Every Time You Close Your Eyes

Pulling The Trigger: Writing in the Aftermath

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Abstract

*Every Time You Close Your Eyes* is a long poem set in New York City during two major power cuts in 1977 and 2003. The poem explores ways in which people find connections with each other during the aftermath of a trigger, or a disaster. The poem deals with issues of both real and imagined fear and the way the culture and society of New York changed dramatically between both periods of time.

The accompanying exegesis examines the way Ian McEwan and Haruki Murakami use triggers to reveal the state of the world in which their characters live. It contains interviews with two New Yorkers who experienced both power cuts and includes discussions of major activators such as disasters as well as smaller triggers such as a song. The exegesis also includes a discussion of my own creative and research processes as these relate to the development of the poem.
Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Belinda Schenk and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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SIGNED:
Acknowledgements

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Part One: Major Creative Work

Every Time You Close Your Eyes
New York City

Summer, 1977

July 13. There is a blackout in the city.
The lights go out just before dark
and people blame lightning.

There are many different ways to tell this story.

This is one of them.
Fade

Hear the crash of glass on one small man’s head
as he now lies bleeding in the gutter.

His fingers form a fist, clutching
as if holding a weapon

or someone’s hand. People walk on, unwilling to bend to see
the damage. One person though, calls out.

The final repeat of the echo fades
and darkness is almost set to tumble through.
Ammunition

Three and a half blocks away, through alleys and streets, but still, this is Brooklyn. Here, the boy and his bed. One hides under the other. Soon, but not yet, he will fall into easy sleep.

His soldiers drive green army tanks and carry plastic guns. The boy’s flashlight shines a path ahead. Whether or not he hears shooting, imagined or real, he’ll never know. If he does, it’s best to pretend that it comes from the tiny weapons of toys.
Television Flickers

Out on the street, the flicker of television screens dissolve through apartment windows. People search for candles and matches to direct them through the long hours of night.

They are about to learn something new. The barman locks the doors and the men knock on them. Loud, as if they would open for a more petulant beat. Seventeen types of vodka rattle on the shelves.

There is a sudden head rush if the men rest their mouths below and wait for one to crack and spill over them. Here in this state, someone will mumble. Somebody will say something beautiful.
The Subway System

On the platform, people recall the location of the exit light’s glow and follow the sounds and energy from the movement of others. If you’re a reliable sort, you give directions to anyone who will follow and anyone who will trust. The rats are hushed. There seems to be no need to scurry under the railings. The A train is somewhere under the city.

Deep beneath earth and concrete, clogged under grass and the footsteps the people are inside the carriage. They clutch at things, feel their way. Sometimes people speak and swear, saying the things they forgot to filter. Inside the people, their blood rises and falls like every free standing building. Deep inside is exactly what you are thinking right now.
In The Bedroom

Red lips get looked at. Rose knows this. She can hear them smack against each other. The pout curves into a pale cheek and she kisses a white piece of toilet paper on the dresser to check the bleed.

The boy sleeps on cowboy patterned sheets. Now, she can leave for the bars or the front seat (and the back seat) of her lover’s sedan. She finds it best not to argue with herself or to think about it too much.

He sleeps right through, waking only for wafting breakfast smells and the thought of a hair scuff. He sleeps right through because she has never seen him wake, even from those loud winters where brutal wind tries to bend you.

He sleeps right through, even in heat like this, where the sheets stick and the towel, wet with water, turns tepid as you wipe. He sleeps right through, tonight, with killers and fleas, certain that his dreams fill his thoughts with light.
The Soldiers

They won’t save him. They are toys after all.
Sure, he can imagine. Of course he can imagine.
He can make shooting sounds with his mouth
and create as much blood as he needs. Some time soon,
he’ll have to come out for something to eat.
The Soldiers won’t feed him.
They might not even be on his side.
Electricity

You may have heard about it. Maybe you have read about it. It doesn’t matter, you’re reading about it now. Perhaps you were there, in which case, you’ll be recalling where you were and what you did. You’ll be remembering all of those old faces and names, and the old walls that held your ceilings straight. By some coincidence, were they wallpapered brown?

Five boroughs and a few other suburbs are out. But in this moment you can still see these words in front of you. Listen. This is electricity. Watch it.

Write a list:

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then cross off the things you can’t live without.
To The Shop Owner (1)

Of course, everyone will say that he should have got insurance
but right now, all that matters is the fact that he didn’t.
This will keep him awake, decades from now.

They come at nightfall. Behind the counter
he shouts all the things they don’t understand. In Spanish.
He waves his fists to conduct them out. One two three,
one two three, one two three. Pause.

But it doesn’t work like that. Not when he’s outnumbered
and small. Five foot six and thinner than a puppet on three strings.

They grunt as they punch and run through his aisles.
Fire, outside. He smells it before he sees it. Hears its rust and guts burn.
Orange heat and a burnt hand.

Boxes fall like urgent landslides
breaking the contents inside.

A gun fires somewhere. He stands, still there. Trying to will the
tears back to the insides of his eyes. Behind the lids and the skin.
And someone screams fire, police, fire.
And he’s down after ten counts
and a whack in the jaw.

Someone is dying and he’s yet to notice.
Someone’s banged up and bruised
and all that matters is this, now, and different ways of speaking,
the rules for language.
The box of this smashed up transistor radio
reads batteries not included.
Superman

On a crane, high over Manhattan, Christopher Reeve is stuck in the sky. Just his luck he’s wearing full body lycra over muscles and under a red cape. Hearsay has it that the tech crew on the set plugged into too much power and destroyed a gigantic metropolis in one full go.

Bam!

He is about to be a star. You can just tell with some people. They’ve either got it or they don’t. But where is Superman really when you need him? Memorising lines? Wondering if this is the beginning or perhaps the end of his career?

No, he’s all the way up looking down and across the blunt buildings, the river’s shine, waiting for the crew to bring him down. He’s all the way up stuck somewhere between flying and falling.
Hiding

From under the bed, here comes the boy.
His face bears creases from the grooves in the carpet
and close by, in the next room, his mother calls.
Call it hunger, call it fear, call it loneliness,
he meets her in the kitchen.
She makes him cheese on white bread.
Cut into quarters. She pats his head and bends down
to kiss his cheek. Pulls him up and wraps her arms around him.
She sits him on the bench and tells him to not be afraid of the dark.

Sometimes when you imagine hard enough
you can confuse make believe
with a memory. It happens
sometimes. If you try.
At the Police Station

Police stations always seem to be downtown. Wherever this one stands, there’s not enough room for all these people here. Some men refuse to talk. Some fight. Some cry.

In the cells, there’s shouting:

*Fuck you, man! Lemme outta here.*
*I ain’t done nothin’ wrong? Everyone’s doin’ it.*

And calming:

*Be quiet. Nothing’s gonna get done with all this noise. Just stay quiet.*

Advice:

*Why don’t you try getting’ the real bad guys, huh?*
*Son of Sam’s probably killing some lady right now.*
*Psycho serial-killing freak!*

But what they really notice is the stench of sweat as they’re thrown in. Not even allowed to make a phone call, some ask others what their problem is.

And since you haven’t spoken to her for three months and one week, what would you say anyway?

*I love you.*
*I’m sorry.*
*I’m in trouble.*
*Come get me? Baby?*
*I’m sorry. It’s dark.*
The Other Room

The boy knocks on her bedroom door.
She always tells him to knock in case she’s doing the things that women do.
(The boy often wondered about these things).
He opens it and enters. Shines his flashlight on the bed
and whispers *ma?* He feels the flat unmade bed
with a copy of *Cosmopolitan* lying open on the pink sheets.
In the mirror he shines light on his face.
Makes monster faces with his skin and teeth.
The Looters

From broken shop-front windows boxes are tossed from man to man from the south side to the alleyway. Alarms fail. Even the sirens from police cars can’t make their point clear enough. Holes are small so they make them bigger with their boots. Kick it in. Kick it in. Unless they kick, they can’t kick it in.

After that crash they simply enter and take. It’s hot inside and deadlines make it hard to breathe and hearts jolt like sugar hits.
Men carry boxes from cars and up flights of stairs, each thigh muscle stuffed into tight flared jeans.
Dry mouths splashed with water or a mouthful of coke.

Someone follows, panting faster. He holds on to what he’s got between his hands. It doesn’t matter what it is. Faster and stronger with this broken thing.
The sweat on his face beaming, he heads back again for a second turn. Kicking everything in, legs jelly with the burn. Today, boys become men and men smoke cigarettes like movie stars playing bad.
**Intersection**

Rose walks past the intersection feeling the sweat on her neck. A sheen, sticky with her DNA, a reminder that she’ll never be somebody new. Customers argue with merchants as they negotiate for cans of beer. She smiles. A policeman tells her to hurry home. *Single women shouldn’t be alone tonight.*

*I’m not alone,* she thinks.

Those words tumble into her mouth where she decides to keep them for now. They sit like books in special collections. You’re not supposed to take them out. Food lies scattered on the concrete. Tomorrow it will be all eaten by rats feasting like kings. She steps over each bit watching her shoes, gentle as she does. How it still tastes, this crosses her mind.
Dear Sam,

Ma says I will grow out of soldiers and also my lisp. It is because my teeth are crooked at the front. I sometimes see things about you on the news. People saying stay home at night. I will stay home at night. I’m only nine. I know why soldiers kill people. It’s because they have to or else they will get in trouble. Will you get in trouble if you don’t kill people? My Pa told me that I had to protect my Ma. I will. But she’s not scared of you. She’s not scared of anything. I sometimes wish that blankets were cold in the summertime so I could snuggle up without getting hot. I hope you get this letter. I do not know where to send it.
Embrace

Robert’s cello sits tall in his apartment.
His strings are tuned and the maple wood polished.
Curves like a line of music. A verse of a song.
The sound of the cello is the closest instrument to the human voice.
Outside, listen: the shouts and the screams
land in higher places. He sits behind and throws his arms around
the wood and drowns the voices with those long strokes.
Curves a line of music. A verse of a song.
They Evacuate the Art Show

Outside the gallery, you look for her on the curb.
You want to tell her something. You need her to know.

She has the straightest back you have ever seen.
You swerve with a tray of champagne in your hands.
The room is full of artists and reviewers and tipsy students.
She takes a glass and you want to say 'you have the straightest back I have ever seen'
even though it might come across as peculiar.
You say it and the words fold into each other like a note between pages.
She doesn’t hear you.
You watch her fingers on the stem of the glass. She looks at you
and you try to slip inside the hoods of her eyes.
Tuck yourself in and float on the glimmer.
People scamper out. She doesn’t know this, but you place the palm of your hand
on the small of her back to usher her out.
Trick yourself into thinking it’s part of your job.
You could have been anyone. She has the straightest back you have ever touched.

You write something down. You have the straightest back I have ever seen.

People on the street mill about and chatter. You carry the bucket of ice and bottles
to the crowd and pop them all. Throw ice in the air and let bubbles fall to the ground.
She has the straightest back you have ever seen. It feels like rain.
You say it again, this time, under your breath. You have the straightest back I have ever seen. The words merge with the speed of the bustle as you try to find her.
Somewhere. Down the street. On the final page.
Or in the photographic records of tonight.
Robert goes to bed: a monologue

I simply went to bed. I walked up my street and everyone was on their stairs, drinking and talking, but I went upstairs, opened my apartment door. It was as hot as firelight. I opened my fridge for a glass of water, put it next to my bed, closed my eyes and tried to sleep.

I could hear the sound of people laughing, and sirens. A typical Brooklyn night. But louder. Somebody told me that when he looked down, and across, the flicker of candles took his breath away.

I didn’t know what time it was when I woke. I looked out of the window and saw a few candles through other people’s windows. It was late enough that people were either asleep, or were out on the streets, drinking and dancing. Stealing things, I think. I doubt there were that many people sitting inside trying to read by candlelight at that stage. Maybe, but I doubt it.

It took his breath away. That’s nice, isn’t it? That something so simple can have that effect. Although, candles are designed to take your breath away. If not, they would never get blown out.
Tempt

In an attempt to replace fright with something, he chooses yet again curiosity. The boy shines the torch on the glossy pages. Women in high heels pose. *How to give your man everything he wants* bold on the cover. Outside blares. It’s tempting to pretend that they are coming to rescue him. Tempting to think that he could jump from the fifth floor window and be caught by a man. One of those men with broad accents and broader shoulders, waiting there on the concrete, looking up and shouting his name.
Son of Sam

Couples in parked cars had been warned by police and reporters. You had to know to be careful. You just had to know. The crazy man was not in your imagination. Not this time.

So tonight couples stayed in clammy apartment buildings. They went to bed early. They talked, still fucked, and may have asked things that the other would like to know. Like favourite foods. School. Ambition.

Much later, upon arrest Son of Sam’s words were reported to be: You got me. What took you so long?
Rose (Tortoise)

I pass two men carrying a couch and three chairs between them. They tell me to get what I can from the store around the bend. A floating lounge room. The dream life of wanderers.

I poke around the corner allowing for one moment, a fantasy. Television. There are dozens of people inside. For television. I walk closer. Feel the impossibility of carting it home.

The possibility of hiding it. For him. In the broom cupboard, I could get it in there. We could, you see, come back later. It would be for him. A siren blasts. Like cockroaches, people scatter home.

If for a moment, I could talk to you about him. I wouldn’t waste your time. If you have it. This straw haired boy, my little man.

If, for a moment, I could lift this television alone. I look for help in the lane. Out there. The bicycle spins a blurred figure away.
She Thinks

On the steps outside the door of his place
Rose sits. Imagination becomes the stone cold enemy of the curious.
She designs scenes. Writes lines. Plays both parts.
Thinks about those sheets she’d like to wake in
on Sunday mornings.

Love and astrology.
Grace and fall.

She holds her hands in her lap and with her finger
traces the rings of her silver bracelet.
The tiny gaps where one notch joins to the other.
One ends and another begins.

She looks up to the stairs on the empty fire escape.
A man on foot turns the corner.
Stop. Steady.
Forward.
He walks by. She breathes hot like a sprinter.
The Shapes

In the laneway, distant objects
and all the shapes yet to be identified
shift with the energy
of the man walking past.
Misbehaving

1. The boy dares to look outside.
   Containers of food burn in the deli down the street.
   A man runs, collecting people on the way.

2. Never leave the apartment at night.
   He has been told.

3. He leaves a piece of cardboard to keep the apartment door ajar
   and climbs the stairs to the rooftop.
   Never leave the apartment at night.

4. The lower lip bites the tops of his teeth
   to stop. Stop the shakes. The crash of Brooklyn.
   Women roam and men steal.
   Some seem to burn.

5. And his mother …
   He does not yell for her.
   He does not yell.

6. A man and a woman
   from somewhere
   ask what he’s doing.
   He says nothing much, just looking. They step closer.
   Do you want to come and talk to us? We live here too.

7. He does not yell for her.
   He does not yell.

8. What number are you in? We haven’t seen you before.
   We locked ourselves out. What a night to lock ourselves out.
9. I hope you got the letter.
I did not know where to send it.

10. The man steps close.

11. The boy steps back. He does not yell for her.
The man in overalls whistles a tune. There is stubble on his face and a stench, odd like tomatoes.
The woman stands behind, as if in defence.

12. If a boy runs at a pace of 30 Miles per hour how long does it take him to climb back down those stairs?

He outruns them. His body swerves and weaves.
His tiny legs lead him back down.

How they shout *come back, let us in.*
Romance

He comes down to her. He says he can’t stay for too long.
I told her I was getting supplies. I better get back with supplies. Batteries. A torch. Cans. How long will this last for, do you think?

They take the car. She loves taking the car. How long can this last for?

They park where the river leads to the ogreish buildings. We’re not supposed to be out tonight. The Twin Towers – black skinny trousers stand on the edge of Manhattan. Tonight, only headlights from cars and trucks shine pretty on the water.
42 Pine Street

Police: Let me haunt you with these words: I'll be back! I'll be back! To be interpreted as — bang bang bang, bank, bang — ugh!!
Yours in murder.
From a hand-written letter, written by serial killer David Berkowitz, otherwise known as Son of Sam.

In Apartment 7E, David wonders whether to head out
or to stay in. The view of the Hudson River,
with its steady stream of navy,
offers no direction.

His dog has been talking in strange phrases. Odd ways.
It’s as if he was in control. David opens a can of beans
and eats them cold. Once, there was a steady line to continue on.
A path with an easy tread.

Now, when he is most expected, he stays in.
The dog makes it clear after he drinks again,
from the un-flushed toilet bowl.
Yesterday

At 5.30am she wakes with her arms wrapped
around a sideways pillow. Each weekday she’s at work at 6
– lipstick, an apron, comfortable shoes –
then at 8, a break to make sure the boy is up and ready for school
– cereal, juice, science books.

For the big tips, she smiles as wide as her mouth can stretch
and remembers to wiggle her hips when taking the orders to the kitchen.
This has proven to work.

This man on television above the counter.
6’4, dark hair, blue eyes. Christopher Reeve.
She watches him make bad choices
on the soap opera – Love of Life –
all of the drama Rose might have
if she plays it right.

The other waitress tells her he’s filming that Superman movie.
You should find him. Just yesterday they were filming on 43rd.
It’s time you got out there again, anyway.
Don’t let some cheating husband get the better of you.
You deserve it.

Rose deserves it. Clark Kent and blue eyes.
The Superhero, the reporter and the soap star
all rolled into one good man. One good one.

Her heart glides over the smell of full breakfasts
and strong, bottomless coffee.
Her heart glides like a rescued Lois Lane.
The Disco

Even without the mirror balls and the sounds, people dance. Remembering how to feel, they carry the beat and the rhythm with them. The syncopated bass line runs through.

This girl on the floor, kicking and spinning and completely shiny. She is like the moon. She gives light to all the people in the city and a dull glow to the space in the empty rooms.
In the Backseat

or how to give your man everything he wants

The leather sticks.
Rose sits, her dress hitched around her waist.
His buckle is undone. Shoes remain tied to his feet.
She lies back, her head against the window.
What was that noise? she whispers.
Relax, sweetheart. You’re too tense tonight.

He peels off her underwear. Her high heels kick off.
They land near the coins
and the dust under the seats.

Somewhere, Robert plays cello in a murky room.
The chords long through his arms
and strong between his legs.
The notes stop in the sticky air outside.
Stiff in the still, they’ll never reach
anywhere close by.

The boy runs and runs faster and startles a cat.
It jumps from the fire escape to the alleyway.
On its paws, the grease makes a trail to follow.

Back in the car, they shove and shift.
The sweat rolling in between them as they move.
The exquisite sadness of a sonata.
Back beats in alleys.

The last note is played. The cat stops running.
Rose arches her back.
I need supplies, he says.
Maybe I should get cigarettes.
It seems like a good time to start smoking.

And silence now.
The cat turns to chase a rat in the brown gutter.
The boy locks the door, his back and a pile of things sit against it.
He counts how long he can hold his breath
until his face gets redder and redder. He does not call for her.
He does not call.

The cello set down. Robert holds
a mouthful of whiskey on the back of his tongue
before he swallows.

Rose puts her hand to her cheek
and feels the flush and flurry. Redder and redder.
For a second of deep and warm,
they all hold their breath and again, sigh it out.
Afterwards, They Share a Drink

The shop owner sells supplies
for seven times their value. He can. There is demand.
He has a gun.
Rose stands aside.
Her mascara and lipstick smudged on her cheeks.
She wants a drink. Demand. He has a gun. This is backwards.

The cops ain’t doing nothin’ to protect us, man. We gotta take control.
You want these things, man, you pay for ‘em. I lost half my shit tonight.
Kids just came in an’ took it all. And you, lady, watcha doin’ out?
Dontcha know there’s a maniac on the loose. Killin’ those couples in car seats.

Rose knows. She wants a drink. She wants a martini on the kitchen bench
as he rides her dress up past her hips and bites her neck.
But she’ll take a beer.
She’ll take anything she can.
In Bus Terminals

Boys continue to earn a living
and men continue to pay. In this dark,
the needles on the ground
and the veins in your wrist are tough to see.

Trade is good tonight
and some negotiate higher rates of pay.

In the corner, you can hear the oddest mix of sounds.

Someone’s nose breaks with the punch of a fist.
It clicks back into place after a moment of still.
The swish – the opening of a bus door
with downwards footsteps following.

But the vacant stares. Those boys have it down to photographic perfection.
The stares are soundless.
Supplies

When he chooses flowers and fresh fruit for his wife, it’s hard to keep smiling even though she’s dressed for disco.

Rose takes something for her boy. Oh, she hadn’t planned to. It was just there. Not exactly television, but pink bubble gum. And who needs money in times like these?

He buys five candles and matchsticks for light.

Candlelight.

*Let’s go. I’ll drop you home,* he says.

*It’s okay,* she says, *I’d like a walk.*
**Comic Book**

With the flashlight,  
the boy reads the *Superman* comics  
he’s piled by the door. This makes him,  
for a moment, feel brave.

If the floor creaks in the hallway, even a little  
he’ll feel it. He’ll be ready.

The boy sees the world  
in lines and panels  
and red, blue, yellow and green.

He’ll be ready. The skin under  
his nails bleeds. The pressure on his bladder  
built and releases …  
releases.
Her Walk

Rose’s best companion is her walk.
She takes it everywhere. Past buildings
and dark avenues.

She might like to quicken pace when she passes the men,
but she strides with high heeled precision, avoiding the pot holes
on the pavement. Convincing herself
that she’s sassy.

Convincing herself of many things:
Love. Sleep.

From piles of sneakers dumped in corners
men find pairs in any size.
**Sport on the Radio**

European men play chess.
Sometimes they feel the next move,
or simply guess the shapes on the board.
With matches, people watch as the game takes place.
Somebody offers commentary, like sport on the radio.
Gloomy shadows in the backdrop.
Rubbish on the concrete
where kids play baseball and
crack dealers talk all things sport.
Shooting Star

Somebody sees one
for the first time.
People in cities often forget to look up.
*If only she were here to see that,*
Robert thinks. *If only.*
**War Games**

The laundry basket with its piles of clothes.
The boy finds last week’s pyjamas
and replaces them. They are not his favourite.
The are dry. He waits for the sound of a key in the door.
Tiny soldiers line up ready to attack.
A tank parks next to them. Heavy and big.
*She* has to get past all of this, this whole army
before she can check
if he is alright. All of it.
Ready. Aim.
**Behind**

Rose takes the short way home.  
It’s much later than she had planned.  
People down the streets sit on brownstone steps.  
She wishes, for a time, she was one of them,  
chatting and drinking from shared bottles of whiskey and beer.  
She keeps the pace up.  
Checks her steps in front and not behind.  

She can smell the fire and hear the bottles  
crashing to the ground.  
Sirens and stones break windows  
and people look through.

*Do you know the way to San Jose?* a man asks her.  
She points left. He laughs.

People look through. One of them spits  
and it lands, wet and frothy  
at her shoes. She stops, ready to stand face to face  
at the window. Ready to fire back.

They stare at each other, waiting for someone  
to let some words or some stray bullet from their mouths.  
She could easily spit and run. There was a time when she would.

The village here still rages. Rose,  
between this hour and the next  
grows fuller. She walks taller than before.
Those Familiar Places

At 2am he gives up
and falls asleep.
Rose struggles into her doorway. She picks him up and carries him to bed.
The feeling of floating when he wakes.
She’s home and she smells like his memory.
*Are the lights back, Ma?*
*No, sweetie, they’re still out. I’ll make you pancakes in the morning.*

She puts him to bed.
When she lies down beside him
he curls into her familiar grooves.
Dear Sam,

My ma is not bad. Sometimes she is messy, but she is not bad. My teacher once asked me to write about my family and I wrote this:

*My family is my ma and me. My dad lives in Idaho with another family. We like to go out for milkshakes and sometimes we dance around the house. This makes me happy.*

My ma is not bad so do not come to visit us because then I will be alone. I was happy when the lights came back because then I could see the pictures on the wallpaper. I hope you get this letter. I do not know where to send it.
Light

Somebody gets it first.
It returns like dominos clacking through the city.
In reverse. Even the fish swimming in aquariums notice the bubbles floating to the surface.
The Shop Owner (2)

Every time he closes his eyes
he will notice the difference
between before and after.

He emerges
from behind the counter
to the aftertaste
of this ridiculous disarray.
Chinese Whispers

In the end, darkness or light,
it doesn’t matter.

Chinese whispers waft through the city.

The people in the know say the energy system is fundamentally flawed.

Chinese whispers waft through the city.

No one knows exactly who to blame.
Reports are written and articles are read.

Tiny whispers wait in the city.

Some people still believe that bolts of lightning pumped the sky with straight and diagonal lines like the last five letters of the alphabet.

Tiny whiskers make tracks in the city.

Some people didn’t notice at all.
They slept through it or lived like usual, in the dark.

Tomorrow, whisper thoughts while you’re sitting.

Some people were reminded of a song played at the end of a movie.
Some people hugged.
3,776 people were arrested creating heat in cells.
Tomorrow, whisper thoughts in this city.

Three people fell in love.
Some 26 years later,
two of the three have fallen out of it.
One remains
whispering thoughts.
New York City
Summer, 2003

August 13. There is a blackout in the city.

The lights go out at 4.30pm

and people pray it is only lightning.

Are you still here?

This is not a copy of before.
Aviation

The aerial shot from the single engine Cessna as it flies over the city.
Radio sounds and power
travel from the pilot to passengers
as they look below.

Twenty six years have been and gone like puberty.
New towers have been built
and others have fallen,
some with the people inside them still.

And so much has been eaten and drunk.
The ones still standing are full of beer
wine, cigars and rice.
Each grain of rice boiled.
Millions. So many to count.
You simply can’t.

Bodies float like extras on television.
Movie stars and poets buy on 88th,
now famous because they live here.
Everyone knows.

And it’s not just the towers and the planes.
It’s the money and the politics and the cleanliness.
In the village, a rock star shot.
Trees planted.
Art hanging in a swirling gallery.
A bomb and scandals.
Greedy trade in the leather of a briefcase.
400 thousand people marching against a war.
The blizzard of ‘96
and the blackout of ‘77
all combined, like one memory,
neither cold nor hot.
Alex

Architects talk about gravity.
Alex entertains the idea that he would jump rather than burn in any situation.

Architects sit in open plan.
They listen to talk radio and watch clocks.

The electricity fails.
Computer screens fade to black.
Architects sigh and begin to make bigger plans.

Alex’s email *I guess we should talk soon* is never sent.
The Architect designs his own feelings.
Martha on the Subway

Today, as she reads,
the words, urgent and fast,
crash together at the end of the chapter.

Martha follows them,
chasing them on the page,
clutching the cover.

The schoolgirl gasps
as the train jolts.
Most people in the carriage doubt
the lights at the first flicker.

Shadows roll on and over each sentence
as Martha keeps reading.

The next jolt is not caused by a man
jumping from the platform,
head on into a moving train,
but something else, perhaps bigger.

Without earmarking the page,
Martha closes her book.
Subway Operators Disguise Worry With Smooth Announcements

Calm, trained voices soothe worried passengers.
Some soften foreign accents
and others remember breathing.

It is dark, pitch black
but they can smell the person
sitting next to them.

She can taste the meat on his breath.

It’s easy to scream and she does.
A help first followed by a softer me
that is drowned out by men at the back
saying things like we’ll be okay if everyone just keeps quiet.

There will be rules to follow soon.
somebody leans over to Martha:
*take my hand*, he says
*it is too dark to be alone.*

At first, she refuses.
thinking sleaze,
and of men in crowded bars
offering drinks with obligation.

Now darkness.
A small carriage on parallel lines.
Still.
And with a childlike hand
she selects the appropriate grip
over three calluses
and places immediate trust
in the hands of the classical cellist.
Twelve Million Text Messages

Some reach their destination
and others find random and confused readers.
Some never make it down.
They stay climbing
elsewhere and upwards.
And some cheeky ones
land on the phone screens
of the lonely people
they were never meant for.

Where are you?
Upgrade

Sometimes taking the stairs down
feels harder than climbing up.
It’s to do with balance and creaky kneecaps.
Thirty-something kneecaps. This used to be easy, he recalls.

Alex makes sure that people
from every floor get down with the minimum of hassle.
One screams ‘terrorist attack’.
A girl from accounts asks if he’d like to grab a beer.
He tells her he needs to make sure
that everyone’s safe first
and to work out what this is all about.

The design for the house on the coast remains
in the ‘personal’ file on his computer.
Recent changes saved.
On the disk in his satchel,
the latest backup.
Crawling to Safety

One by one, they move to the front carriage.
The only exit door.
It’s slow and no one ever has liked this.

Still holding the calloused hand in front of her,
Martha is now focusing on the man behind.

Walk in front of someone faster than you
and you’re always off balance.
Their shoes always seem to be in between your feet.

He whispers behind her to *hurry the fuck up.*
*Fuck off* she says back.
*I fucking wish that I could.*
*I fucking wish that you could too, freak show.*

This goes on for over twenty minutes.
This back and forth. Back and forth.
She doesn’t let go of the man in front
until they reach the next obstacle: the tunnel.

Martha shallow breathes
and thinks about rats.
She follows the light of her phone
and the soles of the cellist in front.
Commando style.
Her elbows and knees on the ground,
one crouched move at a time and her new jeans stained.

When trapped underground, it’s important to remember to breathe.
It’s important to remember to trust your instincts and listen.
To look for the light and the sounds of streets.
Horns and people
and all of their thoughts
both spoken and withheld.
Robert

He walks a little unsteadily these days.
It’s age. Just age.
He asks her if she is okay. She says yes.
She is okay.
He buys a black coffee and a litre of water
from the vendor and brushes the dust from his suit.
Starts walking. It’s best to start early, he thinks.
Best to get going before people
begin to clog the path ahead.

Lines of people wait for the telephone.
Stubbornness equates to crankiness.
Someone dares to touch another man.

When you look closely
there’s always an upside
at having no one to call.
**Rose Writes in Her Journal**

Helicopters swarm overhead.
I sit on my steps and convince myself I am a criminal waiting for capture. This wonderful attention from strangers. It’s hot and I am waiting for something to happen. Some drama, or at least somebody to talk to. Just five words. In English. Or Spanish if they are easy to understand. The weather. The words will probably describe the weather. Strangers like to talk of the weather.

I read Shakespeare as if it is my journal. Pretend to be his characters and shudder at the thought of my actions. The worlds within this spine. Such a way to live a life. I warm the books with my hands and blow hot air through the pages. The smell of tea. There are many words to underline.

Things become easier to feel now. The position of the sun. The cement under my feet. The shadow that would not exist without them. I have been here before, of course. Many years before. We rarely mention it.
The Airport

Passengers panic at the slightest difference.
Staff refuse to think that they make judgements
based on accents or family names.
The large voice on the PA makes it clear
that there’s no flying out,
or in
or over.
For the toll free number of any airline
call: 800-555-1212.
In the lounge, a plump man slumps in a row of blue seats
and watches jet planes tortoise on the tarmac.
Things Like Climbing

The only way up
when the elevator is down,
is one at a time. Slowly.

Or by using corny circus tricks
as transport. Flying upwards with the wind,
from the ground, to twenty-six.
A catapult. Rose imagines a catapult.

At age 58 things like climbing take a little longer.
It might be better to wait
at the bottom with dreams of a superhero.

There are things to worry about now,
like the pot roast on the bench
the plot twist on the show
and about silence.

The hum of the fridge absent.
A reminder of things never noticed
until they’re gone.
**Traffic**

There is a chance they will move
half a yard in this triple line of traffic.

There is one small chance.
And while they chug away at this melting road,
she sings from mix tape songs
over the horns and the swear words,
as he rolls down the window
to catch a hint of the breeze.

The city is distracted. Hold on.
He wants to drive with her over the bridge, into the forest.
She switches gears.
The arrogance of this swelter
saturates their skin and clothes.

Now something is in her, like everyone’s energy.
She turns the steering wheel to drums,
her hands to their sticks,
her sticky grip to a microphone
and the ceiling light to the spinning of a mirrorball.

She sings musical notes to the windscreen.
Every part of this car listens like an audience.
Claps in time like a groupie.
Sweet talks for a pass backstage.
Memory

Soldiers and disco dresses.
An unlikely combination
yet strangely, Alex ponders,
a dead hot mix.
It’s Impossible to Fly with a Crushed Spine

Eight years after he fell from a horse
and severed his spine (nothing at all like flying),
Christopher Reeve sits in an electric wheelchair.
Thank Christ for the generator
that allows his respirator to push air
from his mouth to lungs
and back out again.
Thank Christ for the new kind of super men.
The ones that climbed the buildings as they fell.
You Said Something

Not long into his walk Robert climbs the stairs
to a bar. Any bar. The closest. Maybe it’s time to do things differently.
The posters on the wall advertise gigs for the latest bands
and the coolest new drinks around. The barman pads down
a coaster and Robert orders a whiskey. Through a battery powered stereo
PJ Harvey sings of rooftops in Brooklyn at one in the morning.
Lights flashing in Manhattan.

*You said something*
*that I’ve never forgotten.*

Sing some more. Take hold of my breath.
Tell me where the lights are going tonight.
Mature Woman

Of course, she made it up the stairs
and here, in her kitchen
Rose worries about the water pressure
and ways to stay busy. She smokes cigarettes
and still, tries to take one less puff than the one before.
In this hour, her mind is kept clear. The gushes of before,
have ended like heartbreak poems.
Still. She chooses activities before they get her.
She stays in one room. At the table.
Polishing tumblers.
**Dent**

Alex stands on the concrete
and looks up at the huge double-glazed
and streaked window pane
through which, on weekday mornings,
lunches and afternoons
he has stared south,
to the tug boats on the water
and to the big dusty crater
dented into the city.
Double Negatives

Three weeks after the big talk
he recalls all the ways people
tried to make him feel okay again.

*Sounds like you broke her heart
long before she broke yours*

is the only one that really sticks.

He thinks about walking up to midtown
to see her. To work a few things out. To talk.
To play scrabble if he has to.
To fuck it all away.

It’s not that he doesn’t want to,
It’s not that he doesn’t want to talk,
or that he can’t or won’t or doesn’t need to.
It’s just that he doesn’t think it’s the right time.
Not today.

Of course, there’s an argument for
forgetting everything before today.
But now, for Alex, when creating excuses
it’s best to double.
Double all the negatives.
The Way You Spin It

Robert falls into 1977 like it’s written in italics.
The emphasised past. *It stands out.* Demands attention.
There’s a way to feel things more clearly. Through photos and songs
and triggers. There, under the sound of cars,
sit the delicate voices of children playing in the street
as if it’s the day before the beginning of school.
From the bar window, all too aware of
the complications of such an act, he tracks the baseball
with the eye of a spectator waiting for the winning home run.
Caught out, the boy sits in the gutter. Shoulders slouched. Eyes cast down.
There are ways to feel better about lack of physical ability. Blame the heat. Timing.
The way the sun sits in the sky like it’s actively plotting your downfall.
There are ways to feel better about most things.
Blank spaces and pauses. Italics deleted.
Washing the dirt from your cut knee.
Thinking that you never wanted to hit that ball anyway.
It’s all in the way you spin it.
It’s all in the way the italics curve.
The Butcher Cooks His Meat Before it Spoils

The smell, it hits like a smacked kiss
in the middle of your cheek. Boys come from around
the corner and from underground to fill bags and plates for home.

The sausages fry on gas heat. People wrap them in bread, mustard
and onions. The vegetarians recall moral choices
and the butcher trades his profit for dozens of smiles.

Dogs try to break from their leads, barking like the men
from cell 32 on the other side of the island.

Alex takes his phone out to call her
but pauses. Martha passes him a hotdog.

He takes food from a stranger
and finds a reason to eat when already full.

Hey everyone. Come to mine. I have beer and
cold cuts. Get here anyway you can.
Otherwise, see you on the other side.
Martha Flicks a Smile at Alex

He is suddenly the tallest. The strongest and the best looking kid on the team. The quarterback with the muscles. The dude at the party with the keg.

She says he looked hungry.

He admits that he’s not feeling quite so great. A little light headed.

_Do you want to walk with me?_ she asks.

_Sure, I’m going to Brooklyn_ he says and they walk streets. Slower than usual.

Men play percussion nearby.

It sounds like a thousand rough hands

beating down on tight leather.

Alex makes sure they are walking in time.

If nothing else, he’s careful not to miss a beat.
Questions for the Survey

In the halls of the school
the cleaner wheels his tools
down slippery lino
past lockers and dozens of messages
in colour on the walls.

A student, carrying out a survey
about occupational health and safety
carries a clip board and a pen.

If you had an accident
– were unconscious –
would the person to find you
know who to call?

I don’t know.

It’s really a good idea to carry some kind of card with your next of kin. Just in case, you know?

Yep. Sure thing.

Does the security system in this place still work?

Is this a question for your survey?

No.

I don’t know.

Have you ever had an experience that has made you realise your mortality?
Is this a question for your survey?

Yes. It is now.

I realise this every day.

Are you going home to a living situation of (please pick one)

1 person
2 people
3 people
4 people
Other.

Is this a question for your survey?

No.

Other. None. Just me.

Does the staff room have beer in the fridge?

Is this a question for your survey?

No.

I think so.

Is the beer getting warm? This is not a question for my survey.

Yes.

Do you drink alcohol (pick one):
Is this a …

No.

Socially. Only socially.
Best change that to occasionally
In staffrooms.

Warm beer occasionally
in deserted staffrooms.

*Has anyone ever cried over you?*

Is this a question for your survey?

*No. But I am interested to know.*

Let’s go and drink beer. I have the keys
London, 1940

There was something inspiring just in the awful savagery of it
Ernie Pyle, on The London Blitz, 1940.

Sixty-three years before
under fire, bombs and hearts glowing,
Robert sits in the Leicester Square tube station.
14 years old. Positively adult.
Listening to people as they sing
from the next shelter.
Learning to play cards.
Developing the perfect poker face.

Everybody claims their part in history.
Some hit it harsher and harder.

A dull chord is struck.
Only the lucky will be scared tonight.
Multiple Choice

Alex waits as Martha ties her sneakers
and thinks that this could be a good time to:

A)
Walk, alone, in the opposite direction.
The Cowboy in the Sunset
not glancing back.

B)
Ask, ever so casually,
if she’d like to get a drink.
Just one, for the heat.

C)
Extend a hand
to see if she’d shake it goodbye
or hold on.
The Brooklyn Bridge

*Like all great bridges, this one has had its share of post-construction death as well. A Mr. Brody leaped off the bridge in 1920, marking the first suicide. Locals say if only he had tucked and rolled, dived and not belly flopped, he might have lived.*

From *Let’s Go: New York City.*

There’s a man. He sits on the edge of the bridge drinking from a bottle of beer. Iron rungs lead upwards. Climbing inspires him but is not encouraged by lawmakers.

Suburbia in the distance. His cigarette lighter between his thumb and palm. Firelight is too far away for the water to reflect.

People walk past him and some say things. The sweat on his upper lip shines like oil on water. He feels like swooping, longing to feel the cool and wet on his belly. To span his arms the length of himself. To carry him across.

The bridge makes him think of the words under and over and how they sit alongside each other. Like you can’t have one without the other. He feels like middle is lost. Sits on it. Almost in it. In the middle.

Today is different. Cars are stuck and people are multiplying as if they were in some B grade horror movie, escaping from a monster or a war. They don’t seem to stop and look around. They miss the view.
Entry

In his bag is the journal.
Robert wrote last in January:

_Slush on the sidewalk makes it difficult to tread._

Today, he writes:

_Blackout. Waiting in a bar. For what, I can’t be sure._

Two people enter from the stairwell.

A man and a woman.

_It feels lonely to see people laughing._

He writes with his left hand. Uses both sides for lists:

Shopping, timetables, old numbers and names.

Receipts have been used

to bookmark useful pages.
The Trailer for the Television Movie

Whether or not you usually notice, you have never seen these things clearer.

Martha downs a shot at the bar.
Alex downs a shot at the bar.

People outside dance on car hoods and sidewalks. Men kiss each other on the mouth.
Most people have wondered whether this is something like a moment.

People share headphones and girls hold hands. There are songs to sing to. Dance moves, hand claps, like a soft drink commercial. It’s all here. Moments.
You know – those moments.
Realising Your Superpower

It has to be an accident.  
No amount of planning can be done  
standing on a building’s edge. Here on this day  
instead of landing, you fly.

Of course you must ask what you’re doing  
on the tip of a building’s edge.  
You must ask what made you jump.  
Sure, the reason can be hard to think about.

Because you’re distracted by the now.  
You fly through it. Weaving through buildings and landscapes.  
Gathering speed and ways of curving your body through turns.  
See? Yes, the people see.

On top of those buildings, they fell. See?  
The people saw them land.  
It had to be an accident, the first one.  
No amount of planning could be done.

And those people up there,  
they flew for a while. Down floors away from fire.  
They tumbled and dived, the 9.3 out of 10.  
The grounded saw. People jumping from buildings.

But couldn’t there be just one who found out  
then and there, that morning.  
The one who jumped.  
Fell for a while. Flew through it.

Couldn’t there be just one with his shirt
ripped off from the force. The falling man. Head down arms up, turning himself around, from vertically down, into sideways.

Don’t be surprised if I say something silly today.
Man and whiskey bottle

The screw top lies next to the glass
and the label is turned so you can’t read the words
but if you know anything about Whiskey
you know it’s Chivas Regal.

Robert’s hand touches the salt shaker
(though he has no food to shake on)
and the other lifts the heavy glass to his mouth.

Eyes closed for taste and imagination.
His eyebrows are long and grey.
Like someone has carved them as rivers
on a wooden map, you could swim
in the deep lines on his face.
The Traffic Controller

There is an art to directing traffic. You can learn it, but the beauty has to come naturally.

Robert knows this. He is blessed with grace, perspective and outstanding eyesight.

A basic need to silence the horns and to separate the bumper bars on the naughts and crosses grid of Manhattan.

And so it goes that when he steps out from the bar and onto the road, with his arms stretched, cars stop and go. The mess and confusion completely restored.
The Night

At last the sun rolls down.
People get set for a night
that wraps the city with its enormous coat.
Most manage to keep their spirits high.
Some weep into it.
Grip

Walk across the bridge.
So as not to lose each other.
Hold hands. Grip.

Home is a taxi ride away
or a long walk on bitumen
that sticks to old sandals.

Over the edge
rubbish floats or sinks
depending on its weight.

It’s as if all these walkers
are taking a pilgrimage to somewhere.
Or escaping from another place.

But really, they are somewhere in between.


Let go to open the top of a cola bottle.
The plastic rips and the effervescence releases a low ‘shhhhhhh’
like grumpy parents in movie theatres.

Disguise a sigh of frustration through a burp of bubbles.

Throw plastic from railings.
Wonder if it sinks or swims.
Hold hands again.
Home

Tiredness comes into the mix
after a little while of walking. Street numbers get larger,
your lungs smaller, and the breeze keeps stopping
when you need to breathe it in.
Despite all of this, Robert makes it home.
Finds the rhythm as he walks the stairs.
Knocking for Charity

People that cook with gas
sigh a certain gratitude
and quick fry the contents of their fridge
with olive oil, soy sauce or homemade chutney.
Rose knocks on the doors of her floor
and offers portions of her pork,
spinach and black bean stir fry
to familiar faces and the strangers.
Some are mistrusting.
Some are happy and hungry
but none invite her inside.
Back in her apartment,
she watches the dim and the empty,
and again, designs activities for her brain or body
but ends up lost,
like lids for Tupperware containers.
The Height of Buildings

They cut down a laneway  
past kids on the fire escape smoking cigarettes and joints.
One of them says to Martha  
*be careful.*
She takes Alex’s hand.
At that moment, she might have taken the hand of anyone.
The kids climb higher  
and the even paced footsteps on the metal stairs  
waltz upwards.
The sound fades like the final bar of a song  
as if inhaled by the height of buildings.
Eating Pizza and Pissing on the Streets

Martha raises pizza to her lips. The base bends. She folds it capturing oil and pepperoni in a pocket like origami. Alex could draw her like a building. Lanky and rectangular. He watches. She wipes her chin with the back of her hand. The slices have stopped turning in the display heater. For no good reason, men have been pissing on the streets. Martha’s warm slice has saved her from the grumps of hunger. Reflux. She burps into Alex’s ear. He admits to her gently that he likes it.
The Stuff that Happens to Objects and Animals

Between the streetlights
you only notice
when not working,
branches sigh on trees.

The illuminated messages on billboards disappear.
Products become un-buyable.

Street signs send people in wrong directions.
Clocks stop. Writers write. Dogs bark.
It’s very loud.

Buildings seem bigger against their new backdrop of darkness.
They might topple over at this moment.
They just might fall.
Exactly

Suddenly it is romance
in the restaurant
as the waiter brings candles
and fills glasses with wine.

The woman had once said:

_Do you find it odd that I prefer to sit next to you
rather than opposite while eating?_

On this night, they sit across the stains from merlot.
The paintings behind him look deeper.
more abstract in this new light.

He takes her hand and tells her
_I love you, Babe._

Meeting his gaze she manages:

_Me too._

Something similar,
but not exact.
Another Décor

They surround themselves with different décor
in every new bar. Alex sits across from Martha.
He wants to ask her about things (job. home. boyfriend)
but finds instead, that he fills most silences
with long gulps of warm beer.

In spite of himself he tells her
that she has a good mouth.

She tells him that he has a good forehead.
Questioning without being wrinkled.
The forehead of someone who thinks a lot.
The forehead of someone who worries.

They rally with compliments
until Alex runs out of puff
and misses the smash. He reaches for her hand
and suggests something else.
Everyone Has a Story …

about the planes in the towers. Alex asks.
Martha says there was a guy she used to go to school with
in Tower 1. He was nice. *I liked him. He died. Sad.*

He died. Sad.

And it all comes down to a line
in a children’s book.
Like this is all there is left. Sad.

*And you, Alex? You knew anyone?*

*No. I didn’t.*
*Sad in itself, in a way right?*
*Let’s just thank God that this isn’t the same.*

And just like that – boom –
they enter religion.
And in the End, They Danced

Because there was music
Because there was a feeling
Because they had been holding hands
Because it would have been rude not to dance
Because his mother loved to dance in the rain
Because his memory was a father who loved to watch his mother dance in the rain
Because it seemed they had known each other for weeks
Because of the smell of her hair
Because they had lost all sense of insecurity
Because of the smell of her clothes and hands
Because tomorrow they might not think to
Because of her hands
Because she put her hands around his waist said, simply
we must dance
because tomorrow we may not think to.
In the end, they danced.

You have the straightest back I have ever seen
Alex
(In the stairwell, she fell)

For a second I thought she was going to die.
In the stairwell, she fell,
ankle bent and bruised.
I carried her weight.
Her breath against my neck.
She whispered *don’t drop me*
like a lover might say
*Take over. Hold me everywhere.*
We were shapeless,
counting steps down each numbered floor.
Moving like madness.
Passing

Robert lies awake glassy with memories of this time last year. He meant to tell her back then, that he thought darkness and emptiness were alike. And tonight, as every hour passes unchanged, his body flat on the mattress, he is still here recalling her breath and heartbeat shallow and quiet.

And, you know how she said that you can’t have one without the other? Well, she was exquisite that night, in the way she said it. And in the way the back of her hand moved on his chest up and down up and down. Quenching his thirst for surface.
Weightless

They come to the end of Manhattan Island
and begin to walk across the bridge.
Harder than it should be.

Sweat falls from her nose and the thread of his shirt
is darker where the strap of his satchel rests.

Martha inhales. She says *I feel awake*.
Alex holds his breath for thirteen seconds
and feels light. This woman limping next to him,
this awake woman
lets him feel weightless.
This

And from space
the satellites continue to take pictures
for surveillance.
Alex and Martha kiss
the tops of their heads concealed
by darkness. Both of them,
rushing their breath. Thinking –
trying to remember
what *this* feels like.
Break

This seems like a good place to stop and pause to look at these people, the city and its surroundings – water, suburbs, the way you pronounce ‘catastrophe’ like it’s the last word you will ever say. The on-liners suffer tonight. Forced to break the habit of a chat room. nice to meet you. The veil of a screen and time to decide and delete what to reveal. I work for myself. I don’t get out much. I am a little complicated right now. I like stuff. The fiction and poetry. Imagination. The stranger waiting in the dark alleyway. The delete button. The wit of your typeface. Delete. The monologue from the other side of the table. Delete. The hand on the subway and this question: What is easier? The lies, or the truth?
A Conversation

Martha tells Alex that she’s been in New York for three years. Just upped and left like the end of the movie. Or the beginning, perhaps.

They stand on the bridge watching the lines the city reveals, even in the darkness. They lean on the railings with their elbows like they’re still drinking at some dive bar in the neighbourhood.

Martha thinks about falling. Not falling from the bridge, but about falling for someone like him.

People walk by. Everyone looks closely at their feet hoping not to step on any cracks or to get left behind. It’s hard to see.

She has an idea:

We need some of those glasses like in The Silence of the Lambs you know the green ones so we can see in the dark.

He has a story:

Last blackout, the serial killer, he was here. Ah, shit, I can hardly remember, but he was here …

Let’s go. We’ll get left behind.
Love in Darkness

Puffed-out and dizzy from talking while climbing stairs they reach the top floor, just before the entry to his place.

Soles feel the path to the door. She limps there. Another excuse to hold her close.

A neighbour sings opera imported from elsewhere.

For spaghetti from home and smooth lullabies, there is sudden nostalgia for the old Brooklyn apartment.

An urge to phone the warm maternal voice, to visit memories of hands patting to sleep the boy with the scruffed hair and the most wonderful insomnia.

Hey, are you in power? We're out.
Alex

We have climbed many stairs.
In the kitchen, we drink large glasses of water
and I begin to undress you. Your perspiration shines in the groove
where your neck ends and the top of your ribs begin.
I run my hands along the back of your shirt,
a mix of the grit from the subway, white cotton, and grease – the buttons are small.
Turning an opened eye into the cheekiness of a wink, I undo all ten of them.
Your shirt slides from your shoulders, inside out, along your arms, over your wrists
and lands on the kitchen floor. I had imagined this once. One morning, months before.
It doesn’t matter where it lands exactly, as long as it steadily falls
onto the tops of our feet.

I have undressed women before you, of course,
but it has been fuelled by music or lighting
and everything that goes with knowing somebody. I swear,
I am awake but empty to details of you.

I kiss your forehead. Counting the seconds it takes
to reach your mouth –
three four five. There’s a stillness about your face,
a questioning look in your eyes that says when
rather than why. I like the word wanting.

Then I kiss the tiny freckle on your neck.
It’s like licking the last crumb from the plate
where a delicious meal once waited. It’s time.
I count three, four, five, six, seven.

Sometimes there are things to write down.
Later, when you’re a little less close. As if it’s to be an anecdote
adapted for canvas.
Afterwards

They kiss as if they know
so many things about each other. But still,
they kiss like new.

_Do you remember the first blackout?_ he asks.
_God, how old do you think I am?_
_I remember bits of it. I remember being scared. I was alone._
_Were you parents?_
_I don’t know. Dad left when I was younger. Mum went out._
_She left you alone?_
_Yeah._
_Wow. How old were you?_
_Nine._
_Where did she go?_
_I don’t know._
_That’s terrible._
_Oh, no. I was fine._

In his mind, Alex flies uptown
to see if Rose is okay.
Knowing that really, he should have called her earlier.
At least he should have tried.

This lasts for three and a half seconds.
He knows this, because he’s counting
and thinking simultaneously.

_Wow,_ Martha says. _You’re very forgiving._
_There’s nothing to forgive. She just went out, that’s all._

They look at the ceiling,
until Alex finishes this conversation.

He’s done with it.
On Top of the Rollercoaster

Two people
are stopped at the peak.
Apart from the jerking of their own bodies,
there is no momentum to let them move.
Something about this cage they are in
feels like freedom.
Or a fantasy. The way a child never wants
the amusement park ride to end.
The grin and the screams.
The happy fear.

I told you not to trust her
Quietly Dizzy

Martha’s face glows with adorable perspiration.
Alex traces her curves with his palm as she half sleeps.
There are rules about closeness with strangers
that Alex would like to know.
But tonight he remains blissfully ignorant.
Quietly dizzy.
Hunch

Inquiry. She calls to see how he is doing.
Or, more importantly to see what he is doing.
And who he is doing it with. There are things to know.

Clench. She scrolls though her collection of names
while the people outside cheer. Throw water.
Clipped. The voice in the middle of a speech bubble.

This message. Eleven words. One conjunction.
The ways she says just and me holding some parts of him. Closer.

Wait. There are memories. It takes a kind of darkness to see clearly.
Song lyrics and inscriptions in books trigger them,
but mainly it’s the lack of anything else right now. Here.

Spent. The simple fact. She’s eating cold baked beans
and flipping through photographs from last winter in Mexico.
The sand from the coast falling through the stills. Grit.

Still. The feeling you get when you just know something.
Call it intuition. Call it being on the same page.
Call it emotion. Call it real. Sensation. Anything. A hunch.

Another. The end of something.
The drama of simply feeling the chest heaving
like inhaling violence.
Robert Plays

When he plays, the woman above lowers her eyes as she listens to the notes gliding over the guts of the cat.

Closer, she puts her ear to the floor and waits there, until the end of the last bar, repeating like the waves.
The Day

It was always going to come gently
rolling over again
into her room.

On a nice day for a walk.
Rose will pick up litter on her street
or write notes to the neighbours.

In a few days she’ll tell stories about this and in the coming years
she’ll say I was there and I did something and it will be
one of those stories where everyone nods in appreciation.

And unless she wanted it to
she never really thought
it would stay dark forever.

She never really thought
she’d disappear,
disappear into it.

And climbing stairs was harder then.
It reminded her to tread carefully over those awkward things
she’d recently said.

It reminded her to think of the others
and what would happen to them.
What would happen if she fell.
You Taste Like Weekends

They wake to the first tease of sunlight. 
He makes coffee.

Back in her arms, under the sheet and still over-tired
she says you taste like weekends.

He thinks of central park joggers
and Sunday morning hangovers.

Coffee and sleep, she says.
You taste like coffee and sleep.
About a Bridge

From the window
the Williamsburg bridge
stands unchanged.
The lights are not required.

Two coffee cups
and a plate of un-toasted bread
sit on the counter.

The focus changes each time she
blinks in and out. Above and under
the sky and steel.

The fridge smells like distant cheese
and onions. There is noise … but not much.


This morning is not served with breakfast radio.
No traffic reports and clichés about sport
or soft rock about hearts and girls.

She inspires levels in him.
A certain distance
increasing with each wave of sunlight
on the water.
In Camera

With his own camera, Alex is forced into a photograph. He hates this kind of stuff. Being an image.
A design.
Martha has ideas. She tells him to *act normal* which he thinks is an *oxymoron*.
Are you calling me a moron?
He does a variety of things: scratches the surface of his stubble, checks his mobile for messages, (there is just one, of course), discards food from the freezer.
Acting normal. Acting like this woman is supposed to be here, in his kitchen, as if they are together, or something.
Acting. She kisses him on the back of his neck.
*You should call your mother.*
Quiet. Close by, someone talks about brilliant stars and a new beginning. Far away. He’s acting as if he is far. Very far away. Only two weeks later, he wants this moment as a poster. As a teaser for something a bit more real.
The immaculate still.
Ignorant of the fact that living things move.
Stairs/Stares

She picks up her backpack from the kitchen floor
and slings it on her shoulder. They hug.
She asks for his number.
They kiss.
He says something
that she’s never forgotten.
She says *see ya later*
and limps down the stairs.
Strings Attached

Martha emerges into a Brooklyn street.
Far from home.
An ice cream van parked in an illegal spot
plays an irritating song. Greensleeves, she thinks.
Two strangers walk past and she asks for easy directions.
West, the answer. You are West.
Let her construct a map and move
through straight lines and crosses. Aim a compass at the sun
to help her direct footsteps on the bitumen. Let her go.
See Martha walk towards tall buildings.
Again and again she returns to Manhattan
like she’s collecting day passes out.
Let her back into that colour. Those heights. That type of energy.
But easy does it. Slow her down.
Make her take her time. Distract her with something (Wait. Stop. You!)
as he considers running after her.
Behind you, behind you.
She turns.
She turns to the blank street. As still as today’s breeze.
As still as sidelines. His image. As still as he sits.

It was really good to meet you, Alex. I hope
we can see each other soon.
And then …

When the lights came on
his home answering machine showed saved messages:

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it flashed brighter and faster than the previous:

7

the *I still love you*
the *I miss you*
the *are you sure it’s over?*
the *I’m partying with Patti. Having so much fun!*
the pause and break in the voice
the *you don’t have to call me back. I didn’t call for any reason. Just because.*

He had lost them all.

Along with the beeps and buzz of background street noise.
The blust and wind from the 3am corner.

When the lights came on …
his heart illuminated.
Game

Now the kid from the Upper East can finish his computer game.
Older kids from other countries have passed him in the ranks.
Enemies stuck in mazes.
On the screen, blood falls on blades of grass.

Good to meet you too.
I'll call when things calm down a little.
Small Luxuries

Robert takes a walk to the corner store.
The humidity has overstayed its welcome.
Nipples can be seen through shirts that
stick to chests and backs. Milk has still been brought
from plump cows, fresh from the farms a truck ride away.
And you can smell hot bread again. And taste the coffee that steams
from lips through teeth and to the absolute depths
of your stomach.
Alex Takes It On

Summer still, and of course nothing really changes.
Alex rides on the subway. The headlines are all over the darkness.
Now he must learn a new way of reading.
The one where he puts himself into it. Like it’s his movie.
Today, people walk a little slower. They smile like they’ve shared
the last round of drinks before the bar closed. Alex walks the streets.
His shoes soft on the sidewalk. Careful not to walk on cracks and junk.
The smell of stale beer. The whir of machines making all the food we need to survive.
Alex checks his change. He buys a coffee. Everyone he speaks to comments
on the dark and what happened to them. Stories and anecdotes.
Alex climbs the stairs. Only because he can. The smells in stairwells never change.
Even between decades. They just never change.
Alex knocks on the door. Soon, she will open it.
Between the door and the frame, soon, she will appear in backlight.
Bigger than a city. Ready, now.
Questions

The place is more cluttered than Alex remembered.
In the kitchen, Rose makes tea. Small talk follows about work
and of course, last night. About why and how and when they would
find out exactly why the power failed.

Things like money, computer crashes and politics follow.
At least, they agree, it’s not the unthinkable.
Planes. Crashing.

Still, his room is as he left it in ‘86. Models of buildings
on the shelves and posters of models on the walls.
Tanks remain parked in cupboards and planes landed years before.
He’s been saying for years that he’ll clean it all out.
Pack up his childhood in boxes and bags.
Letters written on the backs of magazines.
Superman and the Soldiers hide out in drawers.
Ellipsis

It is now possible
that each page has been turned at least once.
The poems flipped, landed at an ending.
There is silence lasting longer than a pause ever should.
It fills the spaces between two words.
Carriage

Alex waits on the platform ready for home. He gets on the train thinking

maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t going to come.

With the television promos and the slogans and the slippery seats. It’s here. It has arrived.

Alex rides in the back carriage. Last around the bend.

From now, he always rides in the back carriage.

It’s more likely

to jolt something inside of him.
Chinese Whispers

Above the tunnels and tracks
the concrete absorbs the heat from the August sun.
Summer remains for now. It shocks and offends.

Chinese whispers waft through the city.

Now, people think carefully
about choosing a window seat.
It’s harder to exit a plane, bus or train from there.

No one was rescued by Superman.
You forgot to ask for his help.
It’s not like you really needed him, anyway.

Chinese whispers waft through the city.

The book, half written,
sits on the computer screen of a writer.
The people become fictional. They talk like characters.

Insurance forms sit on in-trays
on desks in office blocks.
The intern files by last names, rearranging the alphabet.

Shiny whispers waft through the city.

Candles, burned down
to the last speck of the wick,
make hard puddles of wax on carpeted floors.

Elevators travel up and down,
like they are supposed to.
Numbers are pressed with slight hesitation.

Shiny whispers want you to see me.

People ring old lovers to see how they are.
They can’t help but talk about other things
and to ask ‘were you alone?’

The earth turns a little more, and summer rolls around
to the other side. People think about coats already.
Autumn leaves fall like stars.

Tiny whispers want you to love me.

And when you wake,
in the dead hours of a dark night
whisper thoughts to the person sleeping next to you …

Or write them down and send them off,
and if your speech bubble is blank, walk the city
and catch the thoughts wafting through.
As intimate
as whispering.