

Alexander Williams (descending)

by Michael Clough

(i)

It seemed not so long ago, that cool winter morning when Alexander Williams walked into the temp agency on Pin Street. He'd been looking for a job, of course, but preferably something in media. Yet with his bank refusing to extend his overdraft any further, he'd little choice but to accept anything. Thus he found himself sat at a VDU inputting his vital statistics. It didn't matter that he had a third-class degree, he was assured, as long as he could use a keyboard and answer the phone. BCC was undergoing a recruitment drive. It had recently opened a new call centre on the tenth floor and needed a pool of temps. It didn't sound all that appealing. He'd heard that call centres had a high turnover of labour, poor wages and terrible conditions—there'd been speculation that one of the larger banks intended on moving its operations to India; if it did, others would surely follow. He was told BCC was different. If he did well he might be selected for a permanent position.

Had he heard of BCC at all?

He admitted no, he hadn't: the only aspect of business he was interested in was leisure. As an undergraduate he'd researched the music industry and written a dissertation about EMI. He wanted, eventually, to manage a band.

She told him that BCC was a good employer with prospects; he should endeavour to find out all that he could before starting.

You've not much time. You can start this afternoon if you want: there's a late induction at two.

He apologised, said that he had other matters to attend to, and would it be okay to leave it for today.

She told him yes, that would be fine, and the next morning he took the train into the city, a tube from Kings Cross, alighting at Bank Street across the road from the BCC headquarters.

He couldn't help but be impressed by the company's towering edifice of shimmering glass, the forty-four floors rising sleekly into the cool blue air, the sprawling car park fronted by glimmering Porsche Carreras,

Lamborghinis and Ferraris, the wide, airy reception teaming with young employees, the fountain that drew light from the multitude of windows and sparkled like diamonds. There was no formal dress code at BCC—he had been told as such at the agency—and although some wore suits and carried briefcases, it was virtually impossible to identify rank from outward appearance. Above the long curving marble desk, where he collected his pass, there hung photographs of the various executives—only the CEO wore a suit and this was without a tie and he had the same effusive smile as the others.

There were fifteen other temps starting. They were hustled into a room on the ground floor where a breezy young man wearing jeans and a jogging top shook everyone's hand and cracked jokes about the company initials.

No one really knows what the acronym stands for, he said. Be confidently crazy. Beware crafty corporation. Benign capitalist creation. And so on and so on.... until he'd practically exhausted all possibilities.

There was a podium at the back of the room but he preferred that everyone arrange their chairs into a circle. He explained that no matter whether you were temp or permanent, you would be properly inducted.

I love working here and hope that all you inductees will come to share my joy.

He gave a presentation, a slideshow profiling the company's activities—BCC had a diverse range of operations, everything from selling mobile phones to offering financial advice. There was a brainstorming session during which the facilitator, as the young man in a jogging top liked to call himself, explained they were being assessed for Potential.

Here at BCC, he said, you are always being assessed for Potential. Everyone is being assessed for Potential in every activity in which they participate, every project. Even the CEO is being assessed, although he'd like to think that he's already shown his worth and achieved his goals. That's what we believe in at BCC: it's our corporate ethos. At BCC we believe everyone should be provided with the opportunity to maximise their Potential.

Alex liked the sound of this—it wasn't the music industry, no, but he believed he could do well here. If he worked hard enough he could rise, rise, rise—there would be no limit to what he could achieve. He had Potential.

There were questionnaires and psychometric tests to complete, to assess his personality and latent abilities. Alex concentrated hard, more so than in his finals, hoping to impress the marker. He imagined the Head of

Personnel glowing with anticipation as he reviewed the scores.

By when lunch arrived he was already feeling quite exhausted. A buffet had been laid on. Nibbling a chicken wing, Alex chatted with a young Asian who like himself had graduated earlier that year.

He told him he'd been to five of these inductions now. He'd temp for a few weeks, pay his debts, and then quit.

You get your free lunch, he said, you do your tests, draw a month's salary and then leave before you get sucked in.

“You could spend your life here, sleeping, eating, keeping fit, as well as working of course. You might even find the love of your life here and use the pub across the road to get married in.”

Alex was taken aback.

If you work hard enough you might be taken on permanently by one of the country's largest organisation.

Bullshit.

Seems like a good place to start.

We could all get good jobs here if we show we're capable.

Do you really think so? Well, I might just do that then.

There was a note of cynicism in the man's voice which Alex found distasteful. He wondered whether he ought to report him.

After lunch, the facilitator talked about the benefits of working for BCC.

There are plenty of activities to get involved in, he said. More perks than any organisation I've worked for. There are the football, rugby, cricket, basketball, rowing and darts teams. There's the bonus scheme which means you can put in extra hours and be compensated with shares in the company, if you work hard enough. There's a gym with a sauna, a Jacuzzi, twenty-four tread mills and a swimming pool. You could, if you wanted to, sleep over meaning if you've a deadline to reach you'd not be wasting time getting to and from the office.

You could spend your life here, sleeping, eating, keeping fit, as well as working of course. You might even find the love of your life here and use the pub across the road to get married in.

It was only now that the young Asian decided to say something. The facilitator had been in full flow, and for a moment he appeared to be grateful for this intervention.

Why you sayin' all this to us, man, when we is only temps? Why you tellin' us all this bullshit? Sleepin' here, eatin' here, marryin'. None of us wants to spend all our lives here, get married here. Nobody wants that. It's

just a job. A means of gettin' by.

And with that, the young Asian swept out of the door. Alex didn't see him again. He decided it wasn't such a great loss.

Before the induction was through, the group was presented with an eighteen page document which the facilitator described as the BCC bible. It contained platitudes about how the company was striving for success and was proud of the collective effort of its members, as well as email addresses and numbers for the various personnel.

Finally the group was taken by express lift to the tenth floor and sat at pods with VDUs and headsets. The floor manager took over, putting on a headset and demonstrating how to take a call. Unlike the facilitator he wore a suit and spoke in a terse, clipped manner; he had red ruddy cheeks and the intense look of a dog about to bite.

You don't have to think in this job, he said. All you have to do is press the green key on the keyboard to take a call, and then when the call comes through you follow the script that appears on your screen. Any deviation from the script is unacceptable, no matter what the customer says. A deviation wastes time and you don't want to waste time. I'll know if you're not following the script because I tape and monitor the calls. I can refer to any disputed call if I have to, and that's all the evidence I need. If you're taking less than one hundred calls in a day then you'll be put on review. You'll have two days and if you don't come up to standard you'll be issued a warning; if by the end of the week you're still falling short I'll have no choice but to dismiss you. And listen, it's not difficult. I'm going to show you how easy it is. This isn't really a job but a holiday camp—you're lucky to be here. Oh yes, you've landed on your feet all right, on the tenth floor.

The record is two hundred and ten calls in one day, which is quite something. Mostly you should be averaging at one-fifty, one-sixty, even after a couple of days because there's really not much to it. That works out at about three minutes a call, which isn't bad because the vast majority of calls are straightforward. You ask the questions, they give you the answers, and you make sure to input everything the computer asks for. Anything else is extraneous, a waste of your time and mine. Watch and listen, I'll show you.

Alex watched and listened; the floor manager, following the script, dealt with the customer in three minutes.

As I said, there's no need to use your brains, there's no stress in this job—a piece of cake. Not a particularly appetising cake, a chocolate gateau or anything, but cake nevertheless. Something to keep you from being hungry, I suppose. So just take it as it is, be here on time, keep to your quota,

and you'll be fine.

The next day he arrived at the office half an hour early, wearing a jogging top he'd bought especially. He was sat in a pod next to an experienced operator. He admitted being worried about the quota.

Although I'm not exactly loquacious, he said, recalling a word from college, I'll find it difficult not being rude to anyone—if some old grandma, for example, wants to talk about her pet budgerigar, I'll feel obliged to make conversation.

Don't you worry about that! There's a way around all that shit, quotas and what have you. You just need to know how. Watch me and learn.

With a simple click of the green followed by the red key, the experienced operator doubled his tally of calls.

You take a call, you skip a call—it's as simple as that. It looks like whoever's on the other end has put the phone down. Do this for a couple of hours and you can take it easy for the rest of the day; it's that simple.

Won't they check the tapes, figure out what you're doing?

The experienced operator laughed. The tapes get wiped at the end of the week; no one ever checks them—it's just a legal requirement. Why on earth would anyone want to check through all these dull, dull calls—unless they were a masochist?

Alex didn't think much of this. If he wanted to be taken on permanently, then such an indiscretion could cost him—it amounted to little more than fraud, and the last thing he wanted was to begin his working life on a bad footing.

On that first day he took less than fifty calls. He followed the script as best he could but it was impossible not to deviate. One woman practically chatted him up, saying he had a nice voice, did it match his body, and what was he doing working at a call centre? He told her all about his degree, his research about EMI, and thirty minutes went by before he'd hung up.

Still, as he would discover, even if you stuck to the script it was near impossible to keep a call to three minutes. His average came down from six to five—not enough to reach target.

The following Friday he was summoned to the floor manager's office.

I'm afraid I'm going to have to put you on review. Your timekeeping is good, you're always here early, but these figures fall below what's expected. Your best is ninety-two and really that's not good enough.

What about everyone else? Alex asked. There was pleading in his voice.

Admittedly it can take a couple of weeks to get into the swing of things, and you're not the only one to fall short, but your average is seventy—that's very low, even for your first week.

Alex returned despondently to his pod. He did his best to hurry along the callers but even then, out of breath and sweating, it'd take four and a half minutes to obtain all the information required.

With every chance of being out by the end of the week, he allowed his hand to hover over the red button.

The caller gave his details, Alex apologised, asked him to ring back; pressed. He figured it was better than simply cutting the man off without a word.

No, the experienced operator said. There's not much chance of the tapes being reviewed, but even so the last thing you want is your voice on there.

It's much better to answer and cut off - all in one swift motion. Look.

At the end of the month, Alex was summoned once more to the floor manager's office. He feared the worst.

Impressive, the floor manager said, looking at his print out. This is the most a temp has ever done in their first month. At first I had you down as a slacker; one of those fly-by-night fools who stays a couple of weeks, messing us around, and then leaves. But no, not at all. I'd say you've got a future here. Welcome to BCC.

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He knew he had to leave. If he didn't leave today he'd surely be transformed into a non-entity, a golem of officialdom, a simpering old creature with all hopes in this world abandoned. The loathsomeness of it all was in the cloying, claustrophobic air he daily had to inhale. He felt his blood thickening, his arteries choking; so many petty concerns.

EMI, he liked to say. I sent my dissertation to EMI.

He would sit at his desk hour after dismal hour, his mind a whirlpool. There was a contract nearing completion, a report to write.

His reflection in the VDU was black skin and hanging eyes. He would open his dismal BCC mouth and all that jargon would flood right out.

Quantity versus quality measures.

If he didn't leave today he'd surely be transformed into a non-entity, a golem of officialdom, a simpering old creature with all hopes in this world abandoned.

Asset accumulation.
Targeted marketing strategies.

One sick, tired afternoon, the young Asian from the induction rose up before him as an apparition.

I thought you'd left, Alexander said.

I had second thoughts on the matter. My friends all had the latest gadgets. Girlfriends and cars. And there was the rent to pay. Anyway, I'm older now. I wouldn't walk out like that again. So immature.

No, no, you were right. It was just as you said: the corporation sucks you in and strangles your soul. You become a cog, a particle, an atom drifting without purpose. What is this? I'll tell you what it is. It's a great stupid amorphous mass. BCC. But what does it stand for? Really, what could it possibly mean other than Brainless Crass Corpse?

Bloody Clueless Cunt.

Something like that, yes. Listen. Your life is passing, passing, passing in increments of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, moving ceaselessly, inevitably onwards and downwards with no real sense of anything at all. And then what? What happens then? Death is what happens. The pitiful grave.

I've got to go, okay. I stand a good chance of promotion if I's gets this right. I could have a good desk like yours, man. A future.

No, it's no future. Here take it. Take what I've got. You can have it all. I'm going. I'm going right home and do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to put together a swap tape?

A what?

A swap tape. You never done it, you know, with your mates and all? You put all your favourite tracks on it, and then you swap them around and leave comments on the sleeve. It was Billy Bong who got me into it.

Who?

Oh, he was a good friend of mine, a real good friend. He lived in the same house, see, in the attic of all places. A right character he was, a bit of a geezer. He had this scam going forging and selling rent books and all his mates were skimming thirty quid a week off the DSS.

Yourself was?

No, not me. I was playing it legit. I'd only just graduated and I had this temp job here. I didn't need to. But anyway, it was his idea—making and swapping tapes. The rules were simple: you had to put together a compilation of ten tracks that were meaningful to you on some level, you know,

without explaining why. That was for your mates to think about.

Alexander laughed.

Wow, some of those tapes were so like left field and bizarre. We were all trying to outdo each other, see. Black Flag followed by Shirley Bassey on one of mine, can you believe it? Mostly, these swap tapes weren't properly listened to, at least not the way they were meant to. But there was one exception. That exception was Billy's tape. He pushed a copy under my door. Nick Drake, Paul Weller, Scott Walker. All classics in their own right. Yet it was the way the tape had been put together, the songs complementing each other, you know, forming a pattern. As soon as it came to an end I'd rewind it and play it again. Each time you heard it you became aware of something more, another connection. Even the crackle of the vinyl between tracks, it sounded somehow alluring, meaningful. But there's more to it than that. The very last track was the best of all but nobody knew who it was by or anything. On the listing he'd just put down a big black question mark.

And did you ever find out, who it was?

I had the tape duplicated. I listened to it again and again and again. Everywhere I went I had to be listening to it, in the car, on my Walkman. I was becoming lost to it. Nothing else mattered to me but that tape. Not this cruddy job at BCC, not my pitiful no-love life, nothing.

I needed to talk to Billy about it. I had to know who that last track was. Art it was. Real art. The words got right into your head, into your very soul—I know that sounds daft, but that's how it was. The song was about someone out walking, what he sees and how he feels—he sings about a glittering city of fading lights, going down by a slick black river, and all the people he has ever known rise up out of the waters and come towards him holding out their hands in pleading, all anguish and darkness, and then something about dull brown leaves falling from tall dead trees and settling upon the frozen pavement. It became a part of you.

I like rap me. You know, like Dizzee Rascal. Bonkers.

Yeah, well, there is a place for that. But this, this was something different. These simple guitar riffs, they build up all around. An echoing of drums, silence, and then you hear his voice. It leads you in. It pulls you apart. It's fucking poetry, don't you understand. Poetry. Ah, just fuck it all. Fuck this monitor screen. Fuck this office. I was once Alexander Williams. Descending. Let me tell you about it, how I went down.

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I went to his door and knocked hard. I had to know who it was on the tape. And do you know what...do you know what he said to me?

That's me, he said. It's what I used to do before I stopped doing it.

It's beautiful, I told him. You do know it's a work of genius. You could be famous. You could have a record deal.

He said he used to gig bars and clubs. He'd bought time in a studio where he'd laid down tracks. There'd been a contract but he'd turned it down. Said he didn't need it.

And do you know how I saw it, Dizzee Rascal? Do you know how I saw it? I saw it as my way out. My way out! This is what I'd do. I'd convince him to make a proper demo. I knew the business. I'd done my dissertation about EMI after all. I'd tout it around, get the best possible deal. And if that failed, then we'd set up our own label; he'd be a phenomenon. I drew up a business plan. I even drafted my resignation letter. I'd be gone from this place. Two in the hand is worth three in the bush and all that. That's what they say, isn't it?

With plan in hand, I hastened up the stairs and knocked hard on the door to Billy's attic. No answer, Dizzee Rascal, no answer. But the door was unlocked and so I went in, as you would. All the drawers had been flung onto the bed. On the bedside cabinet propped against a lamp there was a cassette and an envelope. There was a letter with it. Billy said he was off and gone. Off on his travels or something crazy. Itchy feet, he said. Perhaps he'd go off to Russia or America, he wasn't really sure.

The tape was a revelation. All the tracks he'd laid down at the studio. Jesus they were good. Not good, no. Amazing. Awesome. Phenomenal. The best.

I listened to that tape over and over, until I knew every beat, every last word of it. Perhaps it holds a clue, that's what I thought—these tracks, Alexander Williams, these tracks are clues. Each one was poetic, hypnotic, resonant. Track one: waiting for a girl outside the pictures in Croydon, wondering whether she'll ever turn up, hopes fading, uncertainty, question marks. The Ritz at the Corner of Cradle Street. The next was about lying in bed all day and the simple pleasure of watching the world go endlessly by. The clue was in the last stanza, Dizzee Rascal. It was right there in the last fucking stanza. Glancing idly through a dusty window I see streams of tourists with their kiss-me-quick hats and smiling retard faces. Paris, New York, Rome, but it all came back to a Northern Seaside Town.

I asked around. I needed to know what people knew. Where did he

come from? Where had he gone? The landlady said he was originally from the North. Morecambe she said.

Morecambe. I had to go there.

I called the office, said I was taking my flexi. They were all furious: twice as much work on our desks now and important contracts due. Three calls I got back.

No. No. I'm packing already. Gone.

It was raining hard the morning I took the train. I'd brought with me a cassette player and a duplicate tape. You see, I had this idea that playing Billy's songs would help me find him. I had to take three trains, the first into London, the second to Manchester, and the third to Morecambe. I took it out on the Morecambe train, speeding through these dull grey fields with the rain belting against the windows. Everyone looked at me like I was crazy. There were these two guys that I imagined the likes of Billy would hang out with—hair falling over shoulders, army fatigues, black tee-shirts, badges all over their jackets. I sat at their table, took out the cassette player and pressed play. Billy's wonderful tinny voice erupted all around. I looked at them meaningfully. I expected a response.

They asked me what I wanted, real gruff voices, you know, northern twang.

My name is Alexander Williams. And I am on a mission to find a good friend of mine. His name is Billy Bong and he heralds from your neck of the proverbial woods. You wouldn't happen to know him, would you? This is him singing. A musical genius is Billy Bong. You must 'ave heard of 'im, lads. Your neck of the woods, after all.

They got off at the next station, laughing. He's taking the piss, they called after the train. That southern jessy woos is clearly taking the piss. Mad fucker.

I am Alexander Williams on a mission, I called out of the window, with the rain spitting into my eyes. The train lurched inevitably away and I watched them disappearing along the damp northern platform into the black, cloudy dusk.

It was ridiculous, Dizzee Rascal. I was acting bloody weird. But then again, I could think of no other way.

I'd been doing a lot of thinking, as it happens. I'd thought a lot about BCC, what it meant to me or rather didn't. I'd thought about you too, about how you'd walked clean damned out of that insufferable induction, corporate ethos and all that dross. I often wondered about what had happened to you, drifting from one induction to the next, taking a month's

salary and then bugging off. Hero. I had a notepad on that shivering train. And I wrote down this:

I don't do anything.

It takes up all my TIME.

I don't have much TIME.

My TIME is limited, fixed, determinate.

It's what I think about, worry about, when I'm not there.

It is the opposite of living; the opposite of being.

The opposite of Billy Bong and his genius words.

Time, time, time passing so fast that before I know it I'll have damned used it all up, every last grain, ounce, increment of it.

But I will find Billy and we'll escape from TIME.

It was drizzling when I arrived. Gulls were wheeling across the cold grey sky, the wind buffeting all these grim boarded up windows.

Not often people come here this time of year, the receptionist said.

All just about shutting up right now with the season over.

I said,

My name is Alexander Williams and I am here on a mission. I took out the cassette player and played her the tape. She said she'd never heard of him, this Billy Bong. But she handed me the key to my room anyway. She said, you must remember the front door gets locked at twelve and after that you'll have to ring the bell to call the porter.

Those three days the sky did nothing but bucket down with rain, so heavy, black and persistent that I thought the entire world was going to drown under a great flood.

I wandered between arcades, shops, cafes, the pier, the funfair, playing the tape to everyone and asking about Billy. I was brushed aside. I was laughed at, mocked.

Billy is from here, your town, a real local hero, I liked to say.

You know, Dizzee, it wasn't all that bad. Occasionally some kind soul would perk up favourably on what they had heard. They might say good voice nice tune and ask whether Billy Bong was brother or friend.

No, I'd say. Local hero. Your town. Me, Croydon born.

I took the bus up to a place called Ulverston because the landlady had said she thought he might have connections there. I asked around local pubs, with the fanciful idea that someone of that area may well have seen or heard him busking street corners. No luck. If the truth of it be known I was beginning to despair. My soul felt low with the task.

By the fourth day of my blessed mission the weather had relented. I

had no fears now of forty days and nights of torrid rain, as had happened in the Good Book. I climbed down a steep stone stairway to the beach. The tide had slipped out leaving long stretches of damp sand, more black than yellow owing to the rain having been so hard and furious these last few days, bringing up all the dirt and dredge from the seabed.

Two children, a boy and a girl with nets and a bucket, were stood in a rock pool with their trousers rolled to their knees. They'd caught a crab and it was struggling hard to climb the sides of the bucket. I couldn't help but think of it as a metaphor, Dizzee Rascal, for my mission mainly but also life in general, and time. I played these kiddies the tape. They looked at me with a strange mixture of curiosity and fear. This is Billy Bong, I said. Should you meet him on your travels I'd be grateful for the knowledge of his whereabouts.

I threw a clump of sand which disintegrated and splattered across the muddy flats. The town looked distant and unreal, a mist rising above its pebble-dashed hotels and abandoned Ferris-wheel.

I cut a path across the beach to the pier where beneath the girders I found something that interested me greatly: two black carrier bags stuffed with clothes. I returned to the promenade. When a figure emerged from under the pier I flicked a coin into a telescope. It was someone of Billy's age wearing a dirty old T-shirt and dirty old khaki pants. He had darker skin though and was a lot thinner. Not Billy, no, but someone like him who might know him. I watched him pull a blanket from one of the carriers and after wrapping himself in it, he smoked a cigarette all quite nonchalantly. It was an image from a song of Billy's: the sea parting and the stranger smoking. I had to keep him close under surveillance. I had to follow him.

There wasn't much to see. Mostly he slept. Sometimes he got up, stretched and looked towards the sea. I needed to go down and play him the tape. But something stopped me; a sense of dread, I suppose, a sense that once more I'd be badly let down.

When at last he left his cosy beach, I followed him along the main drag ducking behind lampposts and into doorways whenever he turned.

A moment of clarity in the drizzle and gloom of a late October afternoon.

Shivering badly, clutching the cassette player to my chest, I walked quickly on following him down an alleyway. I watched him buy chips and Coke from a chippie.

The old fun fair was being dismantled. It had seen better days

and they'd thought to hell with it: we should build a car park over it, hardly anyone comes to the seaside these days - they're all off to the see the sun in Fuerteventura. The rides were all gone but for the creaking dinosaur roller coaster, the ghost train and the Ferris wheel. He'd ducked through a gap in the fence and I could hear him whistling a tune which I'd heard on Billy's tape. I pulled back a metal sheet and clambered into the darkness of the dead fair, my cigarette glowing faintly against a backboard of witches and bats.

People paid good money to see this shit.

His face was well lit, illuminated you might say. Close up, I could see the resemblance now. He had the same bright eyes, the same loping grin, although he looked older, with skin darkened by the elements.

Little kids.

Yeah. Suppose you would've shit your pants once.

When you were a boy, that last holiday—did you shit your pants then? Or were you unafraid?

Do you know of Billy?

Yes, he said.

Can you take me to him?

Yes. I am his brother, after all.

Didn't know he had one. Never mentioned it.

We're soul buddies more than brothers. Me and him, like that we are. Wherever he goes, I go too.

I came looking. Where is he?

Deep inside us all. The essence of man. Do you wanna chip?

I'm starving. I've been looking for so long now. Looking high and low.

When I was a kid, I heard about some fella who stayed overnight in one of these places, a ghost train or a horror house or somethin'. He did it for a bet or for charity. Anyway when they unlocked him in the mornin' he ran out screamin'. Pale as anything, with his hair all white. I used to think I'd get left in one of these places by the old man, you know, as a punishment. Never thought I'd end up living in one. And look, has my hair gone white?

I thought you lived under the pier.

What makes you think that?

I saw you this morning. I was walking along the beach.

That was you, was it? I thought some cunt was watchin' me.

Thought it was the fuckin' pigs or somethin'. You looked through my stuff.

I didn't mean to pry.

Pry? Now there's a word, pry. Didn't mean to fuckin' pry. Where're you from then?

You know that. Come on. You're playing with me, aren't you? Soul buddies and brothers. You look different. But not that much.

You wanna buy some, is that it? It's what every fucker's into round here. It's the heavy stuff. They come crawlin' out of their bedsits at night like fucking vampires. That's why I stay down the pier. No one disturbs you down there.

What about food? How do you eat?

With me fingers, that's how I eat, just like everyone else. There's bins, leftovers from cafes and stuff. An' I do wash, I wash all the time. The lavvies, sometimes the sea. That freezes your bollocks off. How much cash you got then? What you willing to pay?

I'll pay anything for you to come back. Listen to your cassette, man. Just listen to it. You could be the next big thing.

This is the next big thing. That's what they're all dying for round here. You buyin' or not?

What's it going to take me to convince you?

Just chill out, man. This shit will chill you out.

The tide slapped against the pier. We'd gone down to the beach to lean against the seawall and swig cheap cider. Dusk was setting in, the pier's wooden struts throbbing with the umpapah rhythm of the concert above. We looked out across the darkening sea.

You know how to do it, don't you?

I watched Billy Bong fumble with a lighter and foil.

I need a note. Rolled right, it's got to be rolled right.

It makes sense for me to do this, I said with nerves. I see it as my way of getting into your mind, seeing where you're coming from. I'll understand you then. And think about it, years from now they'll look back on this, they really will. Jesus in the desert for forty days and forty nights. If it takes that long, then so be it. I'm not going back without you, Billy Bong.

With the foil powdered, he held the lighter under it and inhaled the smoke. Then it was my turn—Alex the dull office boy who day in day out worked the nine-to-five. I almost knocked it from his hand, so nervous was I. But then I caught a quivering thread and sucked it darkly in.

We looked out across the vast blackness of the sea, at the flickering lights of the far-off bay, cars twinkling along the narrow coastal road. I put the cassette on full and laughed at Billy's words as they worked through my mind.

What the fuck is this?
You know that, Billy.

There was nothing to do but drift from one arcade to the next, sit in pokey cafés slurping tea, or play this game where you'd run between leaking gutters trying to get so wet that you'd catch pneumonia. He wouldn't admit it but I bloody well knew. Wet had a line about doing just that, running the gutters. I'd been there two weeks but had still not yet been granted an admission. We smoked pot and heroin. Billy Bong would disappear for half the day returning with these fat black red eyes, all moist and glazed over like he'd been experiencing a vision.

You are Billy. You know you are. How can you not be Billy?

Well all right, if you want, yes. I can't think of being anyone else.

His face kept fading in and out of focus.

Sing. You've got to sing then.

I can't sing. Why do you want me to sing? I've never sang except at school and that's years ago.

If you sing, I can make you famous. You've all the songs and everything. Those songs on the tape, they are works of art.

Your problem, you know what it is—it's vassalage. This Billy guy you keep going on about, who for some reason you think is me, that's what you want to do—you just want to use him as an escape from vassalage. You keep going on about how shy he is, how he gets stage fright.... Well maybe you just want to enslave him and that's what he's afraid of, becoming a vassal like you.

I felt that I was getting somewhere; entering negotiation. Only Billy would talk in this strange way, of vassalage.

That's not true. It would be Billy who benefits most. I'd be there to help. His manager. And if ever things got heavy, well, we'd just take it easy for a while. Come back to this place if you'd like.

I thought about how I used to sit at my desk for hour after hour, doing nothing. That seemed long ago, a different time. But I'm still here, aren't I? Why am I still here? I'm glad you came back here, in a way, and not to some other corporation. I'm here right in front of you because of that, as a warning. Though I didn't think it at the time you were my hero for doing what you did, walking out on that induction. You should have carried on walking. You really should. Dizze Rascal.

(iv)

Every morning Billy Bong would disentangle himself from his blanket and go over to the rock pool, where he'd pull off his underwear and crouch. I decided that I should do the same, although really not so long ago it would have appalled me to even think it. But I figured it would give me an advantage of sorts, help get him on my side so that he would be kind enough to admit who he was. This is what Roman legionaries did - crouching and shitting together - and they were utterly dependent on each other, a real unit. As the cold sea air breezed about my backside, I laughed to think of it. This will be in the annals of rock and roll, Billy, the annals of history. THE ANALS!

Wordlessly, Billy Bong kicked sand all over his excreta.

You can shit in the lavs up top if you want to. I don't bother goin' up there of a mornin'. There are people looking for me all over this place now.

We have to make a deal. You'd be crazy not to.

Listen, you've just got to ease off with this. You've got to ease off my case, bud.

A man came past walking a dog, and then a middle-aged couple out for a morning stroll. The rain beat down hard on us. I was still laughing. Roman legionaries, that's what we are. The annals of history.

I'm better off not staying around, Billy said, folding his blanket into his bag. I'm leaving.

You want breakfast? You hungry? Do you want me to treat you to a breakfast?

We walked beneath the seawall, Billy kicking seaweed and splashing through rock pools. There was poetry in this: I could hear his words, the soft strumming of his guitar.

We went to a cafe for breakfast. I dangled a pen right in front of him. You can't go. We haven't struck a deal yet.

I've just got to go, that's all. I came here to chill out. And all I get is some crazy guy following me everywhere, thinking I'm John fuckin' Lennon or somethin'. I don't sing. I don't write songs. I never have.

He'll fleece you, that bugger, the woman behind the counter said. We don't want druggies in here.

Billy here's going to be big. He'll be the next big thing.

Billy? He's not Billy. That's Greg. Him an' his mates used to come here all the time before I 'ad 'em banned.

Tupelo. Abbey Road. This location will be remembered. Tourists

will come here.

I bought Billy a second mug of tea. We smoked and watched the rain pattering against the windows.

I'm leaving today, Billy said. I'm getting the train into Manchester. I'll come with you.

It's up to you where you go but just forget this Billy shit.

Billy Bong.

Whatever.

We took the train that very afternoon. Billy said he had no money to pay the fares and we ended up having to jump the turnstile, and then the guards chased us through the concourse past the taxi rank and along Deansgate. It was really something. I felt very alive.

In a way, Alexander, you were looking for the authentic self—one that has been hopelessly lost in the machine. But still, there are limits. You have to accept the limits.

We went into a pub to celebrate our escape. Billy agreed he should play some gigs before cutting a CD. Then he said,

I do need to score some. You got a bank card?

A bank card?

Yeah, a bank card, debit or credit card, I need to get a line of credit going. You need a card for that. Any

card will do. It don't have to have anythin' on it.

And then he was gone. I watched him disappearing along the street.

Thirty minutes went by, an hour. I kept looking through the window expecting to see him but soon darkness was falling and I could hardly see anything at all. I didn't have my card any more, only the change in my pockets and a five pound note. I bought another drink, then another. And then I had no money left at all. It occurred to me then that Billy was never coming back.

I had to get out of there. It was cold and there wasn't much light on the streets. Drunks were teetering along, pissing down alleyways, picking out fights. Billy was somewhere in this city. I had to find him.

I sat on a bench watching figures flitting in front of the mottle-green windows of a warehouse. I could feel a cold breeze lifting off the black canal that threaded past it. I tried sleeping but it was impossible. I knew that I'd never see him again. I knew that I had lost him and I began to weep and scream thinking about this desk and the dreary nine-to-five that surely

now awaited me. I felt myself falling, descending badly.

It was that more than anything which made me do what I then did.

(v)

He was stranger. Just someone out for a midnight stroll. Maybe he'd had a jar or two, I really don't know. He never saw me coming. And then he was down on the ground being kicked and punched. They dragged me off of him, screaming madly.

And then there was only blackness.

He had on a suit, a suit and a tie—it was that more than anything that made me do it.

(vi)

The purpose of hexagonal pool was to further unhinge the confused mind, or so it seemed. I'd play from early morning until late afternoon when the second dose of medication was dispensed. By now, having accepted the diagnosis, I could more or less accept discordant pockets.

I was in the supervision ward of Fairland Hospital squandering time awaiting judgement from the psychiatrists. There was much screaming, much hustling and many remonstrations.

You have been sectioned under the Mental Health Act, Alexander Williams, and it will require an independent report to determine the value of continuing this pending treatment. On my bedside cabinet there was a card from BCC wishing me a swift recovery. It was full of comments and signatures and I couldn't stop reading them.

There's nothing at all wrong with you. Sooner you realise that the better for us all. You're needed here. Without you the Floor functions significantly less well. Missing you badly.

Whether my ability on the pool table had any bearing I didn't know. I surmised that the subtle deviations from the norm were all part of the planning. If you accepted the authenticity of the table then maybe you'd accept diagnosis too. It was Orwell's two plus two equals five. But what sort of organisation would require this to be circulated? Surely it would be self evident. You didn't have to be reminded that two plus two equals five. I thought about all the tiresome hours doing more or less nothing; how it had dragged me down.

It had made sense for me to seek out Billy.



In a way, Alexander, you were looking for the authentic self—one that has been hopelessly lost in the machine. But still, there are limits. You have to accept the limits.

The more I played the more I got used to the balls flying into the pockets from unlikely angles. In the real world, I'd been able to knock in a table within three to four minutes. Now I'd to forget all I'd ever learnt to beat manic depressives and cue-swinging schizophrenicals.

When not playing hexagonal pool or being counselled, I would sit in the hospital grounds writing letters to big bad record companies. I'd send

them the cassette in multiples of five.

But don't listen. If you listen you might end up in here with me. The words are powerful. They work down into your mind like hypnotism.

That's the reason why you're in here is it, Alex? That cassette of Billy's?

You can't hear it and not be otherwise. The words make you want to take off and drift. I understand now why he didn't want to go touring and cut a CD. He recognised that it was too powerful and unhinging. What would the world be like if all of us listened?

Fantasies are important though, aren't they, Alex? Without them everything would appear dull, flat and lifeless. I think the importance is in recognising where reality ends and fantasy begins.

But what if we've got it wrong? What if we're so blinkered that we can only accept what's right in front of us? We don't see Billy, only our shoddy desks, our grey monitors, all the tiresomeness and pointlessness of our mundane lives.

That's why we enjoy television, a good book or a good film—chasing after something that isn't there, at least temporarily, because we recognise the boundaries, where one thing becomes another.

You think he doesn't exist, is that what you're saying? All you have to do is call Mrs. Grimes the landlady at our digs and she'll tell you all about him. Billy is real.

Well there's no denying that. But this journey you went on, this person you thought was him, well, that's altogether different. It could be said that you'd built him up in your mind into something that he isn't and in doing so you lost your grip on reality. And anyway, more than likely it wasn't Billy you found but someone who just happened to look like him. Because think about it, everywhere you looked you kept finding him. He was there, yes, but only in your mind.

I don't know. It won't happen again though. If I did all that again, looking for Billy, I'd be a lot more clearheaded in my approach. I'd put adverts in the papers, a photo-fit.

Fantasy and reality, Alex. The important thing is seeing where one ends and the other begins.

And boredom?

Boredom?

The boredom of the nine-to-five. Hour after hour, day after day, week after week, years of it until you drop stone down dead.

Your job? Well, I suppose it's just something you have to put up with. Think about it this way: if you never experience boredom you'd never experience excitement. I get bored here, you know, dreadfully so. All the masses of paperwork are enough to unhinge anyone. Today for example I'll be spending the morning talking to patients and the afternoon filling in forms. I'll get home and there'll be more. I'm holding a therapy session on the acute ward tomorrow and that requires an awful lot of planning, reading patients' notes and establishing strategies to ensure everyone is involved. Now that might sound exciting and it is the first couple of years. But the same old issues keep propping up: it becomes repetitive—like any job. But I don't let it get to me. Instead I just get on with it. I enjoy the good times and I endure the bad. I make sure that I have something to look forward to at the end of the week; my own time.

But what if there aren't good times? What if the distinction between good and bad doesn't exist, no black and white only grey, oceans and skies of it? What if it just goes on and on, day after day, this misery of nothingness?

I told him about you then, going from induction to induction, working the month, resigning. I didn't know that I would ever meet you again. Certainly didn't think I'd be telling you all this.

Happy, you know. Genuinely happy.

And just wait till the poor sod gets married, owns a house, has kids. He'll have to work then and it'll come as a real shock to him. Do you know about five years ago I used to think just like you, Alex? I thought about quitting my job and travelling the world, writing a journal or something. And then I met the girl of my dreams. We're married now with a third kid on the way. It gets bad and not just the repetition either. There's a sense of hopelessness, nothing can be done for some patients, the acute cases. Sometimes I can't face getting out of bed of a morning. But then I think about the babies. I've got no choice but to get up and take on the day. It takes away a lot of the pain, knowing that I have these responsibilities.

But I don't want to accept something just because of responsibilities.... And anyway, I don't really have responsibilities. The only responsibility I have is to my self. I am a free individual. Or at least I would be if it wasn't for my job. I have aspirations. They are thwarted. Don't you ever think you're wasting your time, living like that, the nine to five?

I do my job. I do it as best as I can and then I go home to be with my wife and kids and it feels right.

I crunched my Styrofoam cup; the coffee flowed down my fingers leaving a sticky residue. I really wanted to kill him then, this fuckin' finger-lickin' psychiatrist. I wanted to punch his fuckin' lights out for him.

But you know what you're doing don't you? You know what you've done? You've given away freedom, given away your time. It's your time, Mark. No one else's.

I've swapped it, I suppose. I've swapped my freedom for love; for love and responsibility. It's a bloody good swap, you know. It really bloody well is.

(vii)

They said I was getting better.

Alexander Williams, you are no longer descending. You are right and ready to go out into the big bad world.

By then, Dizze Rascal, I had chalked up so many wins against the manic depressives and schizoid maniacs that I'd lost count. The pockets no longer seemed so much to be in the wrong places; the balls zinged right in. In fact, it seemed to me that all pool tables should be designed as such, and in many other incongruous shapes too.

The more I thought about what my psycho had said, the more it appealed. I had, it could be said, come to terms. I would spend this happy life as a crunching, turning cog in the Big Complex Corporate machine. I'd need love, of course, and many babies.

I'll be a static ghost for forty, fifty hours of the week, but having ventured out into the world of romance and love I'd have also a nuptial wife.

Wanting to be this big crazy record producer was nothing but a dream—a puerile fantasy of the stupid graduate boy.

You're making progress, Alex. Good progress. You are no longer Alexander Williams descending.

The night before I was due to be discharged I thought long and hard about it, and in the sunshine morning I packed away my paltry possessions, all the cards I'd been sent, and waited for the taxi to arrive.

Take a tenner from petty cash, the psycho said. On his desk there was a new photograph. The week before his wife had given birth to a third child, a boy. There were tears welling right up into my eyes and cascading down my cheeks.

It seemed bizarre that less than a month ago you'd considered me sick enough to be sectioned and now you're paying to get rid of me.

You'll receive an outpatient's card but whether you act on that is your own decision. You're not ill, not really, but I'd recommend that you sort out your life, your priorities. If you do want to be a record producer it's not going to happen by following strangers around with a cassette player and punching some poor bugger to the ground.

No, you're right. And anyway I'm going to forget all that. I'm going to be just like everyone else. I'll listen to music, I'll make tapes perhaps, but I won't be a producer. I'll be a cog in the big fat corporate machine.

I looked disinterestedly towards the motorway, at the fat black bulbous clouds tumbling in towards me.

You have to take responsibility for your actions. That's what it's about. Let's say you found a girl you absolutely doted on and the choice was between this Billy and her.

I don't know, I said, I really don't know, and the rain began hammering down.

(viii)

Of course suicide was an option, the easy way out for the waster, the malingerer. I didn't believe in no religion at all. If I took my own life, Diz-zee Rascal, there'd be no angry venomous god waiting to crush me.

I had touched greatness with Billy. I had actually touched greatness with him, by just being with him. And if I could find him, if I could find him...it would all be so very sweet.

Have you seen Billy Bong? Yes Billy, Billy Bong? I need him. I'm looking for him. Looking for him every damned where.

But no one would listen.

Alexander Williams had been ill, he'd been cruelly descending, and you had to be gentle with him.

Time passed, Diz-zee Rascal. Time went on by.

It only makes it worse if you humour him. You've to tell him no. Pull him back in line. Alexander Williams has POTENTIAL. Or is that had? Alexander Williams had potential. He had potential in this big clanking corporate machine. Anyway, another mark against his name and sorry, but really, he's gone. Last warning. Gone.

Buckle down, Alex. Buckle the fuck down or they'll kick your arse out onto the diabolical streets. Hell.

If a cog is faulty you simply replace it. Loyalty and goodness can only stretch so far. The machine has to keep ticking over, tick-tock, tick-tock. Opportunities seized, turbulent waters navigated.

I knew this. I understood my position to be precarious. I had been on the very edge, the precipice, but now I was back. I would sit at this desk here, Diz-zee, and do my work to the best of my ability, answering the phone, writing reports, calling clients, all the usual.

But Billy was in my mind. He would not let go. His songs were within me, deep inside me. I'd be sat at this very desk and a rhyming couplet would appear as if out of nowhere, and this would be followed by a line, chorus, verse, or on the radio there'd be a familiar riff and I'd imagine the voice of him bursting through.

There were strange looks of course and the rumours spread. It was said I had less than a month left. Other averred that I'd already been dismissed and simply came here for the warmth, with the floor manager too kind to have me ejected.

Finally, I was persuaded to take my long due flexi.

The rent hadn't been paid and the room was a scene from the very depths of dissension. I had been in there now for three weeks, contemplating it all, where it was heading. I'd go out drinking alone, the worst of dives, and my only solace was to invite back dark-eyed drunks with puffy cheeks and blistering vaginas. With so many tinnies littering the floor, the slightest movement of arm or leg caused a metallic crunch. The ashtrays were overflowing with dope ash, a foul grey layer over everything.

During the day I'd watch a monochromatic television showing endless repeats of sitcoms, DIY shows and gardening programmes. I seemed to be surrounded by clocks or rather I was attentive to their presence, the ghostly flickering digits, hands moving onwards into the vast eternity. I couldn't help but dwell on what the psycho had said up at the hospital and sometimes the vision of a young woman, a beautiful woman, would come to me. I'd reach out to touch her. I'd think her real.

One morning the landlady hammered on the door waking me from my stupor.

A terrible stench in here and look at this mess. I must remind you that you're required to maintain this room in a comestible condition.

I buried my head under the pillow groaning that she'd used the wrong word.

I beg your pardon.

Comestible means it can be eaten.

You'll not be eating anything in here. You know the rules. Now why are you not in work?

Flexi. And anyway, what the hell are you doing barging in? I pay for this room.

No, you paid for this room. You used to pay for this room. You're so far behind with the rent that I've every right to turn you out. The only reason why I don't is the goodness of my heart. Two hundred and ten pounds. Either that or you're out by the week. Do you understand?

Out by the week, eh? Out by the week? Yeah, the week. Okay. I'll be long, long gone by then.

So I swigged the sour remains of a bottle and sat by the window looking at the motorway streaming endlessly into the city and back again. There's no way to stop it, I thought. It will go on forever, long after you're gone Alexander Williams.

I listened to the cassette again, although I'd been told to destroy it or lock it up in a safe or a box or something, Pandora. I still liked it, you know. But something was missing. That original quality of surprise, I suppose, that sense of addiction.

That night I went out to top up supply. Storm clouds were gathering and the air had a stark chill. But at least I had a bottle, a tenth of dope and Billy Bong playing into my hairy holes. When later that night there was a knock on the window, it didn't surprise me at all. There she was, this girl of my dreams, all gossamer and airy but nevertheless real. I needed to clean up, to take a shower, but she told me not to. She wanted me for myself and not anything else, this real enough girl of my dreams.

Money's old rope, she said. And your job's no damned good.

We sat on the bed and smoked the dope.

Billy Bong, she said. I'd like us to listen to him, together.

I'm not meant to. Warned.

Come on, she said, clutching my hand.

She sprawled her legs out across mine and I took it from the Walkman and slotted it into the recorder. By now the sky was tinged blue-black and lightning flashed in a multitude of directions. We breathed in the cool air and made rollicking love, listening to Billy.

The smell of you, I said. It's the smell of you I love, that above everything else. I could die for this smell. I could die for you. Lay down my life for you.

She put a finger to my honest lips. I knelt between her legs and

looked up into her glimmering eyes. I saw Billy Bong in there. And other things too.

We have the same thoughts, you and I, the same thoughts. It will last forever.

Time, she said. Time moves on.

Not in the moment.

I kissed her. I whispered into her ear. The voice of Billy Bong shimmered all around. I fell asleep after we'd made love, and it was the gentlest sleep ever, so soft and comforting like being a boy again held in your mother's arms.

In the morning she was gone, the only sign that she was ever with me at all the wonderful smell of her and the door caught in a gentle swing. I threw back the curtains and watched her disappearing into the mist.

A light drizzle had begun to fall as I made my way along the street, thinking that the only thing to do now was to follow.

By when I reached the shopping precinct the sun was rising to dapple across stretches of black water and all the great encircling tower blocks. It was now that I saw Billy. It was unmistakably him, as real as the daylight. It struck me how fragile he looked like he'd been through a bad time but gentle bad like in one of his songs. I quickened my pace and we headed down into the ghostly dawn towards the very edge of the city and the swaying fields.

Billy turned to me now, his face lit bright, and he was singing.

He was singing a song about time and how together we could descend into it.

I said goodbye to the world that morning, Dizzee Rascal. I said goodbye, Billy Bong, so long. And it's why you find me here right now, at this desk.