THE THRILL OF IT ALL
Also by Joseph O’Connor

NOVELS
Cowboys and Indians
Desperadoes
The Salesman
Inishowen
Star of the Sea
Redemption Falls
Ghost Light

SHORT STORIES
True Believers
Where Have You Been?

THEATRE/MUSIC/SPOKEN WORD
Red Roses and Petrol
True Believers
The Weeping of Angels
Handel’s Crossing
My Cousin Rachel
Whole World Round (with Philip King)
Heartbeat of Home (concept development and song lyrics)
The Drivetime Diaries (CD)
For Philip Chevron
1957–2013
Way it see it myself, there’s only one reason for art: to make you appreciate that you got a spin on the planet. Picasso, the great writers, the poets, the musicians. If you can listen to the Beatles doing ‘She Loves You’ and not be a little bit glad you’re alive, you’ve got an answering-machine for a heart.

FROM FRAN MULVEY’S FINAL INTERVIEW
My name is Robbie Goulding. I was once a musician. For five years in the 1980s I played guitar with the Ships. This memoir has been long in the making.

Commissioned in the opening months of the twenty-first century, it appears – at last – more than a decade late. Time is an editor, altering outlooks, italicising certain memories and blue-pencilling others, unearthing chronologies you didn’t notice while living them. And the book, like its author, has changed with the years, increasing in size, now slimming, now regaining, surviving the recalibrations and unnoticed evolutions collectively known as Fate. At one point, it was angrier, out to settle a few scores, then it morphed into an assertion of lost friendship. It seems to have become the book I wish someone had given me when I started out in rock and roll. Had that happened, it would be a different book indeed.

For reasons that will become obvious, I don’t remember every part of this story. So, here and there I’ve relied on the reminiscences of my former bandmates, who speak in their own words, drawn mainly from interviews. Inevitably there are moments when those recollections differ from mine, but life would be thin if we all sang the same notes or noticed
the same goings-on. My thanks to Sky Television’s Arts Channel for permission to quote Trez Sherlock, to Seán Sherlock for agreeing to be interviewed (by my daughter) for this project, and to BBC Television/Lighthouse Music Ltd for permission to quote Fran Mulvey’s last interview. A brief passage comprising my daughter’s own perspective is included in the narrative. She recorded this for personal reasons, essentially as a diary, and it appeared as a blog on various music-related websites in the winter of 2012. We inhabit the age in which everything is public, especially, of course, the private. When young myself, it was the other way around. Bowie sang to a public who knew nothing about him. Mystique, it was called at the time.

Some characters you’ll meet in these pages are no longer with us. My late mum, Alice Blake, from Spanish Point in County Clare, bought me a guitar for my fourteenth birthday. More even than this, a life-changing gift, she tolerated the endless murderings of ‘Johnny B Goode’ that occurred in our home as a result. Greater love hath no woman than to endure ‘Stairway to Heaven’ morning and night for two years, with ‘House of the Rising Sun’, ‘The Sound of Silence’ (‘if only,’ Dad said) and further notables of the apprentice repertoire. Mum went on to survive the emergence of punk. I have memories of the September evening I spent learning the chords of ‘Anarchy in the UK’ at the kitchen table as she ironed my soccer kit for school. Beside her among the Angels of forbearance is the noble shade of a proud Brooklynite, Eric Wallace, founder of Urban Wreckage Records, whose belief kept the Ships from sinking.

I thank my daughter Molly Goulding, for editorial

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assistance, and her mother, Michelle O’Keeffe, from Athens, Tennessee, for more than any love song could convey. I would have liked to write at greater length about Michelle in this account, but she has insisted on the privacy that she has always valued, and I respect and understand her wish. My father Jimmy and brother Shay are princes. I thank them for uncountable solidarities.

All errors and lapses – well, most – are my own. Nothing in the book is fiction.

_Engineer’s Wharf,
Grand Union Canal, London,
Winter 2012_
PART ONE

Ships in the Night

1981–1987
Let me tell of someone I first saw in October 1981 when both of us were aged seventeen. An exasperating and charming and fiercely intelligent boy, the finest companion imaginable in a day of idleness and disputation. His name was Francis Mulvey.

So many symphonies of inaccuracy have been trumpeted about Fran down the years that I find myself reluctant to add to the chatter. Unauthorised biographies, a feature-length documentary, profiles and fanzines and blog sites and newsgroups. My daughter tells me there’s talk of a biopic movie with the Thai actor Kiatkamol Lata as Fran, but somehow I can’t see that working. She wonders who’d play her daddy. I tell her not to go there. Fran wouldn’t want me included in his story any more. And he’s lawyered-up good, as I know to my cost.

These days my former glimmertwin is private, characterised by the media as a ‘reclusive songwriter and producer’, as though ‘recluse’ is a job description. You’ve seen the most recent photograph available – it’s blurry and five years old. He’s with his children, attending the first Obama inauguration, sharing a joke with the First Lady. I barely recognise
him. He looks trim, fit and prosperous, in a tux that cost more than my houseboat.
But the boy Fran, in his heart, was a demi-monde figure, more comfortable in a second-hand blouse rummaged in a charity store in Luton, the town where the fates introduced us. Thirty miles from London, in light-industrial Bedfordshire, boasting an airport, car factories and a shopping centre under permanent reconstruction, it had also, my brother joked, a time zone of its own, ‘clocks stopped around the second lunar landing’. I think of it as my only home town, the place I grew up, but by literal definition we were immigrants. I was born in Dublin, the middle child of three. In 1972 – the year I turned nine – we moved to England following a family tragedy. Luton’s housing estates, built after the war, were identikit, perhaps, but there were parks and further fields that my brother and I enjoyed. My parents were fond of our neighbours on Rutherford Road, whom I remember as tactful, welcoming people. It wasn’t Thrillsville, admittedly, but every country has her Lutons: places notable for points of indisputable interest, one of which is the fact that they are thirty miles from somewhere else. You will find them in Germany, northern France, Eastern Europe, by the thousand in the United States. I’ve never seen one in Italy but I know they must exist. Swathes of Belgium seem one vast Luton. The best to be said for ours is that it was good at being Luton, in a way that, say, Malibu could never have managed. I had happy times and tough ones. There was a lot of non-event, as we marched to our own little humdrum. I tend to divide my youth into before and after Fran. The former I recollect as a series of monochromes. Luton got colour when he came.
I’m told he no longer wears make-up, not even a dusting of rouge. When I first encountered Francis, in college in the eighties, he would pitch up for lectures sporting more lip frost and blusher than Bianca Jagger at Studio 54. Apart from on television, he was the first male I ever saw in eye shadow, a weird shade of magenta he sourced by trawling theatrical-supply shops. ‘They use it for murderers and whores,’ he’d explain, with the insouciance of one on terms with both.

I became aware of him during my first month at Poly. Let’s face it, he would have been difficult to miss. One morning I saw him upstairs on the 25 bus, asking the loan of a compact-mirror from the unsmiling conductress, a Jamaican lady of about fifty who was not a believer in light-touch regulation when it came to Luton’s scholars. Supplying the mirror, she was then beseeched for a tissue, on to which he imprinted a lipstick kiss before handing both items back to her. It’s a mark of Fran’s innocence, which expressed itself as vulnerability, that no one kicked his teeth down his throat.

Who was this wraith? Whence had he come? My classmates traded theories about his birthplace. China was a candidate, as were Laos and Malaysia. Oddly, I don’t remember anyone ever suggesting Vietnam, his long-departed actual motherland. What was certain was that he’d been adopted in South Yorkshire as a child, looked fabulous and didn’t talk much. Many regarded his habitual silence as a form of attention-seeking and determined to look the other way. The Poly had students and faculty of different ethnicities, as any college near a large English town would, but in several respects Fran was unusual. You had the feeling he
was aware that there was only one of himself, a threatening
signal to transmit to any group. It must also be unnerving
to the transmitter, I imagine. The peacock may be flaunting
through angst or plain boredom and would rather you just
buggered off. What Fran had wasn’t confidence. It was a
million miles from flounce. The closest I can come is
‘dignity’. And you want to watch out when you’ve dignity
in England because it can look like you’re taking yourself
seriously.

I can’t say I recollect offensive remarks. That would
rarely be the form things took. But there would be that
certain tentative chuckle and a rolling of the eyes, particu-
larly among the boys, who were not exactly hostile, but who
wanted you to notice that Fran didn’t look like you, in the
unlikely event you hadn’t noticed already. Fran didn’t look
like anyone.

He lived in a room, though no one knew where. Leagrave,
perhaps. Farley Hill. He was rumoured to have friends at
Reading University, and this, by itself, gave him an urbanite’s
exoticism. We, at the windblown outposts of my town’s
Polytechnic, felt outshone by the Flash Harrys of Reading.
They galumphed about their town quaffing hock, snogging
doxies and shooting mortarboards off each other with a
blunderbuss – huzzah! – while we fumed on the banks of
the Lea.

Theatre, Film and English were Fran’s courses at the
Poly. Sociology and English were mine. Dad accused me of
selecting Sociology in order to annoy him, and he wasn’t
equally wrong. In addition I’d registered for Greco-Roman
Civilisation, since it was required of all first-years to ‘do’
three subjects, and I reckoned, having twice seen the movie
Ben Hur on telly, that I’d a fair bit of groundwork dug. Also, I couldn’t think of anything else. The college offered Musicology but this wouldn’t have occurred to me. I’d been banging on a little Ibanez Spanish guitar since my fourteenth birthday, was workmanlike in the plunking of a Beatles riff or two, but studying the mysteries of music seemed to me pointless, dingbat that I was in those days. I adored the Patti Smith Group. They hadn’t a degree between them. It was hard to picture Patti telling herself the key signature of C-sharp minor contains four sharps. Why would she need to know?

My hobby became Fran-watching. There are worse pursuits. I see him yet in the 300-seater lecture hall, always at the back, often smoking. There was a girlfriend for a while, a mournfully gorgeous punkette. They’d spend afternoons in the student bar – ‘The Trap’, we called it – wordlessly gazing at art books, the pair of them ordering ‘crème de menthe frappé’, not a common undergraduate’s drink in Luton. Paddy, the obliging barman, would gamely produce the crushed ice that beverage requires by filling a supermarket bag with chunks from the freezer and stamping his hobnail boots on it. But by Christmas the girlfriend was no longer around, at least no longer paraded. When the college reopened in January, there was another at Fran’s side, a soul-girl said to be studying Mechanical Drawing. You saw them hand-in-hand on the soccer fields at dusk, two blackbirds in the snow that lay for weeks on the campus. Then there was a boy. Predictable murmurings began. My experience of the young is that they can be intensely conservative and easily disconcerted, far less accepting than the old. If Fran was a loner, it wasn’t entirely by choice. And I’m no
one to judge, for I didn’t approach him myself, preferring to be intrigued from a distance.

He contributed articles to the Students’ Union newspaper. I found them odd, enticing and very, very bold. Joy Division released the compilation album Still not long after their vocalist Ian Curtis took his life. Fran’s review termed the sleeve ‘corpse-grey’. I felt that was close to a boundary but not the right side of it. He went through a thankfully brief phase of signing his pieces ‘Franne’, attracted, I think, by the Elizabethan connotation. Evidently he loved the melancholy ballads of Dowland and Walter Raleigh, for an article on that subject appeared beneath his name. An unusual, clever boy, he’d endured a childhood of savagery. I don’t know how he was alive. Many years after I met him – in what turned out to be the last television interview he’d ever give – he made public some of the biographical details.

From Fran’s Final Interview, Michael Parkinson Show, April 1998


Where am I from? Well, Yorkshire, like I said. Before that . . . you know . . . Vietnam. I was born in a place called Đài Tiếng over there. Rural, it is, in the Sông Bé province . . . I’m probably not saying it right . . . I’ve been in touch, you know, with the authorities down there. And I found them very helpful. But it’s hard with the records . . . Beautiful
country, is Vietnam, I was over there last year, very
gentle people, and curious, and welcoming, but the
place is still messed up. My dad might have been a
soldier. American, yeah . . . Anyroad, I was aban-
doned. A foundling . . . I ain’t sorry for myself, you
know, I’ve done all right . . . But that’s what it was
. . . Not the best.

Yeah, the war was still on. But you know, you’re
a kid. So you don’t understand what’s going down
is a war, it’s all you been used to, like weather.
Violence? Sure. I saw bad, bad stuff. Nowt to say
about that . . . Because this in’t the forum. Talking
to you now, we’re on telly, it’s fine, and I’ve a respect
for you personally, always have done. But I’ve limits
. . . Which makes me unusual.

All I know: some farmer took us as a baby to a
convent in Tây Ninh City . . . And I’m told I was
there until four years old . . . I’ve looked into it.
Because yeah, I’d like to know more . . . It’s a natural
thing, in’t it, you wonder where you come from . . .
I’ve a researcher working for me now, she helps, she
speaks the language. And there’s incredible folk out
there, in the States, in Vietnam, trying to put all these
stories together. Because there’s thousands of
Vietnam-born children have a background like mine.
Canada, the States, all over Europe. You get to
thinking you’re alone. But you’re not.

First thing I remember is the heat, you know, that
heat you get in Indochina. Humid. Then the sound
of French. Because the nuns looking after us, they
were French. Funny, I remember two of them had the
same name, Sister Anna. There was a priest often come to visit, Father Lao, Vietnamese. And soldiers about. Big Y anks talking English. A huge rubber tree – you could see it from the window. And a yard, where there was a bell, and animals and people selling stuff. I mean farm animals, roosters, and these small, black potbellied pigs. And we’d play with the pigs. Me and the other kids. And often I get to thinking, what happened them kids? Break your heart to see ’em. Break your heart.

One day this European woman’s come and she’s give us a cup of milk. Some diplomat’s wife. You could see she didn’t want to touch us. Nothing against the woman, she was doing her best, but I won’t never forget that. Couldn’t bear to touch us. That’s the West, right there. Mix of kindness and condescension. And fear. Because pity’s the cousin of fear. And to me, the whole thing about aid . . . it wants changing. Going further. Dole ’em a cup of milk? Deluding yourself, man. The crumbs off your plate in’t enough.

Whatever happened, I dunno, they’ve took us down to Saigon. To this massive great orphanage, like, eight mile from the city, with fifteen hundred kids. Frightening place. Like a nightmare. Poor kids who’ve been maimed, and blind, and deformed. I was there a couple of months, and the night came when they took us away, me and a dozen others. They’ve put us on a bus, give us Red Cross parcels, bottle of juice, pack of sweets. And you’re a kid, all you’re thinking is Christ, what’s this? And now we’re at the
airport. Told us, get on that plane. This adoption society, a Catholic charity, they’re taking us to England. And nobody’s ever asking if you wanted to go. But you’re going. Decision’s been made.

A plane, man. Imagine. And I’m proper scared of planes. To me, right, a plane is dropping bombs out the sky. I don’t want to be in no plane . . . Eighteen hours later, I’m on the ground in England. Cold. Foggy. I in’t never felt cold. And there’s snow. What’s that? You don’t even have the words . . . And there’s no one to ask. So you’re scared.

This woman and her husband, they’ve took us away. Told us I’m now an English boy. ‘Stop speaking that language.’ They were cruel-hearted bastards. That’s all. Less than human. I won’t say their names. Wouldn’t sully my mouth. Animals. Thugs. I hope they rot.

At seven I was taken by social services and put in a home. Then at nine, I got fostered by this Irish couple up Rotherham . . . Prefer not to say where exactly. Just private . . . It’s been put about by the tabloids that they treated me bad. They never. They were proper decent people. But we didn’t get on. Fell out when I was a teenager. I left at sixteen. Got nowt against them, no. They’d limitations. Who don’t? I don’t blame ’em for not being able to handle me, I was broken inside. You can’t fix that brokenness. All you do is cope. No, I wouldn’t want to see ’em again – anyway my foster-dad died a couple of years back – but I wish them an easy conscience. They did their best. You know? It’s something. And they give us my
name. Francis Xavier Mulvey. And that was my Irish foster-dad’s name. God rest him. That’s a boxer’s name there, right? Francis X. Mulvey. Not as cool as Herol Graham. But I like how it sounds. He’s won twenty-eight fights, man. I never won one. But I’m hopeful, you know? For a pessimist.

This isn’t the place to continue Fran’s childhood story. When I met him, he never spoke of his upbringing directly, although of course there were hints – if you wanted to see them – but I was as shocked by the full revelations, when many years later they came, as were most of the tabloid-reading public. In his student days Fran was good at setting up smokescreens of irony and indifference, even to those who loved him. You didn’t take it personally. In truth, you rather admired the smoke, tinged as it was with the brilliant glow of his magnetism. Yes, you noticed he’d fall silent when the subject of family was discussed, but you assumed he wasn’t listening, or perhaps had misheard, or simply had other things on his mind. In conversation he asked a lot of questions, always a sign that the asker doesn’t want to be questioned himself. But I only understood this with hindsight.

I see him in memory, dawdling the draughty corridors of the Arts Block or asleep in one of the bare brick alcoves of that inhospitable building. The college had a cohort of rural Irish students, pursuing degrees or diplomas in Agricultural Science, and it surprised me to notice Fran at one of their discos. Not that he stayed too long. He was beautiful even then, before he’d grown into his beauty, scrawny and kissable, like some teenagers are, a ragged
organza scarf around his throat on a wintry morning, a Judy Garland bonnet on his head. In all my life I never encountered a thinner individual. You’d have seen more fat on a chip.

It is not true, as has been written, that he’d come into the college wearing ‘a dress’. The days of the frock came later. But certainly, his look was unusual even then, among the raggery of denim and collarless cheesecloth we conventional souls went in for. On his long, slim fingers were profusions of rings, scavengings from the junk shops of the town. He turned the pages of a book as though someone was watching, which most of the time someone was. There was oldness about him. His eyes were cold lakes. He reminded you of those ruined chapels you see in the north of countries, weather-blasted, still hanging on. He had a part-time job washing dishes in the canteen. You’d glimpse him through the grille where students placed dirty plates, Fran wearing the only spangled hairnet ever made. You didn’t reckon that the professors so barely aware of his existence would one day offer seminars on his work.

It was as though he’d been lifted out of The Threepenny Opera and dropped into Stanton Polytechnic and Agricultural College by some sardonically smirking god. In one of his articles he wrote that society’s esteem for accomplishment was ‘brutalising, murderous’, that ‘the artist has a DUTY to fail’. This was beyond the usual beslobberments of undergraduate drivel that nearly all of us parroted at that innocent time. He actually seemed to believe it.

In those days, the man that sold him drugs had a question: ‘One-way or return? I’ve both.’ Fran, when we were students, was a stickler for day-tripping. Indeed, he had an
intolerance, which seemed to me strange, of drug use when witnessed in others. He could become puritanical if some Arts girl in the Trap took a pull on a jazz-fag. Even drunkenness, which most of us indulged in, as he did himself, could purse those frosted lips to a scowl. His mode at a party was to stand in a corner, observing from the shadows as the odour of lager and mildew sanctified whatever writhings ensued. I was astounded when he told me he never missed Sunday Mass. I suppose I shouldn’t have been.

That conversation, our first, I am able to date, for I know it took place on the afternoon of Good Friday 1982, which fell on the 9th of April. The holy day tended to unleash a viral panic through the undergraduate body, for it was one of only two in the entire year when the Trap, being administered by an observant Catholic landlord, was closed or at least shut early. Several pubs in the town were unavailable for the same reason. Others did not welcome students. The unease would commence at the start of Easter Week, rising to full-blown hysteria as Spy Wednesday approached. There would be no drink. What would we do? CHRIST, THERE WILL BE NO DRINK. In some realm of re-enactment Our Lord’s departure from the corporeal zone was imminent, but we had more immediate devastations on our minds. By Holy Thursday night, you could have sodomised anyone in the college in return for a six-pack of Harp.

The form was to stockpile and repair to someone’s flat, in one of the many crumbling old houses partitioned into bedsits for students or the not-quite-destitute. There, the Zeppelin wailed and the wallpaper peeled. Christ’s tears spattered the windows that the ratepayers of some rural county had arranged for bright youths to live behind. A nice
girl studying Accountancy would end up weeping into the communal toilet on the landing, puking like a fruit machine, her hair held aloft by some monster out of Poe, his other paw working its way into her tights. Scholars in a wardrobe chewed at one another under damp coats. The corrugated kacks of the lessee or his cousin dried by an electric fire. Some wurzel would start fisticuffs and get kicked down the stairs, only to return, an hour later, eyes raging for forgiveness, the bottle of Blue Nun he’d stolen from the 24-hour minimart in the town his passport back into the pleasure-dome.

Rebel-yells, drunken gropes. Lachrymose talk. Backroom fingerings, declined lunges, Black Sabbath’s ‘Paranoid’, stale bread in the toaster at dawn. My Purgatory will be a thousand years of Good Friday, circa 1982, reeking of chips, old carpet, crushed sexual hopes and unlaundered nylon bed-sheets sprinkled with Brut aftershave by a student of Agricultural Science. Sad songs say so much, as Elton once told us, but the Bedsitter Blues be bad.

It was at the original bleak lock-in that I first exchanged words with Fran, emboldened by the pint of snakebite I’d pretended to enjoy. He was wearing a kilt and scarlet-lensed sunglasses. A kilted youth was a rare enough sight in Luton – well, maybe on St Patrick’s Day, but he wouldn’t have fishnets and a parasol, as Fran rather noticeably did. His polo-blouse was in the colours of the Italian soccer club A.S. Roma, the only sporting association he ever admitted to liking. I felt the slogan he’d embroidered – ‘Up the Romans’ – was either deliberately provocative or grossly tactless in the general context of Good Friday.

‘Fakkin queer,’ remarked a boy, later an adviser to New
Labour, passing by. ‘In your dreams,’ Fran nipped back at him, toeing a cigarette out on the lino. With difficulty, I took a step forward.

‘I’m Robbie,’ I said.
He nodded.
I waited.

He raised the crimson shades as though curious. I suppose it isn’t possible that he didn’t blink for ninety seconds but that was the way things seemed. Then he reached into his sporran and tugged from it a naggin of transparent liquid, opened it without averting his gaze from my own, took a docker’s deep slug, wiped the rim on his cuff and offered it unsmilingly. I sipped. Gin-flavoured paint stripper was now on the market. Who knew? I downed a belter.

The first sentence he ever slurred to me was in the Gaelic language, ‘Labhair ach beagán agus abair go maith é’, a proverb known to every alumnus of the Irish Christian Brothers. ‘Speak but little and say it well.’ It was clever of him to address me in Gaelic, a twitching of his antennae. Fran was always good at codes, at sounding you out. My answer, being in Gaelic, seemed to admit me to the nightclub. His watchfulness lowered one notch.

Well, then he switched to English, or his own version of that language. This party was ‘a droolery’, he averred. Our host was ‘a shitehawk’, the guests were ‘lottery spittle’; enduring them was ‘an emotional groin-strain’. The college we attended was ‘a nest of illiterates’, training ‘flunts’ to be ‘hirelings’ and ‘couch-jockeys’. Bombing it would increase the average IQ of the Bedfordshire hinterland by no insignificant percentage. Vivisection should be the fate of most of its professors, but they lacked the properties of a lab
mouse so what would be the point? I was flummoxed by his accent, which turned out to be heavily Yorkshire tinged with Connaught, when I’d expected a bored poet’s drone. Fran sounded like the son of a Mayo-man, which in one sense he was, a fact I learned only later. Strange solecisms peppered his conversation, yet you knew what they meant. That student, ‘a fukken facecloth’, had a girlfriend ‘a hanky’. The pair of them would give you ‘the butt-plugs’. The thug now urinating into the sink was ‘a stonewash Jerry’, Fran’s term for a boy whose mother buys his jeans. The problem with most people was that they ‘never rang themselves up’, a phrase I took to mean that they acted without thinking. I did my best to present myself as an urbane and inveterate self-dialler. I don’t know how convincing I was.

It was hard to conceal disquiet at his defamations of our lecturers, of the college community generally. Dipsomania and impure practices were imputed to some, incontinence of ghastly varieties to others. Professor X was ‘an eel-faced sadist’, Dr Y ‘a pimple-nippled klutz’, the Dean of Humanities, in all truth the nicest of women, ‘a piñata waiting to happen’. Father Z, the Catholic chaplain, was ‘cottage cheese on legs’, his curate ‘a midget on stilts’. Great was Fran’s ire for the triumvirate of elderly scholars helming the Department of Comparative Religion. A puddle-eyed, ignorant, self-spanking fop, a mule-eared turd and a monk-sucker. Their achievements in bastardry, sloth and betrayal had considerably exceeded their scholarship. The writer in residence was a ‘turtle-necked rat’, the porter ‘a dug-up Troglodyte’. The Adjunct Professor of Architecture had put the grope into Gropius, and any elevator containing only the Moral Tutor must be avoided. The texts required to be read
by candidates for the degree of Bachelor of Arts (English Literature, Hons) were ‘an anthology of degraded chimps’ bumfodder’.

Did I box? Why not? ‘You should.’ In his Yorkshire adolescence, three posters had adorned his bedroom wall: Jean Genet, Grace Kelly, Herol Graham. ‘Kid standing out needs to box,’ Fran said. ‘Look like me up north? You boxed or got shat on.’ He had spent many hours in Brendan Ingle’s gym in the Wincobank area of Sheffield as a boy. ‘Didn’t have the hands. But I could fight a bit, yeah. Nothing like Herol. You look strong.’

I didn’t ‘stand out’. Nor did I look strong. But it’s arresting to be offered a compliment by way of induction, even when you don’t believe it.

Not a syllable about music was spoken by either of us that evening. We swapped clichés and inanities about the early novels of John Banville, to whose works Fran attributed significance for they rarely troubled the bestsellers lists back then. Anaïs Nin and Brendan Behan he mentioned with similar mercy, at least I think it was mercy, it might just have been drunkenness. Elias Canetti, winner of the 1981 Nobel Prize for Literature, was ‘passable, if you like being bored’. Jane Austen? ‘No.’ Dickens? ‘A perv.’ George Bernard Shaw? ‘A peved vicar.’ Only one of the Brontës didn’t make you want to kill yourself: Branwell, the pisshead brother. I must surely know the writings of Czeslaw Milosz? I didn’t, but I said that I did. It was difficult, given my condition, even to say ‘Czeslaw Milosz’. Try it next time you’re soused.

Soon he reeled off a prospectus I hadn’t actually sought, the list of authors enjoying his imprimatur. Rimbaud, Verlaine, Kathy Acker (who?), Kerouac, Neal Cassady, the
Lake Poets ‘bar Lying Billy Wordsworth’. Elizabeth Bishop wasn’t bad; she’d rung herself up. Keats and Camus rarely stopped. But Dylan Thomas, ‘a fukken soup-tureen’, was wildly overrated; he ‘couldn’t write “cock” on a shithouse door, not without several attempts’. A piece of pulp erotica called *Hot Dames on Cold Slabs* was ‘the only important American novel since *The Beautiful and the Damned*’. Banned here in England, of course. Fran always made a speciality of esteeming banned writers, because he knew you wouldn’t have read them.

If I’m honest, he struck me as something of a disappointment that evening, silly and a bit predictable and spoiling for a quarrel, neither as brilliant nor as dark as I’d imagined him from afar. In ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues’ Bob Dylan advises against following leaders. But at eighteen, who wants advice? And come on, don’t be judging me. When young, you were grandiose yourself from time to time. If you weren’t, you loved someone who was. And it isn’t as simple as the attraction of opposites, more a matter of half-glimpsed recognitions. Friendship is a Venn diagram, not an inhabiting of the same space, and the philosopher Montaigne had it right: ‘If you press me to tell why I loved him, I can say very little. It was because he was he, and I was I.’

I didn’t see him for a fortnight or so. Indeed I remember thinking he must have abandoned his studies, the better to contrive the destruction of the college with a thermonuclear device, for he didn’t show up at his weekly tutorials. I’d made a point of watching out for him. But then, towards the end of April, I noticed him at a lecture, alone, as was his custom, at the back of Theatre L. Mild scoffs issued
forth from him as it was alleged from the dais that the
literary works of Gerard Manley Hopkins repaid study or
gave any sort of pleasure. Students turned to glower at his
gum-chewing sternness, an Easter Island statue in heart-
attack pink. To one he offered that gesture of sexually tinged
aspersion involving the right hand’s middle finger. Soon
afterwards he appeared to be feigning sleep or actually
sleeping, forehead on the desk before him. He approached
me when the talk was over, and I was surprised to see he
was carrying a black plastic refuse-sack from which he
produced a guitar.

The departing lecturer was denounced, somewhat
unfairly, as ‘Harry the Talking Haemorrhoid’ before the
matter at hand was raised. He’d been teaching himself
Stranglers riffs, he explained with some reticence. The
instrument was a bass. He’d found it in a skip on Gordon
Street in the town. A 1970s ‘Violin’ Höfner, spray-gunned
green, white and gold by no craftsman, so that jags of its
original black scowled through the tricolour here and there.
It lacked its original pick-ups and the action was so wrecked
that to hold down a high B made your wrist and knuckles
ache. Poor navvy, it looked as though it had been used to
smash down a door. He had stolen a set of strings for it,
but hadn’t an amp. Would I know where to score one, cheap?

In truth, I was so fiercely flattered he thought me worth
asking that I blushed to the meats of my teeth. It is the only
blush of my life that I actually remember. Once or twice,
it has coloured my dreams.

As it happened, my brother Shay had recently quit a
band, a long story that would embarrass several people if
I went into it here. Taking up space in the dustbowl of his