March to March the train to nowhere.

He bought the train tickets to nowhere with two gold coins.

Engraved with her majesty’s likeness as the head a twisting number. They were sticky from where he'd clutched them tight, running up the 3 flights of steps to the booth, the bite of solid mettle against his clutching fingers had anchored him.

He needed the anchoring now that he had become adrift in a sea of anxiety which seemed to push his thoughts asunder with the crashing roiling of his heart. His throat was tight, oxygen felt a stranger. But it was fine, everything was fine as long as he clung on to the coins.

He and his coins took a moment of stillness outside of the ticket booth doors, where he squeezed his eyes shut. Winter still haunted the station with its tendrils of icy wind that cuffed his cheeks, the sun veiled by thick clouds. Maybe that was why the platform even during the work rush hour was quiet.

Opening his eyes, he pushed down everything that wasn't the coins and ticket booth, then pushed himself forward one foot at a time, opening the door with his jacket pocket pulled over his fingers. The motion freeing a burst of warmth air and the crinkling of a newspaper as the ticket seller, bespectacled with wide expressive eyebrows and a tattoo embracing his left index knuckle, lowered his paper. Behind the glasses his eyes were deep brown and they took him in with little interest. "Morning," he said slowly.

Shuffling forward he, Kay, let the door fall shut with a faint thump behind him in its wake forcing a smile. "Quiet one?"

"Never seen it like this in 30 years, strange times they say," the ticket master agreed contemplatively; deep lines appearing at the corners of his mouth. Worry lines, smile lines.

"It'll work itself out soon, well touch wood," pleased with how level his voice was coming out Kay forcefully unfolded his fist, baring the coins.

Lines relaxing the man nodded. "We can hope, how can I help you lad?"

"Please could I have a return ticket," Kay asked, passing over the coins whilst forcefully pushing down the unwarranted fear which sent a rush of tingles down his fingers. Light as butterfly wings, a light house’s fog horn off a home cliff face, common as sand grains on an undisturbed beach.

"Good of you to bring these you'd be surprised how many forget," the ticket master said, scooping up the coins to drop in an open cash register at his elbow. "There are no return tickets on this line sorry," and there was regret in those brown eyes as he tore off a ticket and gently handed it over.

"None at all?" Kay queried, neck heating, stupid, stupid. But he still accepted the ticket crisp clean paper whispering against his fingertips.

"These are strange times lad," the station master told him grimly eyes averting to a spot beyond Kay's shoulder. The train whistle rang out sharply in the quiet.

"Okay," Kay agreed weekly. "Strange times indeed have a good one."

"Hurry lad better go onboard these drivers are always in such a rush these days," the ticket master warned, the lines coming back in to focus as an expression which Kay couldn't fully read, understanding, exhaustion, sadness maybe, flitted across his face on wraith’s wings then was gone. "Take care lad."

Waving awkwardly Kay spun about, nudging open the door, fingers and mind clutching on to the fragile slip of paper which wavered in the low wind. Then he was jogging across the platform, the feeling of rain in the air wrapping all around everything, the train roaring through, across the tracks to meet him at the platform’s edge, breaks squealing in outrage at the stop in projection. "I want to fly," he thought they seemed to chant. "I want to rush through the country past where the trees are thick and the grass is frail as ivory and the honeyed beaches cushion the stone sleeping giants."

Whilst in argument the low groan of the holt chuntered. "Not yet.

and they roared their apposing war cry of freedom and restraint until finally restraint beat down the wheels wings the train shuddering to a stop and the doors hissing open. Glancing over his shoulder a final time Kay did not see the ticket master, shrugging he pulled himself up with the tacky yellow rail and stumbled in to a seat.

2.

Outside the window the world is not distinct. Shapes of trees hunched, brittle bark cracking, become one with new spring saplings. Back garden ponds made misty by clumps of frogspawn join great clear lakes that glitter in the sunshine. Askew little toys abandoned on the floors of nurseries join with the warm halls of care homes. Soldiers piecing together heavy camouflage coats and sardonic revolvers meet varied phantasmagoric fingers with "Shielded visages.

There is no clarity. No distinct understanding of age or goodness, or personality or any distinct identity out of a befuddling blur that absorbs everyone and everything.

Unnerved Kay looked away, attempting to bring his awareness in close. He is sitting on a blue padded seat with thickened yellow metal at the edges. Something hard pokes in to his tail bone. A national rail safety card is in the pocket before him, brimming with neat words describing safety precautions and what to do in the event of and do not smoke! The floor was stained and the hand rails smudged.

It’s a carbon copy of the train car which he'd sat on with his mum and older sister, when he was young and they were traveling out to the local city to buy school shoes. If they were well behaved their mum would buy them ice cream from the dainty shop which sat beside the river, and sitting on an old bench by the water they’d slurp up their treats, Cookie dough with extra sprinkles for him, honey comb for Mia, and an ice lolly with loads of twisting colours for their mum.

The memory calmed him, allowing some of the pressure to drip drop out of his chest, and his spine to relax in to the back of the bumpy seat. He'd be okay, he'd be okay.

3.

"This is a safety announcement, unattended objects, terrorism, report call this number, tell this person. Save lives protect, hands, space."

Kay straightens, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. The train rocks gently softly with the consideration of a mother with an infant, rocker bye baby, don't you stop. Outside the sky is still light, the kind of fresh spring evening which his mates and he used to love because light in to the evening meant more time playing football. Then he loved because it meant more time before his notes spiraling out over floor, rumpled unmade bed, floor strewn with rainbow chocolate bars without his eyes smoldering with eye strain. Then he loved because of the time he could spend sitting outside talking about everything from sports to the movements of hippo shaped clouds with his friends.

Isla rolled her eyes at him, so black pupils spun with white and deep brown iris but for Kay those light nights were everything.

Anxiety had begun gnawing at his belly again with little razor-sharp fangs so he wrapped his arms tight about himself, and breathed slowly, puffs of air in through his mouth down in to his anxious lungs. The sky was darkening outside the window but the journey must end soon.

4.

The fragile squeak of the car door opening snapped Kay in to awareness. Straitening he ran a hand through his hair, down his face, rubbed his eyes, and bounced his knees.

"Tickets please," the train guard announced in a rumble like early storm thunder. Then blinking he took in the empty train car.

"Just me," Kay waved half self-conscious, trying to emulate his mum’s gesture which balances perfectly between casualness and respect. Everybody loves his mum. "It’s a quiet one."

Still blinking confusedly, the train guard approaches. "It is that," he says his accent from the north all stretching vowels and mist shrouded hills. "Can I see your ticket."

With fingers that have almost forgotten how to flex out Kay passes over his ticket, the little scrap of paper a little creased. "There far to go Sir?" he asks quietly.

The train asters badge is tilted at an angle so the lettering seems to be sliding slowly away. "A while yet son," he informs him, stamping a hole in the ticket, so the lights flying past in the darkness outside the window, shine through. Then he's gone, humming a disconnected tune, bouncing his hole punch through the air, and Kay is alone again.

5

In the minutes before the sky fades to nothing but a starless black void the world gains some clarity. The indistinct shapes snapping together with the same violent thrust of an elastic band coming together after being stretched to its limits.

Flying past smooth plastic diplomas engraved with 3 years’ worth of tears and late nights and pounding panic for this piece of paper, this paper peace. Wedding ceremonies with grinning families before exchanging of bands. Serene beach cafes with dainty drinks. Birthday parties drenched in champagne, problems left to dry out and removed in the name of better features. Fantasies, dreams, gold coins shining bright at sundown, red skies at night, shepherds delight. For the world was already scorched through deviation, politics and hatred surely the only creature that Pandora could release was hope. The sight transforms the air he breathes into joy which dances down his throat to weave optimism’s golden thread around his ribs. He's happy and safe.

But if that's true why is it only a vision flitting past the train window as he barrels past on the road to nowhere? Why can't he get off the train to walk the road he should be walking. Working, graduating, spending time with his friends, hugging his grandmas when they visit on Saturday, attending his sister’s wedding, and holding the future with full fingers.

It doesn't stop.

6.

Somewhere on the road to nowhere Kay is falling asleep.

Exhaustion’s maternal arms consume his brain in a fuzzy fog. A great weight must be attached to his eyelashes and keeping them open is a great effort of will. His thoughts curl up in to each other, whilst a wizard turns his limbs into lead. Calmly he floats in the lazy river between consciousness and unconsciousness where the under current is warm and the stars above are bright. No mortal strain can chain him down here.

Sinking he sleeps.

Sleeping he dreams.

He dreams that fires rip through dry fields with a velocity dreamt of by horse and plough. Choking drowning smoke which craws as if from a dragon’s throat.

He dreams of inconsiderate marks creeping upward in conversation with its neighbour, a growing stack of names.

He dreams of children’s desks left dented alone. He dreams of dolls houses filled with dolls. He dreams of death warrants.

He dreams of dolphins spinning through crystal clear water. Of ivy exploring pretty stone walls. He dreams of bridges to new worlds; painted red yellow orange green blue indigo violet.

He dreams that the world outside of his head is burning and healing and breaking and fixing and hurting. He dreams things which have his heart soaring and his soul plummeting with all the gravity of a coin dropped in to a wishing well.

Rapidly Kay jerks awake, heart drumming, palms sweating, and Isla solemn beside him.

7.

"Where did you come from?" Kay gasps, sitting up so fast that his vision spins with the rush of blood to his head. Fingers and toes tingling as he reaches up to rub at a crick in his neck.

Isla takes him in curiously, tilting her head to one side so her pony tail falls over a shoulder. "I've always been here?" she asked eyes measured.

Frowning Kay glances out the window, but the sky has entered the impenetrable state of witching hour. "No, you haven't," Kay protests doubting himself heavily. "I've been alone for a while."

"That's not true," Isla says gently. "But it’s a strange world out there," he can almost feel her gaze prickling against the back of his neck. But when he turns she is looking past him at the world barreling past outside, her lips pressed together tightly, fingers loosely interlocked between them.

"People keep saying that, the world is different I mean," he tells her.

"That's true," Isla nods slowly, she's still. Its disconcerting, frightening that a woman always so full of energy and sound, never stopping, fidgeting, babbling, bubbling to be so still.

"Isla?" he asks weekly. Something’s wrong, wrong, wrong.

"Kay," she echoes his tone. "You’re not alone."

"Neither are you," he responds a shiver making its way down his spine. Even through his jacket he was cold.

"Let’s go for a walk," Isla holds her hand to him, which he takes finding a disconnected comfort in the coolest warmth as he stands steadying himself in the train’s despondent rocking. "We shouldn't have a long way to go after this," she says and there is a sadness in the furrow of her brow. She squeezes his fingers and then lets him go.

"Go where?" he asks anxiously, the need for reassurance a desperate pang.

"To the place where we can walk upon clouds and swim through the rain. We can ride sun rays and feed thunder oats. Wonder amongst the stars and sleep on the moon, whilst the world spins around beneath us," suddenly she is smiling, eyes sparkling. For that moment the darkness doesn't matter.

"Will we?" he grins all pangs forgotten.

"No," she says when her face becomes solemn once more she summons back in the darkness. "We'll just walk down the train."

He begins to laugh, the kind which comes up from his belly and engulfs his entire being. Laughing until his knees tremble and tears run down his cheeks in happy streams. The world fading away until all that exists is his laughter.

The corner of Isla lips tilts up with mirth. "You’re not alone," she tells him softly.

He has no words.

8.

Outside the tremulous train windows the world is a void of darkness. The absence of safety lights cracks something in his chest. Before him Isla pushes open the next compartment door, her long plat falling straight down her spine. Bracelets jangle at her wrists, she doesn't ever look back at him. "We haven't long," she tells him and there is an emotion that shrouds the words, something that exists in the plains between comprehension and grief. "I have to get off at the next stop."

"Can I come with you," Kay asks weekly, frustrated at the uncertainty that clutches at his words.

"Kay? Do you remember when we met?" Isla asks. They're alone, the train is hauntingly quiet. Discomfort is hot Kay had never fully realised how hot it was, scolding, scorching, soon his skin will turn white.

"Pulling at the sleeves of his jacket Kay nods. "Yeah, first day of sixth form."

"It was raining," Isla affirms distantly. "Hard, we were all crammed in to the class room, nobody would make eye contact."

"You were always too harsh on that, Is," Kay murmurs.

"I was," Isla laughs a relieving bright sound which transports him back to sunny school fields and the world before normality when away. "But I wouldn't change it."

"You wouldn't be nicer if we went back, thought more?" Kay said uncertain whether he meant his words to be scathing or sarcastic.

"Nope," Isla raised her shoulder in a little shrug. The dismissal gesture that had set his temper blazing when they'd first met. It was dismissive. "There’s a lot of things I'd do differently, speak more, stand up for people, stand my ground, not give in as easily," stopping abruptly Isla slips down a row of seats to press a palm against the window. Her bracelet, the one with the clam on it, clanking against the glass disapprovingly. In the reflection he can half see her face.

"Isla?" he asks anxiously.

She doesn't look at him. She is silent. She is still.

In the reflection however, he can see her blinking furiously.

"Isla?" he repeats tremulously. "There are trees outside far away, old oaks that were saplings explorer struck out, they have strange fruit," Isla says tightly.

"Strange fruit?" Kay asks befuddled. Reaching up to rub the back of his neck Kay is startled to find his skin dry.

"It hangs from my family tree, all our family trees, swinging there, never changing always growing, one harvest after the next, and it won't change because the planters wear the protector’s uniform and we are the seeds," she says and a tear is running down her cheek. "I can't breathe here, none of us will ever be able to breathe here whilst harvests keep planting yet we starve."

9.

Jaw open wide Kay feels but can't.

The train beneath them releases a great whistling of kicking breaks and grinding wheels. Isla presses a palm to the glass fingers spread out like a star fish ripped from the rock. Her eyes are the empathetic place between the stars.

With a jolt they are at a stop. Kay's heart must be breaking.

"This is my stop," Isla says looking over at him for the first time in a long time.

It hurts.

"Can I stop the fruit?" forcing himself to hold up his chin he looks out through the glass behind her. It hurts. Smoke and pain and no oxygen, it hurts.

Moving forward Isla takes one of his hands and entwines their fingers, rubbing her thumb across his knuckles. "Stand beside me," she tells him solemnly, squeezing tight, then letting their hands separate.

"I'll be beside you," Kay promises. "I'll be here, Isla."

"Good," Isla smiles, a lost expression. Then as the train doors whoosh open she leaves, bouncing down on to the platform and plait swaying she is gone in to the darkness. In her absence the train door grinds shut and they keep on going.

10.

Alone Kay lets himself cry, knelt on the floor rocking by the never-ending chugging of the train. His mind falls on to desecrated wedding parties, overly cramped beds, and heaven being unable to wait. Of blood drenched bandages and too many deaths. Of racism and neglect, anger and grief.

He wonders why the world must burn and if this pain is justified. It isn't fair! Nothing’s fair, everything hurts. And Kay sobs tears that come from the very bottom of his throbbing soul. His breaths ragged and his knuckles bloody as he punches down against the floor. He sobs and screams and hurts.

11.

When he finally stills he is sure that it will never end, he'll be trapped in purgatory forever on a train which won't stop. He curls up on the floor eyes turned in to cotton wool and throat to acid, anger is tepid in his chest, fear is rife in his tummy, and nothing is in his mind. He breathes and lies still.

12. Lying still he watches the pitch-black sky, hopelessness pounding at his soul.

The sun is rising.

Forgiving amber hews mixing with the softest yellows and nurturing red. They're swirling together at a point in the distance but perhaps not too far away. Playing and laughing and breathing.

The train has stopped its swaying but Kay stays still.

Slowly he lies in a train to nowhere, watching the sun rise.