog Brian Wilson watch him go.

You can never trust a jockey-type, John says, on account of they've got oddly set eyes.

*

A broad-shouldered kid comes walking through the square with an orange football under his arm. As he walks he scans one way and then the other, east and west. The kid has a dead hard face on. As if he's about to invade Russia.

Morning, John says.

Well, the kid says.

The kid stops up and drops the ball and traps it under his foot – he rolls it back and forth in slow pensive consideration.

You one of the Connellans? he says.

I could be, John says.

Ye over for the summer or only a small while?

We'll see how it goes.

Ah yeah.

The kid kicks the ball against the grocer's wall and traps it again and kicks it once more for the rebound.

How's the grandmother keeping?

Not so hot, John says.

She's gone old, of course, the kid says, and winces.

And what age are you now?

I'm ten, he says.

Bloody hell, John says, time's moving.

Could be the brother you're thinking of, the kid says. The brother's Keith. He's only seven yet.

I have you now.

The kid moves on, curtly, with a wave, and kicks the ball as he goes in diagonals to his path, now quickening, now slowing to meet its return and tapping rhyme as it follows the fall-away of the street, an awkward-looking, a bandyfooted kid whose name never will be sung from the heaving terraces – and so the silver river flows.

And the kid crosses the river and walks on and the heron

takes off on slow heavy beat-steady wings and the kid's away into the playing fields and the rising morning. It's the sort of thing that could break your heart if you were of a certain type or turn of mind.

If you were a gentleman quick to tears, John says.

And Brian Wilson moans softly again and stretches and yowls in the morning sun.

*

Here's an old lady a-squint behind the wheel of a fab pink Mini as it grumbles and stalls again by the grocer's – centre of the universe, apparently. She wears a knit hat of tangerine shade and a pair of great chunky specs. She rolls the window and sends a pessimistic glance from the milk-bottle lenses.

There is no sign of Martin, I suppose?

He's after a night of it, John says.

She has a German-type accent – the careful inspection of the words as they tip out.

Well that is me fucked and hitting for Westport so, she says.

She takes off again.

*

A lovely old tractor spins from its wheels a dust of dried mud and shite and there's an ancient farmer with a stovedin face and electrified eyes of bird's-egg blue and he stalls also for a moment and calls down and not a little sternly – Cornelius O'Grady is lookin' for you.

And he moves on again and the old dog rises from his feet and coughs up a forlorn bark and heads back to the sideway.

More fun in it asleep than awake, John says.

He has a look about. There's that small hotel at the top of the square. It sits there with an air of grim inevitability. He shrugs and rises -

I mean what's the very worst that could happen?

*

Reception is deserted but they're banging pots and pans together out the back. A demented brass band. Morning engagements only. He smells the green of bacon being fried up. Wallow in the waft of grease and smoke. Eat the pig and act the goat. He presses the bell. Nobody shows. He presses again and waits. There's no rush on. He presses again and a hatchet-faced crone appears on the tip of her witch's snout. Looks him up and down. Sour as the other Monday's milk. Double-checks his ankles to see if he's got a suitcase hid down there.

Well? she says.

It's about a room, love.

She throws an eye up the clock.

This is a foxy hour to be landing into a hotel, she says.

And in denim, he says.

The reception's air is old and heavy, as in a sick room's, and the clock swings through its gloomy moments.

Do you have a reservation? she says.

I have severe ones, he says, but I do need a room.

She sucks her teeth. She opens a ledger. She raises her eyeglasses. She has a good long read of her ledger.

Does it say anything in there about a room, love?

She searches out her mouth with the tip of a green tongue.

It's about a room? he says.

With great and noble sorrow she turns and from a hook on a wooden rack takes down a key – he feels like he's been hanging from that rack for years.

The best room you can do me?

They don't differ much, she says, and switches the key for another – he'll get the worse for asking.

Payment in advance, she says.

No surprise there.

Name? she says, and he rustles one from the air.

She leads him up a stair that smells of mouse and yesteryear and they climb again to an attic floor and the eaves lean in as if they could tell a few secrets – hello? – and at the end of a dark passage they come to a scary old wooden door.

Is this where you keep the hunchback? he says.

She scowls and slides the key and turns its oily clicks.

He thanks her as he squeezes by - hello? - and for half a moment she brightens. She lays a papery hand on his - quality of mothskin; the veins ripped like junkie veins - and she whispers -

Your man? she says. You're very like him.

Not as much as I used to be, he says.

He started to Scream with Dr Janov in California. He was worked up one-on-one. He was worked up fucking hard. He sat there for hours, and for months, and he went deep. He wasn't for holding back. He hollered and he ranted and he Screamed. He cursed everybody, he cursed them all, he cursed the blood. Dr Janov said he needed to get at the blood – he went at the blood.

*

Mother, father.

Cunt and prick.

What had stirred and made and deformed him. What had down all the years deranged him. He was angry as hell. They worked together four months out on the coast. Dr Janov wore a crown of beautiful white curls – it shimmered in the sun. Dr Janov spoke of amorphous doom and nameless dread and the hurt brain. It was no fucking picnic out on the coast. He squatted on the terrace and he looked out to the sea and he was heartsore and he drank fucking orange juice and he wept until he was weak. He had a shadow beneath the skin and he was so very fucking weak. Dr Janov said that fame was a scouring and a hollow thing – he said there's fucking news. Dr Janov said he should ignore it – he said you fucking try. Dr Janov said he should channel his anger and not smoke pot – he said I'll see what I can do.

Dr Janov said he should Scream, and often, and he saw at once an island in his mind.

Windfucked, seabeaten.

The west of Ireland – the place of the old blood.

A place to Scream.

*

He sits in his tomb up top of the Newport hotel. It contains a crunchy armchair, a floppy bed, several arrogant spiders, a mattress with stains the shapes of planets and an existential crisis. But he wouldn't want to sound too French about it.

He looks out the window. It really is a very pretty day. The street runs down to the river, and there is the bridge across, and the hills rising and

lah-de-dah, lah-de-dum-dum dah

the green, the brown, the treetops, and it means nothing to him at all. Across the square a flash of hard light, turning – a swallow's belly, and now dark again, and his mind flips and turns in just that same way. He wants to get to his island but unseen and unheard of – he wants to be no more than a rustle, no more than a shade. He makes the calls that he needs to make. It's arranged that a fixer will be sent the next day. He lies on the bed for a while but cannot sleep. He takes his clothes off and climbs from the bed. He has a bit of a turn. He scrunches up in the armchair by the window. He's all angles and edges. He speaks aloud and for a long while. He speaks to his love – his eyes close – and he speaks to his mother. Fucking hell. The hours he spends in the chair are like years –

He is a boy. He is a man. He is a very very old man.

– and he sits all day until the sun has gone around the building and the room is almost dark again. A day that feels slow as a century – he might be out there still. The evening gets chilly and he climbs onto the bed. He wraps himself in a blanket and phones downstairs. He has a long Socratic debate that after a certain period of time results in a bowl of brown vegetable soup arriving. The kid that brings it has a perfectly ovaline face on as flat as a penny.

You'd be quicker on roller skates, John says.

He slurps down the soup. He sits wrapped in his blanket. The soup is that hot it makes him cross-eyed. The bed is moving about like a sea. A call comes in from the fixer. Something deep and familiar to the voice – like a newscaster, and he sees the high purple face again, the dead nose, the fattish driver.

You again?

Well.

He is asked gently of his needs. It's as if he's had a loss. He is on a bloody raft the way the bed is moving about.

The important thing, again, he says, is no newspapers, no reporters, no TV.

Not easy.

Another thing, he says. I can't remember exactly where the island is.

Okey-doke.

But I do know its name.

Well that's a start.

The arrangement is made - they will set off first thing.

What was your name anyhow?

My name is Cornelius O'Grady.

Cornelius?

*

The way that age comes and goes in a life – he'll never be as old again as he was when he was twenty-seven. In the attic room at the small hotel he paces and laughs and the words come in pattern for a bit but they will not hold. No, they will not fucking hold. He looks out to the town square by night. It is deserted but not static – it comes and goes in time and the breeze. Half the time, in this life, you wouldn't know where you are nor when. There are moments of unpleasant liveliness. Tamp that the fuck down is best. He aims for the telephone. He builds himself up to it. He breathes deep and dials and there is a transaction of Arabic intrigue with the fucking desk down there. It works out, eventually – the roller-skate kid fetches a glass of whiskey up.

That'll put hairs on me chest, he says.

Okay, the kid says.

Peat and smoke – it tastes of the past and uncles, sip by the beaded sip. He doesn't really drink any more. No booze, no junk, no blow. These are the fucking rules. He is macrobiotic. He is brown-rice-and-vegetables. The stations of the fucking cross. A read - that would be an idea. The room has grown sombre as the night finds its depth. What's the fucking word? Crepuscular. He flicks a lamp switch against it. The amber light of the lamp as it warms weakly on the old flock wallpaper brings the waft or flavour – you can't miss it - of Edwardian time. Oh and here's a word -Edwardiana. Very nice. The word gives dapperness, and tapered strides, and teddy boys. He looks around his tiny room beneath the eaves and laughs - the West of Ireland by night. Oh just taking the fucking air, really. I'll have a stroll in a bit. Try not to fuck myself in the briney. Fathomless depths, et cetera. Oh Christ, a read – fill up this sour brain with words. He slides a drawer on the tiny dresser – the dresser is so tiny it might be for the fittings of elves - and there is no Gideon's, not as such, but there is an old book there:

The Anatomy of Melancholy by Richard Burton

Richard fucking Burton? What kind of establishment is this? Now the melodious syllables come to shape his lips – hammy, taffy, lispy, vaguely faggy? How did it go? In *Milk* Wood? He looks in the dull silver of the dresser's mirror and mouths the words –

I know there are Towns lovelier than ours, And fairer hills and loftier far, And groves more full of flowers And boskier woods more blithe with spring . . .

Boskier? Fuck me. He flicks through the pages. Okay. It's a different Richard. And there are all sorts herein. He falls onto the bed. He unknits his long, cold limbs. He falls into the drugged pages. He reads for hours and every now and then

Thou canst not think worse of me than I do of myself.

he speaks aloud but

Melancholy can be overcome only by melancholy.

just the two words, repeated

He that increaseth wisdom, increaseth sorrow.

over and over again

If you like not my writing, go read something else.

fuck me, fuck me, fuck me.

*

At last he gives into the night or at least makes an arrangement with it. He sleeps a long, unquiet sleep disturbed by