

# Verbal Medicine



Centre for Experimental Ontology

# Verbal Medicine

## (A Product of Several Authors)

Stephen Steeplton meandered his aged blue Volvo 940 along the main road between his place of residence (he was going home) and his work-place. A man of fifty plus years, he didn't feel the need exceed the speed limit or to even drive up to it. The car wasn't powerful, and he didn't care. It accelerated pitifully, it dragged up hills, he braked excessively at small bends. It generally annoyed the fuck out of every driver behind him. Today he possibly drove even slower on account of his mind pouring over the details of a patient at his Phytocorp clinic.

Stephen was a medical herbalist or at least that's how he named himself internally. In fact, this name had been abandoned when the corporates swept through herbal medicine business over 10 years ago. Phytocorp and the rest of them had swept through the market purchasing every small herbal practice and health store in the country. The business model was appalling. These companies borrowed vast amounts of money to purchase and transform these shabby small businesses into sleek metallic operations. It hadn't really panned out like that. Of course phyto-therapeutics had been getting increasingly popular as an alternative to the mostly wealth oriented 'real' drug biomedical industry —the poor turned back to the plants in desperation of their increasingly sickening plight. This made it look like the industry (if you could call it that) was ripe for corporatization -it wasn't. Business after business failed, corporates lost vast amounts of money as they endlessly failed to turn small herbal clinics and health stores into shiny capital producing machines, because the poor were, well, poor.

However, determined not to let the shabby grass roots practices of snake-oil re-emerge, companies like Phytocorp grimly hung in there until this wasteland cleared somewhat. They then set up the *Phyto-clinics* in hotspots where the practices had been actually successful and bought politicians that banned the re-emergence of any independent herbalism of similar practice (in case you wondered, acupuncture suffered a similar fate of corporatizing, the independents were removed and lucrative deals were made involving the syphoning off bioelectricity from clients on the sly). These hotspots were of course places where the middle classes were wont to indulge themselves with every alternative therapy they could lay their hands on. These people initially expressed a mild disingenuous dissatisfaction at the lack of the feel of authenticity corporate world exuded (they wanted to feel like they attended something more earthy) but quickly embraced the smooth plastic curves and carefully manicured philodendrons that adorned the practices. Once reconciled with this herbalism-of-the-future image they came in droves to (mostly) have their chronic conditions mildly ameliorated and talk about themselves.

So Stephen Steeplton was not a medical herbalist, he was a *phytoclinician*. This was his official title. This was somewhat confused by the fact that the corporates had even created a new title in law for them: Pr. So he

was Pr Steeplton. No one knew exactly how you were supposed to pronounce 'Pr'; because they hadn't thought about it that hard, someone in PR had just noticed that Doctor becomes Dr and they liked that. Running with this idea, the same ingenious PR operative board switched the D for a P to make the Pr title. In theory it was short for phytoclinician, but of course that didn't make any real sense. Worse still, since the title came from the PR dept more confusion ensued when some covetous management officials started adopting Pr as *their* title despite not being phytophysicians (but working in PR). Professors from various universities chucked in their tuppenceworth by writing to the government, protesting potential conflation with their own titles but these complaints were burned.

The patient Steeplton was considering was one he'd seen earlier that day. He considered most of his patients to be malingerers of some sort, middle aged people with mithering complaints symptomatic of little other than age itself; infected with some kind of ecological ethic these people came to the phytocorp clinics rather than mainstream biomed for the *holistic* touch. Pr Steeplton was at least proficient in this. He invariably had a variety of plant allies that hovered around him in adjacent realms. These beings would often whisper diagnostics to him saving him the trouble of thinking about the patient himself or even listening to them. The only problem with taking his eye completely off the ball was that sometimes the allies would just make things up for their own entertainment, suggesting wildly inappropriate remedies for conditions the patient didn't even have. One time based on such recommendations he gave an old lady an Rx of 50% Capsicum 50% Datura (10ml TDI) for what turned out later to be haemorrhoids. It all turned nasty and Phytocorp had to clean up the mess —quite literally. So nowadays he paid attention to his own mind *and* what they said. This was usually highly effective.

The patient he reflected on at the moment, was, though boring in character, interesting in case. He had come originally about a series of paralysing headaches which biomed centre had at first diagnosed as idiopathic tumours. However subsequent scans has shown the tumours to be only occasionally manifest. Interdimensional tumour interference was something they couldn't treat since even if they scheduled surgery there would be no way of telling if the tumours would be there that day or not, furthermore this came with the extra danger that an ego driven surgeon (and they all are) would not be able to live with not removing something in the operation and hence would remove sections of brain and pass them off as if they were the tumours. Biomed didn't need the hassle so sent him to Phytocorp who immediately gave him to Pr Steeplton (being the most esoterically capable of the Prs and this unit).

Gary (that was the patient's name) was a talker. He talked so much Pr Steeplton's allies even got bored and switched off. Steeplton had a hard time staying awake enough to try to sift through the endless waffle 'So Pr, how do I say that is it like 'prr'?, doesn't matter? Okay, I've been a little better, I took my medicine like you said. It doesn't taste as good as the last one and I uh, feel it goes more left side than right if you know what I mean? My Cynthia says I can't tell my right from my left, maybe she's right I do sometimes get confused, I mean not so confused I don't know which hand I'm writing with if you know what I mean. Anyway...' and so it went on, and on.

Aside from the fact that occasionally manifest tumours was an interesting case, it was what Gary had said that had sparked Pr Steeplton's interest, Gary had been talking about a dream he had had. Stephen had always been interested in dreams. He considered himself a bit of a Jungian on the sly, or maybe a neo-Jungian, whatever that was. Jung seemed so distant now that it seemed sticking on neo as a prefix might be a good idea. 'So I had this dream Prr, just after the last headache, which was big but only lasted a short while, which is good as they used to last much longer, except it was more painful, do you think as the tumours get shorter in time, they might get bigger in space? Anyway I was sat in this armchair and a man walks in. He's only small and he's old but really spritely. He says, 'get out of the chair!' and I get out of the chair. Then he says 'you know your problem pal?' I say 'No' he says 'You walk all wrong!' 'I do?' 'Yup, so listen up I'm going to show you the right way to walk!' Then he walks round the room in this weird low walk, leaning slowing forwards as he does so. It looked pretty creepy to be honest but there was also something kind of, uh, powerful about it. Anyway he goes round the room a few times and then shouts 'Now you!' I start trying but I can't lean forwards, I just lean sideways, then I wake up'.

Pr Steeplton was worried that Gary might be right about the tumours growing as they were temporally compressed. He obviously needed to adjust the prescription, the last thing he wanted was Gary's haemorrhaged brain on his conscience. Gary wanted to know if he should try the weird low walk or not. Stephen felt unsure. He needed to know if the old man was a bad symbol or not. He tried asking Gary what colour his clothes were, but Gary couldn't remember. This was frustrating as decoding dream clothing was his favourite interpretive device. He liked it so much he even had devised a whole a categorisation system of items of dream clothing, their colours and what the various combinations meant.

His mental flitting between the various areas of this conversation were suddenly interrupted by his noticing of a quickly approaching police vehicle in the rear-view mirror. He attempted to pull the car to the side of the road to allow the vehicle by but it sped past him before he could do so. Upon passing him though, rather than speeding on its way, it screeched sharply to a stop forcing him to do likewise, or at least meander to a stop (given that he had only been driving at 42mph).

Stephen sat confused as a slender pale policeman swung himself out of the car and strode towards his vehicle. 'Good evening sir' 'Evening officer' 'Any reason why you didn't pull out of the way of our car just now sir?' 'Well, I was about to, but then you just went round me' 'Sir the reason we did go round you was because you were *in the way*, we're on our way to a very dangerous incident you know.' 'Right' 'There's no need to be sarcastic sir' Steeplton was understandably confused. If the incident was so urgent, why bother him? It did however seem unwise to point this out.

The policeman stared in at him through the window, his eyes looked glassy and pink. Stephen shuddered and looked again and they seemed to look more normal. 'Well sir?' Realising his mind has wandered and the policeman had continued talking for some time, he had no idea what he should say 'Yes..' he tried. 'Yes?' said the policeman 'Yes' said Stephen. 'Right then sir, you had better come with us then.'

In the back of the police cruiser, Stephen felt like a caged animal. Handcuffed. Volvo abandoned. This was no longer his kingdom. Nor his phylum. Fight or flight kicked in. Stephen tried to pretend there was a Third Way. Transcendental Meditation as taught by David Lynch in his MasterClass. But Stephen's mind-body was too far gone. Panic. Blinking eyes. He squirmed. He murmured. The police officers no longer understood his language.

Stephen's machine-brain. Orb of light. I am an insect thinker. Praying mantis. Ready to decapitate the copper's head. The police officer in the passenger seat grinned at Stephen. "You like football?" he said. "You like bloody Brighton, don't you? They'll be relegated soon enough." Stephen did not understand a word of it. Sounded like television.

"A cactus is what I am," Stephen thought. Thirst. Drought. The sea is a desert. Seagulls are coyotes. Prickly pricks. Geological time.

Stephen is dragged out of the police cruiser. Kicking and screaming. The walls of the cell at the station are made of limestone karst. He is alone. Tribe of One. Neanderthal urges. To draw. To speak.

A police officer rolls an orange into Stephen's cell. The bright color nearly blinds Stephen.

Citrus.

Seed.

Orange rust.

Squinting from the flavour that blinds the room, Stephen cuts slits in the wood of his vision rather than suffer the vitamins headache and it allows him to take in the sudden actions of his landscape.

The floor, made from dissolving gypsum and limestone rock, is craggy and breathing with so many pores. The orbital sunshine of the orange rolls in along the many dimple sized holes and it wobbles near Stephen's foot, trying to get a handle of being round. On being a ball. On not having any sides and rather slipping into the craters of your foot's fall.

Once it stabilizes, Stephen takes in the background vision. The bars that make the invisible wall that is his cell, the broken away at limestone karst walls, the lack of sunlight dripping in from any windows.

The artificial light inset in all the imperfect scones.

The footsteps dropping away behind closed doors where police might scheme of criminal code.

Realising he may be all alone, Stephen makes a bird of his very own. "Hey!" He whimpers with a hard front beneath his teeth. "What's going on?" As if to say he demands even though his spine is rolling out behind him.

No one returns his call.

Beside his shaking, heavy, crownless head is a stainless-steel bench hung from chains on the wall. Placing his hand on the cool metal and the other hand on the cool floor, he lifts himself from hobbled into a more confident position in his room, his cell, his justice for all.

Stephen pulls in a stuttered breath that fills his tiny chest with the stale air, it's cavern drafts not fresh but recirculated stone. He holds it. The cave of his cell in his tissues, making stagnant folds of the reticulated tides that are his fleshy lung organ. It attracts bats and moths, and they eat away at his lacking confidence, his all alone.

"Shit!" He mutters to himself as he buries his eyes and sagging cheeks into the mud of his palms.

Low sobbing in the cold of handcuffs not worn.

"Hey! Relax Stephen!"

Slash white through the trembling heart as the words take Stephen's shoulders like predatory claws and he whips his head from hiding to the direction of the words that came from the dark. Heart like thin black balls at the top of the music sheet, pupils in and out of focus as the beads of sweat dart around the cell. Stephen checks every inch of his ten foot apartment twice and finds he's all alone.

"Hello?" He calls with the suspicion of a ghost, half standing to see if there was someone down the hall from his cell, assuming it was a hall and not hell.

"Hi!" Said the voice with chipper in its octave swell.

Falling back into his seat, Stephen's eyes match the declination and he looks to the ground. Shock. Strips of white in his hair.

But just the orange there.

Turning on its smooth porous skin, opening its eyes, forming words with a pulpy mouth. "Hello Stephen, I've been waiting for you." It says.

"Oh good." Says Stephen. Surprised that his throat let anything be said at all.

Then nothing happened. Seemingly forever nothing happened. Just the orange and Stephen staring at each other as if the other one might dry and crack and fall into pieces... the dust of it settled in the cracks of

Stephen's brain and it made him want to sneeze and smoke at the same time. If only he had a cigarette, if only he had smoked ever before.

The orange made a faint smile, lifting one side of its white lined mouth closer to the bright slice of its left eye. Awkward, even though it was the orange and Stephen was not. "Were the boys gentle with you?" Asked the orange, its juicy mouth flopping around the way a puppets might, if the hand was drunk and the stage was set in the light.

Stephen nodded, not sure if he remembered coming in at all at this point.

"That's good." Said the orange as it produced a cigarette from the back of its mouth. Without hands, the act was autonomous and reminded Stephen of an assembly line as the cigarette rolled out long-wise and careful—despite its being lit already and it suckered up to the flat lips of the orange's bright skin. The cherry lit for a moment and then smoke rolled out of the orange's eyes. "Would you like a smoke, Stephen?"

He nodded again and the orange reared its lack of neck into a Pez dispenser and another cigarette stood straight up in the flattened out surface of its mouth. The other cigarette lay half flat on the floor, angled from the fruit's maw.

Stephen reached out and grabbed the tobacco roll and the orange turned back to its normal stance, smoking fish eyes and cool nineties Japanese aesthetic all at once.

Inspecting the smoke up close, Stephen found the paper to be damp with citrus. The spark already fired, he placed the cigarette on his lips and pulled the scurvy from his gums as his lungs went black and calm. He didn't cough. He breathed out. His head was already rushing, but not from the nicotine, not at all.

"Sorry, they always come out a little wet." Said the orange.

"Not at all." Replied Stephen. Still polite.

"So we have some work to do tonight and it's a lot. It certainly won't get done on its own." Said the orange.

"Yea." He chuckled, not sure if he should do anything at all. "Don't... don't I know it." Forced smile.

"So, we should probably get started."

Stephen sucked on the smoke again, letting the fluoride and dry leaf tickle the itch at the back of his throat as he held the puff of char somewhere between his chest and his uvula. "Are you uh, are you related to the fauna spirit's that ummm, you know..."

The orange stared at Stephen with one orange eyebrow tilted high up into the seed of its thoughts.

Stephen continued, now too nervous to leave the room silent. "When I practise herbalism, sometimes the plants and their spirits would give me a little guidance but... they were only voices." He exhaled the smoke that had been lingering in his nose and it made the room fuzzy. "Not..." he gestured with his tar stained hand at the orange in circles. "Full grown... fruit. You're not related to them, are you?"

The orange pursed its lips, lifting the half-burnt cigarette into a vertical question mark and then spoke. "You know how crazy that sounds, right?"

Stephen did, and winced inwardly, then instantly winced again, as a reaction to the initial wince. He was embarrassed at the suggestion that he might be mentally unwell, coming from a strangely authoritative orange. Jesus Christ.

Feeling that he should show, if not exactly, spirit (That damned word again) then at least some spark of autonomy, he swallowed another lungful of smoke, coughed amateurishly, and spoke.

"You said that there was work to do?"

The orange seemed pleased. "Oh yes. A big job. A dirty piece of work I'm afraid, but it needs to be done. None of the boys want anything to do with it, that's why we need somebody like you."

Stephen raised himself from the bench, causing the chains to jangle, an oddly jolly sound. "Well, I don't suppose talking about it is going to get it done."

Again he sensed approval from the fruit. The cell door swung open and he found himself walking slowly down a glum, grey corridor, the orange by his side. It wasn't doing anything so obvious as floating along, it was just there, on a level with his head, and slightly in front of him.

Following its lead he turned down an even gloomier, greyer corridor, down half a dozen metal steps and found himself standing in front of a heavy, steel sheathed door labelled "Room Q3."

"I glanced through your file," offered the Orange, "and you're the right man for this job. No doubt about it. Just one thing I want to know, what's the Pr business about?"

Stephen did his best to explain, but felt that he hadn't perhaps, been as successful as he might of liked.

"So it's like Dr for Doctor, but with a P?"

"Well, in essence, yes."

"How'd you say it? Pactor? That's wild. Poc for short. If you're gonna be working for me, I guess I'll call you Poc. I like my boys to have a nickname. Fosters cameraderie, you know? Keeps things light."

Again, the door was shut, and then it was open, the orange made a motion which clearly indicated "after you".

Steeplton walked into the room. Originally painted a drab cream colour, now, inevitably, it was gray. Two heavy wooden tables stood at one end of the room beneath a ventilation grille garlanded with dusty cobwebs. Upon them were piled boxes and ringbound files, here too, a thick covering of dust was in evidence. A yellowish and dim light percolated through dusty lampshades which hung listlessly from the gray ceiling.

The Orange was beside him again. "Well there you go Poc. Brushes, mops, cloths and detergents are in that

cupboard there, think there's some stepladders, you can get hot water down the hall, second left. I'll pop back in a few hours and see how you're getting on, how'd you take your coffee?"

Stephen made a faint noise in the back of his throat. "You want me to clean up?" He asked incredulously, his voice tight with confusion and helplessness. "You brought me here, like this, to clean up?"

"Sure. And sort those files out too of course. I don't know whether chronologically would be best, or by year and then alphabetically. Have a poke around and let me know what you think would be best."

"But I thought, I mean, this is insane, you said a big job."

"Looks like a big job to me Poc."

"But, but, I get taken from my car by the Police, thrown in a cell, then, you, I mean..." He tailed off, feeling a certain delicacy, despite his mounting anger and yes, disappointment, in again broaching the fact that he was talking to an orange. "I mean I thought..."

The Orange laughed delightedly. "Oh I get it, you thought you were gonna identify the exotic alkaloid that offed the Duchess! Figure out who put the psilocybin in the ambassador's cocoa? Oh Poc you boob. You're adorable. Wait till I tell the boys."

Stephen felt his throat tighten. He was hurt. And, yes, disappointed. He realised with a pang of guilt that he had actually been looking forward to some type of adventure. He began a bitter retort, then choked it back. The Orange's expression, however it was conveyed, was one of such good nature that he felt that he did not want to upset it. And then, it had been a very, very long time since anyone had called him adorable. He sighed. "Second left for hot water you say?"

"Attaboy Poc! I knew we could count on you! Didn't I tell Krampus and Odd Legs that you were the man for us? Sure, second left. The tap's a bit tricky, you have to kind of wiggle it."

"What's in the files?"

"Oh, the files? Well Poc, those are our miscellaneous and irritating files. Poltergeists in kebab shops. Inexplicable series of deaths by burning of lawnmower repairmen. Complaints about refractory milliners. Lost shoes. Haunted geese. You know the sort of thing. You must get stuff like that all the time in your day job?"

"Well, not really exactly like that, but yes, I suppose, hang on, haunted geese?"

"Happens all the time. Gap in the psychic world hedge or something. Very much prone to it. Not much we can do."

"But should I see these files? I mean, I'm sure there must be some kind of data protection regulations or something."

Stephen realised how absurd this was, but he was after all, a medical professional. The Orange however seemed to take it in his stride.

"Hell yeah, I forgot, I ain't sworn you in. Raise your right hand and repeat after me, "I Pdoctor Stephen Steeplton" you ought to have an E in there by the way, "do solemnly swear to serve and protect, and uphold the law."

Dazedly, Stephen did as he was told. The Orange beamed, "Here's your badge Poc. Welcome aboard!" This last was said with such human, well citric, warmth, that Stephen felt a glow of pride. He was in. Accepted.

He felt that he should celebrate somehow.

"Do you think I could have another cigarette please, er, sorry, what should I call you?"

"Call me Chief. Sure Poc, here you go, I told you about the wetness already right?"

"Yes Chief."

"That's good. Did I tell you about the time we had a murder down in Chinatown? Back when I was a rookie? Well Old Leopardskin, he was the Chief back then, sent me and Bobbing Head McCarthy down there to see what we could shake loose out of the community. There was this old, and I mean old Chinese guy, hanging around the crime scene just a bit too persistently, so Bobbing Head says to me "Charley, why don't you go see if you can get anything out of that guy?" So I looks over at the guy, then back at McCarthy and I says, "Why me Bobbing Head? Do I look like I speak Mandarin?"

A mote of dust had entered her retina, blinking stupidly, she shook her head, hoping to dislodge the intruder.

Stephen watched Derleth shake her head. *Head lice*, he thought grimly to himself.

There was a chill in the air, Stephen made a seat from an upturned crate, he wondered about what Henri had said, the veteran had been rambling. Henri swore that he had witnessed the splintered people, quiet grim figures on the desolate mound and always at sunset. Both Henri and Derleth listened to the thud bump of the heavy rain on the warped tin roof. The occupants of the bunker were each packed tight into their heavy mantle-capes. A gust of chill air rippled the thin tarpaulin that made for a door. A trickle of dirty water pooled inside the bunker, outside the bunker the slap of heavy sloshing boots could be heard wading through deep mud.

'Have you ever peeled an orange?' asked Stephen, Derleth shrugged her shoulders as she tugged at the sodden burlap drape that passed for a curtain.

'Citrus fruits make me sick.' Derleth confessed her voice deep and prickly.

A sweet unpleasant stench wafted across the canal, nobody complained about it anymore. The aroma came from the old city, the place where the corpses dwelt. At night, if the radiance from the red stove fires was just right, the sentries could see twisted hands and feet clawing at the sky, silhouetted and groping.

'So, what's a *Phytoclinician*?' Demanded Derleth.

'Pardon?'

'The other night, in your sleep, you said you were a *Phytoclinician*.'

'Oh,' Stephen sighed, 'That was just another version of yesterday me, imagine how many yesterday's there are and will be and I'm still here.'

Derleth frowned, she guessed he was lying.

A clanking motor could be heard over heard, it spluttered and coughed angrily as though it had been working too hard for far too long in the wrong direction. Derleth spied the sleek bomber crow away through the grey clouds, it's shadow shimmered across the canal like a fluttering augury of macabre. Derleth saw a horse's hoof breaking the murky viscous surge. She puzzled over why it was so perpendicular, she presumed it to be the night freeze and or the onset of rigor mortis.

'When they catch it in the night, they never seem to thaw again?' Answered Stephen as though he had heard Derleth's own thoughts about the horse's hoof. Both shivered and turned away from the long wide water. Derleth shook her head and shivered, she wondered why Stephen had lied.

'They're like twisted periscopes.' Mumbled Henri.

'Storks?' Offered Stephen.

'Storks?' Repeated Derleth.

'Storks!' Stephen turned to face Derleth and explained himself, 'ensnared in the ooze, imagine a flock of birds suddenly startled, so startled in fact that they fly away in a wild frenzy, only to forsake their feet, leaving them behind, the birds will never land again, but perish of exhaustion in mid-air, dying in mid air is probably the best way to go.' Stephen looked at Derleth, hoping she would understand, but she could not. Henri coughed heavily from his bunk in the dark.

'They'll hit the solid ground eventually.' Offered Henri helpfully.

'But they'll be dead, it doesn't matter what you hit or from what height you hit it, it does not matter one jot, when you are a descending cadaver.' Derleth did not think the corpses looked remotely like the abandoned legs of night storks. Derleth squinted as rain drops freckled against the wooden blocks of the windowsill. Stephen watched the pitter patter of rain become a sudden torrent; he did not think Derleth understood him. Stephen watched the rain, as lightning electrified the low grey cumulous and the prospect of puppetry and storytelling was a very real possibility.

The entire battalion had become nothing more than flat inarticulate marionettes, trapped between a source of light and a translucent scrim.

'They're retreating.' Derleth smiled confidently, 'or they are advancing.' She shrugged her shoulders.

Stephen looked out across the canal, the water level had dropped in the night, the rippling liquid could barely hold the corpses.

'To where?'

Nobody replied.

The cold sharp rain accompanied the occasional heavy rumble of a distant bombardment; heavy machinery interrupted the silence. Beyond the deep sepulchral canal, a city and its architecture appeared like a diorama of bone and concrete and glass. Nobody went there, except maybe Henri.

'Henri found a box of sweets.' Offered Derleth as she playfully nudged Stephen. Stephen did not know how to respond, Derleth watched him expectantly. In the absence of a response, she repeated herself. 'Henri found a box of sweets!'

Stephen felt embarrassed, he had lost the ability to understand or he had discovered the ability to ignore trivialities, he could not know for sure.

'I'm not even me anymore.' Stephen complained, Derleth did not hear him, 'have you ever peeled an orange.'

A gust of military orderliness brought in a tall officer with dynamic purposeless eyes. He entered confidently with a fantastic way about him. Yet all Henri saw was a loud sense of subdued authority. The officer admired his posture whilst a metallic engine churned air outside, dark chemical smoke followed the officer into the bunker, he did not fasten the flap, but instead stood at the entrance and observed the company in the squalid bunker deep. A fetid grey light pooled in the depths, neither Derleth or Stephen saluted. The officer took the opportunity to salute himself.

'The worst is over!' the officer explained. Then in a whispered and disturbed moment of doubt, he shook his head, 'The best is yet to come.'

The officer didn't seem to want to stay, but he seemed incapable of leaving, as though compelled by a hidden force to remain. He seemed awe struck by the prospect of Henri. Derleth ignored the officer, but Stephen smiled blankly.

'Did I used to be a *Phytoclinician*?' Offered Stephen happily.

'What's that?' snapped the officer bluntly, squinting curiously as he spoke.

'Nothing!' Interrupted Derleth, 'he made it up, it's a made-up word by a made-up person!'

The officer coughed, he did not understand insubordination, especially when he was in his uniform. Although it was torn and muddy, he felt powerful, his mantle-cape was the light grey of the officer elite, his side arm was an old issue heavy. He wondered if the recruits were mocking him because of his pistol. Nobody spoke a word, nobody understood anything and there was an honesty in the silence.

Henri blinked, he could hear the bodies of dead birds thumping against the roof. Outside military wagons were heard crunching along the road. Derleth spied the soldiers in the rear, she didn't recognise any, because none of them had faces.

The sound of sudden military music dampened everybody's spirit. The officer knew how things operated. The chatter and rattle of bullets sounded very much like unseasonal rains. Derleth turned to Stephen, both soldiers frowned.

'Where's your gun?' Asked Stephen.

'Where's yours?' Snapped Derleth.

'Did you by any chance happen to see my entropy halo, because I've lost it?' Henri asked.

'I'm unaware of you.' the officer explained, as he fished out a tin of sardines from a hidden pocket inside his tunic. A dusty spray cascaded, a fluff of debris landed on Stephen's face, Derleth wanted to brush it off. Snatch it, but she did not. Stephen's skin was wrapped too close about the bones of his gaunt cheeks.

Derleth feared that if she touched Stephen's face, his skin would tear and she would withdraw a hand sodden with the flesh and the stringy sinew of Stephen. He had not always been the withering creature.

'If we die, military intelligence will tell no one.' Whispered the officer, as he turned to face Derleth, she looked away, Stephen turned to look at the canal Henri began whistling but soon gave up. Unsettled artillery boomed and could be heard in the distance. The low rumble was indistinct and muffled, Derleth suddenly felt incredibly hungry.

Nobody knew who was shelling who.

Derleth turned her attention to the canal, featureless soldiers fled in every direction; the cackle and snap of gun fire rippled through the smog in grotesque exactness. The young officer didn't move or acknowledge anything untoward was occurring. He declined to stoop as mortar shells whistled overhead.

Henri sneezed, he shuddered at the sound of the heavy howitzers. Wrapped tight in his cot, he wondered at the officer standing in the entrance. A ferocious mass of weeping shells screeched through the air.

Stephen glanced at the entrance and sighed.

'Should we get our bayonets?' Mumbled Stephen as he shook his head, the officer nodded stiffly.

'No, it'll be over by the time I get there.' The officer seemed disappointed.

After some time of silence, a calm fat sergeant laboured at the tarpaulin flap, tugging at the frayed edges, mumbling obscenities to himself, he had the aura of a man who had forgotten everything. Unsatisfied at the sight of the officer, the fat sergeant entered, he brought with him a fat wet cough. A foul-smelling metallic and chemical breeze wafted through; the sergeant fastened the flap shut tight, it took him many moments. He grumbled loudly about precision and neatness.

'Listen to me, you shouldn't leave this flap open, you'll invite ghosts!' The sergeant barged past the officer and immediately he knelt before Henri. Both men began to petition the other in inaudible whispers, a negation took place. The fat sergeant kissed Henri on the forehead and Henri allowed him to. The sergeant grumbled as he observed the bunker. He spat on the floor, and with necessary aggression he barged past the officer once more.

'I'm not feeling very well at all.' Offered Stephen, Henri nodded happily.

'I know you all, but I don't know why.' Conceded the officer, his voice distant and apologetic.

Henri immediately forgave the officer, because he had a nice hidden away place in the dark of the bunker. Glancing over his shoulder the officer felt summoned and admonished in equal measures by his own purposeless. He approached Henri's cot. Henri sucked on a seed, his depraved eyes spraying the room with suspicion. Henri began depositing precious trinkets under his pillow.

'I saw a flock of migrating goose fall out of the sky yesterday.' The officer complained.

'Geese.' Corrected Derleth, the officer glanced at Stephen. The officer seemed annoyed, as though he knew the crew had somehow contrived to deliberately scupper the machine in the mud.

'He's missing the point.' Derleth whispered, she noted how the officer coughed as he spoke, the sickness was already in him.

Henri blinked, he was worried about the officer, maybe he had come to give orders. Entropy and artillery were not quite that comical, but they were benign in comparison to well-meaning strategies. In truth, it was calculated movements that got people killed.

'Nothing exists anymore.' Complained the officer from the dark as he wriggled closer to Henri's cot.

'Anymore?' Queried Henri softly, his voice had a strange power to it, the officer understood.

The officer leant in close to Henri, whispering in a conspiratorial tone.

'I've come to order a full understanding of our predicament.'

'Impossible.' Promised Henry, his eyes were maelstrom, the officer seemed suddenly cured of a mystery ailment. The officer fell upward in a stiff projection of dutiful re-emergence from something only he could obey. The suddenness of the officer startled Stephen. Henri smiled in a paternal way; he was delighted for the officer as the officer flashed a new kind of serene understanding. The refreshed officer withdrew his fat service revolver from its holster and he placed the cold nozzle to his forehead.

'Immaculate flesh.' Whispered Henri.

'I'm going now, so don't disturb me with your jazz making and love talk.'

The monstrous bellow sent both Derleth and Stephen scurrying for cover, but Henri remained at his cot, he had found his rifle under a bench and felt immediately more soldierly. The ringing in his ears sounded like distant cathedral bells. Both Stephen and Derleth knelt over the body of the officer, both seemed puzzled and at a loss as to explain what had happened. Stephen pinched his cheeks, he then realised there was no ringing in his ears, they were the sounds of distant cathedral bells.

Henri pointed to a detached eyeball, it had squelched against the ceiling and had come to nest inside a filthy puddle in the mud at the centre of the bunker. Henri sighed, Stephen bit his own lip as he stared through the window up at the grey cumulous lumps. Stephen could not cure anybody, not like Henri, his heart was frozen by too many sorrows.

'Once we thought that he could see and now we know that he is truly blind.' Stephen's apocryphal tone impressed Henri.

Henri nodded furiously, something had stung him deep, there was subtle magic in the officer's sacrifice. Derleth nodded enthusiastically, she remembered everything as she sucked loudly on her gums. Henri and Stephen exchanged knowing glances. More thunder, more rain. After a respectful moment of reflection, Derleth enquired about the dead officer's unfinished tin of sardines, they were still in his hand, partially spilt into the mud. Henri thought that it was deeply appropriate imagery.

Stephen found he was looking at his hands. They looked strange, they looked, well, sticky, wet? He was back in the room with files, the dust and the grey walls. He touched his hands together, they were sticky. He looked beyond his hands to the floor and saw with growing horror a mass of orange peelings. He felt a taste in his mouth. The sharp taste of ascorbic acid, the sticky hands, the taste, the dismal rind laid before him. The terror rose rapidly up his spine as he came to see that somehow in whatever absence had happened to him, he had peeled and eaten 'chief'.

He now noted further that there were still a couple of carefully segmented pieces line up on nearby table. He began to sweat and hyperventilate 'fuck fuck fuck!' he swore through his perforated breath. But then in a horrible dissonant state looked again at the remaining pieces of chief. He'd liked that orange, he'd taken

quickly to accepting its sentence, its warmth, its humour. Now though, the orangeness of the orange began to assert itself. Stephen's throat was dry, his blood sugar low, surely it was actually a waste??

Calmer now, he carefully reached over picked up one of the remaining segments and put it in his mouth. Pressing down with a variety of teeth he felt the sweet juice ripple through his mouth. Man, chief was a tasty orange. Hungrily he ate the last piece and feeling somewhat refreshed he turned his attention to what next. He looked down again at the eviscerated integument. 'I won't let you down chief...' he half muttered as he scooped up the peel and put it into a nearby waste bin. He stood up, exited the room and headed for the second left as he'd been instructed.

In the well-stocked good sized cleaning room, partially guilt riddled, the first thing he did was to wash his hands in the sink (noting the difficulty of the tap, which he wiggled as instructed) until the orange juice was entirely removed. Then, taking a cloth soaked in disinfectant he returned to the grey files room and wiped down the table, the floor and the door handle. He glanced furtively at the evidence in the bin and considered it too incriminating, gingerly, using cloth as a kind of makeshift glove, he opened the bin lid and removed all the pieces of chief's outer layer. He then wrapped the cloth around them, went back to the cleaning cupboard, unrolled an extra bin liner and deposited the cloth (with chief's remains) into the bag. This he rolled up tightly, twist tied the end and put it back in the bin in the files room. 'So far so good' he said to himself, 'Now to work'.

With a real sense of duty Stephen went back to the cleaning room, filled the bucket with hot water and disinfectant, armed himself with a variety of cloths and a mop and went back to tackle his allotted task. Chief had been right, it was a big job. It was a good-sized room and the floor was actually filthy in such homogenous manner that it disguised this. But Stephen was determined not to let chief down. At one point, feeling something sharp digging into his leg, he reached into his pocket and located the badge that chief had given him. A small steel insignia with a classic pin back, it was inscribed with a weird looking filigree pattern that formed the backdrop, in bold letters at the front it simply said 'Poc'. With a confused rush of pride and guilt, Stephen put the badge on. It would least help legitimize him if and when anyone else came along.

He returned to his labour and after about 2 hours and 3 floor moppings, he looked with satisfaction at the near gleaming off-white floor. Turning his attention to the desks he felt with some consternation he hadn't thought this through properly. The tables were really dusty, but if he cleaned the dust he might get some on the floor and then he'd have to mop again. Oh fuck. He could see now he should have done the mopping last. He looked up. The entire ceiling edge (and part of the ceiling itself) were covered with old spiders webs as was the ventilation grille. 'La couleur tombée du ciel' he thought to himself, the ceiling, the sky, caelum, recalling the etymology of ceiling and for some strange reason the French for that old tale of HP's. Callum? Who was Callum? Another random(?) thought.

Pull yourself together Steeplton. Think man, think! If the floor has to get dirty again then so be it. Start at the grille end, get the ceiling clear, then the walls, then do the tables, then the floor again... Stephen's enthusiasm was beginning to wane. If only he hadn't eaten that fucking orange it would have been serving him coffee by now. Reviewing this insane thought in his head he burst out laughing, before pulling it in sharply to a kind of snorting noise lest he attract attention. Still tickled by the absurdity, he went back to the store grinning to himself. There he retrieved a fresh cloth, clean hot water with disinfectant, a long-handled duster and a step ladder. These things he hoped to utilise to properly clean the ceiling and grille and the table end of the room. It was tricky. The tables were pushed near flush to the end of the room making access hard. Stephen figured though, between standing on the tables for some parts and the step ladder for others, he would be able to reach to corners to get the job done properly. To facilitate this he placed the bucket on the table in between boxes so he could reach it to wipe walls and grille down. The system in place, he made start. Everything was going well and he had a whole corner de-cobwebbed and wiped. Unfortunately, the still slight wetness of the floor, the structural instability of the stepladder and the poor angle at which he had placed it meant that when Stephen reached to get a particularly recalcitrant cobweb, the ladder gave way backwards as Stephen fell forwards off it, crashing into the tables and files as he did so. In the fall, a kind of automatic response of preservation, he grabbed at a box, dragging it with him as he bounced off the table onto the floor, knocking the bucket as he went. His shoulder took the force of the landing with his head receiving a secondary kind of blow. The box, he kind of pulled on top of himself in the process, covering himself in dusty files. The bucket of cleaning water joined this assault, soaking himself and the dusty files in an appalling mess.

Half unconscious, half propped up in the detritus by an arm, Stephen could hear approaching voices and footsteps. Unable to stand, he lay there as the sounds grew louder. Eyes blurredly fixed on the doorway he watched as three weird characters entered. The first was of near giant size and looked more beast than human. Massive goat like horns adorned its almost demonic head, yet its smile was bent in a congenial expression of humour. Next was a man in a yellow jacket, he had neat combed brown hair and a bland looking face, which on this occasion looked somewhat surprised. His trousers had legs of different colours and materials, one was green corduroy and the other a pale plaid slack. Lastly was a what seemed to be an insect headed lady with a long purple smock dress that went nearly to the floor. Her antennae were twitching wildly.

In wretched confusion, Stephen looked at the bizarre gang and somehow seemed to make sense of them 'Henri! Derleth! Cantaloupe? Sir, you're alive?!' The beast-man looked more concerned than amused now and made his way over. 'Hey Lily, Odd-legs, help me get this guy up!' The three figure swiftly went over to Stephen who seemed fixated on the insect lady. 'Derleth? Is it really you? Did we win?' Krampus (for that was the beast-man) sat Stephen upright against the wall 'You alright pal?' then glanced at the badge 'Poc? That you're name, you alright Poc? You've banged your head, this ain't your lady friend Derleth, this here is Lily

the Midge.' 'Henri?' 'Wrong again pal, I'm Krampus and this is Odd-legs, take it easy Poc. Hey Odd-legs, get Poc some water!'

So Odd-legs is back with the water in a moment. Stephen takes a sip and slowly the world seems to return. He sees Krampus, looking over him, he sees Lily the Midge and Odd-Legs hovering in the background. 'I... I was trying to clean the grille and ceiling, I must have slipped.' 'You got that right pal, look, now you're back with us, can you tell me, you haven't seen chief around at all have you Poc?'

Krampus pats Stephen's shoulder in an attempt to cool him down, but the touch of his colossal hand does nothing but adding some epinephrine drops to the cocktail shaking in his brain. He appears to be in shock, paper-white face, incapable of emitting a sound. So much ingenuity wasted in flattering the arrogant bureaucrats from General Citronics! Krampus asks some help from Odd-Legs to get Stephen into the team's black van.

It won't matter how far Stephen goes; for better or worse no one will listen. The collected data will be archived, and there they will remain, encrypted, hidden —it's not a question of certainty but just some additional information. Let others navigate the rough asphalt as Stephen did in the old times, when there was nowhere to go and no one but Derleth awaited his return. Both Derleth and himself got a generous sum transferred to their bank accounts, although they were pre-allocated funds which can only be spent on certain things, like the monetary garbage provided by post-governments to simulate that "the economy" remains a thing. Stephen and Derleth wanted to ensure a minimum of lifestyle, much less than others, or perhaps very different, nothing like possessing the space surrounding them, only a few objects that would fit, only those they could easily get rid of. Stephen would rent a cabin on an island in the middle of a lake, something to set on fire without threatening neighbors or forests, all his things there, even himself, burning on the pyre as a heretic. Hot vibrating air would be inducing a mirage of navigation, as if the island slid slowly on the surface of the green lagoon, smoke mingling with the fresh breath of water.

The nagging vinyl stench of electro-succubes wakes Stephen over and over from his false sleep. The beautiful arthropod in a purple gown could well be the effect of entomophiliac self-hypnosis. He feels his own body as a repetition, a chemical reputation, a constant reconstruction of cycles —polenta, pasta, rice, wheat... Instead of trying to continually think about the past, when the team was a congregation of perjure larvae devouring the tree of life, they should start doing something, go out on the street or make a phone call or search for information on the internet —but the plague is too pure and they slip on its varnished surface. Lily is unbearably bright under her purple dress, her exoskeleton still but flexible like walls enduring the shaking of the earth. Charioteers of chance, the team go hunting imaginary elephants to provide ivory to the tower. They are adorned with calculation and weighty military reasons.

Magnolias fall in a junkyard like rusty guns, the alkaline rain of chestnut pollen, the grass that knows how to keep itself always damp and disheveled as if to refresh the cover of a magazine. The nameless creeks are

forest animals with a life of their own, mineral, composed of other small beings, as every life is made of lots of other lives. Withered roses in the garbage can. There comes a time when the body only feels itself in words, which is why Stephen understands those infected by the cunning citrovirus, which, in addition to transforming human tissue into plant thinking, blocks nociception and corrodes the nerve terminals, plunging the hosts in a peripheral anhedonia that ends up seeping into any sensation or idea. The body does not feel the ravages of deformity, as if deformity was nothing but an anamorphic projection —the lack of a proper mirror. Stephen does not perceive what breaks and twists and burns from within as result of his citrophagia —although, unlike opiates, there is no euphoria imbibing the flesh; that intoxication which favored dreams and had taught him the patience that lies at the heart of deep anxiety. Citroviruses have learned to turn human beings into their fruit, rolling spheres, feeding them at their convenience, keeping them alive instead of simply consuming them —that is why they look like a weapon or a work of art, the most sophisticated among artistic armament; the most demonic one; the one that, instead of killing, rebuilds at its convenience; the one that is capable of possessing... The most terrifying destiny conceivable: being possessed by abstract and absurd intelligences without a hint of melancholy.

So it was conjectured that citrosophy itself could have self-organized and spontaneously become a bioinfectious agent; that the very possibility of possession had materialized, coalesced, precipitated, coagulated; that it was a counter-simulation generated by simulations, crystallizing souls in minimal bodies, in just tangles of filiform molecules like the old paper tape impressions of telegraphic messages. Stop, stop, stop; thus the pause of the incessant phrasing is punctuated. The immortalization —or almost— of the metamorphosing flesh had to be compensated with the destruction of supposedly imperishable objects — monuments, bridges, towers, cathedrals, artifacts from extinct civilizations. All their castles are made of cards or sand. There must be a balance in the time that happens to things, a recoil of the chronometric cannon.

They walk over the rotten waste of a light that once illuminated life. Immediately, as soon as Stephen got down to it, he detected the first publications describing the cheerful infection, considering that if Derleth —or someone else— had invented the agent which had citrofected the chief, they wouldn't withstand the thrusts of academic vanity. It would be a matter of reading between lines until discovering the traces of a pinch of pride, of parenthetical parental love.

Long ago, Stephen's father had gotten himself a tape recorder, but Stephen hated to hear his own child's voice play back so he used it to pick up any other sound in the house or the garden: dishes crashing in the sink, birds screeching each other, the drumming of rain's fingers on the wooden ledges, the vibration of the trucks stuck in traffic, the distant cries of other children playing football, the crickets chirping... He tried, unsuccessfully, to record softer and more subtle sounds, like leaves falling from trees or the buzzing of bees and flies. He hid it in the cemetery at night in the hope of capturing psychophonies. Ghosts, however, were mute, or they fell silent in the presence of that device that emitted its own purr of a small mechanical mill when dragging the tape. Perhaps the dead were impregnated with the almost imperceptible screeching, perhaps they could not avoid behaving themselves like tape recorders. Vibrations pierced them, remained

permanently attached to the ectoplasmatic garments. Perhaps it was the noise what parasitized the spirits and not the spirits a parasitic noise, and that is why they pursued the most absolute silence and never materialized to Stephen's crude and spectacular invocations.

The dead of this world do not find enough warmth in the souls of the living and fly away to orangination. But that is what the real dead do, not those who, for the moment, only imagine death from the outside, like a concert they have not managed to enter, with their faces glued to the cold window. Although the living are being invoked as if they were dead; although the chief is now nothing more than the wrinkle of a shadow, a crack in a ray of light.

After curling her antennae with a rusty fork, Lily lights a bonfire on the sand and stands still, listening to the lament of an instagrammatic sea she barely glimpses, a goldbergized variation on the constant bass of the abyss. Only the reflection of the dance of a thread of fire could be seen, as a ray of water, as the magnetic clamor of a wire threatening to pierce the night with the slightest carelessness. She didn't learned the fear she should had, when everything seemed to consist on being properly scared. She didn't perceive the horror on other people's faces, only a pareidolia of fearlessness, the rise of an exhausted sun on the desert horizon right before the curtains were incapable of stopping the stab of light. She's the corollary of an oasis. She does not grumble, she simply follows the instructions of a fiction that seemed kind and adequate to her, although she always kept herself on the margins, on the unwritten banks of the rivers.

The surface of a planet that could get rid of anyone with a slight tremor has just begun to scratch, and the team already think about themselves as demons for having displaced a little carbon. Such is the case with every new arrangement—putting things here or there seems essential, like ants obsessing over a grain of sand. Stephen remembers hearing the chief say that freedom is holding the reins of self-destruction, and thinking that he was right. The team stop the van in front of a shopping mall looking like a place of worship and commotion, a temple for their depraved practices. Odd-Legs helps Stephen out. He's getting sicker, but they won't take the risk of going to a hospital. Contrary to what Blanchot wrote, they're pushed back by their determination to move on, simultaneously chased away and drawn, waves of electrons in a fermionic sea, like insects repelled by the perfumes of bystanders.

"Don't feel guilty, sweetheart", Lily whispers to Stephen, "we knew you were supposed to eat the guy."

"You all knew? You knew, and yet you left me alone with him?" Lily smiled as gently as she could, her mandibles marring the effect less than one would imagine.

"It was inevitable, more than that, it was preordained. That was why you were chosen."

Steven felt his intestinal tract convulse. Mandibles? No. Red, red lips. Lips like wine. That was what they said, the poets. He felt a pain which was more than physical, sweat broke out on his forehead, suddenly feverish, he felt drops of perspiration run down his cheeks, his nose, onto his lips, his chin.

Despite himself, his tongue darted out and intercepted a few drops.

It was sour, and yet so sweet.

He stared at his companions. "Meant to eat him you say?"

Krampus looked suddenly shifty, Odd Legs was busy tinkering with the doors of the van. Lily met his gaze, with eyes that were pools of deepest black, and nodded.

Somewhere, away in the darkness, there sounded a sudden cry, sharp and yet deep, the cry of a startled goose. Stephen watched in weary understanding as Lily's eyes flickered, deep and black, then multifaceted, compound, her face twitched, melted, swam.

Lips. Mandibles. Saw edged. Brutal.

Bubbles for eyes, holes into the blackness, the blackness which went on forever. The blackness which would swallow him and everything he knew, without thinking, without caring.

His right hand made an involuntary movement towards his throat, caught on something.

Something sharp edged. He looked down. Something shiny. His badge.

Protect and serve the Chief had said. A buried memory from his youth leapt up. Protect and survive. The sirens. Paint your windows white. Sandbags full of your parents flowerbeds. Prize blooms, loam, manure.

Protect and survive. Serve and protect. When you hear the four minute warning. An old punk song screamed in his brain "It's too fucking late!"

He swallowed, tasting the citrus flavour of his frantic sweat. "I was supposed to eat him?"

The Lily thing nodded, almost like a prayer. Praying. Preying.

"So it was oranges?"

"Arranged, yes."

"But the poor Chief, he had such a zest for life."

"Yes. But it is the way. It is the way. And the sacrifice is made."

Odd Legs turned away from what he was doing and stared at her. Krampus seemed to deflate.

Did in fact deflate, with a parping noise reminiscent of childhood birthday parties. His body wobbled and collapsed in upon itself and with a final ribald toot became nothing more than a scrap of coloured rubber.

Steeplton's right hand clutched his badge like a totem. His left felt in the pocket of his coat, fumbling, searching, until he grasped a small smooth object.

Pulling himself straight, he forced himself to look straight into Lily's face, and worse, into what it became when it was no longer a face. Strobelike, it was a face, albeit buglike, then a warm and human face, with dark and imploring eyes, then the cold mask of the insect, then a cartoonish, mad, villainish visage, then something else, all of the above, and less, and worse, much, much worse.

"Protect and survive. Serve and protect."

Steeplton's left hand flashed out, he felt the dry, yielding chitinous surface, felt the thin glass of the vial shatter, the acrid liquid spray out, stinging as it touched the fresh tiny cuts on his skin.

The Lily thing screeched and threw itself backwards, flashing between its forms, legs, arms, flailing, too many legs, too many arms, too many everything.

Grinning savagely, Odd Legs leapt to one side as the thing thrashed about, twisting and writhing like a moth in a flame. His hand darted to his shoulder holster and came out with a wicked looking thing that gleamed

dull orange in the faint street light.

One. Two. Three. Four times the weapon spat lurid flame before the Lily thing lay still on the ichor stained tarmac. Odd legs looked down at the sprawling wreckage of Lily the Midge, his flat features registering the minimum of surprise possible whilst still looking surprised. "So Ol' Lil was a bug huh? It's always the ones you least suspect. I should probably start suspecting the ones that I don't suspect, but old habits die hard. What was that you hit her with?"

"Super concentrated Citronella. It was something I was working on for my old job."

"Oh yeah, the Chief said you used to be a fighting magician or something before you joined the force.

Sounds like a pretty cool job. Like in a film."

Stephen started to correct him, but let the words trail away. What was the point?

"It was ok I guess. Lots of routine."

"Like being a cop then."

"This is routine?"

"Oh sure. Happens all the time. Bugs, Balloons, Sand Devils."

"Sand Devils?"

Odd Legs pointed down the street, to where a whirling yellowish cloud veered and pirouetted towards them.

"Best hop in the van till it passes, those beauties will abrade you down to a skeleton pretty quick. And there's some toffee in the glove box."

Steeplton did as he was advised, and the two of them watched the miniature tornado spin along the road towards them, a low spresh spresh spresh growing louder as it advanced. It enveloped the van like an overly keen carwash, seemed to dally for a few moments as if irritated that it was unable to abrade them down to skeletons, then rushed off all at once in a fit of pique.

Silence fell, broken only by the faint sound of Odd Legs chewing toffee.

He ate very quietly, for which Stephen felt irrationally grateful. With a final elegant swallow, he opened the door and jumped out. Walking round the van he whistled appreciatively. "That's saved us a job Poc, Ol' Sandy there's cleaned up Lily real swell. Say Poc, you're looking better, we'd better get back to the station and report to the Chief."

"The Chief? But..."

"Oh there's always a Chief Poc. Always. That's how the job works."

He delicately scratched his neck and peered into the darkness of the sky. The smears of cloud against the gloomy greenish blue gave it the appearance of a long uncleaned aquarium. "Gonna be a long night Poc. The enemy are advancing somewhere. Or retreating. Or staying where they are. Maybe all three. We're gonna need coffee. And we'd best pick up a few tins of sardines for the Chief."

He settled his cap more firmly on his head and cocked an ear as if hearing something on a frequency inaudible to Stephen, then slammed the back doors of the van. "Yeah. Gonna be a long ol' night."

Only a short time had passed before Stephen's legs began berating him with queries of when and where and why this particular how had become the way? Stephen himself, questioned why they were walking and hadn't

simply taken the van? He even remembered asking odd-legs at one point, "why?" And he had answered back something mumbled and half baked about the orange taking hold.

They walked in a strange and busy silence down the road now littered with small sand dunes and garbage blown around from the storm. The buildings beside them stood with imperious-cross-armed stances, shining what little office light they dared onto the darkening paths that wore beneath Stephen's feet. Odd-legs was prattling on about something while Stephen tried to half listen, getting wisps of recipes or vitamin lists that he couldn't quite put into an organized construct so he just paid attention to the horizon.

It was orange.

Or was that just the colour he demanded of the sunset's form?

Stephen blinked several times, trying to push a lemon seed from his eye while simultaneously attempting to press the orange from his view and it made for some awkward gaits beneath his knees. He tripped a few times, stumbled, wobbled, as if his legs were getting shorter or his body were getting rounder.

Odd-legs piped up at the two step waltz that Stephen was performing in the middle of the street but it fell on deaf ears. While trying to find a balance between walking and not walking Stephen forgot about his legs and began to wonder where the story had taken such a strange turn. When had it devolved into such chaos? Was it when he was first picked up in the cop car? Or had it been when he met the chief...? No, that wasn't it.

Again odd-legs perked up and mentioned again, about the orange taking hold.

"That's it!" marked Stephen. "That's exactly when things got weird."

"What?" asked odd-legs, "You mean just now?"

Along the horizon, the sun was no longer in view. Instead it rested its fiery wings somewhere around noon hour, high above the white kepi caps of the royal legion positioned at the exact centre of the desert. They were huddled around an unexploded shell sitting by the east end of their huge canvas command tent. The shell's propeller-like end poking up from the sand cast a shadow that looked like starburst. Stephen was not three inches from the firebomb with his spectacle out and focused on the inscription on its side when the camel walked up, groaning as it rolled its head in close to the focal point of the crowd, curious too of the ammo's intentions.

"Dammit horse, not now!" bellowed Casper, pushing the muzzle of the beast backwards to avoid any unnecessary damage.

"It's a camel." retorted Jonny.

Casper threw a shade at Jonny that covered all three men in a cold shower before Stephen broke the bickering.

"Could you two shut up?" he spoke while holding his spectacle in one shaky hand in front of the bomb. "I'm nervous as is. I don't need you two adding to the anxiety."

"Right. Sorry." said Casper to his feet before swinging out to hit Jonny in the back of his shoulder, who jumped and apologized too.

The men had spent the entire morning pacing around the unexploded shell, trying to estimate its arrival and origin while sweating tiny plastic beads from their pores. The sun barking at their necks was adding to their irritation and the constant interruptions of camels and sand thrown by windy hands was not assisting the matter further. That, and the terrible sleep they had in the night.

Stephen kept waking from strange dreams where he had been a cannibal, a jungle plant painted cannibal with teeth for eyes and eyes too big for his teeth. In the somnolent universe of the evening, he had chased beautiful, blonde haired American women in khaki shorts through snake riddled rivers and spider strangled trees. He had cut the flesh and sinews of fair skinned maidens and chewed their bones to dust. When he woke, screaming or sweating, he woke the other two and threw bone dust at their eyes, causing them to cry for his weeping state.

Casper and Jonny had come accustomed to the night terrors, they all had them here and there; it was a war outside. Or at least, it was supposed to be, no one had seen a bug for weeks but these night terrors, they had sunk deep. Dreams of eating another human while slowly going cabin crazy in a wide open sand dune, it struck a different rib and produced a different tone.

"What's the range of these mortars?" asked Jonny.

"One to two kilometres I believe." Said Casper.

Jonny studied the trajectory by the position of the dial face in the sand. "I'd guess it came from hard east," he turned around and pointed into a vast landscape of nothing and salt. "from that direction specifically."

One of the four camels grunted.

"What's it matter?" asked Stephen.

"Just trying to think ahead. Maybe we should talk about scouting out that way?" Said Jonny.

"Naw." Said Stephen. "Chief said to stay right here."

Stephen leaned further forward, trying to see the squiggles of the inscription as more than just little worms, his nose touched the metal and it smelled like lemon polish or ascorbic-acid and the letters that slowly formed looked a corroded green from the gunmetal of the shell.

"But if they get a foot closer, they'll be shelling the tent!"

"I doubt it was an intentional shot, there would be others if it was." Said Casper.

"Besides," continued Stephen. "Chief said to stay put and so we stay put." as the strong scent of tea in his words fell from his lips the first few words on the shell's side began to make sense. They read...

*when the orange*

Stephen's head was a tunnel of green vine that he travelled along until the bee plucked him and dropped the seed of his eye in another flower. Then he was pregnant and then blooming and then looking from the telescope into a hazy image of himself, in another place, in another body that was the same but different. There he ate an orange and it screamed as he removed the rind. It shook and trembled as his nails dug beneath the bed of white calcium and drug ruts along the fleshy fruit below. It filled Stephen with citron and sickness, a yellow fever that compacted and lifted his organs so far into his throat that he thought he might vomit pus and ivory bile.

He snapped his back to the desert, the heat on his neck made his skin into a sail of poltergeists and the wind dared to push him away.

"You okay?" asked Casper. "You look a little white Stephen."

Something acrid burned its way up Stephen's throat and he poured white onto the shell from his mouth. The water was fire and his stomach was so empty and his head so far away he almost fell over.

"Oh my god."

He heard someone say but it was so far in the past he couldn't make it out as more than just a story from Grimm.

Blurred vision had split the inscription in front of him in two distinct stories but the thing that came from his stomach, the sheet of phantasm, made the words stand out and as his vision turned black he caught the last two words.

*takes hold*

Gasping, Stephen struggled against the pulp in his throat. It was citrus in flavour but had the distinct shape of a noir film femme fatale. An antagonist. And a smoker.

"You alright Poc?" Odd-legs was looking at him, his eyes crescents of concern and Stephen thought he made out the soft shape of a kepi cap but it was just a halo.

Of light.

From the investigation lamps above.

"Are you or are you not?"

42mph = 67.5924kmh

Top speed of a camel.

Camel's odd & uncanny legs make it capable of 42mph in short bursts.

The vulva of a Volvo.

Odd-legs indeed.

Sexy legs.

Stephen repeats... data, information.

The interrogator has had enough. She is ready to waterboard Stephen. "Are you the saboteur codenamed Agent Orange?"

"Orange you kinda sexy," Stephen says with a gin-and-tonic grin.

Stephen knew that the Kraken would come after him. He had flown under the radar for far too long. All his life... he knew... he knew he was getting away with something. Never quite sure what. He was faking his existence. People would find out.

Stephen would be exposed. Stephen would be rearranged.

"Bring the orange crush!" Lily-D yells.

"No!" Stephen cries.

A bucket of orange crush is poured over Stephen's head. He cannot breathe. He cannot speak. He cannot think the thoughts he thought he could think. Stephen is a vegetable. A mineral. A fruit.

He inhales. Big mistake. Inhaling is a mistake. Simulated drowning becomes... beyond a simulation. Peace. Peace in death. Peace in life.

A piece of orange. What is language? Are you satisfied with your limit-experience?

Stephen's mind-machine spins & spins.

Wittgenstein says: If an orange could speak, we could not understand it.

Not true! Stephen understands everything. Every word the orange speaks. Every half-thought. Every gesture.

Investigation lamps. What are "investigation lamps"? The investigation lamps grow brighter & brighter. Like three suns in a triple-star system.

Imploding & exploding.

Breathe, Stephen. Speak the breath.

Stephen speaks "silently" to himself. Reflection. What a technology! Phonic signals. The alphabet.

What does Stephen say?

What can Stephen say?

[i]... [i]... I am a human being.

Are you sure?

What evidence?

May It Please the Court. My name is Stephen Steeplton. I apologize for the missing "e".

It was not my fault.

...The halo of light hummed and an extraordinary event happened as Stephen stared into the investigation lamps. A surge of energy blasted up his spinal cord and crested in his brain leading to a long series of ramblings and incoherent messages that were recorded in detail by those present. He recreated himself and the others out of the very words that got them there in the first place...

...automatic response of disinfectant, laughing. I see you all drowning between the step ladder and walls...Those are not even real camels are they? That taste in my mouth from before...was that from eating a camel or smoking a Camel? My head is injured (again?)...a blow of insane secondary thought, my friends from the edge of this coffee bucket. Everything is clean and ready for use if you would be so kind as to let

me express myself in the easiest possible way. Eating fucking oranges...citrus fruit is dangerous, don't you think? I demand answers...

Someone shouted: You are not in condition to demand anything, Stephen!

The rambling continued, as Stephen didn't seem to acknowledge anything from his sudden dissociative state...

...the system is wiped, tables and files destroyed in the process. Snorting noise off the table, hahahahaha!

We're all stuck here...INSIDE the orange.

As suddenly as Stephen had entered the strange headspace that turned him into an incoherent mess, he blacked out on the floor.