Umbrella

By the same author

FICTION

The Quantity Theory of Insanity
Cock and Bull
My Idea of Fun
Grey Area
Great Apes
The Sweet Smell of Psychosis
Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys
How the Dead Live
Dorian
Dr Mukti and Other Tales of Woe
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Non-FICTION

Junk Mail
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Perfidious Man
Feeding Frenzy
Psychogeography (with Ralph Steadman)
Psycho Too (with Ralph Steadman)
A brother is as easily forgotten as an umbrella.

– James Joyce

I’m an ape man, I’m an ape-ape man . . . Along comes Zachary, along from the porter’s lodge, where there’s a trannie by the kettle and the window is cracked open so that Muswell Hill calypso warms the cold Friern Barnet morning, staying with him, wreathing his head with rapidly condensing pop breath. I’m an ape man, I’m an ape-ape man, oh I’m an ape man . . . The lawns and verges are soft with dew, his arms and his legs are stiff – a rigor he associates with last night’s tense posture, when I aborted the fumbled beginnings of a non-committal congress. While Miriam fed the baby in their bed hawsers and pipelines coiled away into milky, fartysteam – the enormous projectile retracted into the cradle of my belly and thighs . . . I’m an ape man, I’m an ape-ape man . . . the Austin’s steering wheel plastic vertebrae bent double, kyphotic . . . had pulled at his shoulders as he wrestled the car down from Highgate, then yanked it through East Finchley – knees jammed uncomfortably under the dashboard – then across the North Circular and past the blocks of flats screening the Memorial Hospital before turning right along Woodhouse Road. Under the bonnet the pistons hammered at his coccyx, the crankshaft turned his pelvis round and around, while each stop and start, each twist and turn – the very swivel of his eyeballs in their sockets – didn’t ease this stress but screwed it still further into his frame: bitindrill, chuckinlathe, poweron . . . In his already heightened state he had looked upon the city as an inversion, seeing the parallelograms of dark woodland and dormant grass as man-made artefacts surrounded by growing brick, tarmac and concrete that ripples away to the horizon along the furrows of suburban streets . . . While his domestic situation is by no means quiescent, nor is it
settled, and the day ahead – Ach! A beige worm of antiseptic cream wriggles into the festering crack of a bed sore . . . Bitterly he had considered: Is my dip’ psych even relevant when it comes to this first-aiding, the sick parade of a shambling citizen militia? . . . I’m an ape man, I’m an ape-ape man . . . The drive into work is already automatic. — Still, it’s a shock that his destination is this folly with a Friends’ Shop. Along comes Zachary . . . Hush Puppies snaffling the gravel path that leads from the staff car park – where cooling steel ticks beside floral clocks – towards the long repetition of arched windows and arched doorways, of raised porticoes and hip-roofed turrets. Along comes Zachary . . . creeping noisily up on the high central dome with its flanking campaniles in which no bells have ever rung, as they are only disguised ventilation shafts designed to suck the rotten fetor from the asylum . . . Along comes Zachary . . . avoiding the unseeing eyes of the tarnished bronze statue that hides behind some forsythia – a young man clearly hebephrenic . . . his face immobile forever in its suffering, the folds of his clothing plausibly heavy . . . for he looks altogether weighed down by existence itself. Along comes Zachary . . . chomping beside the arched windows now, and the arched doorways, and then the arched windows again. He admits himself into this monumental piece of trompe l’œil not by the grand main doors – which are permanently bolted – but by an inconspicuous side one – and this is only right, as it begins the end of the delusion that he will encounter some Foscari or Pisani, whereas the reality is: a low banquette covered with dried-egg vinyl, and slumped upon this a malefactor, his face – like those of so many of the mentally ill – a paradoxical neoplasm, the aged features just this second formed to quail behind a defensively raised shoulder. A hectoring voice says, You will be confined to your ward and receive no allowance this week, DO YOU UNDERSTAND? Oh, yes, I understand well enough . . . which is why he continues apace, not wishing to see any more of this routine meanness . . . Along comes Zachary – and along a short corridor panelled with damp chipboard, then down some stairs into the lower corridor. Along comes Zachary – and along – he has clutched his briefcase to his chest, unfastened it, and now pulls his white coat out in stiff little billows. You’ll be needing one, Busner, Whitcomb had said – a jolly arsehole, his long face a fraction: eyes divided by moustache into mouth – else the patients’ll think . . . Think what? Think what?! But the consultant’s attention span was so short he had lost interest in his own phrase and fallen to reaming the charred socket of his briar with the end of a teaspoon, the fiddly task performed inefficiently on the knobbly tops of his knock-knees. – Why were the staffroom chairs all too low or too high? Along comes Zachary – and along . . . I’m an ape man, I’m an ape-ape-man, oh I’m an ape man, his splayed shoes crêping along the floor, sliding across patches of lino, slapping on stone-flagged sections, their toes scraping on the ancient bitumen – wherever that was exposed. Scrrr-aping. He wonders: Who would dream of such a thing – to floor the corridors, even the wards, of a hospital with a road surface? Yet there is a rationale to it – a hectoring, wheedling, savage rationale – that explains itself via the voices that
resound inside the patients’ bony-stony heads, their cerebral corridors and cortical dormitories . . . because these are roadway distances – a hundred yards, a hundred feet, a hundred more, a North Circular of the soul. No signs, though, no Tally-Ho Corner – instead: lancet windows that peer out on to the airing courts from under lids of grime, exercise yards, really, separated by the wings and spurs that partition the long sunless trench between the first and second ranges of the hospital. Spurs budding from wings – more spurs budding from them, the whole mad bacterium growing steadily larger and more complex in the hospitable suburban substrate. Along comes Zachary . . . On the windowless side of the corridor there are doors with bossy signs on them: PORTERS, CANTEEN, MAINTENANCE DEPT CANTEEN, SYNAGOGUE, BOUTIQUE – boutique! then BREAD ROOM – a room full of bread . . . and there are also ramps leading up to the wards above. On he comes . . . and still the deep throat gapes in front of him, a gullet of light-stripes indented with bands of pockmarks – the original plasterers’ decorative scheme – or else scattered with medallions and stone-rustic quoins seeped-upon-brown. On he comes . . . tenderly touching the flaking veins of old gas pipes, to the bare copper of one of which has been Sellotaped a single flyer for POPULAR SWING BAND, The Rhythmaires – but, he thinks, can this be that dated, or is it that the air in here and everything else ages faster? This is at the corner where the western corridor intersects, a rounded corner worn down by lurch-upon-lurch – No! It was designed that way to stop them killing themselves, which they will do. And get used to it, Whitcomb had said perkily from behind his plastic comb moustache, because you’ll have to deal with a great many more. That’s just the way – how it is. A great shame – but how it is. Hanging may’ve been repealed by Parliament . . . he puffed small and aromatic clouds of cosmic faux pas . . . but it remains the number one method of execution in here – this decade is proving quite as swinging as the last! Not that Whitcomb was being callous, it was just that that’s how he is – like so many psychiatrists of passable competence, so accustomed had he become to speaking to the distressed and the deraigned in tones bridled by concerned neutrality, and employing vocabulary purged of any upsetting words, that when set free he became laughably inappropriate – or would be if there was anything to laugh about. Nor had he expected his new junior to deal with the amusing suicides himself – certainly not by swabbing, or even so much as looking – that’s what nurses were for, surely! – only that he should be prepared for how the more feisty ones, with sprightliness fizzing in their melancholy, would smuggle a sheet to the lavatory, tear, twine and then knot it to the crook of the pipe where it entered the cistern. The blessing as well as the curse of this Victorian plumbing, Busner had felt Whitcomb might well have said – it was his sort of remark – but instead he was obliged to furnish his own homily, for any death, no matter how meagre, demanded at least this consideration: The blessing as well as the curse of this Victorian plumbing is its robustness. Kick and thrash as they might, the most ardent suicide was unable to break the pipe . . . They sometimes manage – this from Perkins, the nastier of the charge nurses on 14, one of the two chronic wards to which Busner had been assigned – to hang themselves from the bloody chain, would you believe it!
We find ‘em with their bare tootsies in the kharzi . . . Busner believed it. He saw rivulets of urine and faeces running down the gutters between metatarsals, *plip-plopping into the commode while up above the cistern splutters unceasing*. . . That first suicide, which he had not only looked upon but also helped Mboya – the nice nurse – to cut down, had suspended herself from the completely reliable pipe – and so in death she was wedged in the awkward gap between it and a white-painted window that had been halved lengthwise when this cubicle was partitioned into existence – *yet more evidence – if any were needed* – of how the hospital altered its own cellular structure to create new morphologies for new pathologies to be diagnosed by psychiatrists accredited by new professional associations . . . while the inmates remained the same, patient only in the way she now was: inert, with no sign of her bowels having been emptied apart from . . . *that smell*. Instead, her papery skin, *oh so fine*, crinkled into the flannelette of a too-big nightie. She was, Busner had thought, a dead dry moth, its cellular structure decaying inside of this far larger one.

. . . Apart from that smell: *faecal, certainly – but antiseptically chemical too, with a sharp tang of floor polish* — a still more intense blending of the odour that emanated from the pores, mouths and hidden vents of the inmates confined to the first psychiatric ward Busner had ever visited, more than a decade before, where he had *student-foolishly* inquired, What’s that smell? And been told it was paraldehyde, a liquid sedative as limpidly brown as the state it was intended to induce . . . *in Henry, in Napsbury . . . where he still is . . . my brother lest I forget*. Paraldehyde – how much of it had been poured down throats in asylums throughout the past half-century? *Gallons . . . demijohns . . . barrels? Hosed into them, really, to put out the fire. And now what was left – this rain inside the building, this rusty old rain falling down from the saturated plaster to the asphalt floor.*

All this had jetted Busner forward *sea-sluggishly through the greenybriny*, the sounds of crying, sobbing and cackling amplified by the third-of-a-mile corridor, distorted by its scores of alcoves, then spun by its rifling so that, with unerring accuracy, they strike him in one ear and revolve around his head to the other . . . *Axoid: Bold as Love. Along comes Zachary, my tremolo arm vibrating as I sing to my own don’t-step-on-the-cracks-self . . . past the HAIRDRESSER and the SCULPTURE ROOM, then out from the main block of the hospital towards ART THERAPY and the REMINISCENCE ROOM – the last Whitcomb’s own humane innovation. In this section of the corridor the light from the south-facing windows gives him the sensation of trundling lousily along a trench, *paraldehyde . . . paral-. . . parados!* that was the word for it – the side of the trench where they stood to fire their machine gun, its traverse . . . the airing court, its ticcing picking off the enemy that comes bellowing across the dormant grass: *madness – a banshee. Along comes Zachary . . . Not that he has had the corridor to himself – there’s been a steady stream of staff and a few purposeful patients on their way to buy pathetic sundries or attend therapy sessions. A few purposeful – but many more let out from their*
wards simply to wander the sprawling building. There was one platoon – or so he’d been
told – who marched from the Camden Social Services office in the north-west to the
Haringey Social Services office in the north-east, then headed south to the lower corridor,
and tramped the entire length of it before heading north once more, and so completing a
mile-long circuit of the hospital’s insides which they would make again and again, until
ordered to halt for food by their bellies, or for rest by their feet, or for medication . . . by
their keepers. Yes, there have been these patients in their charity cardigans soiled at the
hem, thick socks sloughing from thin ankles, their eyes cartooned by the wonky frames
of their National Health glasses – for whom a corridor is a destination. None of them is
real – nor remotely credible, not compared to this: Along comes Zachary . . . the me-
voice, the voice about me, in me, that’s me-ier than me . . . so real, ab-so-lute-ly, that
might not self-consciousness itself be only a withering away of full-blown psychosis?
This must, Busner thinks, occur to everyone, every day, many times, whether or not they
are walking along a corridor so long that it would challenge the sanctity of a once-born, a
cheery Whitman. Still . . . that way madness about madness lies . . . a madness that has
already diverted his career from the mainline before it got started, sending him rolling
into the siding that connects to this laager, with its buttoned-up soul-doctors and
Musselmen, all of them compelled to serve under the campanile, the water tower, and
the chimney from the stained brickwork of which a smooch of yellow smoke licks the
grey sky over North London. Along comes Zachary . . . the corridor is narrow – ten feet
at most – yet none of the human traffic thus far has detained him until now — when he is
fixated by one transfixed. It is a patient – a woman, an old woman . . . a very old woman,
so bent – so kyphotic, that upside down she faces the sagging acrylic belly of her own
cardigan and vigorously assents to it. This is all that Busner can see: the back of her
nodding-dog head, the whitish hair dragging away from two bald patches – one at the
crown, the second a band across the rear of her cranium. At once, he thinks of twitchers
he has seen on his chronic ward, screwing their heads into the angle between the
headrest and the back of their allotted armchair – twitchers, wearing themselves away
as opportunity hammers away at the inside of the television screen and applause comes
in monotonous waves. She is at once a long way off and close enough for him to
manhandle. After the eruptions – and there are many lifetimes of afterwards – it settled
down on him, an understanding soft and ashy, that all the important relationships in his
life – with his uncle Maurice, with Alkan, with Sikorski and the other Quantity Theorists,
with his wives – definitely with his children – were like this: fondling familiar, their
breath in my nostrils caries-sweet, sugar-sour – yet also radiophonically remote, their voices
bleeping and blooping across the lightyears.

They take a long time to reach one another – the psychiatrist and the old woman
patient. To see her, to see her properly, Busner has to wade through a Brown Windsor
of assumptions about the elderly insane. — Moral aments, McConochie had called them
in the subdued and amphitheatrical lecture room at Heriot-Watt, neither knowing nor
caring – so far as the young Zack could see – whether this malaise was born of heredity,
anoxia, syphilitic spirochetes, shell shock – or some other malfunction in the meaty mechanism altogether. The dopamine hypothesis was beyond hypothetical to McConochie, the dope, whose favoured expository method was to get a chronic patient in from the back wards and put them through their hobbling paces on the podium. This, a dour travesty of Charcot’s mesmerism, for it was his students who became hypnotised by their professor’s monotonous description of the schizophrenic to hand, whose own illness rendered her altogether incapable of evoking the harrowing timbre of her own monotonous voices. McConochie, the worn-out pile of whose fustian mind would be bared – as he wandered from lectern to steamy radiator and back – by his inadvertent references to general paralysis of the insane, or even dementia praecox, obsolete terms that meant far less than the vernacular: loony – yet which served their purpose, inculcating his students – Busner too – with the obstinate conviction that any long-stay inpatient above a certain age was afflicted not with a defined pathology but a wholly amorphous condition. — It is this loonystuff, at once fluid and dense, that Busner wades through, and that, besides clogging up the interminable corridor, also lies in viscous puddles throughout the extensive building and its annexes. The old woman’s head vibrates beyond my reach: a component on an assembly line just this second halted by the cries of shop stewards . . . She tics, and her crooked little feet, shod in a child’s fluffy bedroom slippers, kick and kick at a lip of linoleum tile that has curled away from the asphalt. Kick and kick: micro-ambulation that yet takes her nowhere. Busner thinks, inevitably, of a clockwork toy ratcheting on the spot, a plastic womanikin doomed to topple over . . . but she doesn’t, and so he comes on, his thighs heavy, aching as he forces his way through his own clinical indifference.

Right beside her now, bent down like her so that he can peer round her palsied shoulder and into her face, which is . . . profoundly masked: rough-bark skin within which frighteningly mobile eyes have been bored. – Shocked, he withdraws, and the old woman is at once far away again, shaking and ticcing, her fingers scrabbling, her arms flexing I’m an ape man I’m an ape-ape . . . Perceptible flames of movement ignite on her left-hand side, in the middle of the densest thickets of akinesia, a paralysis not only of the muscles . . . but of the will itself – abulia? then flare up one arm, across the shoulders, before exploding into ticcy sparks and so dying away . . . Torticollis comes to Busner uselessly – and such is the parasympathetic drama he has just witnessed that he is amazed when two auxiliary staff, their black curly hair aerated cream in white nylon snoods, casually part to circumvent them – . . . I tellim mek a gurl an offer she’ll ’preciate, their remarks volleying between him and the old woman . . . See, ’e cummup ’ere mos days . . . – before they reunite and carry on, oblivious. — Electric woman waits for you and me . . . with Nescafé and a marijuana cigarette burning rubber after the International Times event at the Roundhouse. Somewhere in the bedsit grot of Chalk Farm . . . Busner had taken the wrinkled fang trailing venom, his eye caught by Ronnie Laing and Jean-Paul Sartre paperbacks stacked in the brick-and-board bookcase . . . nauseating. Her boyfriend’s hair hung down lanker than the bead
curtain she clicked through with the mugs. She was in velvet – the boyfriend in a sort of hessian sack. Was it Busner who had been time-travelled here from a past as jarringly austere as his test-card-patterned sports jacket and drip-dry tie, or, to the contrary, they who had been op-art-spiralled from a pre-industrial opium dream of foppery and squalor? Later . . . she frigidly anointed him with tiger balm and then they coupled on a floor cushion covered with an Indian fabric that had tiny mirrors sewn into its brocade. The boyfriend hadn’t minded gotta split, man and Busner was split . . . a forked thing digging its way inside her robe. She fiddled with bone buttons at her velvety throat. His skin and hairs snagged on the mirrors, his fingers did their best with her nipples. She looked down on me from below . . . one of his calves lay cold on the floorboards. There was the faint applause of pigeons from outside the window. — His strong inclination is to touch the old woman, his touch, he thinks, might free her from this entrancement – but first: Are you all right? Can I help you? Nothing. The upside-down face faces me down, the eyes slide back and away again, but their focal point is either behind or in front of his face, never upon it. – Can you tell me which your ward . . . is? He grasps her arm – more firmly than he had intended acute hypertonia wasted old muscles yet taut, the bones beneath acrylic sleeve, nylon sleeve, canvas skin . . . thin metal struts. The fancy new quartz watch on his own plump wrist turns its shiny black face to his as her malaise resonates through him . . . Along comes Zachary . . . he wonders: Am I blurring? Ashwushushwa, she slurs. What’s that? Ashuwa-ashuwa. One of her bright eyes leers at the floor. He says: Is it my shoes – my Hush Puppies? Her eye films with disappointment – then clears and leers pointedly at the floor again. She is drooling, spit pools at the point of her cheekbone and stretches unbroken to where it doodles on the tile with a snail’s silvering. At long last . . . slow, stupid Zachary bends down and presses down the lip of the tile so that the toe of the kicking slipper scoots over it. Then . . . she’s off! Not doddering but pacing with smoothness and fluidity, her shoulders unhusching, her neck unbending and pivoting aloft her head as her arms swing free of all rigidity. – It took so long for Busner to reach her, so long for him to decide to touch her, that he’s agog: she should be right in front of him not twenty yards off and falling down the long shaft of the corridor. Except . . . already her gait is becoming hurried then too fast . . . festination, another uncalled for Latinism, pops into his mind as the old woman is swept away from me on the brown tide . . . Is this, he wonders, a contradictory side-effect of her medication? The lizardish scuttle that counterpoints Largactil’s leaden tread? Because, of course, it is unthinkable that she shouldn’t be dosed with some form of chlorpromazine – everyone is. The drug saturates the hospital in the same way that paraldehyde formerly soaked the asylum, although a few isolated voices – Busner’s muted one among them – have, while not doubting its efficacy, its . . . humanity . . . questioned its necessity. For all the good this does, because there’s no damning its sepia-sweet flow, a single wave that nonetheless drowns out many, many voices. Not having seen quite so many chronic mental patients in one place for some years, Busner has been struck, since arriving at Friern, by the chloreography, the slow-shoe-shuffle of
the chorus from which an occasional principal choric breaks free into a high-kicking and windmilling of legs and arms. Noticed this tranquillising – but also become aware of a steady background pulse of involuntary movement: tardive dyskinesia that deforms the inmates’ bodies, flapping hands, twitching facial muscles, **jerking heads** . . . They are possessed, he thinks, by ancient subpersonalities, the neural building-blocks of the psyche . . . **She is gone** – or, at least, too far down the corridor to be seen any more a human particle. Busner, who is interested in most things, has read about linear accelerators, and so he takes a green-capped Biro from the row ranged across his breast pocket – green for his more imagistic aperçus, red for clinical observations, blue for memories, black for ideas – then writes in the notebook he has taken out and flipped open: **What will she smash into? What will happen then? All the subhuman parts of her – can they be observed?** in the long dark corridor where they play all sorts: **skippin’** and boats and **hoopla-for-chokkolits**. Mary Jane comes to **smackem**, Lookit the skirtin’! she cries. In the passage it’s **allus** dark – so **dark inna coalhole**. Illumination comes only from a fanlight above the door, comes on sunny days in a single oblique beam a **Jacob’s ladder** that picks out a **burnin’ bush** on the floorboards that Stan and Audrey jump into and out of – Yer put yer leff hand in, yer put yer leff arm out, Shake it a little, a little, then turn yerself about, the little ones, they are, going **Loobeloo, loobeloo**, but Bert just laughs at them: You’re rag-arises, you aytnt got no proper cloves, juss smocks, and he swings open the front door and goes out on the step to play with his marbles . . . his **wunner** . . . his **fiver an’ sixer inall**. He has them all neatly wrapped up in one of their father’s noserags, wrapped up and tied in a little bindle. He sits on the front step and gets them out and places them in a row. Audrey peeks from behind the door and sees **claybrown, marblewhirl, glasstripe** with **sunrays** shining through it so **pretty** she cannot resist it when he goes down the four steps to sit at the kerb and twist fallen straw – but **grabs it** and darts back inside. Stan’s eyes are wide, Yul catchit, he says, yul catchit. They stand in the **burnin’ bush** looking at the striped marble glowing in Audrey’s palm and neither of them can move – Yer put yer leff leg in, yer put yer leff leg out, yer put yer leff leg out, **yer put yer leff leg out** . . . but it won’t go **no ferver**, it is stuck there kicking and kicking against an invisible barrier, while, terrorised by the imagining of what Bert will **do to me**, Audrey’s head shakes, **Yer put yer noodle in, yer put yer noodle out** . . . The door crashes back on its hinges and there he is: Where’s me stripey! He howls, then charges for her, **Yer put yer whole self in, yer put yer whole self out** . . . He grabs her wrist so hard she feels the bones grating together inside it, then twists it so that the fist opens helplessly. A’wah-wa-wa! A’wah-wa-wa! she blubs. Audrey’s big brother’s starting eyes are fixed on his beloved marble – but hers, hers, are equally held by the peculiar bracelet he wears, its golden segments **fiery** in the **burnin’ bush**, and on the back of it a huge black jewel **Mother’s jet beads**. Audrey staggers, almost falls, bends double to escape the hurt and is caught there feeling the long **Vulcanised** strip of tension that loops round her middle and stretches in either direction the length of the passage an **inner tube pulled tight round the rim of a bicycle wheel**.
Stuck in the present’s flesh are the looking-glass fragments of a devastating explosion: a time bomb was primed in the future and planted in the past. The debris includes the row of houses along Novello Street towards Eel Brook Common, their top two storeys weatherboarded and bowing over the roadway under widows’ peaks of rumpled tiling. There’s the fat-bellied kiln of the pottery in the crook of the King’s Road and the ragged patterning of the yews in the misty grounds of Carnwath House. Old Father Thames sucking on weedy-greasy piles stuck in the mud all along the riverside from the bridge to the station. Her own father sucking on a hazel twig he’s cut and whittled with his pocket knife to slide in and out of his muddy mouth, in between his remaining weedy-greasy teeth. — Audrey’s father, Sam Death: not De’Ath, not lar-de-dar, not like some uz thinks they’re better than they should be. Namely, Sam’s brother Henry, who styles himself like that and resides in a new villa somewhere called Muswell Hill. They have their own general, the De’Ath’s. Audrey has heard this said so many times that even now, a big girl of ten, she cannot forestall this vision: a rotund man in a scarlet jacket hung all over with gold braid, and sitting on a kitchen chair in a scullery. His white mutton chops creamy on the rim of his high collar, his red cheek pressed against the limewashed wall. Not that Audrey’s mother speaks of the De’Ath’s general enviously – there has always been a niceness to this understanding: while the Deaths are not the sort to have servants, neither are they those what serve. And while the Deaths are no better than they should be, neither are they worse than they might. Whispering in the parlour before the new bracket was put in, before the cottage piano arrived – whisperings when Mary Jane put a solar lamp on the table at dusk and it rounded off the corners of the room with its golden globe of light. Guttersnipes, they hissed, urchins, street arabs – different ones came on several occasions to say, If it please you, sir, ma’am, I bin by the line-up fer the Lambeth spike, anna bloke wot wuz innit said if’n I wuz to cummover west an’ tell iz people there’d be a tanner innit. But Sam Death is not the whispering sort: A tanner! A tanner for a windy nag stuffed with skilly! You’ll count yerself bloody lucky t’cummaway frummee with a thru’pence – now fuck off, or I’ll call fer the blue boys! The arabs aren’t down – thru’pence is a good dip, so they skip from the avenue into the Fulham Road, tossing their caps up as Audrey’s father buttons the long skirts of his rabbit-skin coat, saying, There’s one as won’t be dining wiv Duke ‘Umphrey t’night. Audrey never sees ve windy nag, knows only of her father’s other brother from these evening sallies – Sam heading off to head him off, muttering that: It’s a crying shame Honest John Phelps the ferryman is no more, so cannot take him across to the Surrey side. So, James Death the pauper uncle becomes all paupers for Audrey – when she’s sent to fetch her father from the Rose & Crown for his tea Jim’s is the shadow that capers beside the trapdoor dancers. In the flare of a naptha lamp, she sees him, grovelling beneath one of the coster’s stalls in Monmouth Street market – cowering there, picking up orange peel and pressin’ its smile to ‘is ol’ man’s mouf . . . Then there’s the screever kneeling on the pavement outside the ironmonger’s on King Street, where Audrey waits while her mother goes in to buy a tin of Zebra grate polish.
This rat-man scratches a gibbet on the granite with charcoal, not chalk – a fraying hank of marks from which hangs Uncle Jim, who sings: *Je-sus’ blood ne-ver failed me ye-et...* his cap in hand.

Stanley, his blazer hung from the privy’s latch, feeds the chalky inner tubing into the steel groove – *Gilbert, Gilbert Cook...* does something similar so that Audrey *bites my lip* –. But not yet – before then, when Albert sits at the kitchen table, his shirtsleeves cinched by *fascinating* bands, their parents are already styling themselves Deeth, to rhyme with teeth Sam picks, his face *swellin’ beet-red*. You’ll have an apoplexy, guv’nor, says Albert, dipping his nib and filling in Olive’s line of the census form with quick, clever, cursive, clerkish writing. Don’t guv’nor me, you jack-gentleman, Sam growls, what matter if we change an a to an e? Whose business but our own? Albert has his father’s hand-down face, which would be handsome enough *onna a fat man*, although it appears queer on their tapered heads – the smooth flesh *bunching up* at their brows and along their jawlines. It’d be the Ministry’s business, I’d say, t’would be better if you left off – and as he speaks Albert continues to write, Death, Violet May, daughter, —, — — —, —, —, Secondary, his pen *morsing* from box to box, the dashes indicating further shared characteristics – *’til at least I’ve gone into rooms, I’ve no wish to speak for the others...* who, despite having grown up with Albert always before them, are still agog when he does two things at once, *both perfectly*: piano playing and reading the evening paper, timing an egg while totting up the household accounts – no alternation between hand and foot, or coordination between eye and hand faults him, no variability of scales confounds him. ‘E’s twins inna single skin, said a local wag, seeing Bert unerringly volley a football even as he was marking possibles for the guv’nor in the Pink ‘Un with a stub of pencil – this when father and son were still close, down at Craven Cottage, the playing field all round kicked and stamped into a happily tortured morass. Audrey thought: if we’re Death, then Uncle James must be *dearth* – this a word gleaned from Bible and Bunyan at school, for the Deaths are not regular attendees, let alone communicants.

When four out of the five Death children had left the house on Waldemar Avenue, Death, Samuel A. Theodore, 51, married, 31 years, Night Garage Inspector, Omnibus Coy, Worker, was still known, familiarly, as Rothschild Death, on account of the flutters and the rabbit-skin coat, and the *art and arfs* he downed in pubs and penny gaffs from King Street to Parsons Green and Mortlake beyond, ales that imparted a jovial gloss to his coating of bombast. Familiarly, *yes*, for *those sort won’t be told*, but formally it was Deeth, and when the three Deeths transplanted themselves from the London clay to the red Devon loam, with Albert’s assistance taking up residence in a cottage at Cheriton Bishop – where Mary Jane had been raised – they became known locally as the Deers. — Sam Deer totters around the small garden, Olive Deer watches him. She has seen pictures in the illustrated weekly and read the accompanying text. The pictures are obscure – the words surpassing allusive. Olive, who knows nothing of adult bodies besides her own, still wonders how it is that they get food into the women in Holloway...
Prison who won’t eat . . . who keep their jaws clamped shut. She wonders what it might be like to tell someone that a twisting rivulet of ants has leaked into the cottage from the rain-washed garden. Got in, flowed up the stairs, sopped up the grooves of the candlewick and, not unpleasantly, are infesting me merry bit . . .

Stanley mends the inner tube, feeding it through the water in the wooden pail, the kinked eel sends a piddle of bubbles to the surface. He pulls it out, mops it, marks its gills with the chalk. Caught in the kink, the corridor stretching away in front of her . . . longer than time, Audrey burns with covetousness for that safety bicycle, convinced she can ride it better than him – fix it quicker. Neat as a pin in the tailor-made she’s bought with her first week’s wages from Ince’s, she covets it – and resents him. It was one thing to be still soaping Bert’s collars – from when they were nippers his primacy was taken so much for granted that there was no more need to speak of it than what you got uper in the privy. But Stanley – her baby, her bumps-a-daisy, that he should have this and not her, well, she was reft, the suspicion creeping into her that he’s never given a fig for her. Playing out, playing Queenie – and I was Queenie, and the Wiggins boys all mocking me . . . and that lousy boy, who come up from Sands End – the one Mother said az the stink of gas onnis togs – picks up the ball and dips it inna puddle, then rolls it in some horse shit, and when I turn round he throws it at me so ’ard the string busts and all the soggy, shitty paper wraps round my face and spatters my pinny, an’ Stan leaps on ’im, thumpinim proper, defendin’ his big sis, and the Sands End kid ad vese big obnail boots, no stockings, juss vese boots . . . coming down on Stan’s face . . . a yelp! The Wiggins boys scrammin’, turnin’ tail. There mustabin a nail come loose – there was that much blood. When Bert come out of the house and dragimoff, the Sands End kid was spittin’, Garn! Piss up yer leg an play wiv ve steam! Still . . . maybe . . . maybe even then it was all a bloody show . . .

Cold meat, mutton pies, Tell me when your mother dies . . . November in Foulham, the streets greasily damp – the colour of rotten logs. Bad air from the river, bad air from the Works, rotten malt gusting from the Lamb brewery over Chiswick way. In the back bedroom Audrey rubs the soot-stained muslin curtain against her cheek and peers down in the near-darkness at the backyards of their terrace and those of the terraces behind, fret-worked by walls and fences into separate territories, each with its own upright hut . . . a command post – Ladysmith relieved. Come inter the ga-arden, Maude! And see the raspberry canes scattered spilikins, the humpback of an abandoned cask, a pile of bricks, a birdcage shaped like the Crystal Palace that them two doors down adfer a myna, which had croaked back at the cat’s-meat-man: Ca-a-at’s me-eat! Until p’raps a cat gotit. Audrey! Or-dree! Cummun get yer tea! Cat meat, mutton pies, Tell me when your mother dies . . . She should have been down there with her sisters, fetching yesterday’s leg of mutton down from the meat safe, peeling and boiling potatoes, scraping dripping from the pale blue enamel basin. Or-dree! She can’t be doin’ wiwvit. Time enough for tasks later – her soda-scraped hands bloaters floating in the scummy water. Besides, she cannot abide her mother just now – Mary Jane who stinks of chlorodyne, and slumps
narcotised on the horsehair chaise her sons dragged in from the parlour when it split. Her *Ladysmith*, a bell tent of grey woollen shawl and black bombazine, her tired auburn hair down *rusting* on her big shoulders. I can’t be bovvered wiv me stays, she says, not when me mulleygrubs comes upon me. Audrey is repelled by her – disgusted that her mother vouchsafes her *women’s ailment* to her alone – the *sly thing, Or-dree!* – where they jumble together in the sewn-in pockets of time swung apart from the *general shindy* of Death family life.