



karl finch

livorno and other travels

KARL FINCH

# **Livorno and Other Travels**

Published in 2016

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## Late

Ah, I slept in  
through the end of the world.  
Nothing changed, although  
now the sky is greyer than it was before  
(or maybe just grey in a new way) and  
my neighbours have died  
and gotten up again.

I watch them from the dark corners  
of my windows. Every day  
they're a little more decayed,  
desperation hanging in the air  
with the stench, unchanging  
in the changed world, like me.

I slept through all of it—luckily  
it was all I ever dreamt about.  
I still dream, recently of a man  
and a woman in a field, tilled but empty,  
glowing in the hazy evening light, and they stare  
at the sun, a sun I can't see.

The silence is hard to describe  
    (quiet is precious until you have it in abundance  
        (but then so is everything)).

It's worst at night when it becomes  
some unheard soundtrack to the uncertainty,  
and outside  
the wind waits for companion noise.  
The shapeless shadows moving just out of sight  
let it down.

We clung to habit the most out of everything.  
We still work, though the job market  
somehow got worse, and now the commute is  
a manoeuvre around restless corpses instead of traffic.  
I took the only job I could get:

    HUMAN PROP. NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY.

Now I work for a girl who talks to a camera.  
Somewhere out there is an audience  
that buys the designer clothes I wear  
from the official sponsors of Absurdity.  
I just stand, shifting

occasionally like the dead  
before the cold eye of the camera lens  
as she dispenses profitable nonsense.

We're all alive. Can you believe it?  
Shaken snow globes look just the same  
when everything has settled.  
It numbs me in this special way  
that frames my mannequin's face.  
The girl's inane chatter is a nice change from  
the silence,  
cruelly pleasant.

I'll never sleep in again.

## Samsara

I've done this before.

Well, I think I have. Maybe it's a recurring dream. I stand back and look at myself from the outside. Like a dog in a space capsule orbiting Earth, I drift, watching a world that looks so strange to me despite belonging to it.

I can hear her impatience growing, a dark vine creeping up a crumbling wall. Her voice becomes muffled as if heard through static, but the resentment rings clear. It's rain falling on a tin roof, and I sit underneath listening to it in the dark of my mind until it becomes a pall of white noise.

I've let it come to this again. I wonder if I do it out of some masochistic tradition, because however cold it is, familiarity is just that. The cynicism chews at me until my blank face creases with a smile, and it only inflames her more. I smile because it's all I can do.

Some people believe that we repeat the same cycle of living and suffering until we can finally break free of it through enlightenment. They call it *samsara*. I'm not convinced—I'm not a spiritual person—but I know I'm

repeating something, more than a mistake and more than a memory.

It's not funny, she says, barely holding herself back. I know it's not, I tell her, but the last of my sincerity has been left behind, the way back locked. I search for any words I might have left, but they're scattered, without meaning.

I'm the soldier trying to invade Russia in the winter. I freeze in trenches of distrust, waiting for a battle I somehow already know cannot be won. You, you are Shiva's own daughter, terrifying and hungry for chaos, yet I end up worshipping you. Of course, I'm not a tormented soul and you're not a cruel goddess. All the same, I'm the one gripping a rifle, finger locked corpse-tight around trigger. If only it were about martyrs and villains.

It's an old struggle, the lion cubs clawing and chewing, tumbling over one another in the biting-hot savannah dust until the sun sinks away, along with the conflict that in its moment seems eternal like that sharp horizon. Wounds are licked to make way for new ones. Happiness needs suffering just like dawn needs night.

Until enlightenment, it'll just have to do.



## Clock Says Four

Come on, mate.

Come on and

have another drink

and I'll fight you.

I'll fight you. We can fight

just for laughs.

I've had plenty,

too many,

but not enough.

It's never enough.

You got the time?

(My phone's dead.)

Can you read that clock there?

What's it say?

Four? Five?

Doesn't matter—

the buses have stopped.

They don't go to the place

I need to be  
                  anyway.  
I can't afford a taxi so I  
          think I'll just walk.  
Home is as good a place  
          to be as any, but  
          the ground doesn't look bad either.

I heard about this guy  
          once who saw a group of kids,  
          went up and just jumped them.  
He woke up in hospital  
          with a fractured skull  
          and a smile on his face.  
Something about that  
          I like. I don't know why.  
I think he remembered what it's like to  
          be alive.

I just want to feel  
          the taste of blood in my mouth. I'm not  
a violent person. I just,

I just,  
(I mean, I have an idea, but)  
I don't know  
what it means to be a man.

If you find  
out, let me know.

I say because I feel, but if it is  
then isn't the feeling alone enough?  
I tried saying nothing and realised  
that the words were where I put it all.

## The Catalyst

It started about eleven months ago.

She was the one who approached me. I knew I'd made something of a name for myself since I began in the profession, but I wasn't expecting anyone like her to be interested, let alone the one to seek me out. I was swept up by the opportunity, seized by the thrill of the idea, and I also won't deny that she had a certain charm about her.

The woman was the daughter of a very well-respected man, an aristocrat from a family older than the city itself, and prouder than it, too. He was immensely cultured and influential, a patron of local artisans and companion to royalty. More than any of this, he terrified me.

I knew on the first and only occasion I saw him, marching down the street with the air of an emperor, that he could only be the woman's father. I felt his gaze cut right through me as if I were paper. I feared that he knew immediately and simply by looking in my direction the secret that I could keep from all others, and not just that one but every last lie, deceit, feint, gambit, cunning arti-

fice and subtle sleight of hand that I'd ever been responsible for.

She came to me, already fully aware of what it was I did, perfectly clear as to why she was there and what she needed. This was that rare kind of woman who without fail knew precisely what she wanted, and all that remained was for her to obtain it. We spent many evenings in the back room of my establishment, witness to a candle turning to a misshapen crater of wax, almost as if corrupted by our talk of the wondrous and the arcane, the divine and the salacious, the unknown and the forbidden.

God, of course she had to be wickedly beautiful, all cascading dark curls, sharp grey eyes, and those small, devious lips that could and would turn any and every word into some cruel conspiracy. Although, the attraction—yes, I will admit there was one—was not simply physical. I realised very quickly that even the rest of my life could not possibly be enough time to discover all of this fascinating creature, even if I could allow myself to try.

I was an alchemist, or rather I should say that I claimed to be. Before, I'd been convinced that the entire discipline of alchemy was a strange joke told by madmen

and tricksters, and I am at least one of these. Even those such as myself have been known to be outdo themselves. My work is more than the sum of its parts, after all.

What she asked for was simply too much. Worse than my inevitable failure and worse even than the prospect of her disappointment was whatever unimaginable things her father would surely have done to me. I spent so many restless nights thinking, planning, agonising over the situation, the trap so ingenious that it caught the one who'd laid it. A small part of me desired to bare all to the woman and ask her to come with me. My life had become unbearable.

My only option was to leave her with one last ruse, the very best of this or any other deception, months in the making and sure to confound even the fierce wit of this father and daughter for several more. That would be all the time I needed. I've had to end one existence in order for the next one to begin more times than I can count now. I know that I've lied, but believe me when I say that I'd be pleased to describe every last detail of this plan, my very best, only for once my ego is less important than concealing the terrible truth.

I had my sights set on Prague or perhaps Saint Petersburg, but neither could possibly be far away enough from here after this ploy of mine. I asked of a cartographer the most exotic maps he had in his possession to plot my winding path to safety, my silent slither to freedom. The new colonies over the Atlantic are no place to hide or practise my craft, I know, but perhaps one day they will be. Surely the Orient will suffice. I just hope that there's a land distant and alien enough to separate myself from her, from her father, and from what I've done. All that is left to do is become someone else and see where he ends up.



## Insides

My skin speaks  
to yours as you first brush  
against it, initial strokes  
that turn to motions  
of a knife, testing.  
I notice how firmly  
you grip it, not cautiously  
but ready to sever, to end  
the dangerous experiment.

Feel how my veins  
seem to work faster  
now, before you  
take apart, peel away  
the ribs hiding a heart.  
Do you know that only you  
can see it moving,  
watch it quicken,  
blood pumping,  
rushing through me?

I know the fear  
heard only in your exhalations.  
I see how it keeps to your shadows, but  
out of sight is not  
out of touch.  
This is too much,  
                    too painful,  
but you are compelled.  
I know because  
I am human too.

Look past my eyes  
            —no, deeper—  
where a lifetime lives in a maze,  
and sparks erupt as you  
run along narrow paths, kindling  
fires with soft              footsteps,  
lights                      glowing as you  
touch them like a moth, curious,  
            and like a moth  
you came in darkness.

Those memories of warm evenings  
in never-were places meander like their  
headlights peeking around  
pine trees, pitch-black.

## Some Haiku for a Quiet Friend

We exhale silent  
recitations twisting through  
this friendly night air.

\* \* \*

Your ghostly dancers  
fall up into nothingness  
like rumours, gently.

\* \* \*

You bring summer's swell  
to the year's cooler corners.  
On that cloud I rest.

\* \* \*

Tell me—I forget—  
did we ever see Nepal?  
Was that just a dream?

## The Silent Rain

When did it rain?  
I didn't hear.  
Selfishly, I think  
the drops of water clinging  
to the window came to listen  
to our closed-door conversation,  
not a whisper, but still  
too hushed to hear.

## It Sleeps

Have you ever seen Pripyat in the spring?  
The sun glows  
as only it knows how,  
bold,  
in ignorance trying  
to rouse, evoke  
something out of the forsaken  
ground.

For me it's not  
the concrete sentinels  
and the half-made  
memories still living  
there like hidden scars,  
but that silent struggle  
piercing the cold air.

The snow may melt, but  
the warming earth laid bare  
despises life.

The sky is so clear,  
the quiet simply  
perfect,  
painfully perfect.

It's not a place  
or one that once was,  
but an un-place,  
a void somehow full,  
full of longing.  
It sleeps as if waiting to  
try again.

## Dunedin

Modernity, nervously  
grip the sooty edifice with steel arms  
and glass outfits. Straddle  
wind-rattled closes and bridges  
crossing underworlds, the tangled limbs  
of wild lovers exchanging  
smoky kisses as they writhe, writhe  
in stony bliss upon the heath.

Street becomes river beneath the downpour,  
regular visitor, always startling.  
Weary slabs seem sunken to unseen depths,  
cobble in stubborn formation among  
these old drainpipes, gargling black serpents  
climbing the coarseness like iron vines.

Night: your field of lights collected  
waver as if still only candles, caught  
inside sojourning droplets wishing  
to wait out that sullen half-dawn—uncertainly



dim, eternally grey,  
still like your hilly perches, yet  
ever-moving as the chill  
cutting through them.

A thousand tongues tell  
new travellers the tale  
of the city of stone, stories  
set in forgotten wynds  
and on sleepy old back roads—hazy,  
blurred by drink, coloured by every scent.  
Resident ghosts whisper of pasts  
kept among the rugged pages of sandstone  
volumes in the library maintained  
by every wry smile, each weather-wrought thought.

We move, we sleep  
in the myriad around  
proud crags, earthy throne  
watching over, peeking around  
this corner and that.  
We come and go, near and far

and now back again, knowing  
what but not why. All the same,  
here we are, home.

## Another Round

Your lifeless hand is strangely firm in mine.

*Click.*

Is today the day I get a kiss from those cold lips?

*Click.*

Bitch. All right, all right, I'm done. I know it's wrong. It's not right.

*Click.*

I'm sorry. I just can't seem to help myself. I admit, it's just a game to me.

*Click.*

I fancy my odds.

*Click.*

How about another round?

He's the lad's dad, a guy  
who tried parenting from far away.  
The results weren't reassuring.  
Reason and ego have another wee scuffle.

## Man for No Seasons

I find myself in San Diego, a safe distance from L.A. and that surreal hollowness I find more stifling than the heat. I already miss the open-aired isolation of Alaska, a world away from Texas and yet otherworldly compared to the rest of the country in some oddly similar way—something I'd never admit to any Texan and probably not any Alaskan either.

The money will run out soon, though. I drink from any wealth I might possess like water from a tap. I never learned to handle finances and, never settling down, out of sheer habit treat every advance, paycheck and royalty as my first, or last. I'm all the more aware of it as I try to navigate through the mall and pass by all those seemingly as lost as I am, like peacocks with all the colors of their shopping bags, lurid arrays of feathers. I wonder what kind of bird I look like to them with my rough edges and wandering gazes.

I am a writer by trade, at a point in my life now at which it seems clear that writing is the only thing I can do. Newspaper columns, magazine articles, travel guides,

radio plays, shorts for anthologies, critical essays, lamp-post poetry—everything I can, anything I ought to, I do. Sometimes I worry—foolishly, I know—that I will string together so many meaningless words that I will find myself with nothing to write and will be forced to come up with some convoluted new genre in order to survive.

I return to the motel in an attempt to escape, futile though it may be, as it is still a boat on the open sea for one who cannot stand the water. The unfailing Californian sun finds its way through the shuttered blinds to give the room a burnt brown hue, and so it feels like a cocoon to me. Soon, as for a pupa, it becomes unbearable and I must release myself from it.

Even when I stop at a single place I must encircle it so as not to feel pinned down like an insect by a collector. I drink at a couple of bars I haven't yet visited before quickly tiring of them. Walking down the main street, I feel shuttled as if drifting on through Disneyland, from location to location surrounded by cardboard cut-outs, set pieces, images of manufactured idylls that almost seem to carry price tags. I trudge along the distressingly clean (manicured?) beach, careful with drunken steps not to fill

my shoes with the flawless sand.

I should admit that I drink often, which is to say constantly. I eat only as I need to, having little interest in food. I cannot, even after having traveled for days on end, sleep more than six hours a night. I do not dream, or rather if I do, I cannot distinguish it from what I endearingly refer to as reality. The best understanding I have of that notion I take from what others have told me.

I don't frequent any kind of bar in particular; they are the gas stations and rest stops along the road to anywhere as my last drink fades. Many know better than to engage with me in conversation once they see the look inadvertently asking, *Can you break this spell or are you here to perpetuate it?* This drastically limits one's social life, as what is left in my net are the most curious, unusual and out-of-place characters, food for my soul.

I've met a transgender bank robber from the East Coast (whose drink of choice was a lime vodka). There was the man who'd fled to Canada to avoid the draft, only to enlist as a Mountie (tequila, straight). Most recently was a former bull rider who retired after a shattered hip, a man who insisted his grandfather was the last true cow-

boy (Coors and only Coors).

A fellow I once met on my way somewhere—I can't recall if it was Tulsa or Topeka—had called me a man for no seasons. True, I suppose, because seasons are given to change. I'm a stranger in a strange land, and the two negatives cancel out one another. What I'm left with is an absurd sort of oneness, the only kind I believe it is possible for me to experience in this lifetime, and so I am grateful for it, if begrudgingly so.

I once overheard a man, a psychoanalyst perhaps, explain that the human mind craves the stimulation found in new environments and experiences. For him this meant the importance of vacationing somewhere new each year or to have one's child learn to play a musical instrument.

Myself, I realized then that I had a surplus of this precious stimulation, that my life was a carousel of paint-on smiles at check-in desks, the arid departure lounges of regional airports and miserably familiar bars. It all batters my brain like artillery fire, and so I write incessantly to direct this inflow of reality back out again. Here I am, scrawling this confession of sorts on a series of napkins



in an overly comfortable restaurant as I wait for soup.

To feel stuck in time while never remaining in one place is a bizarre thing I have yet to find the words to describe adequately. I *am* a man for no seasons. It isn't wanderlust that drags me here and there, far away and then back again, and it isn't the promise of work either. What moves me is something as invisible yet pervasive as the wind, to the point that when I feel a gust, I feel it is time to go.

Goodbye, San Diego. I'll see you when I see you.

## Bag of Masks

I carry around a bag of masks,  
careful not to let those  
around me hear the sound  
they make as I move,  
as I saunter or as I sneak.  
The rattle is unsettling  
and calls for the mask  
of reassuring deceit.

I would tell you I have something  
of a talent, unless  
I was wearing a modest mask.  
It becomes a game  
of evasion, manoeuvre,  
that makes a particular mask  
smile with glee,  
a snake's smile.

I can be whoever  
I need to be,

anyone  
you want me to be.  
I can be stony stoicism  
when inside is a state of emergency,  
screaming warzone, glaring abyss.  
My denial shames governments.

There is a face beneath  
all these facades, although  
I'm not sure you'd  
like to see it.  
It's been a long time since  
I saw myself in a mirror, and  
an act is only such  
for so long.

Moving through gardens of thought,  
the grass mentions that you were  
here—not long ago, I heard,  
but it could've been a lifetime.

# Untitled

## I

These streets have  
no names, turns without corners,  
unseen, known like home.  
The only landmarks in these alien parts  
are these familiar footprints I  
come across, treading over  
as if it will provoke  
answers out of the reticent earth  
in this twilight of reason.

Some breed of fear moves  
beneath its midnight pool whose  
ripples I can see, but even now  
sight, out of oath, betrays me.

## II

Here inside the darkened palace, doors  
outnumber keys.

Rising stairs somehow  
descend to places where instinct's broken  
compass knows no north.

Paces whisper down  
the hallway I seem  
to swim along.  
The only light is on  
my back, casting  
the long shadow of  
uncertainty. I recognise it now.  
I've been here before.

All doubts weighed,  
resistance met in kind,  
I found humility in surrender  
as I drifted among liquid hours.

When will I meet myself?

When will I—

I?

When I understood, I laughed.

### III

We left time some way  
back when it slipped from our grasp  
like some plaything  
out of the curious hand of  
a wandering child,  
now out upon the expanse.

Beneath the holographic sky,  
we became ourselves.  
The storm clouds didn't take the stars  
with them when they left.  
Here is infinity.  
Let's take our time.  
As long as the journey lasts,  
it never ends.



## IV

Where did it all begin?  
We've been here so long, though  
the way we came is now hidden  
behind peak and valley, the way out  
over some unmade horizon.  
Between is a fine stroke,  
the halcyon madness  
on a painting without edge or centre,  
the painting we'll never finish.

