Monologues for Actors

from the plays of Steven Dykes

Women (pages 1 – 44)

Men (pages 45 – 61)

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WOMEN

CONTEMPORARY

From *figures*

'*98, a young woman in her 20s, responds to the imminent threat of the Y2K bug, drawing up a list of what she’ll miss as the end of the world nears.*

i know it’s coming / and i’ll be here to see it / all of us will / the craziness / the freaky weather and the planes just falling out of the sky / and the computers like firing missiles when there’s nobody there / like by themselves / um / but still it’s kinda weird / i guess / saying it out loud / um / so hey yeah / i made like a list / wait / i have it wait / yes / uh-huh / things i’ll miss / ok / number one / jo-jo / my cat / tells you something i put her first / um / i’ll miss my mom / and jennifer of course / j d / i’ll miss you jonathan weiss though you never called me after that one time / i’ll miss the lake in summer taking out the boat / like dad did when i was a kid / the bookstore down on maple the coffeshop on third / joyce carol oates and nina simone / ben & jerrys / fredo’s pizza in midtown / the sweater jamie bought me two christmases ago / the bracelet grandma left me / and i read somewhere or someone told me or maybe i just made it up / about this woman who was like a multi-millionaire / and she gave away her fortune to some charity for aids / and i’ll kinda miss that goodness though it’s rare / oh/ and all the chances all my opportunities to come / i’ll miss them too i guess / ok / things i won’t miss / working for the ungrateful sons of bitches at goodman realtors / lucy zebrinski talking endlessly about her implants / won’t miss trying to figure why jonathan weiss is messing with my mind / or the food court at pendleton mall / a lawsuit waiting to happen / won’t miss running into high school friends with nothing new to say / or car pooling / or flossing / or feeling bad in the morning ‘bout the empty ben & jerry cartons and the fredo’s pizza boxes on the couch /
won’t miss finding the right hair colour / or a top goes with these pants / or a suitable use for my mfa like my mom keeps telling me / and most of all i will not miss these final days / this countdown / to armageddon / the time is dragging don’t you think / i wanna get there / like c’mon apocalypse let’s do this thing / hey it’s not like a church thing with me / i’m not into all that stuff like god’s wrath and the afterlife / whatever / it’s not a visitation from above / it’s simply that we’re not cut out to enter in the next millennium / that two thousand simply won’t compute / i find that kinda comforting the end is nigh our number’s up / don’t you? / to know it’s drawing near / the end of time / that the decision’s made for us without us / that machines’ll do the rest / out of our hands sit back and relax / all systems go / let’s get it over with / for good / for good / and it is it is good / no listen / anyone else remember how your mom would always say / said it was our job to be the optimists / it’s us that has the babies sweetheart / us that carries life in here / means we have the hopes of all the race inside us / means we hold the key / said it was our job / to be the optimists / can’t tell you the relief i feel / now that all hope’s gone / now that we’re like you know / lost / sorry mom / can’t keep it sunny side up any longer / and sorry professor whittaker who said my work was / ‘exceptional’ / at the time i thought you were like just trying to get in my pants / but now i look back and i’d like to think i had it in me / now that there’s no chance of realising it / yes i’d like to think i had / potential / like i mattered or i might have mattered / or at any rate i might have not been / entirely / insignificant / at least / so you know / up yours jonathan Weiss / no seriously / i’m like fine with this / and it’s not pessimism / i want to make that clear / it’s the end of hope / that’s different that’s something entirely look it’s bigger that’s all / it’s / white out / it’s / black out / it’s / sleep / i guess / still / i’ll miss old jo-jo that’s for sure

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From *Coming To Our Senses*

**Melissa, an evangelical Christian in her late 20s, responds to a young man’s advances by explaining the nature of her work in the Pro-Life movement.**

On the sidewalk, yes. Well, there are laws to stop us entering the building. We’d stand on the sidewalk, we’d offer counselling, advice, whatever fit the bill. It’s what we do, Tom: spread the word. Persuade them. Why so surprised? Many times it was unfair pressure brought them there. It was the last place they really wanted to be. Oftentimes, we were the first people who’d actually listened to them, who cared enough to talk it through. Hey, we’re not the one’s making money out of these women. It’s the clinics that profit from exploiting them, not us. We tell the truth. Then it’s up to the individual what ‘choice’ she makes. The group was real active on college campuses, too. Still is. High schools sometimes, where the staff are sympathetic. No, it’s not ‘just say no’, there you go again: trivialising it. We’re talking about emotional trauma here. It’s killing these kids. Yes, literally. What, you think that it’s coincidence teenage suicide is through the roof the last ten, fifteen years? Paralleled exactly by the rise in minors having intercourse? You bet I’m serious! They’re using sex to communicate their needs. To define who it is they are. “Who am I? Oh, I’m the girl who sleeps with Scott or Brad or Josh.” And when Scott or Brad or Josh gets what he wants and dumps them, then the lines of communication are cut. Total isolation. “Who am I? Oh, I’m the worthless tramp no one can love.” It’s not all Scott and Brad and Josh’s fault, I’m not saying that, but when it comes to break-ups, it’s so much tougher on the girl, it is! We’re bullied into sex with boys who don’t give a damn about us or themselves. You want me to spout some pseudo-feminist line about sexual liberation or d’you wanna face the truth? Ninth-grade girls don’t carry books to school anymore, they carry condoms and home pregnancy tests. “If I give him want he wants, maybe then he’ll love me too. Put out in the back of daddy’s car and he’ll be mine forever.” And you never recover from that, your self-esteem is shot. Your whole
adult life, you’re repeating the same pattern. My dorm at college, we had girls who had had multiple pregnancies, multiple terminations. All of them filled with this terrible self-loathing. But because they had so little sense of their own worth, they craved any attention they could get. And so back they’d go: to the same destructive situations and meaningless relationships that got them into trouble in the first place. What I’m saying, Tom, in terms maybe a man like you can appreciate, what I’m actually saying is: the sex isn’t any good. How can it be? It’s a barter system, a meat market, it’s ... pornography. You watch it, right? You have watched it, right? Porno, dirty movies, whatever? And it satisfied you? For how long? And you felt empty afterwards, right? Yeah, you did. That’s all it is for these young boys. Sex with these girls is porn. It’s not mutual, it’s not loving, it’s not satisfying, it isn’t even fun. It’s just ... You can laugh all you want but, yes, I think that it is. It’s sin. I think that it’s sinful, yes. The girls feel like crap and the boys, if they feel anything at all, it’s guilt. They’ve got some crying girl plaguing them in the hall. She’s all “confused”, they’re, what, embarrassed in front of their buddies? Next thing, you know, she’s running a bath and slitting her wrists. Yeah, that’s the thing about sin. It’s a real downer.

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2002. North of England. Myrrah, a farmer’s daughter in her 20s, explains the ancient rural means of counting sheep and the cause of her father’s suicide. As she speaks, she counts off the fingers of her hand, rhythmically, to twenty.

Yan. Tan. Tether. Yes? Yan. Tan. Tether. Mether. Pip. Keep counting. Azar. Sazar. Akka. Cotta. Dik. You follow? Yannadik. Channadik. Tetheradik. Metheradik. Bumfit. Yannabum. Channabum. Tetherabum. Metheradam. Jiggit. You see? Yan. Tan. Thether. One two three. My father taught it me. It’s how you count sheep. Traditionally. In the fields, on the hills. Yan. Tan. Tether. Mether. Pip ... When you get to Jiggit you pick up a stone and start again. End of the count, total up the number of stones and multiply by twenty. There’s your flock. Jiggit is a stone. A stone is a score. (smiles) I like it because it’s old. And strange. And familiar. You’ve no right to the words in your mouth, but still you can almost taste those stones. It’s in the blood. In the skin and bone of things. Heather and bracken and hale on the moor. Something worth remembering, because it’s something you can’t forget. (Pause) My father kept me from it. The old way. Kept me from him. No, it’s true. From his life here. As soon as he could send me away to school, he did. My mother’s family paid the fees. Were happy to. They didn’t want me growing up out here, any more than he did. Didn’t want me talking like him, brooding like him. Wanted me away from all that. All the things they felt had killed my mother. The worry, I suppose. This place was only truly mine at Christmas, Easter, the summer holidays. Hands full of straw. Fistfuls of hair. Staring up at the eaves. Blood in my ears. (Pause) I’d just started back at college when Dad ... Michaelmas Term. True to form. He waited till I left. Put everything in order. No loose ends. Left nothing I might possibly dirty my hands with. He wrote he had trouble sleeping. Was still getting up at five thirty to milk cows he no longer had. He’d stand in the yard, listening for some sign of life. The pyres had driven even the birds away. I was well out of it. His letter said. We all were. (Pause) ‘Course, now he can’t stop me from staying. And there’s no going back.
2011, USA. **Debra**, a health care professional in her late 30s, describes the events around the death of her daughter, a specialist in the US military who was about to ship out to Iraq.

When Heather called to say she’d gotten sick … I tell you, Yoyo, was glad. I didn’t tell anybody – least of all Heather, didn’t want her mad at me – but it’s true, when she called to say she’d been transferred from the base to a ward, I was happy. I thought, well, nobody can hurt you now, sweetheart. It was just the flu, she said. But that was enough to mean the company deployed without her. I knew she’d be devastated, not to go, she’d spent so long preparing, worked so hard. And to have her friends head overseas, while she was stuck back here in a hospital bed, I knew that’d be a kinda torture for her. But I was selfish and I didn’t care. I thought, my baby’s sick, praise God - no one’s gonna blow her up in the mid west, no one’s gonna kidnap her, hold her hostage, I won’t watch her blindfold on some videotape on the news, men with masks won’t scream at her in a language she don’t understand, and show off their whaddyoucallem, *machetes* for the camera -

No, I thought, she’s safe. It’s like a weight had lifted, I could breathe. I bought a ticket for that weekend, I was gonna fly out’n bring her home, ‘they let me. The Friday morning I got a call. Heather died of complications in the night. What if … What if I told you, Yoyo, they killed her. The army killed my child. You know the care my Heather took. ‘Bout her health, her diet. Damn it, she was training as a *nurse*, Yoyo. And she loved all that boot camp stuff. Taking on the boys at their own game. She hardly took a sick day in her life. Ran track in high school. She was fitter than I ever was. Fitter than her daddy and he still plays ball. How’s a girl like that wind up dead inside a month? They *injected* her. Vaccinated. Before they post them overseas. The shots they gave her, that’s what killed her. She got sick straight after the inoculation. Her condition could have been brought on by the vaccinations. Million and half people on active duty, all of them vaccinated. Army says one in ten thousand gets a fatal dose, that’s acceptable. But someone loves
that one in ten thousand. Someone loved Heather. *(Pause)* I cursed her. When she called me I was happy in my heart that she was sick. I wanted her home, wouldn’t let her go. So she dies among strangers, instead of with her friends. Instead of people who’d have watched out for her. I had her so young, you know. She was so tiny and I was so damn young. I didn’t know what I was doing, just a kid myself, you know. But I thought I had longer. You know, to get it right. *(Pause)* It’s hard when what you want’s a curse. When they’ll never thank you for it. Some days this whole damn country seems that way. Seems like a land of curses. Like we’re waiting on another plague to fall upon our house. I thought that I had longer … when there’s no time at all.

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From *Glockenspiel*

2011, USA. Eloise, a blue collar girl and widow at 24, describes the events around the death of her husband, a former soldier who served two terms in Iraq.

Most of us’re living with strangers, far as I can tell. I slept beside him best part of six years, barely knew the man. Wasn’t the same one’d come back anyhow. Little bit less of him each time. You watch someone in pain long enough, you get to thinking every which way. You listen out at night. You wake and hear him down the hall. Hear him calculate the odds, like you’d empty out a drawer full of bills, figure out which one you can afford to pay. You sit at the kitchen table and listen to him break it down to the last detail. You try to find a weakness, any tiny chink you can prise away at, open him up again. Try to find a way through to morning, to sunlight, so he’ll see another day, spend it sober, spend it with you. But you know it’s never gonna be another day. Just the same grey dawn, coming round again. And you can’t fault that logic. And he’s says, I’m tired, Ellie, I just want to get off. I know, sweetheart. I love you, Ellie. I love you. I’ll see you soon, baby. I’ll see you too … my man. (Pause) Another dead vet? Police don’t dig too deep round here. VA ticks some boxes. Case closed. I could have killed him for the insurance and nobody’d a-known. Only, what insurance? Ha. (Pause) Tell me he deserved it. He fought dirty in a dirty war. Betcha there’s a whole bunch of people dead because of him. He knew what he signed up for. He had it coming all this time. Tell me that.

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From *Glockenspiel*

2011, USA. **Justine**, a sophisticated woman in her late 20s, describes life with her late husband, a much older man and a veteran suffering from PTSD.

I got back from the funeral and I slept all afternoon. So when I woke it was dark outside. And in. I couldn’t make out what was dream from what was real. I hadn’t changed but simply crawled between the sheets and so my dress was crumpled and my hair all muzzed. I was waiting for his touch. His rough hand on my hip, snaking up my thigh, lingering on my butt, or underneath my shirt. He always woke before me, hours before I did. Up at dawn. A routine he couldn’t break. And so he’d wake me around eight or so and most mornings we’d make love. And he’d have made breakfast. And I’d make at least an effort to peck at some of it, though I’m just a coffee-and-the-paper kind of girl. A routine I can’t break. And later, when I showered sometimes he’d wash me clean. And towel me gently dry. And sometimes when I showered he’d just watch. And sometimes he would reach and turn the faucet so only the cold would run. And sometimes he would turn the light off and I’d sense him in the dark, the water icy on my skin and he would just be watching, making out my shape, and I would stand there shivering, an animal in the winter rain, waiting on their master’s call. And sometimes I’d be kneeling. Bruises on my knees from kneeling with my hands behind my back or my fingers locked behind my head, my breasts … my breasts exposed, I’m naked from the waist up. Or I’ve nothing on below. I’m blind, I’ve lost all feeling in my arms and legs. I try to stay there, perfect, hold my breath. I can feel him near me now. He’s … he’s all there is. He’s my world. And sometimes I’d hear him suffer, no, listen ‘cause it’s true. I’d hear it. Feel him suffer. And take an age to come. And after, be so tender. And so so loving, like I’d never known before. Like I could sleep forever. Like I’ll never know again. *(Pause)* So. Returning from the funeral, I slept all afternoon. And now I can’t tell if I dreamt it. It’s dark outside and raining. And I can’t tell one thing from the other … the living from the dead.
A Holding Cell. Dobra, a working class secretary in her 20s, is stunned to find the regime she served has collapsed and herself detained and interrogated.

Not supposed to be like this, is it? I keep thinking, you know if it’s a war, if it’s ‘A War’ - how come I’m not dead? Or at least how come there aren’t dead people all about? You know? If there’s a war, how come, how come our building was never shelled? There were sirens and we all traipsed down the shelters, yeah. And we heard the thunder someplace. But bomb damage? I never saw none, did you? Never saw broken glass even. The outer defences took the brunt, I suppose. But … Yeah. Just, I thought there’d be bitsa body in the roads, burnt out cars sorta thing. But there weren’t. Isn’t there meant to be a … I don’t know … an apocalypso or something? If there’s a war, isn’t there supposed to be a fight to the death. Us all manning the barricades sorta thing. I mean, the enemy don’t just ride up in the lift one day, like some delegation from the ministry wanting tea in the boardroom, do they? Don’t just come knocking on the door and arrest you, do they? That’s not supposed to happen, is it? We don’t all just give up, do we? I mean that’s … that’s just … weird. I’m shit scared all the time, but the only blood I’ve seen is yours. That ain’t right, is it? It’s just … I suppose I didn’t think war would be so … quiet. You know? All them lines of people in the streets, no one saying nothing. Only way you could tell they wasn’t going to work was their hands on their heads. And the blokes in helmets shouting at us. Even that weren’t that full on. Not supposed to creep up on you, is it? Like waking up to snow. ‘Where did that come from?’ - sorta thing. Like I had this uncle once. One independence day, we was all celebrating at my nan’s, whole family, and he just keeled over. Stood leaning in the doorway with a plate in his hand, watching the kids and down he went. Slow motion. We just watched him. All the way down. You feel funny ‘cos you don’t feel nothing. Dead’s meant to mean something, init? (Pause) I wasn’t expecting this. None of this. ‘S not what I was expecting. ‘Cos I thought we were winning. Eh? Weren’t we meant to be winning?
From *The Spoils*.

*A Holding Cell. Dobra, a working class secretary in her 20s, is the prisoner of an army of occupation. She has a terrible vision of the state of her country’s armed resistance.*

Nobody’s coming. Nobody’s coming, you know. Can brave face it all you like, but you know it’s true. What, you got some sort of rescue plan hatching, have yer? Break down the doors, run for the hills sort of thing in mind, have yer? Nah, it’s over what I heard. What I heard it’s done. Nobody’s come yet. Nobody will. What, you expectin’ our boys to come sailin’ in, armed to the teeth, is that it? Our boys. Jesus. They’ve all legged it is what I heard. Those that ain’t dead. They’ve scarpered, the lot of em. Dressed as women I heard. Thas right. Dressed as women. Discarding their weapons in the marshlands. Thieving from washing lines. Our boys. Soldiers disguising themselves as grandmothers. As as as peasant girls. Wearing petticoats, tying apron strings. Farmers giving chase across the fields. Through the northern woods. Dogs. Heavy boots - laces missing - caked in mud - knee-high in ditches. Heavy boots beneath their skirts, skirts hitched, bunched above their knees as they scramble through ditches, farmers taking aim. Shotguns at their backs, pitchfork in their guts, soldier boys in headscarves, scrumping apples, sleeping rough in barns. Keeping off the roads. Travelling, scavanging at night. Spying from the mountainside, spying on the burning villages and the burning tanks the train depots alight and the supply dumps alight and the corpses alight the field hospitals ransacked the nurses raped and the patients raped and the rapists raped and our boys wrapping shawls over pinafores, pinafores over blood-soaked uniforms, our boys … stealing home.

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I used to say it with such pride. Foolish of me really, it was the devil’s luck I’d bagged the job at all. But whenever I was asked - and what is it you do - I’d pretty near burst with it. I drive the general’s jeep, I’d say. I’m his aide-de-camp. Not that I was. Oh, he liked a girl in uniform beside him, all right, but the uniform I wore he’d had designed himself. The insignia was meaningless, I had no rank. An utter fraud I was. Driving an armoured jeep, a hundred miles from any front. But if he didn’t care, then I didn’t care, and he didn’t, so ... The best part of three years. I’d ride with him too. He has the finest stables. Time was we’d spend whole weekends at the summer house. Take the horses out. Picnic in the meadows beyond the river. Long still afternoons. One could imagine the world was ... Well. Those days are long gone now. And the general? Sitting in a cell somewhere, no doubt. Of course. (Pause) One has to be practical. What use does it do to dwell? He was nothing if not dignified, the general. I’d hate to ... tarnish that. (Pause) So, you see. My duties were not those of the common-or-garden variety. My short hand is excellent, mind you. My typing too. I know when to show initiative and when to keep my own counsel. I understand my role and perform it to the best of my ability without question. This makes me an asset to the bureau. I don’t believe it’s arrogance to know one’s own worth. Will they hang him, do you think? (Pause) Of course, returning to office routine was frightfully dull at first. One runs the risk of taking these things personally. Re-assignment as demotion, you know the thing? But the girls bucked me up. I missed the horses, the country air, of course, but the work was still as vital and soon enough I felt as much at home here as ... as I had ... with him.
From *The Spoils*.

A Holding Cell. Kyat, a secretary in her 30s, is the prisoner of an army of occupation. She recalls the pride she took in serving the ruling Party of the defeated regime.

The towpath along the canal? You know it? Its entire length, you know how many bridges you walk under? Fifteen. Mainly footbridges, of course, cycle paths, and the main roads heading for the river. Daytime, there’s people walking dogs. Couples holding hands. Joggers and kids and old men fishing. But after dark, it’s quiet. I watch the trains. There’s four rail crossings in all. Most are deserted by nine or ten till the early morning shift. But one line runs through the night. When the transports were at their height, I wouldn’t leave the office till gone midnight. I couldn’t sleep, so I’d walk down there. If I close my eyes, even now, I’m there. See myself. I walk the canal to the bridge, hide in the tunnel below and listen for the train on the tracks, that faraway screech. Press my back to the wall and try to imagine the sparks thrown up, try to imagine the train’s destination, the length of the journey, the slow snail crawl out of the suburbs. See if I can estimate the stock against the time: is this the delivery I signed off on this morning? Is this my handiwork? Was this cargo loaded on the direct orders from the memos I’ve typed this week? Carriage after carriage, truck after truck, from the city to the heartland and the empty trip back. I imagine the people on board, the men and the women, their families, their faces, and where they’re headed to. How the city will be cleaner once they’ve gone. Free of them … The canal is black and the tunnel wall vibrates. I should have worn my winter coat. And I’ve no idea what I’ll tell the night patrol if they stop me. But it’s so … so beautiful. Well, it is. Running like clockwork like that. All those hours behind a desk and then you actually get to count the transports in and out. And the rolling stock runs to perfection and the regional timetables that you’ve fought over for months, they synchronise perfectly too and despite the cutbacks and the futile arguments over rationalization and the outmoded equipment and the endless sabotage, it all, all, comes together. Night after glorious night. Perfect. With no one there to see. In the dead of night. Perfection. (*Pause*) Not sure I can bear it, never again. Never standing under that bridge again. Never being that alone again.

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From *The Spoils*.

*A Holding Cell. Loti, a secretary in her 40s, is the prisoner of an army of occupation. She reacts to the news that women have been driven from public office and recalls the achievements of the Party she served with pride.*

Just the men? I’d like to see that. Them on their own. Behind our desks, adjusting the swivel chairs, pounding at keyboards, staring at screens, the backlog piling up, the files they can’t access, the missing reports, the entire bloody system grinding to a halt. *My* system grinding to a halt. Criminal. All that promise. All the Party helped us gain. Reduced to what? Men run amok. Women too scared to shop. *(Pause)* They built a road once. Close to where I lived as a child. Highway, I should say. Huge construction project, this was. Must’ve been hundreds of men. And every day I watched that highway grow. Straight and wide, a kind of perfect white. A road from somewhere. To somewhere. Something was happening. Do you remember? You’re too young to, perhaps. But something was happening. I’d watch my mother and my aunts in the kitchen of an evening and even they knew it. I knew it too, could sense it in their laughter. Something exciting. Something in the country stirring into life. Roads opening up, going from somewhere to somewhere. Even sisters who’d never left their home town, maiden aunts like mine, they felt something. They’d both had surgery … a few months apart … travelled to the city for their operations … for what I can’t remember … but were cured. Cured of something that a few years earlier would have stumped the local doctor and killed them both. And they marvelled at it. We all did. The cure. But the hospital, more. The city. Highways and health care and my mother looking at me like a father does a son, like anything was possible. If her time had gone, then mine had surely come. A daughter could be an investment too. She achieved her dream, all right, got herself a garden, when we moved, a little courtyard garden, where my parents’ friends would come and eat and drink and smoke. And every meal at every table in every home in the country was filled with that same talk, that same sense of … of
possibility. I’m sure of that. I’m sure. That’s what these bastards can not understand. What the Party gave us, what revolution meant. It’s jealousy. When ordinary people gain just the tiniest amount, these criminals grow mean and jealous, and they plot to bring it down. I hope they kill us. I hope they do. Find us guilty, break our necks. If I can’t work, then what’s the use? If I can’t go out, can't feel my presence in the world … *if I can’t work!* I don’t know what I'll do.

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From *The Spoils*.

*A Holding Cell. Dobra, a working class secretary in her 20s, recalls the glory days of the Party and how the alleged activities of a boyfriend endangered her career.*

My first President’s Day Ball at the Ministry. My intern year in the Bureau. I’m wearing my hair up and a dress it took me months of saving coupons to trade for. New stockings too – I’ve splashed out, yeah - and shoes I’ve borrowed from my flatmate, which don’t fit, but they’re these killer heels, and she never wears ‘em so she won’t know they’re gone, will she? Christ, wonder where she is now? Anyway, I’m all dolled up, right, the works, and there’s a band and I look the business. I must have danced with half the men in the ministry that night. Majors and Captains and Lieutenant Wotcha-ma-call-its, till I couldn’t bleeding walk. Shoes were too sodding tight. Everyone was happy, though. People were joking even when the curfew sounded. They went home laughing. Happy little cripple I was, limping home, all blisters and bruises. Your first one’s always the best, though, init? I see the first timers now and they’re like I was, all hett up. Course, dances these days there’s a lot less partners for the girls. But my fella couldn’t stick it. Me stopping at the office all hours. We’d been together since school, but it didn’t last once I joined the Bureau. I weren’t that bothered, truth to tell. Nothing he could show me was gonna compete with the Bureau really, was it? After his national service, he was looking to settle down. It all got a bit samey. He wanted a housewife, I wanted a promotion. I got a real kick working up the grades, moving up the floors. It’s a game, init? Good at games, me. *(Pause)* He was one of them arrested at the university riots about a year after we split. Not a demonstrator, no, he weren’t a student, he was a janitor. But he had contacts or something. They found some opposition literature in a locker … something like that. It could have reflected really badly on me. But they, you know, shot him, so that was all right. I wasn’t called, not even mentioned at the trial. My file’s clean, they promised me that. Close shave. Just goes to show. You can’t trust anyone.
From *The Happiness Compartment*

1969. *America. Mary Jo, an extremely bright young woman in her late 20s - a campaign worker for a Senator - recalls events from her youth, particularly the Cuban Missile Crisis of October ‘62.*

We’re driving. And it’s dark outside. My face in the window, rain against the screen. It's the family station-wagon and I'm sitting in the back seat, legs tucked under me. Never felt so safe as then. Never felt so warm. My father's hands, the wheel. My mother's head, asleep. The radio. A song my father likes, his fingers turn the music up. And *her* voice floods the car. Intimate and breathy, a whisper in the air. A child's cry. For attention. And no one there to answer. *(Pause)* I remember the President's address, the Monday evening of the crisis week. Crammed around the television set. Learning the atomic bomb was ninety miles off Florida and aimed straight at our heart. Or words to that effect. That the President would not stand back and take such provocation. That the status-quo was threatened by the Russians arming Castro, and the Kremlin better quit it, or the outcome would be war. And we thought, "My God, he's handsome and a leader for our times!" And when his wife refused the fall-out shelter offered her but chose instead to stay right by his side, it seemed to us an affirmation of our trust in him, and his in us. Oh, this would be the showdown that would test the nerve of young America. Seven days we waited. As the Soviet fleet sailed slowly towards Cuba. And our President's blockade! ... You see, there was a *time.* Wasn’t there? Back then. I mean: sure they took us to the brink, but, it felt great to be alive. Oh yeah, just *peachy* to be us! It did. Tell me you remember. We were scared, of course. It all seemed so unreal. Like something in the movies. But then we knew they wouldn’t dare. A bad dream we were dreaming. We’d wake up ok. A bad dream. And that’s all. Bad dream and that’s all.
From *The Happiness Compartment*

1969. *America. Mary Jo, an extremely bright young woman in her late 20s – explains why she took up the offer of a ride home from her boss, a US Senator.*

I heard this story. Wanna hear it? At the height of the Cuban crisis - well, you can imagine the scene - at the White House and the Pentagon. The pressure was such that the Defense Department couldn't cope with the increased workload. They had to bring in clerical support from Commerce and the State. Anyway, the story goes the President, in the middle of discussing strategy, looks up and spies a particularly fetching member of the new secretarial team, and, turning to an aide, says *(cool voice)* "Get her name. For later." *(quiet)* Get her name. *(Pause)* And his brother has the same thing too. That .. charm, I guess you'd call it. That Senatorial eloquence. That swagger. Oh, that ... what? *(wry)* It's in the details that you'll find it. What it is you're looking for. Over dinner conversations, the restaurant rendez-vous. The Occidental or Duke Zeibert's or the Washington Hotel. The secret deals of background men from both sides of The Wall. The * unofficial* channels where The Compromise is King. It's where the major players get to barter, get to trade. Without the risk of losing face, of selling out their partners on the larger, *world stage*. No, you wouldn't have heard much Spanish spoken in the empty ballroom meetings at the Statler Grand Hotel the October of the Crisis, only Russian into English and then quickly back again. The intimate exchanges of men discussing *terms*. But it's how a nuclear war was averted. It's how the deal was struck. *(Pause)* It's a DC I always sensed was there. And it's a decision you make early: whether what you sense is true, and if it is, then is it *right*? Is it decent, is it good? Is it *government* as you understood it in the classroom back in school? Do you despise it or embrace it? Can you sleep at night, or no? *(Pause)* So you trust him when he offers, and you jump in by his side. And you kinda know what's coming, but you tell yourself that this might be your ticket. He can show you how it works. The details. Where you'll find it. What it is you're looking for. And he turns on the ignition, and the engine comes alive.

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From *The Happiness Compartment*

1962. Boston, U.S.A. Clare, a graduate in her early 20s, has spent the night in a hotel with a Senatorial candidate. She confesses to an aide who has come to discreetly escort her from the room. *It is the final hours of the Cuban Missile Crisis. (Part One)*

She drinks, doesn't she? His wife. Doesn't she? You don't have answer that. I know. She's lost interest, the fire's out. I said the fire's out. His wife no longer wants him. The desire's no longer there. Not since the second child. Gained weight, lost interest. He doesn't discuss it with you? You're not one of the boys? She's lonely, and her drinking worries him. He wonders if it's serious. It is, of course, and getting worse, I guess. But he's still young, still fit. And still surprised by his own appetite. … He kept apologising for the way he felt. The way I made him feel. Like he wasn't used to having his own way. I expected charm, but I assumed he'd have a confidence - no, more than that, I thought that he'd exude an absolute assurance. You understand? That he would take for granted what was offered up, would act upon impulse as if he had a right. I thought he'd call his lust his passion, dress it up, you know? What I got was curiosity. His in me. I wasn't prepared for ... the time he took, when it must appear to him that there's so little time to take. I was wrong. I'd pictured him as bold and reckless, but his touch was ... tentative. He didn't seem that sure ... that sure of anything. Perhaps that's worse … He called me, said my body, what we did ... was precious. As if I'd break in pieces in his hands. (Pause.) Yes, I think perhaps that's worse. To have him shiver at my touch.

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From *The Happiness Compartment*

1962. Boston, U.S.A. **Clare**, a graduate in her early 20s, has spent the night in a hotel with a Senatorial candidate. She confesses to an aide who has come to discreetly escort her from the room. *It is the final hours of the Cuban Missile Crisis. (Part Two)*

I fucked a married man last night. Don't wince, Harvard, I won't use that word again. But I did. A married man. With two young kids. A Senatorial candidate, who spoke to us of ideals and of honour. "An address to the female graduates of The Massachusetts Association of Catholic Colleges". And I met him afterwards. And he invited me up. And we ... Jesus, if that's not a sin, what is! Am I a whore? No, really? If the Russians had attacked last night and we'd all died before this morning came? Before my shame was known. What then? Would I still be one? If I'd have gotten away with it? It's an interesting question, don't you think? I mean, if no one knew what happened here, would I be in the clear? My reputation saved? Of course, there's always God. Looking down on us. *laughs* Seems I didn't reckon on the missiles staying put. I was sure they'd fire them at us. And we'd retaliate. Some miscalculation, Harvard, huh? I wake up cold stone sober to find that I'm not dust? So. I'm guilty after all. Is that it? It's guilt that has me trapped inside this room. I'm too afraid to face what waits me back in Worcester ... Worcester? That's a universe away. See, what I feel, right now, is wrong. And I like the way wrong feels. Because, to tell the truth, the thought of doing what is right, right now, makes me sick, yes, to my stomach. The thing is, Harvard, I don't have a dream. There. I said it. I don't wish on stars. And I'm sorry for his wife but I feel better than her. Because she's lonely and she drinks and he won't understand and it's me he's thinking of, right now - she's banished from his thoughts - *my smell* this morning on his fingers in his hair and all this Fall I've had that stupid stupid song keep playing on my mind. The *low comotion* in my head, it's driving me insane. *(quieter)* 'A brand new dance now. Everybody. Everybody.' *(Pause)* I've almost convinced myself it wouldn't even matter if he didn't want to see me again. If it was just the once.(Pause) Yes. It would be enough, I think. *(Pause)* One short night. To haunt him through the years of nights ahead.
From *The Happiness Compartment*

1962. Dallas, USA. **Marina**, a young Russian bride, attempts to reason with her abusive husband. [Alik was the name Marina Oswald called her husband, Lee Harvey.] *It is the final hours of the Cuban Missile Crisis.*

May I tell you something, little boy? The day we left my country for America, my Aunt Polina went to church. The first time in her life. You know why, Alik? She went to light a candle. She lit it for me. To pray my soul would rest in peace. A prayer for the dead, Alik. Because, you see, when I left Russia I was dead to her. She forgot she ever had a niece. My aunt Polina's curse. She had a son at Stalingrad, another in the camps, she never, *never* gave up hope one day they would return, that her eyes would see them once again. *(fierce)* No! You can not understand! For them she never lost her hope, her faith, but me, like that! *(snaps her fingers)* I am dead! Yes! If not, where is my *life*! No, do not speak, do not! What does it mean, your talk? This Khruschev, Castro, Communist? All these names, these *words* you use, what do they mean to me?

Let them fall, the missiles, let them all come crashing down! What do I care? I am already dead. And where are we? If not in hell? *(low)* Yes, Alka, tell me that. Where are we, Alka? Alka, tell me that. *(Pause)* You said we would be happy here. But this *thing* you have inside your head, this *thing*. *(Pause)* Were you happy on the bridge that day? In Minsk at all? Have I made you happy, Alka, ever? When we met? Or dancing? When we first made love? I promised you a son. I have not kept the promise. Is that why you hate me now? Did you ever love me, Alka? When you brought me here, you said I would be ... you said we would be free. If I have not kept my promise, nor have you. *(Pause)* Tell me, Alka, what must I do? All day I am saying *thankyou*, *thankyou*, *thankyou*. I am little Russian fool, this is America, so I give thanks, I must, okay. But you said *we would be happy*. I never asked this. In my life, I know I do not deserve reward. But why say "happy", if it is a lie. Please, Alka, if you understand your promise is a lie? *(Pause)* I should not have believed. We dream, but we do not live.
From *Homestead*, based on Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

1956. Texas, USA. **Lillian Beckman**, the widowed matriarch of a Texan ranching family lays down the lay to her daughters at their father’s funeral.

We all know why Antonio is here, woman. He and I nodded at the cemetery. His mother too. Let the boy drink his lemonade and be on his way. Why the devil would I want you parading him up and down like a prize bull in front of my girls with their daddy not two hours in the ground? As if these hussies needed any encouragement making cow eyes at every passing buck. You go scratching an itch, that itch is just going to get worse. These girls’ll scratch themselves raw given the chance, scratch on till they bleed to death, you let ‘em. No, you best be still, all of you. We’ve company enough. We have prayer, our duty and each other. You keep your eyes in your head, your heads down and your thoughts to yourselves. We’ll get through this. Lord knows we’ve got through worse … It’s going to be a real long summer. And I don’t plan on receiving no more visitors. I don’t even want the wind passing through the shutters. Not the thinnest breath from outside these walls. We’re shutting up, d’you hear? D’you see? Bricking up the windows, boarding up the doors, sealing all the cracks, keeping out corruption no matter whatsoever shape it takes. We’re going back to the old ways. Modesty. Simplicity. Decorum. Learn us some righteous ol’ Primitive living. Your daddy, see, he got his head turned *around* a little. Not his fault, a course. It’s just these last years, he started harking to those Brothers come back from the army. Now, men come back from war changed. They see how things are away from home and they get to thinking maybe different is the same odds as better. It’s them convinced your daddy to go buy that infernal radio. Those same men would tempt him into town a Saturday night. And it’s them, sure enough, made all that mischief lately at the church, all that unholy talk ‘bout getting a piano to play along at worship. It’s just a lot of hot air from folks think themselves ‘radical-progressive’ or some such. They want to poison our church like they poisoned the rest of the town. It’s no matter,
there’s always been wolves come to worry the flock and there’s always been righteous Elders to shepherd us to safety. And just as the Lord tends to the weakest lamb, so the parent tends to the weakest child. So must I tend to you. And so I tell you, my children, not to be afraid, not to fret about the future, not to pay it no mind. For you know God Himself has decreed your path for all eternity. All the things that will come to pass from the greatest crisis to the smallest happiness. And therein lies your comfort. Therein lies all our comfort.

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From *Homestead*, based on Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

1956. Texas, U.S.A. **Clarice**, a young maid on a Texan ranch, reveals a secret unknown to the family she serves.

The dead are like the poor, huh? Both got nothing. Huh, master? What you got now, huh, what you got now? Rot away Eldridge Beckman, rot away. Stiff in your Sunday best and the boots I shined up pretty for you. Who will mourn you, huh? Who? Your widow? Don’t count on it, Brother. Your daughters? Mary Beth some, I guess. She loved you, ain’t no two ways ’bout it. She did. Me? Will I mourn you, master? Would you? For me? ... Your hand. Here. Lifting my skirt. Rough hand, lifting my skirt, behind the back corral. I knew you would. And you did. Showed me. The back corral. Stench of horses. Your breath, hot in my ear ... I look at them. They don’t know, do they? Reckon I oughta tell ‘em, huh? ... No, maybe not. But we know it, master, we know it. The power of a man over a lonely woman ... You’ll not see these walls again Eldridge Beckman. Never eat at that table again. We got some use outta that ol’ table, huh? And who’ll remember? Huh? I got something to remind me, though, ain’t I? Oh my stars, yes, I got me something of yours always. And it’s mine.

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From *Homestead*, based on Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

1956. Texas, USA. **Mara Lee**, a secretive young woman in her 20s, describes life growing up a shy girl on a remote ranch.

Forget it, Amy Lynn. Better never to look at a man ... I’ve been afraid of them since I was little. Remember daddy used to take us watch the men corraling horses? Mary Beth’s face’d get all flushed, sitting right up close, daddy’s arm around her waist. I’d stand beneath ‘em, hugging the fence pole, hating the heat and smell and everything. I’d watch their hands, the men. Pulling torn gloves over their mud-caked fingers, black black fingernails, shirt sleeves rolled, cigarettes in the corner of their mouths, smoke and loud voices and spurs splashing blood on their boots, wiping the sweat from their brows with tanned forearms, their big ol’ hats held in their big bear paws, daddy laughing hard right along with them. Good ol’ boys ... And I’d think ... Please. Please, don’t let them get me. Please. Don’t let me grow up. Don’t let me wind up in their arms. Bear-hugged to death. Those dirty black fingernails curling round my neck ... God must have heard. He made me weak and sick and ugly. Men never gonna look twice at ornery maids like me … Wade Johnson? Oh, phooey! He was never sweet on me. That was just talk. His friends told me he was too shy to ask but would I go to the Homecoming Dance with him. Don’t you remember? How I sat on the porch swing all evening? Sat in my white dress, jumping at every sound, waiting on that car horn. Amy Lynn, you know full well he didn’t show. If you recall, I sat till past midnight. Like the darn fool everyone at school thought I was. Like the dumb ol’ cow poke Wade took me for, I guess. No, he didn’t come ... I waited. But he didn’t come.
1956. Texas, U.S.A. Agnes, an awkward woman in her 20s entering an arranged marriage, describes how her fiancé proposed.

I wasn’t in my night things! And even if I were, I wouldn’t have been embarrassed none. He wasn’t a stranger. He wouldn’t have been at my window if he didn’t know I wanted him there … And it was nothing really. Conversation is all. Just, “You know I like you, Agnes. And I think you like me. Our families agree: I need a good woman. You need a strong man. So. Whaddayasay?” … It so happens I don’t go in for all that fancy-schmancy stuff. Words don’t mean much, do they? Look at us: all we do is talk. And where does it ever get us? … So, I just sorta looked into his eyes. Shining out of the dark like that. And it kinda struck home. I thought: I’m alone - at night - with a man. Me. Agnes. And I felt there was no one else, no one but this man and me on the face of the planet. Just the dark. And the silent plains beyond. And beyond that the desert and the ocean sound asleep. A world away … So then real slow and real careful, his fingers touched mine, and there we were, holding on to the bars of the window, holding on together. And he leaned in real close. Like it was only me. Only me could set him free. And … you know … I just said yes. Yes.

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From *Homestead*, based on Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

1956. Texas, USA. **Adele, a rebellious young woman in her late teens makes a stand against her a strict religious upbringing.**

Don’t you see, Mara Lee, you can’t touch me. I’m beyond your reach. Because that man is mine. I don’t care anymore. I’ll be whatever he wants me to be. I’ll be his whore. Go live in a little ol’ house and wait for him come visit whenever he’s hot for me. All the world against me? My family? My friends? The whole damn town? Hell, yes! You think you know what hate feels like? Heck, you should taste desire. You know how the Elders tell it in our prayers and such in church? How God comes to the Chosen like a stirring in your soul. And His Grace is irresistible, cos He picked you out before the world began, before all history and the Bomb and black and white and stuff. How if you are His Chosen, you’re Elected and the Quickening’ll come, whether what you think you want is Saving Grace or not. And His spirit’s overpowering and your body’s filled with light? Well, I know I’m not the Chosen now, I don’t feel that way about God. But still I know that feeling and it’s just as overwhelming and it’s calling me tonight! See what I’m saying, sister? I’ll wear that crown of thorns y’all got picked out for girls like me. Mistress to a married man. Uh-huh, I’ll be that. Let Tony have old Agnes for a wife. Who cares! I’m the only one can feel him quickening inside me. And it’s glorious! … How you’re gonna stop me, Mara Lee? I could bring a stallion to its knees with a wave of my little finger. Oh, that’s right. I have!

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From *The Swing Left*

1946. London, England. **Sylvia**, a working class Jewish girl and brilliant mathematician, has encountered Roy, a soldier and former POW. The two of them revisit their childhood neighbourhood, severely bomb-damaged in the war. Roy misunderstanding Sylvia’s intent, kisses Sylvia in the rubble of her derelict home. Sylvia is surprised and flattered, but entirely unaroused.

It’s odd. I was thinking of Gerard. The last boy to kiss me. It was in his rooms at Peterhouse. He was wearing grey flannels and a brown sportscoat. He’s quite brilliant, Gerard. Gifted really. But he has a stutter and a fearfully annoying habit of pushing his glasses back on the bridge of his nose. I suppose, if you were exceptionally cruel, you could say he’s very much like all the men at Cambridge. Or Bletchley come to that. (Pause) I think Gerard has something in store for me. But I can’t say it interests me a great deal. All that ... biology. I know women must find you attractive, Roy. In a dissolute sort of a way. But, frankly, I really would rather go to bed with a good book. (Pause) Sorry. I should have said. I’m a mathematician, Roy. No bloody use to anyone, I’m afraid. Poor old Gerard, eh? (Smiles. Pause) Did you volunteer, Roy? I was at college when war broke out, so I don’t remember. Did you? Must have been proud, your parents. Mine were. Of me. Our little Sylv at university. It was their adventure as much as mine. And the less I visited, the more it pleased them. Their sacrifice worthwhile. I’d stay the weekend at the home of some snobby Newnham girl and they’d be beside themselves. Like an invite to the Palace. I’d have to report back every detail. Juicy snippets of conversation. Witty remarks. The crockery. I’d make it up. Didn’t have the heart to tell them, most weekends invitations anywhere were pretty scarce. I’d stay up anyway. Wander the halls, the grounds. It’s then I felt most ... at ease. I remember it as always autumn. Pale afternoons in a place usually crowded, at once quite still. And, it seemed to me, strangely open to confidences. In those days, I could quite happily forego the company of friends. Or family. I’ve grown cowardly. Don’t like to be alone, these days.

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From *The Swing Left*

1946. London, England. Sylvia, a working class Jewish girl and brilliant mathematician, describes her work as a code-breaker at Bletchley Park during the War.

Do you know what the best feeling in the world is? I’ll tell you. It’s seeing a code broken. It really is the absolute tops. A cipher you’ve wracked your brains over for days, nights. Suddenly the pieces fit, and what was previously a mass of numbers, begins to make perfect sense. It’s beyond anything. What was unknown becomes known. Meaning from chaos. Do you see? Only, of course, it’s not chaos. In fact it’s not even unknown. Those numbers always meant something. The literal sense may have been hidden, it may have been hidden to us, but that’s because we weren’t looking properly! And so we say this is nonsense, this is gibberish, it has no meaning. Because we do not recognize the sequence. And because we don’t, we feel anger, we feel resentment towards what appears to be a string of meaningless digits. While all the time, in the face of this rage, the numbers sit there: meaning something. It all means something. We’re just too afraid to see it. No one wants to admit what everyone knows. Which is: nothing’s ever completely hidden. Numbers are repeated. Again and again. Selected clusters. Patterns re-emerging all the time, endlessly repeating themselves. We’ve seen every sequence before. We have. But we deny all knowledge. Count ourselves lucky. Tell ourselves it’s inconceivable. Then bulldoze the bodies away. Can’t explain that. The sum total. It’s too big. It doesn’t make sense. The death camps. Those people you saw, Roy. Marching home. Endless columns you said. Piles of numbers? Who gets to choose? Which column? This girl to university, that boy the barber’s shop. You and me. Them and us. World of difference. Why? Because one’s better than the other. One’s in the way. Dispensable. So tread on the corpses to escape from the pit. Look out for number one. (Pause) Of course, all of us can only go so far. ‘My People.’ Singled out. To make up the numbers. (Pause) It’s not information we lack. It’s not ignorance. What’s missing is the courage to understand what we know already. What’s staring us in the face. What everybody knows. History is terror.

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**NINETEEN CENTURY**

*From Strange Fruit – Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard in the Reconstruction period.*

1876. Georgia, U.S.A. **Desiree**, a widow in her late 30s, returns to the home where her infant son died, while in the care of Peter, his tutor.

I knew a woman had a son, named him Gerrell. A little boy. A beautiful little boy. Clever too. Bright as a button … I heard the boy drowned. They fished him out the lake. There was a war killed a million men, they say. Took that woman’s husband. Took her papa too. Took too many good men. And God couldn’t spare one little boy. Couldn’t leave one beautiful boy to live on ‘midst all that death? Explain that to me. You call yourself a teacher, Peter. Teach me. So I learn it. You think my son’s death is payment for our sins? I can’t see how that little body helps balance the scales, Peter. I’ve spent ten years running, but the further I get, the less I can fathom it. I’ve slept in hotels rooms in Boston, apartments in New York, mansions in Philadelphia … it’s no matter. I close my eyes and all I see is that lake. You walking from the water, Peter, up towards the house. And Gerrell in your arms. I figure I might as well be home and see it first hand, than dream it every night. … Oh Lord, breathe that air! I’d almost forgotten, riding the avenue this evening, how far it stretches, straight as a ribbon, how it shines in moonlight. How unpardonable a sin: to forsake such beauty. Oh, I feel a child again. Such innocent, innocent days! When I slept in the nursery and woke every morning so happy, so full of hopeful dreams. Tonight my home has cast its spell once more, and nothing seems changed. The Spring makes everything young again. After the endless darkness and the winter cold, to find happiness again. Do you think that’s possible, Peter, that you can find the way home after losing your bearings for so long? For tonight, at least? In the morning the spell will be broken, I know it. The ghastly truth will be revealed: the cobwebs and the dust, the unkept fields and the barren lake, even the cherry trees are slowly rotting from within. Tomorrow, I’ll see the cracks, the sad decay, the awful ruin of our house. I’ll feel the weight again, like a stone in my breast. Oh, Petey, I know it all. But tonight, let me forget. *(She whispers)* Let me forget, let me forget.

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From Strange Fruit – Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard in the Reconstruction period.

1876. Georgia, USA. Desiree, a widow in her late 30s, describes her ‘decadent’ love-life.

(Part I)

There’s a man … Oh Lord, there have always been men. A tawdry parade of unsuitable suitors ever since I learned to bat my lashes. My late husband’s demise should have freed me from a pact I never should have made, but alas as you know only too well it merely drove me into the arms of a gentleman even less worthy of the name. Let’s pretend I was naïve, shall we? A love-lorn Southern Girl caught in the spider’s web of New York society. Oh, I’m well-practised in the art of deception. For years I made-believe a scoundrel had my best interests at heart. A handsome, charming scoundrel with wild eyes and the touch of a fallen angel … I’ve left him, Peter. High and dry. He’s back in New York. Licking his wounds and counting his debts. Well, he left me often enough. Ha. It’s only right I should take a turn after all these years. So here I am: a runaway. He was my master and I’ll be his slave no more. And now the family home is to be sold to pay our creditors. Seems I’ve nowhere to run to after all … Look! – there's mama, walking through the trees! Look! There … there, she’s … she was … there … She’s gone. Another illusion. In the twilight, I saw a figure in a long white dress. Mama … I know it wasn’t her. Mama died before the War. A sound decision on her part, wouldn’t you say? Only the dead are free.
We’ll drink to my sins! My many, many sins … I married a man who did nothing but run up debts even before the war when we had a fortune worth the bragging. They say my late husband died bravely on the battlefield, but I know what really killed him: Parker Kendrick died of cognac, he practically drowned in it. Then I had the inspired idea of falling in love with a Northern rascal on the prowl down South to bag all he could lay his hands on. And he lay his hands on me. And God saw fit to punish me, like a dagger to my heart, he drowned my little boy, here in our own family lake. So, I ran away with my Yankee lover. Let’s not pretend otherwise. I stole away in the night with a man who took me to his bed and made me forget. I fled to the icy North meaning never to see that lake again. Never to see any of you again. I closed my eyes and fled, not knowing where I was going, little caring. Determined only to leave behind my home and the war and the whole sorry waste of everything good and clean and innocent. Leave behind my soul and plunge into the darkness of an alien city. He wouldn’t let me be, nor I him. We devoured each other, both merciless in our icy passion. I bought a townhouse in Manhattan, where for the most part I nursed him or he nursed me through the sickness and the pain and the years of unspoken recrimination. Then last year when the house was sold to pay our debts, he threw me over and went off with a girl barely older than Annalise … I poisoned myself. Least I tried to. But God had other ideas. He saw to it that I lived. Took my son from me, but kept me alive. And I knew, I knew without even thinking it, I knew I had to come back South, to my home, to my children. So, here’s to my sins. May God forgive me now, and let the torture end … *(She takes a telegram from her pocket.)* This arrived this morning. From New York. I receive one bout once a week. He implores my forgiveness. Begs me to go back to him. They say ice is stronger than fire. Let’s hope they’re mistaken. *(She burns the telegram in a candle’s flame.)*
From *Strange Fruit* – Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* in the Reconstruction period.

1876. **Georgia, USA. Desiree**, a widow in her late 30s, describes her ‘decadent’ love-life.

*(Part III)*

And whose truth is that, Professor Trevelyn? You may be our resident judge and jury, but I seem to have lost sight of this precious truth of yours. Oh, I so envy you your conviction, you alone have the answer, you alone see the path we should all be taking. But, my darling, could it be you've spent so long dissecting the problems of the world you’ve forgotten how to *live in it!* Yes, you look into the future without blinking, because you can’t see the on-coming train! Not of all us are quite so brave, quite so honest, quite so brilliant. Allow me to apologise on behalf of the human race for our failure to live up to your standards, Mister Trevelyn! But if you can find it in your heart, perhaps you can spare a thought, just a fingertip of generosity, for those of us whose lives aren’t laid out in a textbook … He’s a millstone round my neck and he’ll drag me with him to the icy depths. But I love him. Why deny it? I love him. I do. I love that man. That wicked, wicked man. And I don’t want to live without love. Grow up, Petey! You talk like a spinster schoolmam. Live in the world. It’s love that has me in its claws, not some casual affair, *love!* Understand what it means to have your guts torn from your body, before you judge me. What do you know? You schoolboy! You virgin! You’re not ‘above love’, you’re just retarded! A dirty little freak! My daughter here practically throws herself at you and all you can do is, what? Pontificate about your feelings! For God’s sake, boy, kiss her! What you waiting for? She’s nigh on panting for it!

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From Strange Fruit – Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard in the Reconstruction period.

1876. Georgia, USA. Susannah, a maidservant in her 20s with ‘ambitions above her station’, considers her engagement to the estate’s rather dull clerk, Simon ‘Underfoot’.

My hands won’t stop shaking. I can’t breathe. He’s onny gone ‘n proposed to me! Who has? He has. Simon Underfoot, the very man. Oh, I’m all a muddle! You don’t find him a little … ‘centrik? Simon? There’s barely a peep from him days on end, ‘n then he star’s in talkin ‘n call me I’m a liar if I unnerstan’ two words outta tha’ boy’s mouth’. He’s real smart, I guess. ‘n he treats me nice. I kinda like he’s crazy as a loon for me. He notices wha’ I’m wearin’, ‘n I sen him watch me, you know, fixin’ my petticoats ‘n such. I caught him once sniffin’ at my shawl when it was hung in the backyard to air. He said it smell like the Garden a Eden itself, a Eve’s perfume. When it was the only scent of a woman on earth. And tha’ was all Adam cared t’ know. (Pause.) But he’s kinda creepy too. You think? They call him Simon Underfoot, cos every time you tunaroun’, there he is: Underfoot. In your business. Sniffing your shawl. Ogling your petticoats.

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**From Strange Fruit** – *Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard in the Reconstruction period.*

1876. Georgia, USA. Annalise, a ‘southern belle’ in her 20s, recounts a visit to New York to bring her mother, Desiree, back to their Georgia plantation home.

Oh, you won’t believe the calamity since I seen you. It was sooo cold! There and back. Endless hours of boredom and fatigue. Charlotte has become, well frankly, unbearable. Why you stuck me with her in the first place is beyond me! Some companion she proved! It was me chaperoning her and not vicey-versa, woman’s a menace! All that phoney-French and throwing herself at every man in sight. Well, we get to New York and it’s just a wilderness of white. February, and the city is snowbound, nearabout impossible to hire a carriage. It takes all afternoon to cross town and find Mama. Her apartment, where she’s living, is five floors up, can you imagine! You look out the window and all you see is brick. They’re building this monumental bridge ‘cross the river there. Just the hugest thing you ever did see! We finally arrive and Mama is surrounded. All a these … theatrical folk. The men stood right alongside the ladies, fraternizing away. It was awful crowded, and real smoky. Everybody puffing away, even Mama! I guess she wasn’t expecting us, because she didn’t even look up when I come in. I figure it’s been so long she don’t recognise me. What with me being all growed-up an’ all. I knew it was her, though, straight off. *(Pause.*)* Thing was, she seemed so … alone, sat there among all them strangers. She was smiling sure enough, but her face looked awful tired and I felt real sorry for her. I thought about how it must have been when word come that my daddy had been killed in the war, and two days later that Papa Randolph had died a his wounds too. How that must have felt. How all her life was misery on misery. How small she looked in that room, smiling but kind of sad. I just walked up and put my arms round her neck and hugged her, right in front of those ‘Society’ ladies. And I wouldn't let go ‘til she was kissing me and crying too.

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From Strange Fruit – Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard in the Reconstruction period.

1876. Georgia, USA. Verity, a black woman in her 20s, adopted by a planter family, describes to her white sister, Annalise, how she finds herself trapped between two worlds.

I have to tell you, something awful happened while you were away. You know the old slave cabins – nobody living there now ‘cept a few of the ancients – Meredith and Tanney, Polly and Joe. That mean old Benjamin Walter, too. Well, they started letting wanderers stay the night, black folk claiming they just passing through. I said nothing about it. Only, then I hear they’re spreading rumors ‘bout me, saying I give orders to feed ‘em nothing but cornhusks. Telling lies, out of pure malice. Accusing me of hoarding and skimping on their share of the crop. And I know it’s Ben Walter behind it. He’s been itching for a showdown ever since the Colonel died and we drew up their contracts. As if it’s me had anything to do with conditions. They lucky they have jobs, all the use they are. So I send for him. He swaggers on in. ‘What y’all been saying bout me?’ I ask him, ‘That’s slander, you know, I could have you evicted from the property.’ He just smiles. Big, ugly grin, sneering at me. Cause he knows that’s not a darn thing I can do ‘bout any of it. Him towering over me, prizing me up like a bull in heat, thinking I’m no better than him. And me with nothing to show for myself. Stood there in the same dress I’ve worn for weeks, living on not much more than cornhusks myself, bunch of keys round my waist to rooms we ain’t never gonna open no more. (Pause.) Lisey? Girl? (Pause.) You asleep? You asleep, Lisey? Best thing, sister. Sleep through it all.

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From Strange Fruit – Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard in the Reconstruction period.

1876. Georgia, USA. Charlotte, a lady’s companion, describes a childhood touring county fairs in a ‘magic’ act with her parents.

For what it’s worth, I have no idea who I am, so maybe that’s why I’ve taken such a dislike to myself. I never had any proper papers, you see, not what you’d call legitimate at any rate. Par example, I have no inkling of how old I am. Une jeune fille, of course, is how I picture myself. As a girl, my maman and papa took me with them as they toured the local county fairs. They had a double act, where she would sing and he’d perform sleight of hand. Maman had come over from France, that much I know. She had a pretty voice and prettier legs, enough to distract the men in the crowd, fool them into thinking Papa’s tricks were better than they were. When I was old enough they’d have me help distract the crowd some more: cutie-pie songs, French chanson and the like. Maman would dance a kind of cancan and I’d ape her best I could. Folks liked that. Then Papa would throw me round the stage and I’d ‘vanish’ and reappear, swap places with Maman, ta da! The kind of thing that draws customers to a fairground on a summer’s night, I suppose. I was only eight when they died a consumption within two weeks of each other. A cousin of Maman’s in Baton Rouge took me in. The old lady encouraged my singing, dressed me nice. So I grew up and became a lady’s companion. Miss Verity hired me to travel with Miss Annalise to New York, there I met Miss Desiree, et le reste, c’est de l’histoire. But where I’m from and what that makes me, je ne sais pas. For all I know Maman and Papa weren’t even married. They could have been brother and sister for all it matters. (Pause.) Look at your faces. I would give anything to have someone to talk to. To actually confide in and to not have stare back at me like a milk cow chewing the cud. Mais non, je n’ai personne à qui parler. Boff, c’est la vie.

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From Strange Fruit – Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard in the Reconstruction period.

1876. Georgia, USA. Ferris, a black housekeeper, describes how the aftermath of the Civil War has brought yet more hardship to former slaves.

Why you allus gotta be talkin like ever’thin better than it is? … You wanna talk about the Yankee army, I’ll tell you bout the Yankee Army. How they stol’ ‘n cheated every nigger they ever met. And you don’t know shit, mister, cos you weren’t here. None a you was here when the soldiers come. White folks they hole up in some hotel in town. That’s where you were too, ain’t it? You in the tavern drinkin’ with them officers, makin’ yo’ swee’ deals, makin’ your money. Out here, we got blue bellies infestin’ the house. Promise us pay we work for ‘em, do their laundry, feed ‘em vittles, tend their horses. They lied worse’n any Massa I know. All the while they prizin’ us up, getting ready to beat us down. No, you lissen to me. ‘Fore the war I had my own plot out back, little garden there, grow my greens ‘n such, trade with the grocer, put aside a li’l bit each month. Save me a little nest-egg. Them Yankees raid my room, tear my mattress open, empty out my trunk, throw my clothes out the window, find the pickle jar I was keepin’ under the floorboard there, ‘n they stole it. They run off without payin’ none of us a goddam cent! … This livin on liberty you talkin ‘bout, iss like them young’uns talkin bout livin’ on love after they’s married. How they gonna be peachy, cos they in love. It don’t work. No sir, it las’ so long and not a bit longer. It sho’ don’t hold good when you has to feed your chillun or when the bailiff come. Thins ain’t better, they’s a damn sight worse and now you got them white devils hatin’ us e’en mo ‘n before. You think they sharin’ their crop? Nah, they ain’t the sharin kind. They got us tied up in credit ‘n deeper in debt ‘n we ever was. Your daddy bought his freedom, huh? These sharecroppers got freedom ‘n what else? Black folks dyin’ to live on liberty. What difference it make if you still workin the lan’ for lessen nuthin? What difference it make if you dead? What difference it make if you swingin’ from them cherry trees?
From *This Divided Earth*

1865, South Carolina, U.S.A. **Emeline**, a young ‘southern belle’ and refugee from a devastated city, mourns the end of a way of life and demands answers of a Union Lieutenant.

Now you’ll recall the Pennywethers hosting the May Day high-tea reception this last season back? Lucinda-Mae Pennywether had on the prettiest cotillion dress you ever did see: soft white organdy, embroidered with a hint of silvertread and woven in these iridescent beetle wings. I had on my white silk ensemble with the blue, red, and green leaves, and my granmammy’s finest pearls. I loved that dress, but it wan’t a patch on those little old beetle wings, catching the light like that, I can’t tell you. Well, it wasn’t but three in the afternoon when Lucy-Mae made her entrance and - oh my - the cut of that dress meant her decollate was all on show. She was practically enticing those cadet-boys to hold her by the waist, they weren’t about to settle for a brush of the elbow if you follow my meaning. She had on the tiniest white kid gloves, so her arms were bare, the entire length, alabaster shoulders and half her back exposed. If she had worn such a costume to the ball that night, it would still have raised many an eyebrow and no mistake, but in the middle of the afternoon! Why, you could hear the whispers over the orchestra. The ladies all were scandalised. Oh, the boys might have lined up to take tea with her that day, but what family of any note would seriously contemplate a son’s engagement to such a shameless jade? And Lucinda-Mae all but set to be crowned May Day Queen! It was a disaster, my stars, a complete and utter disaster … My point, Lieutenant Ogden, is that the Pennywethers town-house was all burned up in the firestorm and the family not heard of since. Lucinda Mae, I know of. She was sent away. Gone with her mammy to her aunt’s. But where, I’d like to know, does her daddy now reside? Where her brothers, three of them and all sixteen years of age or less? Where is Joshua Wardell, the man is eighty if a day? The Manningtrees, two sons and an orphaned nephew, where are they? Withers Alliston’s youngest boy? John Izard, Harleston Reid, infirm and crippled? Elisha Worthington, such a bonny little prince and not a trace? None ventured near a battlefield, nor drew a sword or pistol on your men. Tell us, Lieutenant, Where are the old and youngest of our blood?

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From *This Divided Earth*

1865, *South Carolina, USA. Justine*, a Northern chronicle of the Civil War fusses with her box camera as a group of homeless Southern women reluctantly pose for her.

I have not the blessing of children, and on occasion that can leave me melancholic … but I confess I take a certain pride and joy in this little magic box. There is no end of consolation to be found in an all-consuming passion, ladies. The solitary life becomes most desirable and lonely hours are forever banished. Such a tonic. Now – may I suppose you all have had the altogether trying experience of posing for your portrait before an ambrotype or even Daguerrotype machine - yes? - perched upon a cushion with your elbow placed just so, your arm asleep from propping up your chin, a dreadful stiffness in the neck and shoulders, ah, I see from your expressions you do indeed recall a tedious hour or more bent double, scowling at the apparatus, waiting on the light to be just right – well, take heart, for this new miracle of mine is a ferrotype – a *ferrotype*, that’s right - a marvellous modification, replacing the glass plate of the outmoded process with a thin sheet of iron, coated with a chocolate enamel - or simply lacquered black. It produces both an image of superior durability and most happily a marked reduction in equipment costs and raw materials. A welcome economy for any spinster’s purse! Of course, you have to bear in mind that the tintype image is a camera-original positive, so it follows the picture will appear reversed. You ladies on my left will in the portrait sit on my right and vice-versa. But this technique is lightning quick compared to what we once endured. That said, it has much in common with *wet-plate* picture-graphics, the silver halide crystals’re suspended in a collodion emulsion, which in turn are chemically reduced to crystals of metallic silver, each of various density, in accordance with … ah. Do I detect perhaps my passion is not shared? No mind, the results I dare say, ladies, will astound you, mark my words.

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From *This Divided Earth*

1865, *South Carolina, USA*. **Bekah**, a cockney prostitute has escaped the poverty of London, only to find herself in the midst of a Civil War. Bereft of any savings, she eyes the potential profit in employing the new technology of photography by posing for pornographic pictures.

Oi, sis, we ain’t had nuffink but scraps since we washed up here! Since I come across the ocean, only luck I’ve had is bad. I fort the streets I grew up rough as fuck, till we was below deck two munfs on stale crackers and staler water. Finally land here and it’s like all hell broke loose. Skin and bones worse’n back home and that’s saying sumfink. Better than a fact’ry, working on your back – don’t cough up chunks a lung each night, fair dos – but you fuckers won’t stop fighting each other long enough for a girl to line her drawers. Every cathouse we been at, burnt up when the soldiers come. Grab a bit of snatch, then set the place to blazes. Spoil it for the next lot through, where’s the sense in that? Fire took what little stash we’d stowed. Mattress up in smoke, we scarper, ‘fore they nab us again. Summer last they had us on a steamer weeks on end, up and down the bleedin’ river, wouldn’t set ashore till we was checked and branded. Girl don’t stand a chance. So, we coin it with this dirty postcard deal, who’s to say that ain’t legit? Guvner with his cock out calls it’s art or says it’s sin, who cares? Either way we get breakfast. Just point that box of yours at this box of mine, n’ I’ll do the rest. That awright with you?

*
From *This Divided Earth*

1865, *South Carolina, USA*. **Hedvig**, a Norwegian beauty, has been forced to leave her home to seek a fortune overseas. She describes how her sister and she came to be in America

I can’t say I’ve had much experience of frozen wastes, though I can not vouch for my sister’s affairs. Our father was a merchant. We lived two blocks from the opera house and municipal gardens. My mother held soirees for the town’s bohemians and benefactors. We were quite bereft of tundra, I’m afraid. Ah, but there is but one thing merchants are more skilled at than making money. And that losing it. … If you set your fortunes by the sea, you understand these things. Good news at high tide, bad news at low. The harbour brings you wealth, the harbour brings you devastation. My father traded handsomely with certain foreign ports, so. War came, those same ports were blockaded, he lost, borrowed, lost more, borrowed more, tried to cheat his creditors, landed in court and then a cell. Bohemians and benefactors no longer accepted invitations to soirees at the house. My mother paid our passage, sent Ursula and me to our cousins ‘cross the sea. Looking for another fortune on another foreign tide … How I miss those Bohemians! It is my mama’s fault. You do not invite poets and painters into the homes of provincial girls, unless you place guards on all the doors and padlock the liquor cabinet. Whoever heard of a Bohemian eunuch! My sister is not so different. She has the passion of the fanatic. There is wickedness in the puritan too, I think.

*
From *This Divided Earth*

1865, South Carolina, U.S.A. **Ginny**, a Northern woman in her 20s, has travelled a great distance to be with her fiancé, a Union lieutenant, stationed in a temporary encampment deep in enemy territory. She expresses her deep longing and frustration at his lack of mutual passion. He is naturally shocked but she presses on.

I’m told the tongue is employed liberally. The lips are pressed but gently, and parted slightly too, so that one’s own tongue is at liberty to explore the tongue of one’s partner. A kiss, Clay. A continental kiss … The breasts too may be freely pressed and gently kneaded, as a dough, for even beneath the stiffest fabric, pleasure may be sensed. When unencumbered by outer clothing, the nipples too … the nipples too may … I’m told they too can be aroused. And fear of pregnancy can be allayed through a practised use of the, of the fingers upon the, the nether regions … You rarely meet my gaze, Clay, and pull away should we barely touch. Out of respect, you say, Clay? Respect for my modest disposition. Modesty? … I have ached modestly for your return, my darling, little believing that you would, these three years. A thousand miles or more between us and seldom any word. I have sat each dusk with Mama and Aunt Beth, needlepoint in my modest lap, the dull, dry ticking of Grampa’s timepiece on the mantle sounding in my modest breast. And each day been greeted by the cruel report of death. I have comforted widows and orphans, and rallied and collected and campaigned, and traced my modest finger down the length of those horrid columns in the city paper, *every day*. Scanned them for your name, and wept with terrible relief to find it absent. And wept again to have you absent from my modest side. I know every feature on that dear face of yours only through the picture in a frame beside my bed. And now I have you within arms’ reach and you seem as cold to me as if I had stumbled on your grave. Oh Clay, I blush. I blush at my own immodest words. But I’ll not turn away, not lower my eyes from yours. Never again, Clay Ogden. Till you banish me. Or ravish me! *(Pause)* Tell me, Clay, at least. Tell me I repulse you. Tell me that I’m damned. That you do not, can not care for me. Tell me I am unloved, unlovable, and I will go. Tell me that and I’ll ask no more of you than a brotherly farewell.

*
From *This Divided Earth*

1865, South Carolina, USA. **Willamena**, an aging ‘southern belle’ and refugee from a devastated city, demands answers of a Union Lieutenant. She is shouted down by a delegation of Northern women.

When you have nothing - let me finish please before you hellcats jump on in! When you have nothing - I would think you might permit a widow some little pause at least, a courtesy however much begrudged, some little pause, to speak - oh let me, let me say - when you lose all you have and with it any hope of restitution is extinguished too – there settles in the marrow, in the heart of you, the innards here – settles deep inside a jagged rock, a weight too great to lift, a burden in the guts, makes of the womb a cell forever locked, stops up the bowels and dams the flow of blood. You would not now credit it, dismay has all but robbed me of my youth, but I once was beautiful. Oh, once it would have pleased you to have heard me speak, just to watch me frown and bite my cherry lip. When I had nothing worth the listening to, you would have listened then and found it charming, every vacant squeak. How light I was, so light I might have floated in the ether and away had he not held me firm and true. I know you have him, have my husband here. I know it. Have his carcass neatly wrapped, the butchers that you are. The offal and the bones of him, you have. I know it sure as if you had him bound to me, a millstone round our necks, and both thrown overboard. He’s done no harm. No soldier, him. A planter all his life. What claim can you make to a deadman’s bones?

*
MEN

CONTEMPORARY

From Deadstock

2002, The North of England. Allen, an American veterinarian, has responded to an international emergency, travelling to the United Kingdom to help cope with a Foot & Mouth epidemic. He describes the process of the mass slaughter of cattle, swine and sheep.

You know what pithing is, my friend? Pithing? No? Pithing, my friend, is when you take a thin metal rod. About so. You understand? And you take this rod and push in through the bullet hole in the head of a cow. Down into the spinal cord, you see. Scrambles the brain. So if the bolt pistol hasn’t killed old Daisy, your trusty pithing rod sure as hell will. Course if the cow’s only stunned from the bolt and you leave it too long, you’re gonna have to stick it in her just as she’s coming round. Then, as you can imagine, things can get a trifle messy. Especially if you’ve run out of metal rods and you’re doing the job with plastic disposable ones instead. No messier than beating lambs to death with shovels, of course. Mind you, the army told me they make pretty easy targets. You know, crawling from the wombs of their dead mothers. Not exactly a combat mission. But then that’s the problem with lambing season. If there isn’t serum enough to go round, well it’s just not possible to lethally inject them all, now is it? And you’re gonna have to slaughter the newborn along with their moms somehow. I guess shovels are as good a bet as any, huh? Same with calves. Tend to hide amongst the rest of the herd. So the little devils might not be, strictly, you know, dead, before you bulldoze them into the truck. Or onto the pyre. Shortage of marksmen, you see. Shortage of slaughterhouses too. And gasoline. And vets. Course yours truly has to be grateful for that last foul-up. If the Ministry hadn’t put out an SOS for foreign vets, well I wouldn’t be here now, would I? Every cloud, huh?
From *Deadstock*


You tell a farmer his life’s work is fit for nothing but the knacker’s yard. Not even that. Just a fucking great bonfire that’s gonna block out the sky for miles around. The mother of all barbecues, smoking out every house in the county. Everywhere the stench, like poison in your lungs. In your nostrils, your clothes, your food. And quarantine him throughout so he can’t leave his farm. Tell him no one’s allowed in. Not even his daughter. So while she’s stuck at college, he waits for news of infection alone, hears the worst alone, watches the culling of his herd alone, and then sits in an empty farmhouse contemplating the future. Alone. And then tell his only child it’s not her fault. *(Pause)* You know what’s crazy? In the middle of all that? **Desire**. You fathom that? Comes mid-summer and the ‘all-clear’ is sounded. And I’m up here one day making a call. Out of courtesy, no more than that. It’s not guilt. It’s business is all. Anyway, I make this call, and she comes to the door. Myrrah. This is the daughter I’ve heard so much about. I mean, I’ve seen pictures, but ... you know, here she is. And he comes up behind her - the two of them framed in the doorway - and he’s like a foot over her shoulder. Taller than me, you know. But I look at them. And they kind of fit. They’re a couple, you know? You can tell, the way she looks at me, suspicious as hell, it’s funny but you can tell. No doubt about it. This is her man ... And I don’t think of myself as a jealous person. I’m not, I don’t think. Least ways, I can’t remember my *being* jealous. Not with women in the past. But there was something there. Between them. Father and daughter. In that doorway. In that moment. And I wanted it too. I did. That secret. Wanted to possess it too. *(Pause)* ‘Course the rest of the summer, you couldn’t keep me away. I’m not saying I wouldn’t have applied to stay on anyway. Sense of duty and all that. But she made me see it. Forget the slaughter and ... really see it. The beauty in this place.
From *The Spoils*

*An Interrogation Room.* Shilling, an interpreter in an army of occupation is charged with interrogating the secretarial staff of a fallen regime. He is gradually and dangerously drawn into their world. Here, he questions a young woman about her home town and love life.

Did you work for the military? (Pause) Did your family? (Pause) You’re not proud of them? No? (Pause) Most of my interviewees, they tend to demonstrate a certain pride in their associations with the army. Not you? You were after all an adolescent, a young girl living in close proximity to a coastal garrison of young men. You must have memories, some at least, not entirely painful. Growing up by the sea. (Pause) I see you there, you know. Indulge me, please. Picture you there I should say. A snapshot, seaside postcard. You. Out for afternoon stroll with a soldier. The length of the strand. A swim, perhaps. Something a little daring. No? (Pause) You’re saying there were never days just lying in the sun. Never nights just listening to the surf. We all have, don’t we? I think we all have … I know I do … summers we look back on.

Fondly. (Pause) Then I’d like to have seen you then. The young girl and the soldier boy. Arm in arm. Walking the wind-swept beach. I’m flirting with cliché, I know, but the appeal of the image is far too … seductive. Don’t you think? The young couple, coupling. In the dunes. Yes? The dog days, high summer. Before he ships out. Before he’s gone. And she retraces their steps, alone. (Pause) I see myself there, watching, presiding over the scene if you like. From the sea-view window of my rented room in the dilapidated boarding house on the front. The kind of boarding house your parents might have run. A solitary guest, checked in from out of town. For my health. The sea air. Does the spirit good to spy the pair of you, out on the spit-head at low-tide perhaps, two figures in the distance blurring into one, ah, to catch sight of young lovers entwined, to bear witness to that passion, to feel there in the instance of their perfect self-absorption, one’s own humanity yes, and yet in their exclusivity one’s own extinction too, one’s own utter insignificance. A curiously … comforting sensation. At least, I find it so. Oblivion. No, no, amalgamation. An ugly word, but still, there it is. (Pause) I’m trespassing. I’m sorry.
TWENTIETH CENTURY

From *There's a City in My Mind*

1978. Texas, USA. The *Prophet*, a restless young man in his late teens, who will go on to become a notorious cult leader, shares his innermost thoughts with a fellow teenager, a girl he had previously deserted when she fell pregnant.

I saw the sky, baby, I SAW THE SKY! I'm lying in my truck swamped by the dark. And there I am, looking at the sky, like I'm drowning in the darkness of it all … and all of a sudden it's like, it's like I'm being watched from every angle. And there's this, there's this … this … *being*, this being confronting me and it's like I have no place to run ... This *force* is on top of me. And this voice says to me, it says - it's not a voice, see, like when I'm talking to you ... It's a voice come to impart a picture completely perfect in my mind ... It says, the voice says, *He* says, ‘You're really hurtin’, boy, aren't you?’ And, and, you know, nineteen years of my life flash in front of me, just like in a a a movie. The whole damn aura of of of *being*. It says, ‘You're really hurtin’, little man. You loved her and she's turned her back on you. She's rejected you.’ And it says, 'Don't you know that for nineteen years I've loved you and for nineteen years you've turned your back on me and rejected me?’ And all of a sudden, everything is like, bang! It hits me all at once. The the the reasons, the ah … *purposes* of life! Okay, okay, yes, but the key, the key the key note is this. God said he would give you back to me. He dint say when. He dint say how. But He, you know, He … gave His word. Dammit, baby, this ain’t *church*! This is the back of my pick-up offa the goddam innerstate in the darkness. This in the middle of nowhere, the middle of unholy night. It ain’t some shitty sermon, it ain’t your Sunday best … it ain’t *clean*! Christ. What the hell am I doing here? I'm lost, man, I’m so fuckin’ lost. Call me what I am. A homeless retard with a hard-on for a ninth-grader. I mean dammit, girl, you’re smart, you got it all ahead of you. Look at me. Look. Jesus, what am I thinkin'? There's not a grade I didn't fail in. Failed the first grade - twice. Failed the second. Comes the first day of third grade and here’s
me and my special little friends coming out the side of the door headin’ for the swing sets and all of a sudden you start hearing this, ‘Here come the retards!’… ‘Here come the retards’. I just stopped in my tracks. It's like the sun went down on my world … Longest day of my life … It comes time my mom’s there to pick me up … ‘Mom, I'm in the retarded class.’ She says, no, no, you're not, baby. You’re just special. (Pause) Girl, ain’t you through being hurt by me?

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From *The Happiness Compartment*

1962, Boston, Massachusetts. Reed, a bright, earnest young man in his 20s, works on the election campaign of a charismatic US Senator. He shares his insecurities with Clare, a young woman, who has just spent the night with the Senator.

What you fail to understand is what's at stake. Yes, I think so, yes. If you're in a Pennant race, you don't ease off, the final game of the season. Let the other team close in. You keep on hitting, hard as ever. Cos you know that in the end the Pennant don't mean shit. It's the goddamn World Series that you gotta keep in mind! I've wasted God knows how long stuck inside this room, when I should be out there working for the man who'll make a difference! I should be in the field, not babysitting you! It isn't just the Senate race, there's more than that at stake. And if I did find you attractive - which may I please point out, I don't - I still wouldn't want to know the sordid details of you screwing with my boss. I can guarantee that he and I have more urgent matters pressing, and the day we stoop to locker-room gossip will be the day that I resign! *(Pause, her smiles pricks his pomposity. He shakes his head)* You know I think I know why he ... why the two of you ... hit it off. You're like him. You remind me of him. The way he ... You push the same buttons, I guess. In me. You both make me feel ... I don't know. Stupid? Clumsy? Like there's something different in the room, and I'm the only sucker hasn't noticed. He has this little smile he wears sometimes around the campaign office, and everybody in there knows there's something up. It may be just a stupid joke, you know, he heard somewhere. It lifts the place, his mood. The atmosphere is ... And I'm laughing along with the others, or we're out for a beer or two, and I'm standing there thinking ... "Goddammit that smile makes me nervous. I wish he would quit it right now." I want to do what we set out to do, it's that simple, why does everyone else have to find it so ... amusing? I don't get it. I don't. What's so funny? And that's how you look at me too. *(Pause)* You asked me had I been dreaming? I dreamt I was late for the party. To celebrate his victory in the election.
I couldn’t find the room where they all were gathered. I could hear it, the music and dancing, the speeches, the cheering. But was the noise above my head or below my feet? Another floor of the hotel? I keep running down corridors expecting any time to see an open door and feel the warmth. I knew he would be angry, disappointed if I didn't show. But the time was getting later and the hotel growing larger. And then, I guess, I'd made it. I was in the ballroom. But the music wasn't playing anymore. No, he was on the platform - thanking all his team. And when I entered, late and out of breath, a thousand people in the room all turned and looked at me. Even he stopped in mid-sentence and ... I had interrupted! Didn't I know? Wasn't I told? Where in God's name had I been? (quiet) I'm sorry. I've spoiled the party. I didn't know, you see. No one told me anything. No, it's all right. I'll leave. (Pause, simply) I want to be good.

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From *The Swing Left*

1946, London. Roy, a soldier in his late 20s, who spent the war as a POW in camps in Germany and Poland struggles to adapt to life back home.

What’s it like to be home? *Pause* Queues. Lines of people. All the time. Milling about. First thing I noticed. There was the bombsites and the rubble, of course. The shops and houses and that. But the queues of people really bothered me. Hundreds of ‘em. Outside the butcher’s shop, and the bakery, and the greengrocer’s and the fishmongers and the … Christ, you name it! All these gray little people clutching their ration books. Like rats, scuttling from shop to shop, queuing for hours. Me sister Dorothy having to go put her name on a list for a pram. All the furniture in the house made out of this boxwood crap. Her and Tom walking miles looking for some hole in the wall to rent. All the family living on top of each other. Ships burned out in the Thames. The docks blown to buggery. Bloody great concrete blocks along the shore. I used to walk there. *Pause* Don’t get me wrong. I’ve seen things. Poland. Germany. Jesus, the mess they’re in. Never fix that. They got lines of people won’t never get home. Columns of them, all over the roads. You look out for number one. Keeping marching west. You have to. I know all that. But I thought we won. Then I get back and the country looks like shit. Like everything’s falling apart. *Pause* Girl last night. Talked about revolution. I don’t know what that means. To hear her describe it, you’d think handing out leaflets was a night on the town. She said going to a really good meeting was better than sex. I said: ta very much.

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From *The Swing Left*

1946, London. Alan, a debonair young man in his late 20s, flirts sardonically with a nurse at a dance for returned POWs. Gradually he reveals what he too has lost.

So tell me. What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this? It was either that or “do you come here often”? I couldn’t decide which was worse. Oh, you work here. Medical staff. Ah, so you do come here often. I’ll have to seriously consider becoming a member. You doubt my sincerity. I’m shocked. I’ll have you know I’m here tonight at the request of a very dear friend. I have given freely of my own time to lend him vital support and encouragement in his hour of need. It was in that spirit of Christian charity that I gladly accepted his invitation. And I firmly deny that the promise of full army rations and cheap booze played any part in my decision. *(Smiles)* Who is it you’re looking out for? Darling, you’re as subtle as a B52. Come on, I’ll help you pinpoint your target. What does he look like? Are you in love? Are you though? You don’t have to answer, of course. Highly sensitive information. Restricted access only. I understand. ‘I was adored once too’. Are we getting drunk? *(Pause)* People don’t like to talk about love. Why is that? Bring up the subject of sex, everyone’s aglow. Folks can’t get enough of it. But love? It’s as though people were ashamed. I bet you’ve broken a few hearts in your time. Pretty young nurse like you. Holding the hands of brave boys who lay dying. Looking up from their beds. Into those eyes. I would imagine they found tremendous comfort in that. Solace even. Did they? *(Pause)* D’you ever think about them? *(Pause)* Just all the time? *(Pause)* You’ll have to teach me then. How you manage not to.

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NINETEENTH CENTURY

From *Strange Fruit* – Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* in the Reconstruction period.

1876. Georgia, USA. **Loewell**, a black entrepreneur in his 30s, *son of a slave, awaits the return after several years away of the mistress of the plantation house*.

Miss Desiree Randolph … Back after all these years. She won’t’ve changed one lick. Not Miss Desiree. When I was jess a kid, my daddy, he’d brin’ me up here to the house. I’d fetch ‘n carry for him when he’d come n shoe the Colonel’s horses – tha’s old man Randolph. Anyhow, one summer, I weren’t no mo’ than fo’teen, I was up here with my daddy ‘n I musta done something dumb – sumthin he thought dumb anyways - he bout broke my nose, walloping me the way he did. Blood run down my face like rain … Must be he was drunk, I dunno, maybe I brung it on myself … She wasn’t much older’n me at the time, Desiree, skinny li’l thin’ all a sixteen, hair down her back, to her waist, you know? She appears outta nowhere. I can see her now. Dress, white as cherry blossom. Skin, transparen’ in tha’ sunlight. Brings me indoors, the back kitchen, on them steps there. I remember cos them stone steps were real cool after bein in the heat all morn. She takes a washcloth. ‘Member how the water ran down her arm when she wrung it. Tha’ was cool too, tha’ ol’ washcloth on my fo’head. Her delicate fingers dabbin’ at my nose, real soff ‘n gennel like. I was ‘fraid cos my blood stain up her pretty white dress. She din’t flinch none. 'Don't cry, boy,' she sez. 'It'll heal in time for your wedding.' *(Pause.)* 'Don’t cry, boy’. Me, the son of a slave, sat with the Youn’ Mistress, watching tha’ bloody water run the length of her lilywhite arm. ‘n look-a-here, all these years on ‘n I’s stood in my dandy waistcoat ‘n fancy shoes like a pig in a parlour, rich, with money to spend ‘n a fobwatch I done imported from Paris, France. But you make a study a this here fella ‘fore you, ‘n I’s still the dumb little kid with blood on his britches. You can’t change what’s inside.

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From *Strange Fruit* – Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* in the Reconstruction period.

1876. Georgia, USA. Peter, a tutor in his late 20s, speculates on the future to a family gathering of planters.

It must be a real comfort to believe you are made in the divine image of your Creator. That God has a role for you, a destiny all mapped out. I mean no offence, I simply state that fundamental to your faith is the belief that there’s something spiritual in the very nature of mankind. And perhaps that’s true for you, but if one were to study the human race with the cold eye of the scientist, one would find little evidence to suggest our species has much to take pride in. When the vast majority are brutish, ignorant and profoundly unhappy, it makes sense that our brains are most stimulated by a ludicrous game of chance? Human beings have to stop admiring themselves. Shatter the looking glass before it’s too late. Technology is advancing at a tremendous rate. We’ve invented trains and ships that transport us vast distances in a matter of days; we’ve medicines now that extend our lives far beyond those of past generations; we’ve united an entire continent under the flag of liberty. Everything which once was beyond imagination appears daily on the horizon. On one level it’s astounding! But the innovations of the elite will count for nothing, if not harnessed to the labor of the common people. It’s madness to produce weapons that can slaughter entire regiments in a single afternoon, and not be able to feed and clothe half the nation’s children. What is required is work for all. Regardless. In this country today too few are rewarded by the sweat of their brow. While, with few exceptions, the upper echelons, from what I've seen: do nothing, strive for nothing. They don’t want to work and wouldn't know how if you made them. In turn, they treat their servants like children, and workers like animals. They talk of industry, but remain idle; they chatter about science while revealing only their ignorance; and as for art, it barely registers on their consciousness. They philosophize in fancy restaurants, while the masses starve. For every rail station, we should be building five schools, for every saloon, a library! For every factory, a hospital! Educate the poorest and they will enrich all our lives. Believe me, I see them, every day, yearning to be free, to be of use, to work, to live.
From *Strange Fruit* – Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* in the Reconstruction period.

1876. Georgia, USA. **Peter**, a tutor in his late 20s, imagines a bright future with the young heiress to a former plantation.

**Peter** Now the whole country belongs to you, Annalise. And to me. And to the men and women we once called slaves, all of us get to ride down cherry tree avenues and call them our own. The world is vast and there are many lovely places in it. Just think, Annalise – your grandfather, and his father, and all your family going back, they owned living souls. That legacy doesn’t simply vanish, those souls are looking at you and whispering from behind each and every cherry tree, from every leaf and every branch, through the blossom and on the breeze. To profit from the enslavement of human beings! We’re all of us corrupted by it, Annalise, don't you see? Our generation no less than the previous. So corrupted that neither you or your mother or your uncle, none of you, notice any more that you owe your life to people you wouldn't let step foot on your front porch. The South is a hundred years behind our brothers in the North and we'll fall back still further, 'less we come to terms with history. It’s so clear to me: to live in the present we have to redeem our past, to finish with it, and it has to hurt, there's no easy way – we have to work till we drop. You must see that, Annalise. Throw the keys down the well and go. Free as the wind ... I'm not yet thirty and the things I’ve seen, Lisey, schools built and farms tended. Soon as the freeman has secured his plot, his family works to improve it by ditching, manuring, planting fine little orchards of half an acre or more, I tell you, I've seen peaches, pears, plums, apples, even redcurrants and gooseberries thriving. And when the farm is paid for, the addition of a study homestead cottage, neatly paled and fenced. These new homes put to shame the old plantation quarters, the slave cabins where we stored workers like so much cotton, only not as prized. I'm not naive, Annalise, tutors in the new schools are paid a pittance, I've suffered too. Winters, I've been hungry, sick, a virtual beggar – every blow fate can deliver, I've taken it. And still, every second of the
day and night, my soul has been filled with a sense of purpose, an inexpressible, indescribable feeling of the happiness to come – oh, Annalise. Can you hear it? Here comes happiness, here it comes, closer and closer – its footsteps in the passageway, creeping up the backstairs … And if we don't live to see it, if we never know it for ourselves, what does it matter? There's others who will! Generations to come will live in peace and harmony, black and white together, and wonder why, why it took us so long!

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From *Strange Fruit* – Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* in the Reconstruction period.

1876. Georgia, USA. **Loewell, a African-American entrepreneur in his 30s, announces his purchase of the plantation on which his father worked as a slave.**

A moment, ladies ‘n gentlemen, please … my mind’s a swamp, I can’t barely form a … All-righty. Hum. So. We gets to the auction. The Berringer Brothers was already there, hungry look in their eyes, determined like. Now Whitman, as y’all know, had only the seven thousand his aunt in Cleveland had pledged, ‘n Berringer Senior, well, he starts straight in with a bid of ten. Ten. Tha’s on top of the mortgage! Ten’s mo’ then seven. It ain’t hard to see the way the wind is blowin, so I take the son-of-a-bitch on. I bid twelve. He bids fourteen. I bid fifteen. I see them brothers conferring, like they was real sore, “Wha’s this nigger doing outbiddin’ us good ol’ boys.” All a sudden Berringer Senior leaps to twenny. Ever’one lookin’ at me, like I’s chicken. I don’t e’en blink. I go straight in - twenny five. Indicate we is going up in fives from hereon, they bes’ follow. They come in at thirty, sho’nuff, but they pause jus’ long enough ‘fore the commit, tha’ I know in my bones: thas as high as these boys’re willing to go. So. I shoot back:*thirty one five* ‘n them white boys grit their teeth ‘n the auctioneer curses under his breath, but there aint nothing for it ‘n down comes that hammer! Bam! I bid thirty one five over the mortgage ‘n the property’s mine. The Randolph Plantation is mine! The lake ‘n the cherry blossom, the avenue ‘n this old house, all mine! Mine! *(Gives a loud laugh.)* Lord a Mercy, ladies ‘n gentlemen, tell me I's drunk, I's outta my mind, tell me it's all a dream … *(He stamps his feet)* But don’t y’all laugh! Ya’ll never gonna laugh at Hermes Loewell agin. Oh daddy! Grand-daddy rise up from yo’ graves! See here what happened today! How your li’l Hermes, beat-up, pig-ign‘rant Hermes, who ran barefoot in winner, how that same Hermes is the new Massa of the plantation you worked as slaves! I done bought ‘n paid for the estate where you was slaves, where you couldn’t come *in de kitchen.* I must be dreamin’ – it’s all a dream, a deep … dark … secret … dream … Hey – let's have some music! It's a
Jubilee, y’all! Y’all invited to watch Hermes Loewell take an axe to Randolph Avenue! “I can not tell a lie, papa, was me cut down your cherry tree!” (*He laughs, almost hysterically*). We'll build summer homes ‘n cottages ‘n our gran’chillun ‘n great-granchilun will see a new life here … A new life … Music! Play! Why aren't y’all dancin'? Music, I said! Play so I can hear. So the Massa can hear! Make way for the new Boss! Play!

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From *This Divided Earth*

1865, *South Carolina, USA*. A Sergeant in the Union army describes the conditions of Sherman's 'total war.'

Afore this detail, I marched with General Billy best part of three years. I been shot at and starved, ambushed and bushwhacked, I seen storm and siege, massacre and butchery and still I come through. I been frozen so my blood was ice, I’ve fought up to my neck in swamp water, where I been a-fear of leeches and water moccasins more’n sharp-shooters. I seen wonders overnight, them engineer boys construct a bridge just two miles downstream from a hostile fort, seen a full company cross over in a matter of minutes, cavalry too, outflank their defences in nigh-on pitch black and perfect silence. Seen that fort in ashes by the time the next dawn come around. Yet the rebels still resist. Further we push on, deeper they dig in. They run at us with bayonets, whoopin like savages, we got repeating rifles, don’t make no sense, but they keep on toward us anyhow. One homestead I seen this pup, no more’n fourteen, cold and dead and laid out with his papa, coupla brothers, an uncle too. I figure he’s old enough to aim a musket at my head, he’s old enough for me to put a bullet in his breast … You ask why I am not consumed by madness? M’am, I don’t rightly know. It’s fun to destroy things, I guess. To rip up a rail, heat it ‘til it warps, wrap it round a tree, like a great metal necktie. They can make as much gunpowder as they want, what’s the point, iffin they can’t ship it by locomotive? It’s a kind of madness, aye, but there’s glory in it too. This last winter four divisions marched a hundred days, that’s fifty thousand men through six hundred miles of enemy territory, can you imagine? We took three state capitals, lost but seven hundred men and just about ended this god-damn war … You ever farm? Ever keep chickens? Well, if you did, you’d know there’s no way you reason with a fox. He gets the smell of blood, he ain’t never gonna let up. Only way to teach that furry little red bastard is to kill him. Only way he’ll learn. Less you got the patience of a saint, and an endless supply of chickens, a course …
Back last fall it was, we come across a camp, where they held infantrymen took prisoner that summer’s campaign. ‘Bout two hundred of them held there. They’d … they’d dug these, these holes in the ground to keep from freezing. Didn’t help. They died there by the dozen. We didn’t find but four’n’twenty left alive. These were our comrades, treated no better than swine. I watched the flames that night as we raised the local town. You could hear the womenfolk, their screams’d carry across the river, through the woods. Don’t know why they thought that beggin’d do them any good. Might as well shout yourself hoarse hoping that the thunderstorm’ll quit. I knew then that nothing would stop us. We’d keep right on … ‘til the blasted job was done.

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