

Caposcripti

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Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, 'Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.' Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth."

(Genesis 11:1-9)

1.

The Photographer

A heavy and unruly creature, he habitually dresses in black or grey: for many reasons, but not least because he is living celluloid. He's probably fooling himself - at root he is a pragmatist, a state symbolised by his footwear: his boots are solid with good thick soles.

His apartment is a rat's maze of frenzied overblown house-plants, and concealed cameras. From the monstrous cine-camera in his hall cupboard (activated by the doorbell, it has contained the same reel of film for a long time - company is rare) to a cunningly devised cigarette lighter, which snaps wide shots bond-style. He is a man of few words, and two obsessions, one of which is to make pictures speak for him.

The other? Don't be impatient please; all will be revealed in good time.

Despite his retiring nature he has achieved some notoriety in the world of photography. Infrequent exhibitions and a total lack of interviews contribute to this. And no it is not clockwork that makes him tick, as one critic suggested.

Love Interest? Cold comfort.

The Tribe

The year is 1851 - the year of the Great Exhibition, optimism and palaces of glass (and not the late 20th century, an era of deforestation and sexual insecurity).

The Amazon is full of magic. Travel is difficult. Jungles impassable. Rivers form the main arteries for trade, but most are so sclerotic that traffic is limited to canoes and the occasional raft, all that can survive the rapids and endless deltas of the Amazon basin. Alcoholism, the Clap and the common cold have not yet decimated the indigenous population and the ancient arts and languages are not yet ancient - for the people that live them the

legends are real and spirits, rather than morals, censor their actions. They are not yet children - it will take them a few years longer to become that.

The Tribe are a semi-nomadic people, their wanderings determined by the floods that submerge large tracts of the jungle for several months of the year, when the rivers break their banks. They live in small, temporary settlements, each loose scattering of families taking up a few hundred square feet of jungle. When the rains come they will frequently abandon a whole *pueblo*, returning to it the following year when the Amazon has deposited a rich layer of mud on the dry shores. They range over a fairly large area - always choosing land avoided by more settled tribes.

Keeness of hand and a rich oral tradition have bequeathed to them the gentle arts of head shrinking, and the ability to brew the equally lethal concoctions curare and alcohol. There are substances in the jungle which give them visions, and on attaining adulthood they take these daily, so as not to become confused by the lie of this reality.

Their language is infinitely complex: they tattoo it on their bodies so they don't forget it, starting on their feet for common phrases in youth and scripting sacred truths and personal histories on their faces, on the lids of their eyes, and on the lobes of their ears. As the intellect begins to develop the head is shaved, and various areas of the skull marked with the traits and characteristics that arrive through maturity. Typically an elder of the tribe will be completely bald, hair replaced by an intricate tangle of points and lines. There is a paste made from tree bark, which prevents regrowth.

They exist on a diet of fish and what they can hunt in the jungle - almost anything big enough to eat and not actively poisonous is fair game to their blowpipes and poisoned darts, their almost invisible traps. Although sometimes the crops falter, and the staple manioc fails to yield its large and nourishing roots hunger is not a problem in the jungle. There are more than enough fruits and nuts to sustain the few people that inhabit the region. And yet there is

much to fear, good reason to ask the protection of the spirits against accidents, floods, storms, against poisons, fevers and the attacks of animals. Those lost this way are the ones that are forgotten – their heads missing from the massed ranks that bear witness to the history of the Tribe, and provide the only constant record of their existence in the unsettled and ever changing jungle, ringing with the echoes of wandering spirits looking for another shell to animate. For all those who have ever been are not gone, but merely imperceptible to the living.

Suicide is less an escape from this existence than a passport to the next, and in fact an honourable way to remove the burden of one's existence from one's family. To avoid the fate of not existing, of never having been, those who are too old or tired or sick to continue take poison, mixed for them by the Speaker, who sends them on their journey to the next world. Their heads are preserved in the ritual manner, life reduced to an ideogram tattooed on the shrunken scalp.

After death, the body is mummified in a seated position, and suspended from the branches of trees high up to be disposed of by the elements – the cleansing depredations of birds and tree dwelling carnivores, the sudden, fierce squalls of the late afternoon.

The heads are prepared by quite another, and secret method, which preserves the sacred scrawl in perpetuity. They are hidden deep underground in concealed caves reminiscent of the Photographer's cupboards and drawers - all the paraphernalia of a chronicle rests with them, the wisdom of the future and the potential of the past.

The Explorer

Once he was a big man: his shoulders were as wide as two axe handles, and young ladies sighed over his dance cards. Now the years of travelling, bad food, and loneliness have given him a wizened, jaundiced look. Dirt ground into deep creases, clothes badly stained, candid, fanatical eyes piercing from beneath

untrimmed brows. He has two passions: travelling and chronicling - nothing hidden here, all is transcribed into small dog-eared notebooks which set forth, detail, narrate, enumerate moment by moment the minutiae of life.

In his youth he had been a literary man: possessed of a large vocabulary, and the full complement of the fashionable philosophies. The years have conflated these into an all-embracing pseudo humanism - ennobling the savage and placing learning on a pedestal for all to admire. Reduced though he is in possessions, he has nevertheless held onto several books: the essays of Montaigne; the Confessions of Rousseau; a volume of Keats; a pocket bible. The rest of his belongings fill a number of solid trunks in the family home - sent back to London from all corners of the globe, and held in storage against his eventual return.

He is still uncertain of what has brought him to these remote and savage lands to chronicle their inhabitants. There is disillusionment with optimism - the childlike wonder in the machine, in technology, that has gripped his fellows with fever. - Some disgrace, a lapse in his fortunes. Anger at the profusion of inaccurate descriptions already in existence and daily multiplying. And there is wonder in the thought of describing what had never been seen; of challenging the certainty of those who believed that because they held the secrets of machines, they were infallible. For whichever of these motives you prefer, he has for the latter part of his life taken to chronicling lands distant and mysterious; arcane tongues and barbarous practices in a self-imposed exile from civilised society.

His should have been the guardianship of many secrets: instead all are bequeathed to vellum and paper, mixing his piss with berries when ink runs dry, making a canvas of his skin, his body.

This last is probably what saved him from extinction.

2. SCOUTING

The Photographer is out looking to score with his callipers and cameras. All around, he feels the pulse of the city; in the grumble of traffic, the constant almost-contact with other pedestrians on the pavement. He is edgy, taut. Controlled precision and a certain detachment are evident in his posture. He has chosen that uncertain hour between daylight and dusk when the puddles in the gutter start to reflect darkness and the stark outlines of cornices, aerials, fire escapes. Today, however, the Photographer is not particularly interested in puddles - although once upon a time he took pictures of them: as well as street scenes, barrow markets, smiling children, obscure buildings.

Back then the urban landscape had inspired him with its complexity - awed him with the continual juxtaposition of the unexpected. He would go to Liverpool street station to attune himself to the city's rhythms - wheels within wheels, natives interacting with one another like cogs turning, clockwork and unvarying measures; contrapuntal movement. Nine to five-ers in from the suburbs every day; the swarms of black suits fleeing the city at five fifteen; soaring buildings, park sized atriums, giant tropical plants belying their sterility and dwarfing the scurrying workers below; skyscrapers suspended from great steel arches, glistening pyramids of glass, all invited the Photographer's lens, demanded interpretation.

But now in the gathering dusk he ignores these and other possibilities: he is conducting a dialogue of one, with himself and his camera, the method and the goal, the Cartesian dichotomy. He believes in dualism.

"In the beginning was the word: and the word was with God. Who can we believe? The priests and the philosophers, these lovers of wisdom? Should have been a camera there. Black and white. Never lies.

"Seven planets, God and the Devil, and man travelling a known path one way or the other. Someone is up there with their CCTV, filming inside the mind, no lies. Camera never lies."

The Photographer doesn't own a television: he had a black and white one once, but the dull eye watching him from across the room unnerved him. God and his eye piercing his very soul, pinning him insect-like under the solar microscope, caught in the panopticon. No escape. Sometimes he thinks he is Lucifer – he too carries his hell inside him.

And so he is outside as the dusk falls, while the sun is too engaged in its struggle with the moon to keep an eye on him. Eyes scan the faces of passer-by for the one whose head fits his specifications: he has it down to a fine art now. The callipers a prop, part of the mythos. These days the only genre that interests him is portraiture, and he has no time for clouds, solar eclipses, or the bottom of the ocean. Motion photography he flirted with briefly, in his youth, but lately he's been after the freeze frame, the moment of truth.

Camera and callipers; callipers and camera. The others on the pavement give him a wide berth: his gaze is discomfiting – measuring them from head to foot as they near him. He has chosen a busy time and the roads are at capacity. The city's dwellers are displaying a refinement of evolution: the ability to condense population past the point where another species would choose to selectively cull their own kind. Evolution has a part to play in this narrative: the Photographer has more respect for it than for the scurrying pedestrians in his path. Still they serve their purpose.

3. JOURNAL, AMAZONAS, 1851

Iquitos, Nanay River, Motivations

March 20-

Jungle very dense. As I walk one passage occupies my waking thoughts, providing a mental tattoo wherewith to time my steps. 'Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, 'Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.' Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth." (Genesis 11:1-9)

March 21-

Morning. I awake on what feels like the seven millionth day of my journey. The Jungle is beginning to swallow me whole. I feel my spirit evaporating day by day. My voice feels rusty from misuse. I have taken to muttering to myself as I walk, to combat the loneliness, & to convince myself that I am still here, & not wandering, a figment, in some self-imagined country.

I know not whether I am in Ecuador, or Peru. Borders have little meaning in terms of the Jungle. I have heard rumours of a secret Tribe somewhere in the vicinity, followed them up in the settlements up river, garnered what information I can from rum-sodden natives gone to seed in tiny river outposts. But for some reason the Tribe has never been classified – mere rumours of their existence culled from the records of successive waves of colonisers. Exploration in the area has been

minimal. Attracted by the gold & rare minerals; the guano & oil & ancient treasure troves to be found in the more accessible areas of mountain & coast, the Spanish, & the British, & all of the other greedy or well-meaning colonisers have so far ignored it.

Perhaps in years to come the ethnographers, those missionaries of civilisation, will arrive, taming the natives with ideas of property & sin, cheap gifts & alcohol – replacing traditional medicine with iodine, & quinine, the meeting huts with neat schools. For now the Amazon is guarding its secrets well.

Yet shall I 'build a fane_In some untrodden region of my mind,_Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant Pain,_Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind'. I have no books here with me, everything rots; but my mind is a library.

I cheat the Jungle of my blood by making words of it, the dark fluid clotting on the pages of my notebooks, a self-created epitaph. Still I am becoming dispirited. The earth is all water, the vegetation all slime, the air half steam. The vegetable life around me is oppressive - the Jungle alive with sounds all muted by the foliage, an audioscape that changes with each step, throwing back now the sounds of running water, now the high & melodious whistles of birds, now the harsh calls of parrots, the whirring & clicking of grasshoppers, the rustling of breezes & of my passage. Each step is a struggle & every step feels wrong. The lack of direct sunlight makes direction almost impossible to determine, & time a meaningless abstraction. For the first time in many months I feel lost. For the first time in as many years I feel fear, for somewhere on the edges of my vision I can sense eyes, a suspicion that has been plaguing me for some time. Maybe my mind is finally betraying me. But years of travel, the instinct for survival that has saved me in uncounted situations, make me wary.

My clothes, boots, food, books are rotting in the humidity: the pages gradually turning a virulent green - the ink correspondingly purple. They are rotting, but they addict me - I have learnt to appreciate the smell of musty paper, & still I am writing, recording, reproving this existence.

*Because the Jungle never changes (although it continues to astonish me)
I have begun to delve deeper beneath reality. The life around me seems
to me too sentient to be merely the sum of several different types of
monkey, innumerable birds, fish, plants insects, strange iridescent
lizards. I am gradually developing an equation, out here on the
perimeter: a series of truths hard-gained & dear paid for. These I have
proven on my body, scribbling arcane figures in the crooks of my arms,
& on the palms of my hands. Finally, distilled into these pages.
For now, I suppose, I must continue.*

4. BETTY

Night-time in London – or rather the electric dusk that passes for night in city, where the sky develops a perpetual orange glow that conceals all but the brightest stars, and a thin haze softens everything into indistinctness.

Patches of light from the street lamps intensify the areas of shadow under the long landbridge supporting the railway line, and cast doorways and corners into obscurity. Beneath the overhang arches curve along the pavement. The shops and offices are shuttered against the night, rendered uniform by the dark outlines of graffiti etched into them. The street is littered with the debris of daytime and has that peculiar sense of isolation of the shuttered outdoor market.

Save for the dim glimmer of reflection thrown from his lens, the Photographer is near invisible in his hiding place, black coat melting into the dark stone, dark eyes dim hollows in his pale face, camouflaged in stillness, checking for cameras.

His quarry, an aged female alcoholic entering the final stages of dipsomania, is about halfway down the street bedded down for the night in the entrance to the station. Like the market and the shops it's closed now, quiet and deserted, and she is only just visible through the metal cage that forms the stairwell. A near shapeless bundle in the darkness, even the filth and the stink of piss and stale cider have not been enough to dissuade her from the shelter that the stairwell affords in coldest hour before dawn. Shelter, the Photographer reflects, that will provide his activities with some cover too.

Everywhere these days there are cameras watching; cameras, hidden by them, tricks and feints. Even the concealed ones might be dummies, double bluffs, no escape. Watching me? He marks her and bides his time; there's no need to rush. Does anybody really see such people? Maybe not, but the camera catches everything.

The Photographer pictures a grand controller, seated in front of a giant switchboard, wired into a chamber studded with monitors in obscene symbiosis: a monstrous eye. Images flash on the screens, zoom shots, wide pans; from the grainy black and white of CCTV to the lurid polychrome of cheap porn.

Suddenly everything vanishes, every screen switches to a single shot, a magnified view of the very street, the very doorway where he is hiding, camera lens glinting in the streetlight, sight and senses straining. But what would they see? Nothing. For how can they see what they're not looking for? Blind. Blind leading the blind. Eyes closed to the patterns in the noise, fragments of the lost language. He's been watching this one for some time now, saving her up like a banquet, waiting for the moment of significance, the confluence of signs.

Even in the dark he can form a perfect mental picture of every contour of her person – from the filthy and crusted layers of petticoats, and blouses, and skirts, and coats, and cardigans, to the bloated feet wrapped in layers of plastic; conjunctival eyes squinting from the lined and bloodshot face. He is impervious to the decay, for this face still holds a promise of beauty for him, hints given in the high cheekbones, weathered cheeks, sockets spaced wide and eyes of an extraordinary colour.

He's observed her in all weathers: panhandling for change or drinking Tennant's Super on a bench by the library with the other regulars; shouting and spitting at the pigeons, at the government, at the rain, and at the great confusing conspiracy of it all; sleeping it off on the pavement, as oblivious to the passers-by as they are to her.

How many times has he asked himself: does anybody see such people? Really see them or just register their presence as they pass in the morning as an annoyance or obstacle or object of sudden pity, quickly forgotten? How many hundreds of pairs of eyes glance at this woman on a daily basis without ever seeing her at all? And if challenged to describe even one small aspect of her

appearance, what would they recall? Naturally this last is an important consideration.

It's different for him, for them; he's intimate with her, close as no other. Who else could describe, as the Photographer can describe, the colour of her eyes, the moles on her face, the deep lines carved down to the mouth? Who knows the precise number of her teeth, and which are crowns? Who traces the lines on her hands, the varicose veins marbling the back of her calves, the tone and tenor of her voice, when she wakes, when she sleeps, where she goes.

Who had last touched her emaciated body – as he would – filled with a kind of awe before the microcosm of humanity; the machinery of natural language latent in her cells, like some complex DNA strand waiting to unfold? She will be more than the sum of her parts, society's discard, nameless and invisible. She exists for this, fragment of an equation that embodies that primary relationship between the identity of the individual, and the millions of dim reflections of the original form that people the universe, the fragments of Babel that she carries within her.

And all this contingent on the cameras, the CCTV, his present concealment and his long observation of her habits: Will anybody miss her? Will anyone register her absence, and having registered it, ask questions, instigate a trace, compile footage of her haunts to establish just when and where and how she disappeared? Will they delve into the black economy of the nameless and unrecorded to discover her true identity, that long forgotten National Insurance number, the place on the Electoral roll surely lapsed?

So much easier to suppose that she has moved on, succumbed quietly to the maw of the streets, been rescued to rot her days away in institutionalised peace...

All potential truths, all possibilities, all made concrete to confuse the pursuer – a paper trail laid for those who might be looking.

Black and white. Clear-cut. No, there is nothing preventing this: she is nothing. Camera never lies. People do. I must remember as life is art, she is symbolism. Nearly time now: woo her with the camera; always works, black and white: Camera never lies. Fool the eye. Time. Now.

When he was younger he relished these opportunities. Anticipation and the quick strike, snap, run. But this is only the first step in the process. Each element is deliberate, each a part of the ritual. Above all there must be no haste in his actions.

As with each of his victims there's an element of the lover's nervousness in this first contact. Despite all his observation, even having seen inside them with the eye of his lens, clear as the cross-section of a cell on a microscope, even then first contact is a shock, recognising in each of them a fragment of the true language. Whilst others dismiss their drunken ravings, he rejoices in their deafness to the language of Babel, the speakers of tongues – Have they no ears to hear? Here, in this dark and filthy street, shuttered for the night and watched by the blind lens of a score of CCTV cameras, here, would he hear the voice of God? Her cries could be the only remedy for the lost symmetry of his soul.

Not all of his subjects have been women: although there have certainly been a few. Outwardly they differ from each other, but linked by a common theme; the shibboleth latent in their musculature, in the juxtaposition of cheekbone and eye socket, the grammar of the sacred language encoded in each like a cipher. Each of these individuals could be prepared and reduced to their essence, the barest equation. Each would become an elegant notation in the vast and complex calculation, the answer to which is the original word, the knowledge the first humans stole from the Garden of Eden, which was lost in the destruction of the Tower of Babel.

It was time now, painfully, to reconstruct that language to unpick the myths and conspiracy theories of society's remnants, living on the borders of its conscience, and rework them into his own private mythology.

Time. Strike. Thrill of fear or is it anticipation? He feels himself becoming hard, the street silent enough to hear her gently snoring in the stairwell, his measured tread as he approaches.

Softly he speaks her name, all reassurance – *Betty come now dear, come with me*, calming her with his mild voice and gentle hands, talking to her all the time as he gathers her up from her den. Somehow it's easier than expected to convince her that he poses no threat. She comes quietly, holding his hand in hers, grasping his fingers like a child, despite the illusion of bulk created by her many layers. She is so light and frail that a strong gust of wind could blow her away.

Her hand: cracked and slightly crusted – is it exposure, or some skin complaint worsened by dirt and lack of washing? The contact is uncomfortable, but necessary to reassure her; the last thing he needs is a scene in front of the cameras. He glances at her profile in the darkness, walking head-down, *one foot in front of the other, and the next gets you where you're going; how many years of the same round?* Deliverer.

The rented car is around the corner, but it feels like miles, like they're crawling, open targets on the battlefield. Finally they reach it. He opens the passenger door. *-It's all right Betty, I'm going to help you, can't have you sleeping on the cold street at night. Got a nice warm bed and a few ciders for you at home, come along now, in you get.* Slow, slow talking in a gentle monotone, reassuring smile, no sudden movements; in his pocket, the solution – just in case.

Once she's in he closes the passenger door gently and walks slowly around to the other side of the car, settling his large frame into the seat. Turns the ignition and starts the car; turns to look at Betty, already dozing, head on her chest in the comfortable seat. Good. They can drive for a while.

After half an hour or so, sure that she is deep in slumber, he slowly brings the car to a halt in a residential street beneath a large tree. What infinite patience it requires to wait for a couple more minutes.

The street is quiet and dark, and she has not stirred at all. Time.
Now.

5. JOURNAL: WANDERINGS

March 24–

82 degrees on the Thermometer. Another hard march today. I am traversing dense Jungle; huge tree trunks litter the landscape & where once they shaded a sparse Jungle floor, now are grown up every type of vegetation, & the whole wrapped around by Lianas & mosses grown over the rotting boles so that it makes for very treacherous footing, & much machete work. Birds of a brilliant plumage, in shades of gold, green, ochre occasionally flit across my path, & the air is strongly aromatic.

In this region grow many of the douradinha; it has a yellow flower, & looks something like our dandelion. The Indians use it as a powerful emetic, the which I have no need for just now.

It is only the thought of all the invisible Jungle, the lure of the empty spaces on my map that keeps me going. It is solely the promise of an Eden, a place of purity & simplicity utterly foreign to the Babel of London, the insensate progress of the Western world that drives me on. It is not my first such journey. Other journals now stored safely in London (where one day this volume too, shall rest, God willing) contain passages describing mandalas built up painstakingly from sand by Tibetan lama's, only to be brushed away on the instant they are finished with yak's hair brooms. I have illustrated first-hand locust plagues in Africa, & passed on recipes for aphrodisiacs, philtres, & near untraceable poisons, learnt from the medicine men of Haiti & the Congo, to my descendants in the journals that are already safely back in London.

Sometimes I used guides to take me to those distant & unrecorded tribes, to traverse areas so remote & strange that none of my race has ever ventured there to map their valleys & hills & secret places. Each sentence clawed out of painful ascents into the mountains, to the rocky heights where nothing grows, surviving on a few dried-out grains of corn, goats milk, edible lichens, melting snow water in my mouth, staggering through blizzards over high mountain passes, eyes slitted behind wooden goggles.

But none of it has prepared me for the Amazon, for the rich & hungry Jungle, for the river, its life-blood, & for the unseen & unrecorded interiors, where life superabounds.

Night falls suddenly, the Jungle becoming a negative of itself, deepening shadows where the palms & saplings & vines & trees grow into & around each other. The dark is almost complete – apart from the spark of fireflies, & the occasional star pricked out against the ink of the sky where the Jungle breaks.

March 25th

This morning I stumbled across a clearing that looked as though it may have once been cultivated – perhaps with maize, or manioc – but the Jungle grows back so fast that it's impossible to be sure, or to tell how recently the ground was used. It could be a clue or a Chimera. I have come to the conclusion that I will almost certainly be the last to know when I encounter the people of this Jungle.

Despite the rumours of bloodshed & war between tribes, an almost pathological distrust of outsiders, dark hints of cannibalism & the practice of head shrinking, I have made no attempt at concealment as I hack my way through this Jungle. For one, the sheer density of vegetation seems to insulate against all sound, even the crunch of branches beneath my feet are strangely muted, so that I feel the urge to scream bubbling up within me, if only to reassure myself that I am not forgetting language, losing my voice & the habit of shaping words. & then, too, concealment would be pointless. These people know the Jungle so much better than I.

There have been reports of whole expeditions killed & tortured by indigenous people, angry & terrified at the strangers invading their territory; people who have learnt the hard way to associate the white man with death, with slavery, with the loss of land & children. The Shuar bearers that I hired back at Iquitos have long deserted me. I awoke one morning to find that they had left & taken the canoe & themselves & returned to more familiar lands. I had no hint of what had frightened them so, & I had little warning of their intended defection except for mutterings about bad magic & death.

These people are too superstitious; As a humanist, I have been tainted neither by religion nor fear of unknown spirits. I have no intention of being a missionary; nor am I a tourist. I have looked death in the face; we are old friends now. It is knowledge I am after; a thirst that will never be quenched until I'm in my grave.

March 26–

Another hard day's march through dense Jungle. Only my compass assures me that I am travelling in my intended direction through this matted felted Jungle, knitted together by cabled creepers. Life superabounds with prodigious variety, a terrible & wonderful landscape, yet I find myself almost blind to its strangeness, & occupy my mind chiefly with imagining the tribes who have had, as yet, no contact with Western man. In this Jungle dwell people who have never heard of steam, glass, Faraday, or gunpowder. Their customs could be the strangest I have ever encountered; their religion incomprehensible, pantheistic, sublime. How do they imagine the heavenly bodies, who can only catch glimpses of the firmament between the lowering trees?

According to the rumours that I was able to glean in Iquitos, there is one Tribe in this area that writes, & what's more they have reportedly been doing so since 'the beginning time'. The rumours suggest that they are unlike the other tribes in these lands, the Jivaro & Shuar & Machichuenga, who are one & all bloodthirsty & savage in the extreme. This Tribe is rumoured to be peaceful; a nomadic people who nevertheless have magic powerful enough to protect them from their more warlike neighbours.

It is my Dream, put simply, to make First Contact with this people, isolated from the world outside their Jungle home. That world feels as distant as the moon here, with the great walls of green rising on all sides, the tangled vegetation, warring for space & light. Here the possibility of creating multiple worlds exists, the real far away & half-forgotten. All my life I have been in flight from society, in search of a greater truth, the answer to a single question. What knowledge did Man lose when God destroyed the tower of Babel? What had so terrified Him that he cast Man back into the chaos before speech?

It has been the Work of my Life, to find an enlightened people who have the answers to these questions that plague me so. I can never rest until I do. & when I find them they will take me in, teach me their customs & their language, & through me will discover & come to know their fellow man. I will be their sole interpreter; their unique point of contact. Alone in the world I will understand their ways & a grateful humanity will thank me for revealing the secrets that they have discovered. Secrets of medicine, levitation, magic & divination. Who knows what boundaries of the Mind they have conquered, untainted by blundering Science? All of this will be mine to interpret; to add to my chronicles, to augment the pattern I am creating of the world.

But now the light fades, & it is time to sleep. I write to drive away the demons of loneliness, but neither pen nor paper is limitless. To sleep, perchance to dream...

March 27–

Over the years I have become less & less convinced of the efficacy of language in recording, correlating & explaining the customs & tongues that I have uncovered & chronicled. Thus have I have developed a system of Mathematical Notation combining that of the Ancient Greeks, Egyptians & Sumerians, & including symbols & constructions previously undreamed of in any Western or Eastern lexicon. This system functions as a kind of shorthand, allowing me to cross-reference these elements from so many different cultures. It has the additional advantage of requiring far less space than longhand – thus conserving my limited store of paper.

My hands, wrists, forearms are covered in notes that I have made whilst travelling through the Jungle. They overlay themselves, & with my fading vision, & the guttering of the tallow, it is a struggle to transcribe them all before darkness or sleep claims me. I dare not expose the notebooks to the continual dripping of moisture from the high canopy, so I try to memorise, & reproduce in detail as faithful as is possible, poor sketches of the marvels that surround me.

Decades of squinting at tiny characters have all but destroyed my vision. My greatest fear is not death, so much as the loss of my spectacles! I

preserve these against the damp & dirt of the Jungle by keeping them in an inside pocket wrapped in silk. Sadly it is now slowly rotting away like the rest of my equipment. The humidity here is well nigh total.

Night is falling now; at last it is getting a little cooler. The tallow is holding out, so I shall permit myself the leisure of writing a little more than usual in here; sometimes it is the only way to combat the loneliness. In the background always I hear the sounds of the Jungle. At first the chorus of calls, whistles, barks & shrieks that start up at dusk terrified me. Sleeplessness hollowed my cheeks & lent a grey pallor to my skin. I experienced delusions, & imagined horrors – waking with a jaguar or a puma snarling on my chest, vampire bats sucking my blood at night, giant snakes crushing me & swallowing me whole.

So far, none of these terrors have come to pass. I have seen monkeys, lizards, tree sloths, giant rodents, capybaras, porcupines, but evidently the fanged predators of the Jungle have sought easier meat for their tea. Still, when the firewood situation permits, I build a fire before I camp, & trust that the hammock will protect me from the depredations of ground-dwelling creatures. The merest inch of flesh uncovered is a virtual invitation to the bites of bloodsucking bats & insects alike.

I soon learnt not to leave anything on the Jungle floor, for it would not stay there for long. There seem to be a limitless number of ants, & all determined to carry away every scrap of anything left unsecured, as if the Jungle is intent on gradually assimilating me.

March 29–

The sun is rarely visible, & direction further confused by the variety & monotony of the landscape, the murmur & lap & drip of water, millions of leaves brushing against each other, parrots calling to each other, monkeys screaming in protest, packs leaping through the trees, cicadas whirring. At dusk the daytime sounds segue into those of the night; the Jungle is at its loudest for the brief period of semi-darkness when then sky is a riot of flame & the stars have not yet begun to emerge. At this time the frogs begin to sing, & join their voices to the spider monkeys calling for rain.

Thus far have I seen little sign of the people for whom I am searching – but only the barest traces of settlements, tools or fires. According to the fragments of information that I have been able to gather, they should be somewhere around this area – always assuming that I have not lost my way or become confused by recurring bouts Fever. The unwholesomeness of this place may well be the death of me, but I refuse to entertain the possibility.

The journey through this inimical, yet beautiful landscape can only create in me the most perfect rapport with the invisible people. Hard fought for, the tools with which to decipher their language. Inevitably I will find them, & when I do I will be the first & only of my race to discover their unique world, to create a bridge between their reality & our own.

From my earliest youth I conceived a fascination for language. Just as we cannot exist save for our thought, so language defines people & ideas. & language is grown from Environment as the Flower grows on the Vine. Thus one can make no serious study of a language in isolation of both the people & the place that has shaped its lexicon. & it follows that it is only through a minute & careful study of the life around me that I can have any hope of understanding the detail of their existence.

If I am fortunate enough to be able to talk with the Tribe, & so stumble through mutual discovery to a sense of language, it will be solely because I have learned in the very lineaments of my body the shape of their experiences. The World is in its essence made of words; for how can we have any concept of that which we cannot describe? Descartes understood this.

I have interpreted & catalogued innumerable languages the world over, & although sounds repeat, the meaning is never the same; the words are never repeated. It is as if the shattering of language created a million million tiny echoes of the first word; each corresponding to a facet of the consciousness of the earth, in potentially infinite variety.

6. NINA

Where is it going a good question and one that she was only just after asking herself as she walked down the road. Just where indeed is it all going, Nina - and are you up there at the front, or only just after catching the tail end of it. Life's running away and one of these days you'll not be holding the reins girl: that's for sure. Coming down off a trip and she's feeling blue, blue and mottled, thoughts scattered and useless.

She is tall and pale from a decade under London's gunmetal sky, with red hair and faded freckles. A slightly too-sharp nose points upward and (at this moment in time) her mouth points downwards. Her eyes are shadowed; one keeping an eye on the pavement while the other looks inside. She might be enchanting but she tends to the tawdry. Her clothes are garish.

Her one firmly held belief is in chaos. In the beginning was the word? Bullshit. So what was before the beginning? What was outside the universe? What was inside the apple? Chaos. There is no truth. There is no law. There is no reason. We are not even a humorous error: geometry and nature are only by some strange synchronicity connected. What is left, then, when the creed of irrationality rules? Language only hides the fact that there is no truth.

What makes her distrust truth, all truth, to such a degree? Who held her back with custom, with prejudice and with guilt? Who still daily smothers her with silent grief?

People are far more complex than they appear. These are not characters. The only names that have been changed are to protect the guilty.

There are no innocents.

Her room is small, untidy, littered with books, with bright things, things she's found, and things she'll find a use for sometime.

mistress of disguise, her collection of wigs, false eyelashes, hats and glasses allows her to express her protean personality and exercise her obsessions; self is after all, only a construct. Books are visible scattered amongst underwear, feather boas, glossy magazines and shoes. Energy without expression, painful vision of a world in shades of grey, lost to the simple dichotomy of black and white, opposite and equal, and one in the middle makes Trinity, Church, Our Father, Hail Mary - and Christ I still know all the words after all these years; cold knees and the chill hand of the devil down the back of her neck.

She drags her past behind her like a trawl net.

Her age? Indeterminately twenties. Stance? Defensive. Voice? Mellifluous. Object of desire? Freedom. For desire.

What do we mean by freedom? All of these threads will at some point conjoin. She will discover, and they will realise, and he will decipher, and yet another will record freedom, under 3, under seven, or infinite criteria. At which point there will be a denouement and it won't matter any more. Sure someone will care, but you and I won't know about it, and sure what's the point when I'm only young and I've no desire for a church wedding or knitting lessons. Because after all St Peter's retired, and the hinges rusted off the pearly gates, and God gave up, and man got stubborn: and now here we are faced with this crap. They always say you can spot a convent girl a mile away. Especially the ones with the veils and black habits.

She has no piercing in her body: her earlobes are unblemished, her tongue in one piece, her nipples and navel framed only with fine hairs. She has no scars, no tattoos; none of life's signifiers. She doesn't dye her hair. In this respect she is entirely as nature intended her and thus eminently suited for this narrative. For someone as precise and devoted to rules as the Photographer she is ideal. Her skin is variegated: he could read volumes from her wrists, the flesh on her cheekbones. She is an obsession waiting to happen.

She doesn't have a job in any recognised sense. She gets by on the dole, and on a series of get-rich-quick-earn-£££££'s-at-home schemes that haven't yet made her fortune but consume enough hours to stop her feeling guilty for doing nothing constructive with her time – and keep the DSS off her back. When she's not scratching a living from London's unwelcoming streets she spends her time in libraries, watching the other readers: ostensibly there to borrow books, but perhaps like herself lost in contemplation of the library's patrons, constructing imaginary lives and fantasies around them. The British Library is best. She loves the smell of books long untouched, the dark corridors of shelves and the dim recesses where gems of intellect rest. She has her regulars there, each tenuous connection: students, writers, harmless crackpots engaged in researching their genealogy and serious academics with their air of abstracted genius, gestating theories. Glances across the wide tables, eyes not quite meeting, relationships formed but not consummated.

The reader's ticket she has had since her college days gives her access to the stacks. Down here direction is confused by the fact that the shelves are on casters and can move in any direction, creating a maze of shifting passages where bearings are soon lost in the dim light. You see few people, but they are often the most interesting; each struggling with their own private obsessions. Practice has helped her to develop techniques of observation so subtle that her victims have no idea that they are under surveillance, and she is able to reconstruct their research with astonishing accuracy – checking the notes that they make for themselves, and then carelessly leave on tables, the queries made of the vast catalogues, monitors detailing the location of volumes buried deep in the library's bowels; vicarious intellectual. Is she looking for truth amongst those millions of words, a copy of every book mapped out like a blueprint of humanity's imagination? If so, she hasn't found it. Yet.

But she senses that they have: and one in particular. The Photographer. He was the first that she had wanted to follow outside the Library; to discover what other secrets he had found.

She lives near Elephant and Castle in a council block that's been condemned. In this sense she's technically homeless, but the block has been squatted for long enough that it's inhabitants feel reasonably secure. The corridors have been trashed beyond all recognition, graffiti scrawled in unreadable palimpsest on the filthy walls. The floors are a mess of rubbish, broken furniture, syringes, old newspapers and other, unrecognisable, detritus. She tries not to examine it too closely, and watches where she puts her feet.

Some of the flats have electricity and water – the utilities companies don't care if the tenants are legal or not so long as someone is happy to feed coins to the meter. Five or six people share the one she lives in. She doesn't trust any of them, and padlocks her door when she is at home, and even more securely when she is not.

She has no friends, but innumerable acquaintances. She's known, on the scene, always at the edge of parties, always caning it. She has her contacts with the e-dealers, speed freaks, acid punters. Base, coke, 2CB, pure MDMA when she can get her hands on it – which isn't hard, at the right parties. The wasted addicts lying in the corners in the hallways– eyes glazed and cunning, sizing her up for her cash, looking through her at the next fix, are enough to dissuade her from indulging in anything harder. They make her think of a certain genre of film, the 'gritty hardness' of the 90's, smug revelations of society's decay, drug addiction, violence, crime. – But the comparison is meaningless in the face of their reality. The books she had read, films she had seen always glamorised the addict to some extent. But there was nothing seductive about these wrecks. So she watched her step, was careful and kept her eyes shuttered.

She comes from everywhere and nowhere: one of London's dispossessed, her accent has mellowed and been adulterated in the city of Babel until she speaks in a flat London drawl, with just a tinge on the R's to suggest her origin. The honey pot of the city has drawn her in, as with other character in this story – and now holds her fast in a web of seeming coincidence, where all time's strands conjoin and conspire inexorably to draw her into the centre.

If you asked her where she comes from she would probably name some anonymous small town in middle England – but it's not home to her anymore. Going back there she's a stranger. She remembers a couple of bars, but they're different. She's unlikely to meet anyone she once knew on the street – and if she does, it only confirms her lack of contact. They will have nothing in common, and will soon drift on, having established their separateness. Her life is a list of outdated contact numbers.