



nya Ettershank

*Stepping Off*

*the Flyover*

Montez Press

Writers Residency

Curt, a tall and scrawny man, stood outside the prison, carrying a bin bag in one hand, watching the flags flapping behind him. Finally behind him, not through the narrow frame of his small window. Curt was through the gate, from which freedom had teased him for so long. He was free. Free to walk down this street. The cold wind nipped at his ears and he imagined growing out his hair so long that it would also blow around in the wind, pushing it out of his eyes and another person pushing it out of his face for him. He imagined that person being Donna, but after all this time he thought how any woman would do, craving soft skin against his own dry, mottled scales.

Everything was deafening. The bin bag full of clothes and letters rustled so loudly in his cold hands, like sheets of metal. Curt worried that he might wake the prisoners over the wall, mocking them with his sudden freedom. Although it wasn't sudden, not how he'd hoped it would be, how he'd built it up in his head – playing out his freedom day in his cold cell day after day, the way a girl is meant to imagine her wedding day. Confetti and music and jubilation. Instead, they'd just read his name out from a slip of paper and deposited him at the gate in an industrial estate far from home, handing him £50 and a train ticket back to Wallasey.

Cars and lorries whizzed past quickly, making him think of spaceships. Curt was surprised at how fast and alive the world was, and felt a strange fear. A group of cyclists whirred past too, their calf muscles so strong they reminded him of a waterfall.

Curt froze, wonderstruck. The expanse of the estate and the sky was daunting. It felt fake, as if it could all swoop down and fall on him like a sheet, or a stage play. He'd suddenly lost all words to truly explain the things in front of

him, everything was *like* something else, like it wasn't happening to him. Though maybe he'd always been outside of his life like this, like he was watching a dreary mockumentary. Curt didn't have his bearings, he just knew that this was a street within an industrial estate with construction workers, and sometimes he could hear a church on Sundays and people out clubbing on the weekends. He knew that this was Manchester, but he wasn't really sure what part. Was it wise to get a taxi, with £50 being everything to his name, or would it be a simple walk? The thought of getting a cab made him anxious, being in such close proximity to a stranger when he'd lost all his words. He didn't want to speak, everything around him was so bright and dazzling and distracting that he felt that no words could match or describe the world around him. He brushed his tongue across his teeth and licked his lips, trying to make sense of how his mouth could utter new words. He concluded that it made the most sense to walk, to take in the world around him, and to stretch out his taut legs.

For the last and final time, Curt stopped and looked back at the prison. His head felt dizzy and his stomach panged as he considered running back inside in overwhelmed desperation. He thought about his fellow inmates, Tommy and Idris, and even felt a twinge of endearment to some of the screws. All of them were so familiar, he could even tell their footsteps apart. And Curt nearly wept, wanting to run back and grab their legs as they walked along the cold linoleum floor, holding them like a child, shouting "Don't make me leave!" His stomach churned, propelling him down the street towards the metal cranes and the sounds of the city.

A burnt-out car was parked up by a garage, next to an old Ford pickup truck that looked like it was having work

done. His sentence conditions meant that there was nothing to prevent Curt getting back behind the steering wheel, placing his veiny arm on the clutch and letting the engine roll. He mimed the action with his hand, writing it out in pink smoke to test the muscle memory. All he could trust for now was his legs: he let them take the lead, towards the high-rise towers being assembled. Ahead of him India was staggering like a foal, zig-zagging along the pavement. A sense of relief filled him: he wasn't the only one struggling to navigate the terrain. He looked behind, trying to assess where she'd come from. He wanted to know where the club was. There'd been some nights where the music would reach the prison, and all he could feel was contempt and boredom at the looping four-to-the-floor rhythms. He wondered where the euphoria was, the acid bassline and drops, and grew jealous of their wasted freedom. Then he looked back at her again and watched her. He felt a rush of excitement at her vulnerability, at the softness of her legs and the curves of her body. He felt flustered, and contemplated following. He took a few steps in her direction, honing in on her like prey, possessed by want and desire for a body that he did not know. As he followed her he wondered how he could begin to approach her, he didn't want to startle her. He wondered whether she was an escort; lads on the inside had bragged and gossiped about the women that worked outside the prison, especially alongside Counterfeit Street. Curt felt uncomfortable, he thought he had standards. But his want rose within him as he continued to track the woman's moments. He felt anchored by the woman, safe in having a guide through unfamiliar streets. He watched her again, and imagined walking arm in arm with her. He

could just ask her for directions, he reasoned, and strike up a conversation from there. Just as he'd made his decision to cross over, the woman hopped onto a speeding bus. Pity and anger overtook Curt as the bus blurred out of view, kicking the ground, feeling like a sailor lost at sea.

After thirty minutes of walking Curt needed some respite, exhausted by the adrenaline pumping through him. The city was closing in on him, its smells and sounds assaulting his senses. Shop and car alarms bleeped, people shouted down the phone, cyclists screeched, cars honked and the smell of rotting vegetables from the market wafted in the air, mixing with petrol fumes. Throngs of people scattered in unpredictable directions, and motorbikes ripped past so quickly that he struggled to cross the road, constantly hesitating and colliding into fellow pedestrians.

He felt raw like a baby, and angry like a baby, that the world had raced ahead without him. Heat flushed his cheeks, his blood full of want. He wanted to tell everyone that he was free, wanted them to pay attention, to buy him a round – and then he'd get the next – to go dancing, to make today a national holiday. But everyone raced ahead, leaving a puff of smoke behind.

After imagining a traditional fry-up for sixteen months he spotted the cafe. It was nondescript and quiet, which is why he decided to go in. Mid-century fans were attached to the ceiling and the seats were divided by dark wooden art deco booths. Curt slid into the booth quietly, letting the fake green leather stick to him, and sighed. It was beautiful, more beautiful than he'd ever remembered a cafe being. The walnut wood shone, as if it were polished everyday, and pictures hung on the wall of the happy family who had run the cafe over generations.

When an old Italian waitress took his order he wanted to tell her to make him the best meal she could muster, to cook the chips in beef dripping and to let all the pots overflow. In fact, he wanted to barge right into the kitchen, to push her aside and take over himself. To let the fat spit on his face, and to stir so fast that his biceps bulged. Instead he ordered a ‘Number 1’ – an English breakfast – and asked if he could swap the tea out for a full glass of milk. The woman frowned in confusion: “A glass of milk?” He admired the shrillness of her voice and the thickness of her lips, which formed an ‘O’ shape as she said “milk,” and then released, as if she were blowing him a kiss with the question mark.

“Sure, but that’s an extra 30p.”

Cab drivers shuffled along in the booths around him and music from a girl band played on the radio. They sounded like an 80s post-punk group with twinkly guitars, a slapping bass and deep sweet old-fashioned English accents that reminded him of blowing on a coin. The cutlery in the kitchen out back jangled as the old waitress called order numbers to the chefs. One cab driver ate his meal in moments, with one large inhale, and tossed the coins on the table without saying a word or looking behind him. Curt wanted to stop the man as he pushed open the door, bell pinging, and demand that he show more respect and gratitude for his meal. But the man had dashed away in a blink, and then Curt’s own food was suddenly on his table.

The beans glowed a neon orange, and the meat glistened like a wink. It was glorious: the bread had real butter and real milk that wasn’t previously powdered, and the bacon was thick. He cut at the bacon slowly, slicing off the chunks of white fat around its trimming, cutting them into cubes to

save for the end. The weakness of his body was suddenly apparent: his fingers looked hollow as they gripped the cutlery, and his feet tapped against the linoleum too gently. Feeling ashamed of his body, he wondered whether his status as an ex-con was obvious, and watched the looks of passersby to determine their judgement of him, whether they'd designated him as junk. But everyone walked along the street with blank faces against the winter wind.

The effects of being stuck inside a cell for hours, sometimes for 23 hours a day, were becoming apparent. Thirty minutes of walking was difficult. Curt's spine ached, as if it were a frayed gym rope being pulled, and the soles of his feet throbbed, the thin plastic soles of his shoes worn. He'd tried his best to keep fit inside. He regularly went to the prison's gym, but it was difficult to make much progress. He'd lost weight on his paltry prison diet. Small cereal packets equal to children's portions were given to the inmates at breakfast, and two slices of white bread were added to every meal as a cheap way to momentarily fill up their bellies. Curt speculated that the bread, and the high-carb, low-vegetable meals, were also served to make prisoners lethargic and less likely to act out.

Sometimes he'd do press ups in his cell, depending on how friendly his cellmate was. Few of them caused him any hassle, although the cast was ever-revolving, due to the nature of being in a Category B prison. His favourite was his most recent cellmate, an Albanian man caught smuggling cocaine whose English consisted of the Northern and Cockney slang he had learnt inside. Curt was surprised at how many people were in there for minor stealing, or not properly filing their taxes.

However, Curt was adamant there were still a lot of rotters, and that distinction was important. Those who were rotten – who could never change or be forgiven and redeem themselves – and those who were innocent, or martyrs, or just unlucky. Curt considered himself to be in all three of the latter camps. Resolute that he'd been stitched up, he'd tell every person he'd encounter that he was an innocent man who had been punished for seeking justice. Fellow inmates laughed at him behind his back: at least they had the dignity to admit what they'd done.

He sat in the booth for another hour, nursing a fresh cup of milky coffee. A skin formed over the hot milk, and he ate it, grateful for all the sweet fat he could get after being fed UHT for so long. It was a joy, the book, the fact he was reading. He knew that prison was a place that people read, that so many people were radicalised or wrote a memoir or whatever, but he didn't want to be radicalised or awakened. He wanted to read in true peace and to feel able to fully escape. Inside that always felt impossible: drills would regularly go off, people would shout in the distance, screws would rasp on the door and even the smell of the toilet, a metre from the bed, would be a distraction. He read for hours in the cafe. The yellow sky hit the yellow walls inside the cafe, suddenly luminous. These subtle markings of the day's close, and the shortness of the winter days, amazed him in its stark contrast to time marked by documents and drills. The book was a copy of *Frankenstein* he'd managed to steal from the prison library, dog-eared with return date stamps dating back to the 60s. Curt shuddered as images of the snow in Geneva and the monster's demise unfolded before him. He closed the book and contemplated who the monster truly was, and



found himself relating both to Frankenstein and his creature. The waitress watched over Curt, annoyed that he had outstayed his welcome. He ordered another coffee and pulled out his stash of letters from his bin bag.

Donna's writing was cute, all bubbled with hearts for dots on the Is. But her letters were short, like her phone calls and visits. It seemed like something was being held back, like she was scared to actually meet him in the confined hellhole of both the prison and his mind. There were some photocopied images of his niece, and a few accounts of gatherings at the pub and the local theatre where she often performed, and tales from work, but that was it. Nothing about how hard she'd found it: renting on her own, paying all the bills, fucking no one. Maybe she didn't want him back, made do without him. He could imagine that it might have been more exciting going to bars and clubs on your own, letting men flirt and tease you, and then telling them you had a hard man behind bars, rather than going out to the bars with said man. The man who was no longer able to say any words, hovering over your shoulder with a blank face, while everyone was screaming and laughing deeply with their bellies.