

Fire Horses

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Legend  Press
Independent Book Publisher

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'The past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes.'
Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

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*'Your heart beats you
Late at night'*
New Order, *Procession*

Procession

Words & Music by Stephen Paul David Morris, Peter Hook,
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2007

Does this twelfth Spanish bell toll for me?

As I crush a final grape under my tongue, the catholic chimes end their metronomic march and segue into freeform; firecrackers zip and dart between the feet of dancing celebrants like electric snakes. The ancient walls surrounding the village square absorb the cheers of gaudy revellers like bread dipped in wine, centuries of raucous gaiety soaked into stone.

Cool salt air from the Med throws clouds of fiery sparks like starlight condensed over the bubbling mass below me. Galaxies, compacted into one glorious instant, blistering out backwards to ashes, blackness, the promise of regeneration.

Dense thuds hammer my diaphragm and as my wife takes my hand to lead me down the steps I remember other celebrations in other, colder, distant places. My watch says it's a minute after twelve and I feel like I'm surfing on the crest of time. I made it.

As I chew on the empty grape sac a young woman appears through the jostling, jabbering crowd: late-teens, North European, wearing a mustard safari suit. For some reason this excites me, energizes my imagination. This stranger from Northern climes latches onto my mulberry eyes as though she can smell something in me that I'm trying to suppress: *fee-fi-fo-fum*. Shoving past Alona as if she doesn't exist, she pushes a flyer at me. One of my hands holds Alona's sweaty palm,

the other the bottle. Releasing Alona I frown at the stranger, only half-seeing her face, illuminated by explosions and youth. I address her in English.

“What’s this?”

But the crowd has already swallowed her whole, so looking for clues I glance down at the garishly-coloured piece of paper. It’s illustrated by a rudimentary cartoon depicting a scowling John-bulldog licking something astringent from a leaf, a dock leaf, or maybe a nettle:

Bulldog Billys English beer
English food Spanish weather!!

Now I recognise the address, one of the alleyways connecting the square and the harbour, next to that Andalucian deli that sells port and spiced *chorizo*. Wiping sweat from my skinbare scalp I mentally vow that I’ll never visit Billy Bulldog. I don’t need to be near strangers like me, like the person I used to be.

People embrace like old foes. Alona laughs up into my face, teeth white. I lower my head and she shouts in my ear, warm breath and *Cava*-spittle, “You look so serious... are you happy?”

“Only when you touch me,” I scream at her in Spanish. Screwing up the flyer I drop it into the sparky gutter and reach for her hand again, wet with cider, cold with love. Her eye-light is miraculous, skin effulgent. Above her orange hair *ano nuevo* fireworks spark and glow, their embers falling in the square and onto the dark water beyond the new houses where my boat rises and falls with the tide. The shallow breathing of the dying Med.

There are cracks in the night’s shell and through the cracks someone is detonating mini-explosions. I wonder if the shapes of the stars are crawling across my face like luminous

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spiders, exploding and cascading in my watery eyes.

Fireworks expose the Spain of my lazier dreams – bulls' eyes flash red, bullet holes from antediluvian disputes thrown against the walls like ink spots. The empty nests of storks flare out from the tall steeples like shards, and all the people seem momentarily to shine: faces look up, awestruck, expressions frozen like dull-coloured masks or plasticine figurines.

Brassy Latin songs crank from loudspeakers and drown out the explosions, which also light up billboards advertising mobiles, cigarettes and gleaming motors. For a moment I'm fenced, surrounded by a cordon of enormous bared teeth.

Unwillingly, automatically, I frame pictures, landscapes; over by the internet café a black horse escaped from a bank advert whinnies and rears in fright, golden light shining off its back so that it seems to burn a space through the fabric of night. The little peasant or IT consultant holding it on a rope laughs drunkenly at the fact it could carry him away in its equine frenzy.

I shiver. The safari-suited woman reminds me of someone I'm trying to forget. Spitting sour grape skin into the gutter I watch it vanish beneath dancing feet. The finale booms lower and closer, and I have a sudden vision: that the fireworks are endowed with a high tonnage of explosive, raining devastation and transforming all these happy families into a bloody mess of hell and brimstone.

Strange how I shiver. There's an unseasonable warmth on the new January air, and I try to remember how England felt at midnight in a short-sleeved shirt, try to recall the smells of London and hold them up against these smells of seafish and scales skimmed from bone, tastes of wine and lemon, this romantic sense of unity and belonging that for all I know no-one else can feel.

As I suck harsh port from the gravel bottle and hold Alona

close, I resolve never to return to England; I don't need its complexities, its repressive natures and self-obsessions. Nor does it apparently need me. It has enough troubles, and at least from here I can't add to them.

Alona at my side, I shake hands and swap ravishing kisses with neighbours we have never met. My alien tongue swaps pleasantries; I've made it a point to learn as little of the lingo as is practical, but somehow it keeps seeping into my vocabulary, like the sly nudge of absinthe.

All the happy families, the old and the young. This is why I rarely venture out after midnight in Spain: children. I don't allow myself to get too close. Six-year-olds order drinks in bars and wear adult clothes; they don't fight or get drunk but otherwise they're like stately midgets prancing on the *paseo*... maybe I should get out more. Or maybe not.

Alona knows my discomfort; she finally succumbs and we're just leaving the diluting bustle when a feeling of dread forces me to turn and glimpse a shadow of the past, trapped at the corner of my eye; some dark ghost, some spectral vision cooked up by a guilty consciousness and booze.

Nada.

In the six years I've been living in Spain, I've discovered three ways from the town to the cave: the long, winding drive that coils round the hill in gentle hoops; a tortuous climb up carved steps between monumental rocks; and the shore path, which passes beneath the overhanging cliffs and up by the cut. Too kaylied to drive, too tired to climb, I lead asthmatic, wheezy Alona along the winding path. She wobbles in her heels and clasps her handbag to her like a fresh heart. I still hold the bottle.

The lights end with the *paseo*, and after that you need a torch or memory. Where the path turns up inside the mountain I look back. From here infantilised rockets are lost against the

dark mass of the hulking mountains like moths attacking battleships.

“I thought, for your birthday, we could do something different,” pants Alona as she climbs behind. Alona: Spanish for *light*. I’m walking and drinking and don’t feel compelled to answer. “There’s a new bar near the water,” persists Alona. “It opens *manana*. No – today, later. There is a big party there Saturday, I know. Let’s do something different for once.”

I swallow port; way beneath us the Med sizzles softly, foiled.

“Let’s not.”

“It would be good,” replies Alona, patient as gods, ignoring my stubbornness. “You might make some contacts.”

“*Why* might I?”

“English. Money. They have all the money now.”

A bulldog. A nettle. I stop. Alona shoves past me. Hates coming second.

“Alona, this wouldn’t be ‘Bulldog Billys’ by any chance?”

“You know it?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Then you’ll go?”

“No.” I smile, surprised she should ask. I don’t need contacts now. Midnight has come and gone without a final appeal. The money’s mine. To celebrate this and to see out the season I’ve made my own plans: a night at the *Laguna* watching Saggy Maggie and her disappearing Christmas tree.

Alona tuts and stutters ahead up the rough track, muttering breathless curses in Catalan. Dawdling, I watch her disappear. After a few minutes a rectangular hole opens up in the fabric of the mountain; light pours out as if from some orderly volcano, then a plug falls across the entrance as she closes the door. By the time I get home she’ll have gone pointedly to bed and I’ll make sure the chickens are fed, the house secure against intruders. But there’s no hurry now, no love to catch

up on, so at the top of the steps I sit on a flat rock and listen to the ocean as I drain the remainder of the bottle of port.

Maybe it's time to tell her about the money winging its way from London, our changing fortunes. But maybe I want to surprise her, or maybe I feel insecure, or maybe I just don't want to give her any; does she need it?

What really hurts is her latest complaint, implied in her mention of contacts, that we have nothing, instead of this home in the hills, two cars and a boat. What else does she need? When we met she told me she hated money, that her family skinned the rich. I grow my own vegetables and catch my own fish, but now she wants more? When was *that* contract rewritten, or did I miss a clause?

Still the placid air feels warm, the spare countryside brittle and dry. No rain for weeks; cloudless skies punctured by ancient lights from beyond history, sparks of extinction. I read somewhere that the universe is expanding unsustainably, all the empty galaxies rushing away from each other at vastly accelerating rates, so that in ten billion years' time when all the suns have died all that remains there will be an endless waste of cold, blank nothingness. I find this information disappointing.

Almost as disappointing as Billys Bar, its apostrophe left behind with the old certainties at Gatwick or Prestwick. I find myself cursing my home nation, but you don't reach 39 without spotting some patterns. It's the same trap as always: this need, this requirement, to be outside, *beyond*. That way you can't take the blame, assume guilt by association. Why shouldn't I drink in a bar for expats? What am I then, some banished conquistador?

Hardly. If you were flying overhead, an omniscient eagle with X-ray eyes, what would you see perched upon this harsh precipice? A tall, lank man approaching middle age, dressed casually and with a stance that's anything but.

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My bony, puzzled, clean-shaven face too-easily adopts a scornful, aloof expression; a minor scar lifts the left of my mouth slightly, adding to this apparent air of believed superiority. But I've always been shy in company, allergic to crowds – self-contained, solid within myself.

Though of course, being an eagle, the thing you would notice is my bald head: tanned, smooth, no telltale speckles, another tiny scar above the place where my fringe used to be. It's rare that I remember what others notice right away, though sometimes I curse the way sweat gets into my eyes.

Noises behind me on the path. I shiver in my thin shirt, conjuring *Baba-Yaga*. Finishing the bottle I stand, resolving to go to the bar the next morning. Not because the Northern girl reminds me of the one that I lost, but... just because. Alona doesn't need to know. She knows too much already; about life and its calamities, its surging undercurrents and mega-tsunamis, if not about mine.

As I approach the gate, subdued, subsumed by artifices, something echoes out of the frozen past and hits me on the back of the head. I wince and stagger, certain for a moment (and unsurprised) that I've been shot. But when I carefully place the bottle on the gatepost and hold a hand to my bare skull, it feels cold, not with blood but with frozen water. Looking down I see the inexplicable evidence glowing on the path – I've been hit by a snowball.

Disbelieving, I kneel and pinch cold ice between shaking fingers. Then I squint round at the empty hillside. Even *Baba-Yaga* doesn't throw snowballs, and I doubt the locals have the technique acquired in Northern climes. So either Tony's dead, and Hell's icebox needs chiselling, or he's alive and in Spain. Either way, everything has changed. Maybe that's a good thing. I've been coasting on the coast for too long, resting on hardy laurels. I clear my throat and yell.

“Is that you? Tony?”

Tawny, like an owl, that's how it comes out; my accent flies home to roost. Some bird flutters but there's no answer, not even an echo, and I feel solitary embarrassment, a touch of fear. Certain that Tony's watching I close the gate and walk through the dusty yard.

The door to the mouth of the cave has been petulantly locked; maybe I should have gone for the boulder after all, but some miracles are beyond even me.

Sighing irritably, I turn to look at the first light of dawn seeping in over the water. It would be good to sit drinking 2007 *Cava* and watch the new sun light up the mountains, but Alona is waiting to make up. I bang on the door with my elbow and after a respectable interval Alona's heels approach. It opens on her arrogant, proud face. I follow her arse indoors, the melting snowball still in my hand.

Tony can wait outside. With all the other ghosts.

PART I: FROM ANARCHY TO ECSTASY

1982

The moment I threw the snowball I knew I'd made a terrible mistake but it had left my hand by then, and no rewind or pause would ever be possible. In the fraction of time before impact, Tony, my implacable foe, was standing with his mates in the dirty evening snow. The glint from his glasses and that ridiculous moustache made him look older and more solid than those other flickering ghostly faces. He was laughing, part of the gang, whereas I was the outsider, up on the buttress, watching the cluster of punks, like a company of bedraggled parrots, waiting for their bus back to town. All except Tony, in his shiny new leather jacket and immaculately lined-up studs, band names stencilled with surgeons' precision and an *Exploited* t-shirt ironed by his mum.

Despite my schoolboy error I wished I'd remembered the new camera to capture Tony, laughing, the mucky snowball hovering above, describing a perfect arc; to freeze that frozen moment and all that had come before it, the hurts, the sleights, Tony and Julie laughing as they read a book about a bird, my father's proud expression as he handed me the parcel, everything motionless in this, the coldest moment in the coldest night in history, still illuminated in my brain 25 years later like an image exposed by lightning.

From this great distance I sometimes fancy that as that ball

of ice hung there over Millmoor, I also glimpsed lightning flashes of the future: of Becky's tears and Sarah's giggles, the moons of Australia and the smells of India; and perhaps the magic snowball even covered the sun's eyes as Hermione kissed me on a Cornish beach. Other flashes too, other glimpses, which I will perhaps only fully decipher when my life follows the snowball's trajectory and becomes a cold white point.

According to Zeno of Elea, the snowball could never reach its target because it needed to halve the distance from me to Tony and then halve it again, *ad infinitum*. But, not understanding physics, the snowball began its descent, my camera-less hands already in pockets, teeth chattering, the night black and white, the street lights orange. Tony was still laughing, pretending to shove another plastic punk beneath the wheels of an old green bus that sprayed the queue, making them spin and turn their backs. All except Tony, whose reactions were slow and who took the full force of the gravity-snared snowball right in the mush.

Tony dropped to his knees, face in hands, and his little gang of townies spread out like cowboys under attack as they looked in every direction but up. I stared down, swallowing unease, unable to see Julie anywhere in this tragic tableaux I had painted. I then ducked back out of sight and ran.

That morning I had finally accepted Mum's card wasn't coming. I couldn't blame the postman, whose delays had made my present a week late; nor could I blame the weather, the fierce ice-storm from Siberia, causing birds to freeze mid-flight and icicles so thick in tunnels that the trains to places where weather doesn't kill were stopped.

There had been no school since New Year; the boilers and caretaker had broken down, perhaps forever. Usually I spent days like these on the rampage, setting traps and catching out

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the unwary, the ungripped, the uninsulated, but Dad's giro still hadn't arrived and he'd gone to find it. He looked forward to giro day like dogs look forward to walkies.

Terrified the governmental cheque might arrive in his absence to find nobody home he'd instructed me to kick my heels and wait. So I'd spent the day looking through the dirty ice window, watching evil mists conceal faraway fields where horses stood rooted to the spot like cardboard cut-outs, the drift of pylons linking arms, electricity between them. I dreamed once that they'd dammed the valley, and as I skated across the thin ice to the hillside opposite, where Julie waited, I looked down through the ice and townfolk tapped urgently on the glass.

The hill rose sharply behind Stone Nest's two tower blocks, Hughes Court and Plath Court, circling each other warily. Even from the 20th floor, rockface loomed above you. The other houses clustered around like disciples with their tin roofs and cement walls, in lines of four with their tiny gardens, the alley in the middle so you could still reach the outhouse.

Before they gave us toilets you would sit there at night and listen to strange rustlings, feel spiders crawl beneath your arse, as you sat helplessly with your trousers round your ankles and goosebumps drifting and stretching across your skin like the sleepy drift of clouds.

In the bathroom mirror I pushed my floppy green fringe up to inspect Stig's tattoo. I'd asked him to write 'NO FUTURE' but unable to spell either word he'd settled for initials. I had a feeling this might cause problems at some point. Thank God for hair. At fifteen I had a bony, sharp face, glaring eyes and skin as white as a goth. My punky mop gave me colour, character, and cover.

There was a tender knock on the door so I let the fringe fall, bounced down the stairs and flung it open on a vision of

loveliness in a bright pink anorak; tall, gangly, huge bush of ginger, top teeth protruding, cheeks already pinking: Julie Coxon.

Though I'd known Julie since playschool, it was only when we'd discovered new feelings about ourselves rather than each other that we'd been out a couple of times. There were the usual adolescent fumbings: bus shelters and chips, fingers in dark places. The night of my birthday we'd been to see *Chariots of Fire*. When we left the cinema the whole town was buried white, and we had chased each other through the empty streets and tumbled in the snow.

I believed that I loved Julie and she had seemed keen on me, but after the pictures she didn't ring. I blamed Colin Welland more than the fact we didn't have a phone. Having assumed our brief affair was at an end, on opening the door I was surprised. Thinking back now, so was Julie. Her purple lips actually fell open; her Caspian green eyes searched the empty hall.

"Hi Joe, er – is your Dad in?"

"No!" I cried happily, "come in!"

Grabbing her by the arm, I pulled her inside like a trapdoor spider. Julie seemed a little confused; maybe *she* wasn't sure why she was there, either. I led her into the front room and she dropped her school bag with its equine *leitmotif*, and unzipped her coat. The world went very quiet as I watched her reveal her layers to the hiss of the gas.

First, her shoes, black and buckled. Dirty white socks over leopard-skin legwarmers. The crumpled grey pleats of her skirt. Her blouse had outgrown her navy jumper, and her collars stuck up like a pterodactyl's wings. Her school tie was loose at her throat, then dangled over the shelf of her already tremendous breasts. A deep-ginger Hair-Bear frizz almost covered her puffy red/green eyes – her goth mascara and sulking cheeks. Something wasn't quite right; it then

struck me.

“What you doing in your uniform? Didn’t you know school’s still cancelled?”

“Yes, I – Mum would’ve killed me, you know what she’s like – so I just pretend to go to school, keeps her happy... so, where’s your Dad?”

“He had to go and find his giro. How did you know I was home alone?”

Julie shrugged; looking back, I think I can safely insert the word ‘miserably’.

“Oh, just a feeling...”

Swiping a lemonade bottle of Dad’s yellow homebrew from the fridge, I led Julie upstairs to my room, my forehead smarting from the tattoo. She sat on the bed looking nervous. I found a tape: the soothing melodies of GBH, Abrasive Wheels and Discharge. We swigged yeasty beer then Julie burped and looked at me.

“Have you got anything?”

I hadn’t. The assistant in the chemist was female and I hadn’t yet found the courage to go in, but Julie seemed in a hurry to lead me from the land of virgin snow to a warm new continent. A brainwave washed me back down to the kitchen where I found a pack of Monster Munch left over from Christmas. Wolfing munchies as I went up the stairs I waved the empty packet at Julie, who pulled off her tights and lay down.

That was my first time; my major memories are the hardcore soundtrack, and Julie tasting of yeast, and the fact the packet stung a tad. But she was wet and warm and it seemed an interesting place to be. Julie squeaked, the packet crinkled and I winced.

We arranged that I would pick her up that night and take her to the gig, and then Julie left, quiet, subdued, sliding down the hill on underheeled shoes. From the front porch I

quarried my nose and watched her, still mystified, but less so than before.

Dusk clamped down around three; short days in those Yorkshire winters. The window was a black patch framed by unlucky decorations, but if you looked closely you could see that orange lights and stars made vortexes of shapes spiralling in the ether. An Ozzy Osborne poster looked down from over the mantelpiece. Dad worshipped Ozzy and over the festive period had bet a rash tenner on his untimely demise so we could mourn him in style.

A bike unrevved, a Yale scratched and the front door opened on my prodigious father, full of Landlords' Bitter, a grit-toothed smile from within his vast beard – a NUPE pirate. From his tatty leathers Dad pulled a hard parcel wrapped in *The Sun*. A page 3 girl wrapped around my present, nipples at right-angles to one another like a pixelated Picasso.

“Happy birthday lad. Sorry it’s a bit late – had to get me giro over the counter in town. Anyway, hope you like it.”

Smiling doubtfully I looked at the parcel, adorned with Dad’s neat handwriting. Pulling inky breasts apart I looked down at a Polaroid camera still in its box. I swallowed, disbelieving, and looked at my father with embarrassment. He shrugged.

“I knew you always liked pictures. Who’s that bloke in the *Mirror*?”

“Murdo McLeod. Thanks, Dad. Can I take one of you?”

He shrugged again. As I hid behind the lens (feeling safe, in charge, invisible) his frost-and-beer-flecked beard flushed pink. The glossy film rolled out and we waited. I half-hoped Dad would offer to take one of me but instead he pulled off his leathers and sat by the gas fire with his rolling board, the scarred album cover of some Seventies’ concept band that still pops into my head when I smoke dope. I’ve never

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smoked much.

As a belated birthday tea, Dad stuck a candle in a Fray Bentos and we watched the news. An aeroplane had smashed into a bridge in Washington; foul play was suspected, which seemed implausible. The weather was to get even colder and Mark Thatcher was lost in the desert. I was jealous – I'd never been on holiday, never been on a plane and the warmest place I'd ever been before Julie was Skeggy. I looked up at the mantelpiece: one card. Wise Dad with his beard read my mind.

“I was reading about this experiment in a magazine the other day,” he said, through the clouds of his creation. Dad subscribed to Yank mags as well as wank mags, yet knew little about physics or biology.

“They got these chimpanzee mums and their babies and put them in a metal oven, then turned up the heat. As it got hotter the mother tried to protect her baby, holding it away from the floor. But the temperature kept on rising, scorching her feet. In the end, do you know what she did? She put the baby on the glowing metal plate and stood on it. Every time they did this experiment, the same result. That's what happens, Joe. You think they're always going to be around, but it's all just circumstances. Once things get a bit too hot, or something better flashes its feathers, they're off. She's probably at Greenham Common with all them dykes and lesbos. So there you are, son – it's just you and me now. Smoke?”

To compensate for Mum's mysterious absence, Dad considered it his duty to let me down lightly, to ensure none of life's little surprises came as such, that my hopes would never aim too high and my dreams remained realistic. Maybe that's why I was so surprised then when he gave me some money that night to go to the gig. I was glad to go, despite the cold: Julie waited. As he pressed the fiver into my palm, he looked at me meaningfully.

“Don’t come home before eleven.”

“Thanks Dad!”

Grabbing my coat I ran to the door, already braced for its opening.

“And son, a word of advice.” I looked back expectantly. “Never eat yellow snow.”

It was the only advice he ever gave me. Even with two jumpers and my Dad’s leathers, the wiry wind sanded my cheeks. There was a working phone booth at the corner where the road turned down into town, so I went in and dialled Julie’s number and listened for the pips.

“Hello?” Her mother’s gruff voice responded; I pushed the five into the slot.

“Hello Mrs Coxon, is your Julie in?”

“Out.”

“Oh. Right. Any idea where?”

“Some prat from her school, she says.”

My blood, already cold, started to ice.

“Tony Clegg?”

“That’s him. Now fuck off – I’m watching *Bergerac*.”

The phone went dead. Mad as a box of frogs. But even so, there was little doubt that Julie was out with the new boy – after all I had seen them together, reading that book. Why else would she be out in this weather? All I had to do now was work out what to do about it.

Skidding down the one-in-three road to town, I contemplated revenge in all its forms and shades: hot, cold, sweet, mean, funny and fatal. One of Tony’s strong points was cross-country running, in which we ran through subzero sludge while the teachers drank vodka-laced soup. The route traversed farmyards, where we hurdled over rabid sheep, apoplectic farmers waving sawn-offs. Was there some way I could sabotage a stile so when Clegg hurdled it the stile collapsed, and he fell in the slurry, some of it even getting it in

his mouth?

Impractical: the slurry had frozen and I didn't have a saw.

If I waited till spring there was Sports Day. Clegg was pretty handy at the 100 metres, too. Perhaps there was some way in which I could sabotage his shorts so, as he ran in front of a packed school, they fell to his knees and he'd have a maggot no bird would want, no matter how it wriggled?

But what if he didn't have a maggot? The sneaky side views I'd studiously avoided in the showers suggested a rather alarming girth. Worse, he had hair, whereas I remained resolutely bald down below, despite the mop on my bonce. The girls would love him even more, and chase him *Benny Hill*-style over the horizon.

In the event I settled on something more practical, yet effective.

The cuckoo steps led between two rough walls of drystone, crisp grasses shooting from cracks, sprinkled with hard frost and new snow. Beyond the wall to my right a sheer drop to the town, terraced streets, Lowry-sketched chimneys that never bled smoke, hardware shops and desperate pubs that refused to install Space Invaders because they might frighten the dogs.

The wall to my left rose sheer, holding back the Pennines – halfway up, on a shoulder, Stone Nest. This was my moorland perch, blasted by three seasons. Spring rains scooped from the Irish Sea, carrying radioactive infections; autumn winds from Saddleworth Moor, bearing the neutrons of murdered children; and from Siberia winter blizzards, honking geese and misery. Ducking through a hole in the wall, I slipped down onto the cobbled lane that led to the canal.

It's for the benefit of our sanity that there is such a thing as selective memory; for if we remembered each divided moment our brains would boil over and our hard-drives crash. So as I skid onto the canal path, panting, cold, I don't see the

well-kept lock, the pretty barges, the sheep dog's wagging tail; I have too many other worries to take in the goodness that modestly stands back from my fields of perception.

Why would a young boy notice tended gardens, civic pride? I'm angry, dislike school, cold, and feel my first budding love is under threat. I am not to know that the tears it will end in will enrich my understanding.

The path led me away from the silence and the shadows, the crystalline drips and drops, the sulphurous shadows of spirits on the glass canal. The Ripper stalked towns like these with his claw hammer, his furies busting through fog so thick you could trampoline between villages. From what I'd seen on the blue-grey flicker of the fizzing TV, the Ripper looked like everyone in town, especially the men; what if they'd got the wrong hairy-arsed nut-job?

Monsters are soon replaced; we need them so. Dad had plucked from the skip one of Mum's books about Russian myths, the most terrifying of which was *Baba-Yaga*: an ancient crone in a hut that moved on four chicken legs, screeching as she pursued her prey through the woods. If *Baba-Yaga* was crashing towards me, I'd lead where she couldn't follow.

Tentative, heart racing, I stepped from the dusted path onto ice that had clogged up the canal for weeks, cracking the pretty barges and starving the fish, making life harder for ducks and impossible for fishermen, but easy for light-stepping boys. Skating in brogues on the thin silver sliver between those satanic hills and haunted woods, those sad neglected towns linked by a road, a railway and the slash of ice chipped from its heart, as if the earth's core had frozen under and glaciers seeped through like arctic lava.

In the distance I heard a dog's muffled bark; snowflakes wrapped around branches, thick as potato skins, filling the earth with silence. The valley projected an air of tranquillity,

Fire Horses

of smugness, but this appearance was false. Beneath covered roofs lay blanketed feeling, emotions smouldered as red as dwindling embers.

The houses were built for it; at least the town houses were, the terraces, their slight-angled roofs retaining insulation. The new houses up top were different, tin roofs at steep angles so snow slipped off when weighty, that familiar thump as it crumped in the garden, making creatures of strange shapes that blocked the view south.

As I stooped to gather snow from a frozen wave, the only sound was the rub of my hood on my ears. My inner core felt colder than the snow I gathered in numbing fingers; my heart felt encased in a glove of ice. Gloves served no purpose, I had long since learned – when making snowballs they became wet, burning separated fingers. Digits need each other's warmth inside coat pockets.

My aching fingers moulded the snow, exerting pressure until it became quite round. If you kept on rolling, and the snow drained all your body warmth, would it become a perfect crystal ball? Perhaps I could see my future. I held it up to the orange streetlight, but could see nothing, so I kept on rolling until I held a smooth, transparent diamond.

Perhaps people are made this way too. Maybe constant cajoling pressures from unwanted fingers can turn even a child, soft and warm and pure, into something hard and cold; so hard it hurts.

Furious, impotent, unable to express, I threw the snowball and watched it explode into a tree like a falling star. Then I stepped from the ice, thinking about monsters that lurked beneath Europa's sixty-mile oceans, half-hoping the ice would break and I would be submerged, a tragic teen sealed in amber. But it didn't happen, so I climbed the buttress, the resurrected snowball hurting my fingers like a hot comet, and waited.