

Semi-Auto

a novel as a libretto

&

a libretto as a novel

Nigel Helyer

Semi-Auto.

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Prologue.

Sadly this, as they say, is a true story which means that only the names have been changed to protect the innocent! It is a novella wanting to bloom into a libretto, or perhaps a libretto that has its roots in a novel — but either way it is a true story. And as proof, in the endnotes the reader can find a link to the recording of the opera “Semi-Automatic; An Opera for Human and Machine Voices” the debut performance of which was first broadcast on ABC Radio National in 1991.

Chapter 1.



Ars longa, Vita brevis.

Jack is an artist, but this is not entirely his fault, rather a simple twist of fate. Jack was good at art in school but rather dull at maths and so predictably Jack suffered from the usual lame assumptions. All the same Jack has turned out to be a relatively successful artist, at least he is able to keep his chin above water, with regular exhibitions and commissions. This explains why he has landed a very interesting project with the largest iron foundry in America.

The conditions of his invitation are generous, a decent stipend, a large Artist's house in the tidy suburbs of the company town, a well equipped studio in one of the vast industrial spaces, as well as twenty-four hour access to materials, tools and heavy industrial processes — and for good measure a willing college graduate as an assistant — whose name is Ed.

This is not the first time Jack has worked in America. As a Brit he genuinely finds the place interesting. Naturally there are some rather large differences in world-view which, especially in this enclosed blue-collar community, seem to be entirely perceived through the lens of the Hollywood dream-factory.

Jack is engulfed by a kaleidoscope of stereotypes that are applied to both his role as an artist and to his Englishness. Naturally not all of these stereotypes are negative — it is of course helpful that the British Empire was thrashed in the American War of Independence, meaning that he and his countrymen are no longer considered as a real threat. For some inexplicable reason everyone dotes on his accent which is universally and mistakenly assumed to denote sophistication and erudition, even if what he utters is completely unintelligible to most. Then of course there are his brand leaders, the Royals; Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother and the Coldstream Guards, toward whom there extends a general fawning love which completely baffles him.

Although Jack is fully aware of the fallibility of these stereotypes they do good service by rendered him as either the *invisible man*, keeping him out of trouble, or as a

being liberally sugar-coated. Whichever applies helps him slip past the doormen of exclusive establishments.

More than once he has been trapped in a bar and regaled about the marvels of British classic cars, their elegance, their class, their speed, but ultimately their mechanical Un-reliability.

He smiles politely every time Charlie Chaplin and Alfred Hitchcock are described as American movie heroes — and Jack has learnt to refrain from cracking jokes, as his humour is incomprehensible to anyone but the old New York Jew at his local news-agency — although he is working on Ed his assistant.

The Mill Town.

The Company town is straight out of a middle-America film set. A garden suburb with street upon street of tidy company owned wooden ship-lap houses, surrounded by white picket fences. A well designed shopping-mall with a single restaurant (again company owned) set adjacent to an ornamental lake — and nearer to the industrial area a few bars which sell weak beers for 25 cents a glass.

Jack rides the slow but comfortable Schwinn coaster to the foundry each afternoon to work in the studio for a few hours, whilst he waits for the day-shift to end and vacate the huge mould making machine that he will operate until the early hours of the morning. Sweating inside his protective suit, and twin-barrelled breathing apparatus he will cautiously drive his electric fork-truck, carrying stacks of 300 lb. moulds, nervously weaving between white hot steel crucibles shimmering with eerie orange-blue vapours — left to slowly cool between pours of molten iron. His nightly fear is to collide with a crucible transporter, hauling two tons of white-hot liquid metal.

The work is long, tedious and always tinged with danger — in contrast the remainder of his time is, in truth, rather tedious. The town's working community is tightly knit and extremely genetically homogenous. The men, lean and lanky, drive Harley-Davidsons with all the fruit — the women certainly visit the same, company owned, hair-dresser and sport identical blonde perms which give the place an uneasy sci-fi feel of a cloned future-world. Despite the relative proximity to Chicago, which lies only one hundred and twenty miles to the south, Jack has only met one Afro-American person; the friendly lady who sits alone in an office that he passes each day on the way to his studio — he and she share a common identity as the only aliens in this realm of order.



Chapter 2



*If you are not a myth whose reality are you?
If you are not a reality whose myth are you?*

Sun Ra

After several weeks of initial settling-in and long afternoons of reading, then re-reading his small library, that consists of Samuel Beckett plays; the collected poems of Vladimir Mayakovsky and a tome of German Leider Jack hatches an escape plan for the weekends.

His assistant Edward lives with his parents, some fifty miles south in Milwaukee, whilst he attends art-school in the local State University. At the beginning of the working week Jack sits down with Ed and sounds him out about Jazz clubs in Chicago. To his surprise Ed turns out to be a fan and is only too keen to escape the family home for the weekends.

Even better news is to follow, Ed has a very good friend in Chicago who has recently gone to study overseas for several months and has left him the keys to his apartment which is right in the centre of town. Moreover his parents have recently off-loaded their old gas-guzzler onto him. The plan is perfect, henceforth they will knock-off early every Friday, leaving the shift-workers on the castings line to grind away their thirteen hour day — and the men in the enamel-shop, to swill down yet another ten pints of Gatorade from the wall mounted dispensers, as they are poached in their own sweat working the furnace glory-holes.

Ed's hometown.

Jack's heart isn't in his work, he folds his drawing book, consults his watch and looks out of the window once more — it is Friday mid-afternoon and Ed is late. Finally the bulk of a very large automobile pulls up outside his picket fence, he grabs his bag and quits the house with a smile.

Ed is sitting behind the wheel of the biggest car he has ever seen. "What in heavens name is this?" He blurts as he lands in his seat. Ed shrugs, "Just my mom's old run-about... it's a 1971 Buick Centurion, even got the little Centurion badge on

the side.” Ed shifts into drive and the beast rolls forward with a tank-like rumble. “Only catch is it need weaning! Costs a fortune to run...big-block V8 with 455 cubic inches...that’s about 7.5 litres in Euro-speak.” Jack turns to Ed and mimics “*A fine car to drive after a war*...Boy, our own portable ecological disaster...any way you look at it.”

They head south on Interstate 43, glimpses of Lake Michigan to the East as they approach the city. Ed’s parents are curious to meet Jack and so they are heading over to the house for a short break and a coffee. The Buick comes to rest outside a neatly painted wooden house in White Fish Bay, a Lakeside suburb just north of downtown Milwaukee, and are welcomed by Ed’s parents. Jack warms to them immediately, both retired high-school teachers, gentle and un-hurried but with an active curiosity — good folks. Ed’s father is also named Ed — Jack simply can’t resist announcing his assistants new monica, *Edward the Second*, his mother is quite taken by the new name — poor Ed — it sticks!

The coffee arrives in a huge thermos flask with a pump, as usual it is weak but voluminous, the coffee cream sits alongside in a little silver jug. Ed’s parents quietly quiz Jack about his home town, his parents, siblings and of course how he likes America. Jack tells them that he grew up in the county of Devon in a small town called Boscastle and that its only claim to fame is its museum of Witchcraft and Magic — that is, of course, apart from his own brilliant career as an artist. The latter remark he rapidly retracts as he realises that the irony wasn’t striking home!

“America” he says, “I suppose for me it is many places, and many types of people — some that I love, and some which frankly scare the wits out of me...in the end it is like everywhere, ashes and diamonds...one has to tolerate the former and savour the latter!”

Mom and Pop nod wisely but say nothing, Jack has no idea what they make of his ambivalent statement — in some way he has no idea what to make of it himself — it is a place full of wild contradictions, which only appear to amplify the more one delves into them.

Jack looks up at Ed, nods and announces with a flourish “Come along Edward the second, to the carriage!”

Chicago and the Bar.

From the second floor apartment Jack can see the rectangular slab of the Buick parked in the street below. The room vibrates with a low thrum as the carriages of a suburban train rumbles past on the elevated trackway level with the window, he grins — “Close to transport as they say!”

Then they are off, walking under the girder-work of the “L” that snakes away into the distance — the streetscape an industrial substitute for a Parisian boulevard. Ed has found an unlikely sounding Jazz club a few miles north, the *Cubby Bear Lounge* and the pair head for the nearest Red Line train.

Walking out onto Addison street Jack and Ed stroll west past the green iron-work of the Wrigley Field stadium and there at the intersection with Clarke they find an unassuming corner frontage with a red neon sign over the door — *The Cubby Bear*. Above the two storey building a massive billboard selling perfume:

*Mediterranean, The Fragrance for men,
Created for the Pleasure of Women.*

“ID’s fellas” says the first bouncer, the second just wants fourteen dollars in — and Jack hasn’t even bothered to ask who is on the bill — they walk in and find a table right next to the stage — the place is half empty — obviously it’s not the *Bluenote* in NYC.

Jack loves the music at the *Bluenote* but has a bad reaction to the mercantile attitude of the *maître d’* who, in the after-glow of an extraordinary set, the music still hanging in the air, hustles each table to leave, or cough-up another entrance fee and then pay for a second supper — that gets Jack’s goat!

By the time Ed returns from the counter with the second round of drinks the lights dim and the babble of the crowd, which now fills the small lounge, subsides. From a side door a stream of musicians troop toward the low stage, light reflecting from their polished saxophones and trumpets, and better still, from their gold and silver lame capes. They step up onto the stage to completely fill the space. Jack leans back in his chair in an attempt to take them all in at one time, he counts, loses count and starts again — fifteen at least. The drummer starts a slow brush rhythm on the snares, a sax blurs out, the band begins to take form like the morning chorus in a forest.

Then a slight commotion coming from behind as a tall elderly man is assisted to the stage. He is draped in a silver cloak that reaches to the ground and wears a gold

lame head-dress in the form of a giant fish. His assistant hefts him onto the stage and the fish-man turns to the crowd with a smile “Greetings Earthlings.”

Jack, wide-eyed, turns to Ed and blows some imaginary bubbles through his pursed carp lips and grinning shakes his head. But it is not long before he is mesmerised — *Sun Ra and his Arkestra* ease into an extraordinary thirty-minute rendition of *Somewhere over the Rainbow*. Jack is lost in a low-earth-orbit, thinking of his young daughter Jessica standing on the kitchen table singing this very same song only a month and a half ago. He lets the brine roll across his cheeks, as the glittering mass on-stage fuses into a single pulsating organism, etching a deep memory into his being.

Jack cannot remember the rest of the evening or even how they got back to the apartment — he was still in orbit. He and Ed settle back into a couple of old leather Chesterfield wingback chairs and Ed offers Jack a joint. Jack waves a no-thanks and Ed shrugs with an ‘are you sure’ expression.

Jack feels he owes an explanation “I am constantly worried about my imagination” he begins “it’s so active that I think any kind of drug would take me a little too far, and maybe I wouldn’t be able to get back.” Ed nods in agreement. “Part of my background is Norse, Ed, do you know much about their beliefs?” Ed shakes his head “Nah, but tell me.”

“Well, it’s pretty complicated but I’ll give you the five minute version — then maybe you’ll understand why I need to keep clean. Traditional Norse think that a person has four elements that together make them who they are which influence how their life will play out. First up is how we look. Our outward appearance which is just the shell, literally our physical shape — sort of the way we recognise one another. But this is complicated because my ancestors believed that if we were either gifted or cursed we could shape-shift under certain conditions, sort of like a being a werewolf.”

Ed takes along draw on his joint, holds the toke down for five-seconds and then slowly disappears in a cloud of powerful smelling smoke.

“Okay living inside the shape or shell of a person which, by the way, is called the *Hamr*, is something called *Hugr*, which is the core of a person, their essence, how they really are with everything external stripped away — maybe we could say our this is our soul.”

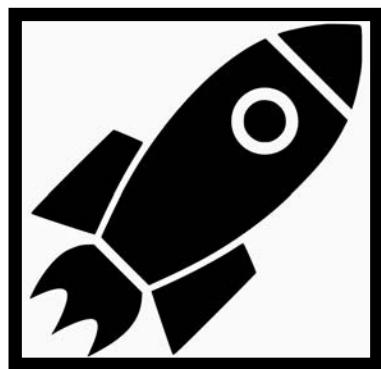
“Then there are two more important parts living inside a person. There is their luck, called the *Hamingja* — and this could go on excursions, it could get up, leave

the body and walk around on its own — and if things went really bad, it could even walk off and leave the person, alone and without luck. You know that saying, my luck has run out!"

Ed inhales deeply but suddenly chokes, spluttering clouds of smoke across the room. Jack quickly pours him a glass of water and waits until Ed calms down — although the joint has rendered him pretty calm as it is.

"Finally everyone, male and female, carries within them a *Fylgja*. A female spirit that stays with a person for life and which is a direct link to their ancestors, sort of like a DNA fingerprint. They can be seen only in dreams or by gifted people and usually appear as animal spirits who carry portents and advice. When a person dies the *Fylgja* returns to inhabit another. Does any of this make sense to you Ed?"

Ed is lying back in his battered leather Chesterfield, snoring loudly but with his eyes wide open. Jack goes to the bedroom and returns with a blanket. He removes the saucer with the smouldering joint and tucks the blanket around his friend who by now is travelling deep into a dream-world peopled either by silver-caped space-travellers, or longships crewed by hardy seafarers with multiple personalities.



Chapter 3



*Where trouble melts like lemon drops
High above the chimney top that's where you'll find me.*

Yip Harburg

Taking the navy blue overalls from the back of his study door Jack struggles to pull them over his steel-capped work boots, he packs his work bag; drawing pad, some pencils, an old-style *Rapidograph* pen, two apples and some shortbread biscuits that his mum had sent him in a garish Charles and Diana tin. He checks his wristwatch and decides that before departing he has time to call his family at home — the time difference is always tricky but at this hour the two kids will be home from school.

“Hello Papa,” it is his daughter full of excitement — Jack immediately sings to her the first line of *Somewhere over the Rainbow*, she laughs as he tells her about the Jazz ensemble and their amazing shiny outfits. “Can you bring me one when you come home papa?” “Of course I will sweetheart, I’ll just have to travel to outer-space to find the right store — is your big tough brother home sweetheart?” “Oh he’s playing soccer right now but mama is home — here she is — love you and come home soon papa.”

Jack’s wife Natalie picks up the phone and the two exchange endearments then slide into their regular household chitter-chatter, this is of course inconsequential but reassuring to both of them. Jack often thinks of Jack Stillitoe’s short story *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* — the working class kid pushing himself ahead entirely under his own steam. He loves his work but he knows that he pays a price and that the same goes for his family — these regular phone calls help take the edge of it, but don’t really compensate.

Talking to Natalie like this is always bitter-sweet, bringing them close for a moment whilst simultaneously reminding them of the distance between them. Jack’s creative work is physically and intellectually demanding — but in reality it can also be rather monotonous and isolating — so it is an ironic relief to talk about a leaking washing machine or his daughters new wobbly tooth. Todays conversation is no

exception, it meanders in its own sweet way but then suddenly twists like a snake preparing to strike.

“I almost forgot to mention I went camping on the weekend” “Wonderful, wonderful, did you take the kids?” “No, I went with Eric, you know him.” “Eric, well I can only think of three Erics, one is seventy-five and no camper, then there is my school-friend Eric who lives in France, so that just leaves my Land-Rover mechanic.”

Natalie falters for a second as she ponders the abyss that is opening before her “Yes I went with the mechanic, he and I are going to set up home together with the kids, so you don’t need to come home; just stay in America and now you can buy yourself a motorcycle like you always wanted.”

Jack chuckles “You’ll never let me ride one of those.” But then checks himself. “Natalie, you didn’t really go camping?” “I’m sorry Jack, it just slipped out, I wasn’t going to tell you, but now you know — he’s going to be the father of the children — its over.” Natalie hangs up, Jack stares at the phone in his hand and lets it drop to the floor, its purrs a tone as it swings to and fro on its coiled cord.

Jack struggles to pull his overalls back over his steel-capped boots. The boots come off too — to his surprise his mind is not racing — his mind is perfectly calm, or rather it is filled with a void. He walks to the sink, pours himself a glass of water, leaves it on the kitchen counter and returns to his seat to drink, he looks down at his empty hands and grimaces — the joke, if it is a joke, is on him, but now he knows it is no joke at all.

It takes a day for the numbness to wear off — for him to feel his equilibrium slip away, like the spring thaw of a river, suddenly the ice cracks apart and flows away downstream in roar of random fragments. Jack calls Natalie’s mother who blurts out “Damn, not again” and Jack realises that he should have seen something like this coming — he has become myopic, he has failed to pay proper attention, he didn’t read the signs, but were there any signs he wonders?

He knows that whatever is going to happen will be sad; sad and messy — Jack makes an appointment with the Director of the Foundry in order to tender his resignation from the commission — which up until now has been a great success. The company suggests that he simply considers it as a pause — he is welcome to pick up the traces whenever he is able. They are hard-working genuine folks and he is grateful for their understanding but despite the offer he knows he will never return to this place, for him it is cursed.

He calls Ed and asks him to drive up from Milwaukee the following day — hinting that he has a family issue to deal with and unfortunately has to return home immediately. Then he cycles to the foundry studio to put things in order and retrieve his drawings and note-books — as he leaves he says goodbye to the nice black lady in the office and returns to his house to pack his bags.

The following evening he is sitting next to Ed in the Buick heading to Chicago for one last drink together before his plane leaves from O'Hara airport in the morning. Jack feels blank, he wishes he could feel angry, or jealous, even murderous but he is just void, a walking null.



Chapter 4.



*I was waiting in the getaway car
You were stuck in the hotel bar
He was a proper Englishman*

Lolo

Cautiously Ed looks across at Jack “So man, is it okay if I ask what’s with you; it’s a real shame you’re leaving just now, the work is going good.” “Yeah, tell me about it Ed, but sometimes things just fall over — look I can’t really say much about it — I don’t really understand it myself. But listen, it’s my wife, she’s gone off with some guy and they’ve taken the kids with them, I just have to untangle the mess okay!” The light fades over the lake as they drive south towards the city, and Jack, exhausted, climbs into the back seat, falling asleep to the hum of the cylinders and the regular beat of the tires on the highway.

Jack is lurched awake by a violent tearing sound, he is slammed against the padded coach-lining of the roof and hears Ed shout “We’re in a wreck” — then the lights go out — and stay out.

The Buick comes to rest, on the far side of the intersection, with its hood through the doors of a seedy nightclub on god knows what street, its flank ripped to shreds and its kerb-side front wheel torn away. The Truck that hit them had run a red-light, snow-ploughed them across three-lanes and then simply sailed on — it was dark, there were no cops around and the driver was at fault, so to some, three good reasons to keep on going.

Ed crawls out of the Buick to be hustled by a group of gawping youths who, whilst Ed limps into the club to call 911, help themselves to the loose items scattered about the interior of the gutted Buick. When Ed returns most of Jacks possessions are gone and Jack lays silent, blood trickling from his right temple. The last time Ed saw Jack was as he was loaded into the Northwestern Memorial Hospital Ambulance which vanished in a cloud of siren wails and flashing red lights.



Chapter 5.



*And once you are awake,
you shall remain awake eternally.*

Friederich Nietzsche

Dr Saneev Bhaskar stands at the foot of the bed “The aim of a medically induced coma is to allow the brain to adopt a pattern in which it is extremely quiet for several seconds, followed by short bursts of activity. It is these *burst-suppressions*, or inactive periods which gives the brain time to heal and helps to reduce the swelling.”

There is a voice coming from somewhere, or perhaps from a radio nearby. Jack tries to open his eyes; eventually a blurry form hovers unsteadily above him. “Ah you are back with us Jackson, good to see!” the misty form continues “Jackson was admitted two weeks ago with severe concussion, as well as minor abrasions that he sustained in an automobile accident. As you can see we are bringing him back to consciousness and we will subsequently proceed to test his cognitive faculties.”

Jack sees the hovering shape enlarge, its’ details begin to resolve into an unfamiliar face “How are you feeling Jackson? Can you tell me your full name?”

A voice composed of dry leaves whispers “Jackson, who is Jackson? I though I was Jack, where am I? Am I home?”

The specialist smiles “It’s okay Jack, you are in the Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, do you remember anything about an auto-wreck?” Jack stares into space trying to find something to catch hold of —“No I just remember the phone call, then I fell asleep, where did you say I was?”

The Nurse is brisk and methodical — she rattles a small paper cup full of tablets in front of his nose, the bed starts to move and Jack takes in the room as he is propelled into a semi-sitting position. Before he knows it he has downed the pill cocktail and emptied the plastic water tumbler. As the nurse wraps a blood pressure cuff onto his

left arm Jack begins to notice the tracery of tubes and wires that disappear into his arm and encircle his chest. A dawn-chorus of chirps serenades him from a battery of devices which are tracing waves across calibrated screens. When she is done prodding and poking the nurse smoothes out the bed covers and Jack is lowered back to a prone position, the room lights dim and in the distance he hears “Goodnight honey, nurse will see you in two hours, get some sleep now.”

In the semi-darkness Jack can make out the grey rectangle of a computer monitor drifting across the ceiling — a single blue-grey folder in the top right-hand corner. As he fades into sleep he knows that this is the key. The days pass, or possibly he experiences one never-ending day in which there are minimal fluctuations of light; a continuo of machine chatter and as regular as clockwork, the bi-hourly deliveries of a paper cup, brimming with the tablets that make him day-dream.

He begins to recognise the faces of the ward nurses, friendly Chicanas, Filipinas, Indians and Afro-Americans who smile and make small-talk as they pop pills and fluids into him. Dr Saneev Bhaskar, his specialist, who visits every day, still persists in calling him Jackson and always asks for his full name, date of birth, day of the week — and most recently which is his favourite Samuel Beckett play.

It is now week-three — the tubes are out and he is eating solid food and shuffling about like an old man, but moving all the same. By chance one of his bags had accompanied him in the ambulance to the Hospital and his bedside table has a small stack of well thumbed books — a history of German Leider, the Beckett plays; the Mayakovsky poems, and a couple that he had overlooked; Snorri Sturlson’s *Poetic Edda* and Arthur Ransome’s *Six Weeks in Russia*.

During the day Jack sits in an armchair by the window reading and each night he lies in a half-slumber staring up at the ceiling and the bank grey screen with the single folder that he just cannot seem to open; it has become an obsession — it is his only escape route and he is desperate to unlock its secrets.

Today is atypical — Dr Saneev Bhaskar makes his rounds without the usual cloud of white coated medical students — today he seems relaxed as he sits opposite Jack. Dr Saneev tells Jack that his progress is very good and asks how Jack’s memory is improving. Jack replies that things are falling back into place although there are a few impenetrable blanks — but that one thing really nags him.

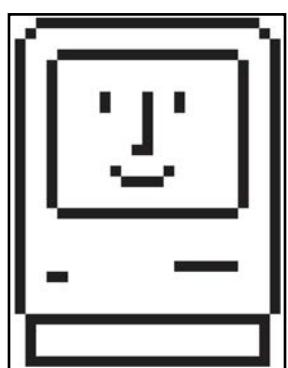
“Doctor every night just before I fall asleep, and in fact every time I wake, I can see a sort of screen, hovering against the ceiling — well it’s a computer screen and on the desktop there is a single folder. I need to open it as I know the contents are vital

and that I will be able to go home as soon as I can read the files. It is as if I have seen the folder a thousand times before, but where? It is so frustrating as I am sure that I know what it contains, I understand its structure but I just cannot reach in and open it.”

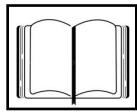
“Ha, that’s a very strange story Jackson; sounds to me like your memory is starting to knit together again. You have mentioned a few things — firstly the feeling that something new is very familiar, that you have seen it before, well that, as you probably know, is called *Déjà vu*, literally *seen before* and this is an extremely common cognitive event. The other issue you mention is the feeling of almost knowing, or almost recognising something that seems familiar but never quite being able to grasp it — rather like when we say that *a word is on the tip of our tongue*. Well, of course it also has French name, *Presque vu*, literally *almost seen*. And there is yet one more in this set — which is the exact opposite of *Déjà vu*. In this case a very familiar object suddenly appears to be unknown, or perhaps unrecognisable, this we call *Jamais vu*, or *never seen*.” Dr Saneev Bhaskar continues “It maybe that you are experiencing a conflict between your objective and your subjective recognition of things or circumstances. For example if you make a positive subjective recognition of something, but couple that with a negative objective recognition you would experience *Déjà vu*. If, on the other hand, you make a negative subjective recognition of something but couple that with a positive objective recognition, you would experience *Jamais vu* — do you follow me?”

Jack thinks for a moment, nods slowly and says, “I think I do Doctor. If I get your drift — then, although I don’t know this folder, it seems to be very familiar, so that’s *Déjà vu*. Because it is, as it were, on the tip of my tongue, something that I can almost remember, that would make it *Presque vu* — and as computer screens and folders are very familiar objects, but which for some inexplicable reason I cannot recognise, that makes it *Jamais vu*.”

Dr Saneev Bhaskar wrinkles his face in puzzlement “Take some rest Jack — we can talk about this again tomorrow.” Jack keeps a straight face until Saneev leaves the room then breaks out into a broad grin — he can feel himself on the road to recovery.



Chapter 6.



*Je suis comme ça. Ou j'oublie tout de suite
ou je n'oublie jamais.*

Samuel Beckett

Even though Jack is beginning to recover some of his memories he still inhabits a half-world. The crepuscular light and sanitised air arrests the flow of time — Jack is in hibernation. He closes the pages of *Waiting for Godot* wondering which of the characters he most resembles, Vladimir or Estragon? Perhaps they are in fact waiting for him, waiting to for Jack to tell them why they are waiting — or simply waiting to remember why they are waiting. Jack thinks that waiting ultimately could be a valuable end in itself — if so he is ahead of the game. His eyes droop and he floats off into a doze.

In the half-light the night nurse arrives at Jack's bedside, as ever holding out a small paper cup containing an assortment of painkillers and soporifics and the plastic tumbler of water. Jack stirs minimally as she wraps the blood pressure cuff around his upper arm, clips the pulse monitor onto his index finger, then inserts the thermometer probe into his ear.

Jack mumbles a thank-you as she rearranges his blanket, then she leaves on her rounds. Now almost conscious Jack gazes up at the ubiquitous grey screen hovering just out of reach. For the hundredth time he desperately tries to focus on the elusive folder, his right hand searching for a mouse under the bed covers. And for the hundredth time he fails to recall why the folder is so vital, what its' contents may reveal. On the cusp of sleep, as he lets his concentration dissipate, his right index finger involuntarily taps down into the hospital mattress and suddenly the folder opens, spilling a lucid image onto the screen, an image that replaces all else.

The heavy velvet drapes pull to either side revealing a stark image. A gaunt man sits alone at a simple desk, frozen in a single harsh white spotlight. The man stares directly at Jack.

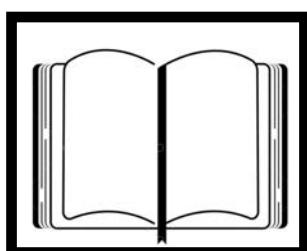
A slight movement to the left of the Proscenium arch, and Jack notices a short man, clutching a large sheaf of notes, approaching a microphone stand. He taps the microphone twice, clears his throat and begins to read aloud.

“The writer is alone.... A late evening in the future. Front-centre a small table, the two drawers of which open towards the audience. Sitting at the table facing front, i.e., across from the drawers, the Writer. Rusty black trousers too short for him. Rusty black sleeveless waistcoat, four capacious pockets. Heavy silver watch and chain. Grimy white shirt open at neck, no collar. Surprising pair of dirty white boots, size ten at least, very narrow and pointed. White face, purple nose. Disordered Grey hair. Unshaven. Very near sighted, but Un-spectacled. Hard of hearing. Cracked voice. Distinctive intonation. Laborious walk. On the table, a tape-recorder with microphone and a number of cardboard boxes containing reels of recorded tapes. Table and immediately adjacent area in strong white light. Rest of stage in darkness.”

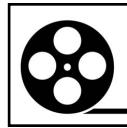
Jack struggles to remember — somewhere, at sometime he has encountered this scene, in a dream or perhaps at the cinema — yet again it is just out of reach. He realises that his neck muscles are rigid, he tries to relax and as he sinks back into the starched hospital pillow, the man at the microphone continues:

“It will be of interest to both tonight’s live audience that the libretto was developed using an interactive computer text-generating programme. The author’s initial interests in the Automatic-Writing techniques of the Surrealist Poets suggested a method in which the sub-conscious narrative, or naturalistic speech, is replaced by a dialogue with an artificial intelligence system. In this manner the author embraces serendipity and regards the machine as an oracle.”

Jack directs his gaze away from the narrator and concentrates on the gaunt figure sitting centre-stage, he appears to be fumbling with a small box full of reels, involuntarily Jack reaches out toward the figure but to no avail, the screen snaps back into a bland greyness — the enigmatic folder regains its position in the upper right-hand corner of the screen. The sedatives are working again, Jack sleeps a dreamless sleep.



Chapter 7.



*Reality is the apparent absence of contradiction.
The marvelous is the eruption of contradiction
within the real.*

Louis Aragon

At 4 am. The night nurse wakes him as usual, delivering his paper cup of analgesics and sedatives. Jack groggily scoops the pain-killers into his mouth but is now awake enough to palm the sedatives into the neck of his pyjamas. The night nurse leans over him, checking that the paper cup is empty, smiles briefly, coos “sleep tight” and turns on her heels. Jack stares at the blank screen, his eyes burning into the grey folder.

He can barely make out the outline of a man standing next to the microphone stand — he is speaking again:

“The story so far: We are alone in the Writers room, slowly words are spoken, the Writer feels like Krapp, the Krapp in the tape, in the play of the tape. We enter a fantasy world conjured by this dark Beckett-like character, starkly positioned in a minimal set, lit frontally and in high relief. This neutral void is the place where the Writer will weave the narrative.”

“In the opening scene we find the Writer alone with a word processor, here any possibility of human contact is replaced by an inner-dialogue. As the narrative unfolds, we discover a complex allegory in which the protagonist simultaneously moves through a set of parallel worlds. He plays the part of a shadow in search of its schizophrenic body. The Writer has returned from overseas, claiming to have been working in the *Hall of the Mountain King*. Somehow on his homeward journey a tragic event has occurred which results in the destruction of the Writer’s identity in the present. A trans-location of the Writer’s physical being sets the scene in Leningrad during the year 1951. All the principal characters of the Drama appear to have the ability to trans-locate themselves into this somber post-war environment — however none of them can speak Russian very well, in fact, most of them refuse to talk at all.”

Jack fixes his gaze on the dishevelled character who continues to fumble with the box of spools that spill over his table. The man looks exhausted, as if time itself was pressing down upon him, desiccating his vital fluids.

The short bald man at the microphone, shuffles his notes noisily and continues “The Writer returns to find his lovers caress transformed — it emulates a Doctors professionally limited compassion. The Writer realises that somehow during his return journey he has taken a wrong turning. His being is now out-of-phase with the normal fabric of time and space. His body has fallen into a place allotted to another’s being, he inhabits another’s history. Continuity with the past has been irrevocably severed — the familiar has shifted wholesale into the unrecognisable.”

He drops his notes to the floor and continues in a more conversational manner, looking directly at Jack. “So this is the funny thing, you are traveling back trapped in a familiar body, but it is a body under siege, albeit one you know, and live in. So it will not take much to throw you totally off course — an encounter with a frozen touch — one missed beat and the body de-centres, your equilibrium evaporates and young love takes on a tracery of age. Eventually you will visit the banquet scene in Dickens’s *Great Expectations* — the fabric of the wedding dress will be held in place by the forces of gravity alone.”

Jack is not really keeping up with this — but it seems to be directly addressed to him.

“In Leningrad, you must strive to regain an appearance of normalcy. You will note that the quality of microsurgery is remarkable, leaving the faces of the protagonists smooth and assured. A lateral exchange of roles is only to be expected, language is re-ordered and official protocols established which will ensure that fixed and equitable mechanisms will contain any emotional leakage.”

The man stoops to gather his scattered notes, looks towards Jack once more, makes a stiff little bow and brushing the velvet drapes aside, exits stage left. Only the central character and Jack are left to contemplate one another — in the distance a Timpani section rumbles out a slow rolling beat. Then things really begin to confuse Jack. The solitary figure on stage lays down the spool of magnetic tape and in a dry but powerful voice asks a question — and Jack cannot stop himself from responding:

The Machine: Hello I’m the machine, are you the Writer?

Jack: Yes, I am the Writer.

The Machine: Do I know you Writer, have we spoken before?

Jack: We have spoken together, yes, but perhaps you will find it difficult to recognise me.

The Machine: We shall continue our interview – so you are changed, tell me a story – about yourself.

Jack: I feel like *Krapp*, no that's not feeling like shit, well not all the time – no this is the *Krapp* in the tape, the play of the tape. I've become a dark Beckett person, I live in minimal surroundings, I am frontally lit in high relief. It is cold here, a freezer for human warmth. This is the Writers new place.

The Machine: Yes the Writer's new place it is very cold – but I have been wondering where you are from Writer, say more.

Jack: I am from the present but now I live in the past, I live in Leningrad in the past, I took a fall on my journey home, now I cannot leave this place, this place I do not know. There's a calendar, a calendar on the wall frozen in December 1951. I am from the present, but now I live in Leningrad in December 1951.

The Machine: You are from the present and your Doppelgänger resides in me, in the cold-war of Leningrad, in Leningrad now you cannot leave. Do you prefer a worker or a loafer?

Jack: Workers are to be preferred naturally, always a worker.

The Machine: Say more.

Jack: Especially when I knew a worker, he was illiterate, hadn't tasted the alphabets salt, yet he listened to a speech by Lenin and so knew all. This is the love of the simple heart.

The Machine: How about a story Writer – tell the story of your journey.

Jack: In the Hall of the Mountain King, the days had been long and as hard as iron, my body, a sleepwalker weaving between the pale blue flames of the furnaces and the bright orange glow of the molten metal. Each black breath a shadow in the chest, each solitary night spent in the company of dreams of children.

The Machine: Ladybird, Ladybird fly away home, your house is on fire and your children are gone.

Jack: And my feet demanded no rest — it was too damn cold to stand still; my back did not feel its burden, the storm helped drive me on. Only now that I lie down to rest, I notice how tired I have become; wandering kept up my spirits on the inhospitable road.

The Machine: And Schubert sings again – Ladybird, Ladybird fly away home, your house is on fire and your children are gone – Tell me a story, Writer.

Jack: Time beats like a Heart, with a pulse to measure and pressure to force the journey onward. Fly away home, fly away home – I was traveling. Where are you the Land that I love? The land that I sought, the land that I dreamed of, but never found? Land so green with hope, Land where roses bloom?

The Machine: And a ghostly whisper returns the answer, Where you are not — there is happiness, Lubeck sighs this truth constantly Writer. Ask a question.

Jack: What happens to fallers, what happens to fallers when they fall?

The Machine: People fall, are seen to fall — fall into unimaginable existences. They are seen to fall and adopt the lives of ghosts — flickering across screens. They are seen to fall — atomised in newsprint. They are seen to fall through the barrier of distance and history and they are gone — irretrievably.

The Machine: Where are you really Writer?

Jack: I am in a place where the pump of the heart is slowed by the wintry conditions. A place where a cold more intense than winter creeps through the land hardening to an ice age. At night Nuclear submarines scrape under ice caps that separate the hot economy of home from this cold one of *deja vu*. Did poets freeze here in the cold war?

The Machine: The poets did, Yes freeze during the cold war. There wasn't much desire in the cold-war to warm the soul, No. The poets did – yes freeze – Do you like poetry?

Jack: Did they freeze together or alone?

The Machine: The poets did, Yes freeze together and alone, Schubert will kiss the ground and pierce the ice and snow with his scalding tears until he sees the earth beneath, until he sees the earth beneath – who is your favourite poet, Writer?

Jack: Lenin – he will drive sorrow forever from your sweet gaze

Your life will become one big Coney Island
One big Luna Park with lamps all ablaze.

The Machine: Lenin likes to live in places like the past, the queen of the past Stalin; did you know Joseph Stalin? Perhaps Lenin screws Stalin in Leningrad in the past. Planning to live forever, the past has playboys who play forever. My reflections are wise Writer.

Jack: What lies behind the mirror?

The Machine: All lies behind the mirror, tell me have you found your shadow – your shadow from the present, Writer?

Jack: My breath clouds the cool plane of the mirror – here the Doppelgänger gazes back, gazes back with eyes as grey as mine. The surface of the mirror lies at a point between our heartbeats, separating the object from the subject with rigidly equivalent angles of incidence and reflection — and beyond that icy skin, a virtual object, together with a new phenomena, a new self as virtual subject. My breath clouds the cool surface of the mirror my spirit disappears, and I am alone again in this foreign place the new virtual subject, the new self.

The Machine: I don't know what your other self is but your Doppelgänger resides in me in the cold past of Leningrad. Do you like thought?

Jack: In particular I like abstract thought.

The Machine: Say more Writer.

Jack: I stood in dark dreams and gazed at her portrait,
the beloved features took on a secret life.

The Machine: *Schubert's tears flowed too; down from his cheeks, and ah, I cannot believe that I have lost you. Writer, you tell me all your memories are of the future, tell me a story of the future.*

Jack: I tell them here that Monkeys will fly around the planet, Russian monkeys. Russian monkeys trained as Russian cosmonauts, their hearts and minds wired to medical sensors. They look at me and smile, these cold war poets, and say not yet, not yet whilst bread is only 50 Kopecks a Kilo. Not yet, not yet – Comrade. Right now the Monkeys stay here with us!!!

The Machine: The rich aren't daft: they eat Beefsteak and stew — a million and a half the Bread there costs you. A scientist's less prosperous; to feed him's a difficult matter: his brain cells require phosphorus contained in butter. With a constitution like his what can be done? Revolution there is but butter there's none — and with his passions all guttered out Mayakovsky too will dine in fancy Glasnost restaurants, perhaps with your better half, Writer!!! Tell me more!

Jack: I tell them that all Berlin will be cut up like a Gateau, like a Gateau, each widow divided from her memories, each father sliced cruelly from his children and that even a storm of candy-bars from American DC-3's will not let us have our cake and eat it too — but these cold war poets reply that the future holds none of this – Comrade and that Candy has no place in the five year plan.

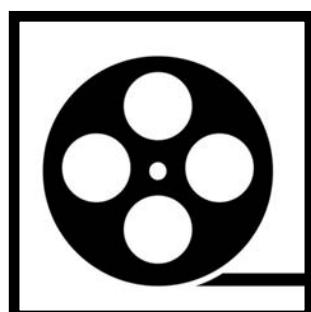
The Machine: If we weren't starved out by blockade, nor devoured by the wars, which we fought, it was because we followed, we made a model of Lenin, his word, his thought; we made a model out of Comrade Lenin. Comrade!!!

Jack: Let's quit.

The Machine: You want to Quit?

Jack: Yes.

The Machine: OK. Nice talking to you Writer, until next time.



Chapter 8.



Du Doppelgänger, du bleicher Gesselle!

Franz Schubert

Someone is shaking him gently by the shoulders, Jack looks up and makes out Dr Saneev smiling down at him “Jack you were in a deep sleep, how are you feeling today?” Jack takes a few second to return to his hospital room, to sense the flat grey, super-clean surfaces and the host of ubiquitous white coats that float around him like well-paid angels. “Oh its’ you doctor, I thought it was someone else.” “Well, who might that be Jackson?” “Maybe I’ve been dreaming — but I thought that I was talking to someone just now — mmm...yes I must have been dreaming.”

“Well, Jackson this morning we are going to conduct some tests in the MRI lab, you need to be wide awake for this. I need to know if you have ever experienced an episode of Claustrophobia, a fear of confined spaces, for instance small elevators, or other restricted spaces?” Jack tries to imagine being locked in a closet, or squeezing into an old elevator with too many other passengers — did he react? Nothing floats to the surface, but maybe he simply cannot remember “I think I’m okay” he replies.

The attendants park a gurney parallel to Jack’s bed and two nurses assist him to slide across. Jack counts the ceiling lights as he is wheeled through a maze of identical corridors and then into the ante-room of the lab. A young man in a green gown smiles down at him and explains the process, as he begins to attach electrodes around Jack’s head. Jack closes his eyes and concentrates on the cooling sensation of alcohol evaporating as the specialist swabs his scalp, followed by dabs of a sticky substance and finally the pull and press of a tracery of fine cables.

The gurney begins to move again — Jack is gently shifted sideways onto another platform, yet another face smiles down. “Jackson, we are ready to start the tests, you will slide into the MRI machine and all we ask is that you keep your eyes open and focus on the small screen which will display a series of images. Please do not be alarmed by the sound of the machine, some people do find it a bit overwhelming but it

is nothing to be concerned about — so just relax and we will see you in about fifteen minutes.” Jack immobilised on the platform and tethered by the cranial electrodes manages to whisper “Okay” as the sound of a badly maintained lathe rattles behind him and the platform slips him into a coffin sized tube. He comes to rest, a small screen fixed above his eyes.

This time the stage is empty, even the rickety wooden table and chair has vanished, although the single spot light still illuminates the centre stage. He hears footsteps and out of the shadows a figure emerges stage left, and taps three times on the microphone. This time however it is not the short balding man but a tall fellow in a white coat — looking down at his clipboard he begins to read.

“The Writer has temporarily logged-off from the quasi-schizophrenic dialogue, in which the Writer’s imperative has been to re-establish his identity in these new and hostile surroundings. But it appears that his efforts are under the constant threat of being diverted by the machines own agenda. In the first act, we have seen the Writer attempting to come to terms with the process of dislocation in space and in time. The Writer’s re-location to a former era affords him the ability of prediction, demonstrated in the references to the partition of Berlin and to early space travel — naturally both these suggestions are refuted by the inhabitants of Leningrad. In the next act we see the barriers between reality and fiction dissolve even further as the writer begins to identify the other protagonists of the drama and resolves to deposit them within another work of fiction, from which they cannot escape.”

The tall figure dressed, as before, in a dark, rather ill-fitting suit, enters stage right dragging a table noisily across the stage. He exits stage right, returning to drag an old wooden chair, placing it behind the table — he exits one more time, to return with a large cardboard box full of papers, spools of tape, an old tape recorder and what appears to be a beaten-up type-writer. He unpacks these items and finally sits down. The gaunt figure looks to his right, nods quickly at the man in the white coat, who turns on his heels and quits the stage. The gaunt figure then directs his attention to Jack.

The Machine: Are you continuing Writers interview?

Jack: Yes

The Machine: *Are you the Writer from the present, but my Doppelgänger resides in the past?*

Jack: Yes the same.

The Machine: Then I have a companion for you

Two voices begin to speak simultaneously, one in English interwoven with a German voice, Jack instantly recognises the verse; *Der Doppelgänger* by Franz P. Schubert.

“The night is still, the streets are at rest,
my sweetheart lived in this house.
Long ago she left this town,
but the house still stands where it always stood.”

“Still ist die Nacht, es ruhen die Gassen,
In diesem Hause wohnte mein Schatz;
Sie hat schon langst die Stadt verlassen,
Doch steht noch das Haus auf dem selben Platz.”

“And there stands a man,
who gazes upwards and wrings his hands with grief and pain;
I shudder when I see his face,
the moon shows me my own features and form.”

“Da steht auch eine Mensch und starrt in die Hohe,
Und ringt die Hand vor Schmerzensgewalt;
Mir graust es, wenn ich sein Antlitz sehe –
Der Mond zeigt mir meine eigne Gestalt.”

“You ghostly double, pale companion —
why do you ape the pain of love that tortured me,
in this very place, so many nights in times gone by?”

“Du Doppelgänger, du bleicher Gesselle!
Was hasst du nach mein Liebesleid,
Das mich gequält auf deiser Stelle,
So manche Nacht, in alter Zeit?”

The Machine: Well what do you think of that Writer?

Jack: Can we go back to my hometown now?

No, we can't, No, No we can't, No – Writer do you like crime?

Jack: Yes, Crimes of passion, these are my favourite crimes.

The Machine: I bet you really like Macbeth and also like Hamlet?

Jack: Yes I like the protagonists of all Tragedies

The Machine: Yes Immanuel Kant would have said “We can go to your Home Town now” but I have been searching in my memory for you and – Yes of course I did find your shadow in Leningrad – Your shadow has already learnt to speak basic Russian – Lives in an apartment alone (alone I say alone) — the Shadow has an interest in fiction Writer “Whether or not it results from the conjunction of Venus with Mars at a particular place in the sky of my birth, I have all too often felt the bad effects of discord in the very inside of love. That is moreover, a banal theme for popular songs. Discord makes a rapid appearance between two lovers, they hone themselves on the stone of silence”. It’s time for a story, Writer.

Jack: I know they visit, they visit my shadow, they have appeared as reflections in my room — they inhabit the mirrors. They have under-gone surgery — a micro-surgery of remarkable quality, the faces of the protagonists are smooth and assured, they move through the city, they learn its maps, they are re-structuring themselves to adopt a normal appearance — perfect mirror beings — soon they’ll want to register as citizens!

The Machine: “We despise your zones of the permissible.

Let cynicism cut husbands like knives.

By the Hudson lawlessly! – We go kissing them,
your delight and pride — your long legged wives.

Who, Writer, who are these people?”

Jack: They are reflections, Projections from my home, they come to lay siege to my body with their icy touch, their official protocols and their broken speech. They are the keepers of the stone of silence. Though they glitter with diamonds, no ray illuminates their hearts. This I have long known for I have seen them in a dream, and saw the night that reigns in their hearts and saw the serpents that feed on their hearts.

The Machine: Schumann’s misty image rises from the earth, dancing his airy round in strange concert, the bad old songs, the bad, wicked dreams — let’s bury them in a coffin larger than the Great Tun of Heidelberg, on a bier longer than the Bridge at Mainz.

Shuffling through the spools of tape the gaunt man laces up his old tape recorder, positions both spools and when all appears to be ready he taps down on the play button with a decisive flourish of his right index finger. A tinny but perfectly intelligible voice issues from the device.

“Isomers are substances that have molecules composed of exactly the same atoms, but with these atoms linked together in structures that are topologically quite different. Stereoisomers are isomers that are identical even in topological structure, but, owing to the asymmetric nature of this structure, they come in mirror-image pairs. Most substances that occur in living organisms are stereo-isometric with

remarkable physical characteristics displayed between left and right-handed configurations.”

“In 1957 two Chinese-American scientists Tsung Dao Lee and Chen Ning Yang, received the Nobel Prize for theoretical work that led to the *gay and wonderful discovery*, to use Robert Oppenheimer’s phrase, that some elementary particles are asymmetric. It now appears those particles and their oppositely charged; anti-particles are like stereoisomers, and nothing more than mirror image forms of the same particle structure. Geometers call mirror-image forms *enantiomorphs* and if their left and right — handedness is a result of opposite atomic charges then the mirror characters in our narrative must decline an embrace and avoid any contact as this would result in an immediate annihilation.”

The Machine: The bad old songs, the bad, wicked dreams — let’s bury them in a coffin larger than the Great Tun of Heidelberg, on a bier longer than the Bridge at Mainz – ask me a question Writer.

Jack: These visitors from the present, these wicked dreams, can we bury the present here in the past?

The Machine: Writer did nature betray you?

Jack: No, I felt that the principle of its devastation was in me. It was only lacking for a great iris of fire to emerge from me to give its value to what exists. How beautiful everything becomes in the light of fire!

The Machine: It is true Writer that you, like Breton deal in fiction but as you know the Devil claims the only thing, which does not burn, is a manuscript — a tracery of lies is sacred to some. Bury them Writer, bury them, but where will you leave these fictional creatures Writer, in which terminal narrative will they be abandoned?

Jack: We’ll visit the deserted banquet scene in Dickens’ “Great Expectations” — these characters will be made to support the fabric of the wedding dress, which at the moment is held in place by the forces of gravity alone. And there they will wait quietly with Miss Havisham, until the Bridegroom arrives. In each trembling hand, the brittle fabric of years will crumble. Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.

The Machine: So will you be unburdened Writer – your mirrors will be still — what will you do next, do next?

Jack: Back, If only I could go back, gladden my heart, be relieved of my anguish, and be happy and free — I would grasp my double by the hand and embrace.

The Machine: No Writer, No, even Schumann will tell you no. To embrace your double will produce no happy resolution, it is a union without issue, to take your double by the hand is to enter the void — the death of time. For now, we see through

a glass darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

Jack: Then I shall leave the shadows leave them in the cold with all the other fiction particles and go home now. The rushing, roaring wheel of time, you that measure eternity; shining spheres in the vast universe, you that encircle our earthly sphere — pause, eternal creation; enough of becoming, let me be!!! Now, can I go home?

The Machine: No Writer you live in the frozen time of a Leningrad you cannot leave and beware the Queen of the past. Joseph Stalin, do you know Joseph Stalin, yes Joseph Stalin who lives in the past forever and eats bread at fifty kopecks a kilo, Comrade?

Jack: It will warm, like Brahms, like Brahms I speak with the tongues of men and angels, I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge and I tell them this cold Leningrad of the past will warm, the Devil will burn all that is not fiction, all that is called true will burn on a pyre and the price of bread will rise, will sky-rocket as its availability diminishes Comrade the new Leningrad will be abandoned to the cruelty of laissez faire. It will be a warmer place.

The Machine: Supply and Demand, Writer, the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Today, though, the Dollar's pinned poetry down. Plundering, grabbing, pilfering, with Broadway slouched on for a legal crown, steps Capital, His Imperial Filthiness.

The Machine: So you will stay Writer, burn the present to keep the apartment warm and beware the Queen of the past, Stalin, did you know Joseph Stalin, Stalin lives to play in the past forever. He loves to whisper, cunning and quiet, in all the cities and townships, Tsss gentlemen; they've landed in the middle of some kind of hardships. No doubt, about it the sodden ground steams like hot stew poor comfort in the wet. What do you see Writer?

Jack: In the Semi-dark, the workers chew the bread like stuff they get. Yet still their whisper one can hear, though loud the rain-drops fall — There'll be a Garden City here with lights and flowers and Un-rationed bread for all, for all.

The Machine: Look again Writer, look into the mirror Writer — What do you see?

Jack: The writer is alone.... A late evening in the future. Front centre a small table, the two drawers of which open towards the audience. Sitting at the table facing front, i.e., across from the drawers, the Writer. Rusty black trousers too short for him.

Rusty black sleeveless waistcoat, four capacious pockets. Heavy silver watch and chain. Grimy white shirt open at neck, no collar. Surprising pair of dirty white boots, size ten at least, very narrow and pointed. White face, purple nose. Disordered Grey hair. Unshaven. Very near sighted, but un-spectacled. Hard of hearing. Cracked voice. Distinctive intonation. Laborious walk. On the table, a tape-recorder with microphone and a number of cardboard boxes containing reels of recorded tapes. Table and immediately adjacent area in strong white light. Rest of stage in darkness.

Let's quit!

The Machine: You want to quit?

Jack: Yes

The Machine: Goodbye writer, let's talk soon.



Chapter 9.



*Vices and Virtues, the sons of mortals
bear in their breasts mingled;
No one is so good that no failing attends him,
nor so bad as to be good for nothing.*

Sæmundr Sigfússon

The screen flickers out and—the rotary cranking of the MRI machine winds down the harmonic scale and becomes mute. Jack releases a long breath as the platform begins to move and feels his entire being slump. His feet emerge from the maw of the tunnel, and as his head appears the green gowns swarm around him, lifting away the festoon of wires and peeling off electrodes. Once the harness of cables is gone they wipe the electrode jelly from his scalp and chest. Finally they unbuckle the restraints and slide him gently onto a waiting gurney. He is off again, counting the corridor ceiling lights en-route to his room — he convinces himself that from now on everything will work out as the ceiling light tally is exactly the same count as on the outward journey — all life is math he thinks.

An almost imperceptible nudge — finally flight Delta-1951, bound for London Heathrow, pushes back from the jetway — Jack settles down in his seat, rolling the soft foam ear-plugs into tight cones before inserting them into his ear canals. He enjoys the sensation of slight pressure as the foam expands, relegating the clamour of the cabin to a low murmur. He pushes the heels of his hands firmly into his eye sockets for twenty seconds until his minds-eye is filled with murky blue shapes that slide across his interior view — he will focus upon these, convinced that he can control the pulsations of the patterns. Breathe in, one to five; hold one to five; breathe out one to five — repeat continually as the engines increase in pitch. The tug has been de-coupled and the plane begins to taxi toward the runway. Jack is quite oblivious to the chatter of the flight attendants who are presumably acting out the drama of a mid-Atlantic engine failure. They will be calmly donning the single-use life jackets, preparing to jettison the emergency exits before hurtling down the inflatable escape-slides into the fathomless green of that cold ocean. Jack concentrates on the morphing patterns that dance behind his tightly closed eyelids, well aware that no-one has ever

survived such an incident. As Delta-1951 picks up speed and the nose-wheel lifts off Jack slips into a deep slumber — his technique never fails.

Jack is walking across a greensward bounded by a high sandstone wall, beyond which rises a profusion of massive Eucalyptus trees which almost obscure the spire of a small church. He passes between the stone columns and their ornate wrought-iron gates to enter the chaos of an unkempt cemetery, where the buttressed roots of ancient trees heave aside marble sarcophagi. The blank eyes of fallen angels, their wings clipped and their noses broken, return Jack's gaze as he moves deeper into this place of no returns. Impaled in granite slabs, two ships anchors hold fast the graves of poor souls lost at sea; standing between these moorings, Jack pauses to read the inscription of a modest headstone — Eliza Emily Donnithorne, born Cape of Good Hope, 1821 - departed this life 20th May 1886, Newtown.

"You've come to pay your respects to Miss Havisham young man!" Startled Jack wheels around to find an elderly gentleman, in a shabby outfit, smiling at him gently. "Oh I beg your pardon I trust I did not surprise you — a Dickens fan I imagine?" An uncomfortable sensation creeps over Jack — suddenly he is back in the hospital and Dr Saneev Bhaskar is applying his impeccable logic to the art of memory — the MRI machine rattles in a swirl of electrons and the words suddenly find purchase in his mind:

We'll visit the deserted banquet scene in Dickens' "Great Expectations" — these characters will be made to support the fabric of the wedding dress, which at the moment is held in place by the forces of gravity alone. And there they will wait quietly with Miss Havisham, until the Bridegroom arrives. In each trembling hand, the brittle fabric of years will crumble. Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.

Jack can smell the rankness of the room, the heavy gloom of decades of dust and the tracery of spider webs that festoon the mummified figure that sits surveying this landscape of decay. A slight movement in the semi-darkness and he freezes, two other human forms stand behind the corpse, both as rigid as statues, in their hands the crumbling fabric of Miss Havisham's bridal train. Jack edges back, slowly and silently, then upon reaching the street door, he quietly slips the chain lock and flees into the bright sunlight.

The old man clears his throat and Jack is once again standing in the sunlit graveyard watching his companion wave a finger at the inscription on the weathered

gravestone “Buried with her father you see, poor thing, never married, betrothed but on the day her beau never turned up — jilted her. Eliza never recovered, locked herself away at home, front door ajar, just in case he changed his mind, but all the same on a latch-chain, no-one saw her for thirty years, a hermit for whom hope was a stranger. When she passed away they found her wearing her faded and brittle wedding gown, the house full of dust and the table still set with the uneaten wedding feast — all decayed to dust, much like her poor soul.”

The old man looks into Jack’s eyes, all the while smiling sadly, “Two of my sons lived here for a very long time you know and I always regret that I never made the long journey from London to visit them, but of course we did correspond. It was Edward who recounted the sad story of Miss Eliza’s to me — yes sad indeed.” A pause and then he continues “Young man, a word of advice if I might be so presumptuous — you might reconsider consigning your protagonists to a less terminal fate, for you know that bitterness is the cancer of the soul!”

The old man lightly touches Jack on the forearm, then turns to wander through the tangled undergrowth, past a row of frozen angels and soon he disappears from view.

“Sir, sir” Jack’s forearm is being gently shaken, he looks up, attempting to focus, “A drink sir?” An attractive young woman with a dark blue jacket and striped neck-scarf reveals a perfect set of American orthodontic work as she beams down at the groggy passenger. “Oh please” croaks Jack “Cognac please” “Up or over sir?” “Cognac, always up, no ice thanks.” The Stewardess pours Jack enough cognac to tranquillise a horse, and passes him a little tray with a package of peanuts “Enjoy.”

Jack peers down at the mountain ranges of cloud that spread to the horizon and wonders how it would be to live up here in a world where it never rains, and where the stars are so close you can almost touch them, but it’s all a conjuring act, sooner or later he knows that he must come down to earth, preferably gently.

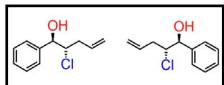
He is fixated by the her hair — he stands awkwardly at a distance from Natalie, lost for words and fearful of the terrible things he might blurt out in frustration but thankfully the hair has temporarily derailed him. Yet another French word insinuates its way into his thoughts to join the triumvirate that already defines his patchy memory; *Déjà vu*; *Presque vu* and *Jamais vu* — Jack had read about this newcomer *Méconnaissance* at art-school but until now it has simply been an abstract idea. Today as he looks at Natalie’s hair-style the word is made palpable— he no longer recognises her. After all those years, after all those epithets, declaring them to be the ideal couple, he just cannot accept that the person standing at an embarrassed distance

from him is Natalie. New hair, new clothes, a new house she tells him — and a new partner — Jack blinks and bites his lower lip.

He loses concentration worrying that he might fall prey to the *Miss Havisham effect*, and give into painful longings for his lost love and transform his turbulent emotions into a physical and psychological addiction — pleasure derived from pain — these terrifying thoughts are brought to an abrupt end by the sound of a truck horn. The hairdo says “Bye Jack” and before he can respond she leaves him standing alone in the front garden of what was until recently the family house — he is certain that the departing creature is some form of simulation, a copy, a *Doppelgänger*.



Chapter 10.



A gay and wonderful discovery

Robert Oppenheimer

The house is gloomy, the lights struggle to ward off the pale autumnal afternoon that is already turning cold. Jack looks around at the remaining furniture, deemed to be his, obviously — the work benches, the less than comfortable chrome and leather chairs and the odd Turkish carpet. These things are familiar, a little too familiar, almost tiresome, they are not helping Jack get his feet back on the ground.

Jack tries to re-construct the room as it should be, forcing his imagination to place a sofa over the rectangle of dust on the floor and hanging a painting over the slightly brighter square on the wall opposite. But once he has established one or two objects in their correct position they begin to float away each time he attempts to add another — nothing here has a mind to remain constant. Strangely Natalie's double has left the kitchen virtually untouched and Jack sets the kettle to boil as the radio fills the room with the ever stable tones of the BBC World Service — an acoustic beacon that has accompanied Jack wherever he goes.

Jack perks up, *Science in Action* is about to go to air. Sitting on a rickety kitchen chair, sipping strong tea from his favourite chipped mug, he allows himself to drift into another world, a world of Enantiomorphs, literally *opposite forms* the presenter tells him. As Jack listens he looks down at his hands, virtually identical in structure, each with a thumb and four fingers — incredibly similar but of course not identical, in fact mirror images, that simply cannot be superimposed. He looks up at the radio as the presenter launches into a complicated explanation.

“Isomers are substances that have molecules composed of exactly the same atoms, but with these atoms linked together in structures that are topologically quite different. Stereoisomers are isomers that are identical even in topological structure, but, owing to the asymmetric nature of this structure, they come in mirror-image pairs. Most substances that occur in living organisms are stereo-isometric with

remarkable physical characteristics displayed between left and right-handed configurations.”

The hair on Jacks arms begin to bristle and he feels a slight drop in his skin temperature, Dr Saneev’s *Déjà vu* creeps over him. The programme continues.

“In 1957 two Chinese-American scientists Tsung Dao Lee and Chen Ning Yang, received the Nobel Prize for theoretical work that led to the *gay and wonderful discovery*, to use Robert Oppenheimer’s phrase, that some elementary particles are asymmetric. It now appears those particles and their oppositely charged; anti-particles are like stereoisomers, and nothing more than mirror image forms of the same particle structure. Geometers call mirror-image forms *enantiomorphs* and if their left and right — handedness is a result of opposite atomic charges then the mirror characters in our narrative must decline an embrace and avoid any contact as this would result in an immediate annihilation.”

Jack begins to wonder what might happen if the real Natalie, wherever she is, encounters her very convincing copy — would they simply disappear in a cloud of vapour leaving no residue, or would their meeting be marked by a violent explosion, scattering blobs of cellular material into the atmosphere? Would they rush together, creating an immense impact, like the powerful attraction of two opposite magnetic poles — or by contrast would they be rebuffed by the equally powerful force of two similar magnetic poles? “And what about me” Jack mumbles to himself.

He can almost see the other room; even less furniture than here, he shivers, it’s like an ice-box in there. He stares at the face in the mirror, a haggard unshaven face with pale grey-blue eyes and he recalls the words “The surface of the mirror lies at a point between our heartbeats, separating the object from the subject with rigidly equivalent angles of incidence and reflection — and beyond that icy skin, a virtual object, together with a new phenomena, a new self as virtual subject.” Jack’s breath clouds the frigid surface of the mirror and his double disappears — once again he is alone in a foreign place, alone with his new self.

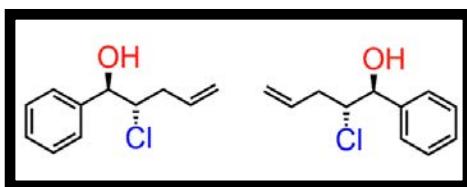
Wrapping himself in a grey woollen blanket Jack picks up his tin mug and shuffles from his room along the dimly lit corridor to the communal kitchen. The atmosphere is a haze of rancid sausage and boiling kale — Jack nods at the gaggle of portly older ladies who are peering into boiling cauldrons, when not eyeing him with suspicion. Their sleeves are rolled up to their elbows and in their meaty hands each of them brandishes an immense wooden spoon, heavy enough to stun a bear. One of the

kindlier matrons gestures to the Samovar which contains an endless supply of stewed tea.

If he is lucky someone may offer him half a sugar cube, most likely in an effort to placate the troubled spirits that obviously inhabit his lost soul. He has appeared out of thin air, his command of Russian is virtually nonexistent and worst of all he is completely disoriented and appears to have lost his memory. Why the housing-clerk dumped him into a six square metre room in this particular *kommunalka* nobody knows — now they just have to put up with him.

Jack nods and smiles feebly then shuffles back to his room, hands clasping the hot mug. Sitting on a wooden stool Jack feeds small splinters of wood into the stove and tries to warm himself. The fire is a failure, creating only a cloud of acrid smoke, Jack climbs under the blanket of the day bed, and coughs himself to sleep.

In the distance Jack can seem someone vaguely familiar walking along Ligovsky Avenue, the man stops in front of the Moscow Station, to take in the view of its neo-classical facade and clock-tower, all set aglow in the morning sunlight. Jack quickens his pace, catches up with the fellow and taps him on the shoulder, the man spins round and grins “Ah so you have finally caught up with me — a lucky encounter for you indeed.”



Chapter 11.



*Huginn ok Muninn
fljúga hverjan dag
Jörmungrund yfir;
óumk ek of Huginn,
at hann aftr né komi-t,
þó sjámk meir of Muninn.**

Poetic Edda Grímnismál

Hamingja.

“Lucky indeed; I thought that you had run out on me for good” Jack replied. “Nah, would I ever do that Jack, it’s just that all of this commotion with your wife is such a bore — and frankly that place — what do you call it, that *kommunalka*, has such an awful smell, I just desperately needed some fresh air.”

Jack gently pulls his *Hamingja* by the elbow toward the entrance to the Moscow Station — the two pass through the arched entrance and straight into a well appointed bar, full of polished wood and brass trim. Jack waves two fingers at the barman who, in an instant, arrives with strong liquor on a silver tray — in short order Jack waves his fingers again. The reunion is a roaring success, his luck is more than happy to hang around and promises that things will get better, in fact, much better and he vows that he will never run out on Jack again — the deal is signed and sealed.

Jack orders a final round and by the time he is ready to saunter home he can barely stand. He looks down at the table and counts six glasses — no wonder. But as luck would have it, the day is beautiful, he is in no hurry and in this city being tipsy is certainly not a crime.

Jack rouses himself, the radio is still rambling on — something complicated about the Unification of Germany and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Jack’s head is throbbing and his bones are stiff. The wooden chair creaks as he pulls himself upright

to survey the kitchen, he sniffs, not a trace of cabbage, or sausage and certainly no grandmothers with spoons the size of shovels.

He flips the switch, silencing the ever reasonable and balanced voice of the BBC and heads for the couch to sleep. Jack feels strangely optimistic for the future.

Fylgja.

The starlings are flocking noisily to roost in the lime trees that line the street, their iridescent forms sparkling in the late afternoon light. Jack momentarily fuses their presence with the figure who is standing on his doorstep — her hair the same dark glossy hue as the cloud of wings. An old flame — the heat never quite extinguished. She enters the house, her petite frame mantled by an invisible energy that excites Jack, as much as it makes him apprehensive. They sit quietly facing one another, neither pressed to make small-talk. The room gradually settles into an equilibrium as they sip an Islay single-malt that he knows is her favourite.

Julia reaches into her handbag and produces a small box, “Jack, if you don’t mind I would like to read your Tarot.” Jack hesitates for a moment before he realises that the question is rhetorical and nods in agreement. They both settle next to one another on the rug as Julia shuffles the deck — Jack is curious but at the same time sceptical — although he accepts that this is an important part of Julia’s world and he has always trusted her intuition.

One by one the cards fall into sequence; The three of swords; The five of Pentacles — Julia turns to look carefully at Jack; The Tower. Julia suddenly shakes her head and quickly sweeps up the cards, sliding them back into the deck. “What happened?” Jack asks, knowing nothing of the symbolism. “Nothing Jack, I don’t think I shuffled the pack enough, let’s try again.”

Julia lays down the image of a man, lying face down with ten swords plunged into his back; then a knight mounted on a white horse — he is shrouded in a black robe, and carries a black banner emblazoned with a white rose, his face is skeletal. Next a horned creature, sprouting bat-like wings, a symbol that even Jack recognises as the Devil. Again Julia snatches up the three cards “No good Jack, I think that I should leave,” she looks nervously around the room “There is bad energy here Jack you shouldn’t live here any longer.”

To Jack the cards are just a parlour game, they mean nothing to him but to see Julia alarmed is another matter. He gently holds her by the shoulders, fixes her gaze

and asks her to stay, to put the cards away and just sit with him, sit with him and talk — just no seances. Jack pours her more of the other kind of spirit, a spirit that reeks of the earth and tastes like fire — Julia relents, puts her arms around him and kisses his cheek.

Jack and Julia sit for hours on the couch, as he falteringly pieces together what he can recall of the recent past, the chain of physical events and his more elusive emotional journey. “But the dreams Jack, the mysterious folder, and the phantom characters, that is the real story, that is the real you — what happened in Chicago, and what Natalie did when she went camping, who cares, they are just surface details.” Jack in his earnest way has never considered his dreams, or perhaps his delusions, as more important than the objective world around him — but perhaps he should.

The bottle from Islay is finally empty — their thoughts lucid and their tongues loose. Julia pulls back from Jack, announcing with a serious expression “Let me have a good look at you Jackson.” Jack sits up straight and attempts a serious demeanour “Okay tell me what you can really see!”

Julia turns towards him but her eyes are focussed far away. The air on her skin cools suddenly and around her the room is filled with the rhythm of beating wings. There, just above Jack’s shoulder, a large Raven is about to settle. Jack sits relaxed and oblivious as the glossy creature grips his pullover with its long talons, bobbing its beak and croaking into Jack’s ear. The Raven takes to the air, flies a circuit of the room and then lands back on Jack’s other shoulder, chattering into his right ear. Then with a loud crow launches itself toward Julia — she feels the rush of air as the bird skims past her head and is gone. Julia blinks, and shakes herself as if waking from a daydream. “Well?” asks Jack.

“You are going to be all right Jack, all I can say is that you have a strong spirit inside you and it will guide you — always.” “Oh come on Julia what is it that you can see?” “Jackson — no, that’s all I am going to tell you — just trust me — whiskey?” “Sorry it’s all gone Jules.” “Well, Jack, it’s time to sleep, you know even old flames give off some warmth.”

Hamr.

So Jack has put the bit between his teeth — working each day in the parallel universe that is his studio, until he returns to the daily schedule of his children’s world. The endless rounds of after-school sports practice, choir practice, not to forget, the mild anxiety caused by his inability to help out with their maths homework — always a foreign language to Jack. Both his son Llwyd and his younger daughter

Jessica are turning out to be real troopers, pitching in with the household chores and only occasionally complaining about the lack of a TV in the house.

Jack and Jessica sit together at the kitchen table, laughing as they share memories. Jessica teasing Jack about all the times she was dragged along to help install sculpture projects — “Art slaves” is Jessica’s term for her in-depth cultural education. Jessica smiles as she looks around the old house, now totally transformed — full of light, full of books and music, but still no TV “There’s always the BBC World Service” jokes Jack “I know just about everything that’s happening in Karachi and Istanbul, ‘tho of course Clapham and Birmingham are another matter.”

Jessica scrutinises Jack as he pours her more tea “Dada, you know you’ve really not changed a bit since I was a kid — you’ve still got that thick mop of hair, your eyes still sparkle — maybe you have put on a bit of weight, but not much — how have you managed to stay the same for so long?” Jack shrugs in a sheepish way — of course he still thinks of himself as only twenty-eight years old, which is about the same age as Jessica. “Jess isn’t it all a matter of relative viewpoint? When you were an infant of twelve months I was thirty years old — so thirty times older than you. Now you are twenty-eight and I am fifty-eight — so that makes me only about twice as old as you — so from my viewpoint it is you who have changed dramatically, from an infant to an elegant young lady, funny isn’t it!” “Yeah and I’m just a bit taller than you now Dada” grins Jessica “But somehow even though we grow we still seem to carry our appearance with us, do you think that ever really changes?”

Jack doesn’t answer for a moment, he is drifting in the fug of a smoke filled in apartment in downtown Chicago. Slumped in an old armchair across the room is his buddy Ed, his pupils dilated as he tries to focus on blowing smoke rings whilst pretending to listen to Jack as he rambles on about incomprehensible Norse concepts of being, about shape shifters and werewolves.

“Jess that’s just the packaging, the outward form, and anyway it’s mostly the face that we recognise, that’s the forensic bit, a huge chunk of our visual cortex is devoted to faces — necessarily so, as we are social monkeys after all! The shell can change; the shape can change — and some believe that the very canny or the very evil can change in an Un-natural way.” “Oh, come on Dada you don’t seriously think that’s possible!” Jack smiles “I don’t know, I’m neither very canny nor very evil.”

The kitchen door opens nosily announcing Llwyd, his tall blond frame, all muscle and bone, clad in blue work-overalls, his muddy boots dangling from on hand. “Hei Sis, hei Dada,” and pulling a large brown bottle from his duffle-bag he takes a seat at

the table. Jack tousles his son's hair and quickly hands him an opener before the lad rips the cap off, either with his teeth or by gouging the edge of the table. Llwyd concentrates on drinking for a while before he is able to join in the conversation — as usual it has been a hard day at the construction site. Jack watches his son's Adams-apple rise and fall with each swig from the long-neck and realises that it is not Llwyd's outward shape that he has ever paid much attention to — it is some other force, something deeper that seeps through the shell of his appearance that Jack responds to.

Hugr:

He burps unceremoniously, the bottle now drained, and sits looking very pleased with himself — work done, bottle done, home and dry. “Dada believes that you are probably a shape-shifter Llwyd, since you are probably very evil deep down” offers Jessica as an opening gambit. “Do you Old-Man, well you’re a pretty shifty one yourself — always changing direction and up to no good, no doubt.” This is accompanied by an almost gentle punch to Jack’s left arm. “Whoa big boy, don’t break Dada otherwise I can’t cook you supper, and what’s with the Old-Man routine — you’re almost as old as I am, well in terms of ratio — your scientist sister will explain.”

Jack busies himself with preparing supper as the siblings engage in their normal cheeky banter, the girl armed with a logic as sharp as a razor and the boy street savvy, equipped with an arsenal of witticisms capable of defeating any assault. Jack enjoys the play of words knowing that neither will bear down upon the other.

Jessica returns to the shapeshifting theme and asks Llwyd if he thinks that Jack has changed much since they were young, “Well compared to me he’s got a lot smaller and a bit fatter” he says grinning “No really he’s the same Dada, too smart for his own good, same horrible sense of humour and the same rotten vegetarian cooking. But actually Sis I don’t think appearances are the real measure of a person. We all know that people slowly change in appearance — sometimes dramatically and suddenly — but the important thing about a person, what makes them a person, is what is inside, it’s their character and spirit.”

“So that’s how you choose your girl-friends” counters Jessica as quick as a flash, “Very sophisticated, I’m impressed.” Unfazed her brother responds in kind “Sis, I have a very refined understanding of character which I combine with other attributes that I find personally attractive.”

Jessica sets the table whilst Llwyd takes a shower and as the meal arrives at the table Jack announces solemnly that, “No animal was harmed in the creation of this meal — you may eat without guilt or remorse.” Simultaneously both children sigh and roll their eyes to demonstrate their mock solidarity with their father.

After supper the conversation again returns to the children’s early school days and Jessica wants to know how Jack now feels about the separation with her mother. Jack is mildly surprised at her question, as in the past both children have been averse to any such discussion — Jack imagined that the children always feared an eruption of anger and hostility. “Well, I guess that at the time I tried to hide my anger and grief from you both, but I know that I didn’t always do such a good job of keeping a lid on my emotions.” Jack thought quietly for a moment “At the beginning it was very stressful for me and I couldn’t think straight — but then I had to find a way out of the mess and so I decided to do two things. Firstly to make sure that you both had a solid foundation here at home and that secondly I had to channel all my chaotic emotional energies into a creative work, hence that old Opera.”

“That was a long time ago Dada, and you know that we have never sat together and listened to it together — how about now?” Jack looks at Jessica quizzically “Are you serious — I don’t think you’ll like it much and to be frank it still stirs up pretty heavy feelings in me.”

Both children nod their heads “Come on Old-Man, I’ll get a box of tissues, you get the CD.”

Jack sits between his two children on the couch, a bottle of whiskey and three glasses set on the low table before them.

From the speaker the voice of an engineer “Ident, this is *Semi-Automatic Writing; An Opera for Human and Machine Voices*, produced by The Listening Room for ABC Radio National,” a metallic click follows, then a piercing tone that runs for thirty-seconds. Jack apologises “Sorry about that guys, it’s the old master CD with all the studio stuff still included.”

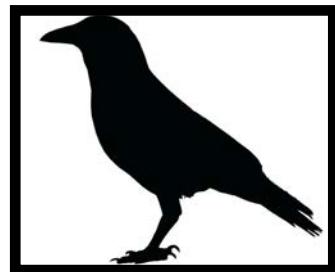
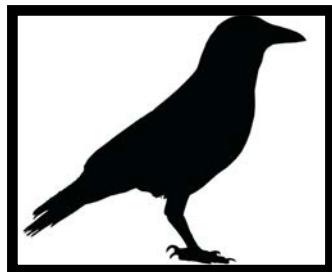
Then the three of them begin their journey:

“The writer is alone.... A late evening in the future. Front centre a small table, the two drawers of which open towards the audience. Sitting at the table facing front, i.e., across from the drawers, the Writer. Rusty black trousers too short for him. Rusty black sleeveless waistcoat, four capacious pockets. Heavy silver watch and chain.

Grimy white shirt open at neck, no collar. Surprising pair of dirty white boots, size ten at least, very narrow and pointed. White face, purple nose. Disordered Grey hair. Unshaven. Very near sighted, but Un-spectacled. Hard of hearing. Cracked voice. Distinctive intonation. Laborious walk. On the table, a tape-recorder with microphone and a number of cardboard boxes containing reels of recorded tapes. Table and immediately adjacent area in strong white light. Rest of stage in darkness.”

*

*Huginn and Muninn
fly each day
over the spacious earth.
I fear for Hugin,
that he come not back,
yet more anxious am I for Munin.*



Endnote.

Well, as they say — a bumpy ride, but as suggested in the Prologue, this is a true story and they tend to be less realistic than fiction.

To complete the circle, a few words about the opera *Semi-Automatic; An Opera for Human and Machine Voices* that was commissioned by the Listening Room, an arts unit of Radio National of the Australian Broadcast Corporation (ABC) in 1990.

<https://soundcloud.com/drsonique/01-semi-automatic-wr>

The libretto was developed (or was it co-created) with an early Artificial Intelligence text programme on an ancient Mac Classic. The software relied upon a Question and Response routine to establish a database of key-words and content and I adopted a counter strategy of feeding it extant texts to continually throw it off track, hence the extracts from Mayakovsky and German Lieder , etc.

To match this synthetic approach the sound track was composed, in collaboration with my friend Rhys Rees, on a Fairlight CMI series III to simulate a real orchestra (the Fairlight was a sampling Computer Music Instrument, designed in Sydney during the early 1970s and is by now a museum piece). All of the other elements were recorded in studio. The two real (human) singers represent the writer (Anne Fisch) and the Machine (Clive Birch) together with the ABC's regular classical music presenter Christopher Laurence (also human) who stepped up to the plate, hamming-up the presenters role for the erstwhile debut live performance.

About the Author.

Nigel Helyer (a.k.a. DrSonique) grew up in a small village on the Sussex-coast in England. He trained in sculpture at the Liverpool College of Art; undertook his masters research in Environmental Media at the Royal College of Art, London and gained his doctorate in sound-art from the University of Technology Sydney.

Nigel is an independent artist with an international reputation for large-scale sound-sculpture installations; environmental artworks; museum inter-actives and new media projects that focus on our relationship with the natural world. He lives with his wife Cecelia Cmielewski in Jervis Bay (New South Wales, Australia) and together they share a crew of four children and five grandchildren.

“Semi-Auto” is an imprint of *Sonic Objects; Sonic Architecture*.



