

Ground, Figure, Sky

Grant Foster

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| Dear Child |

Dear Tyrants,

You know who you are. Regardless of your occupations you never seem to question yourselves. You're the type of people who think certainty is a strength and doubt is a weakness. Nothing is ever quite as simple as that and this is why I find you so profoundly repulsive. However, the root of my abhorrence for you is not limited to your intrinsic simplicities. The main problem I have is how you take us all for fucking fools.

You present lies as facts and you present the truth as speculation. What is truth I hear you say? Well, that can vary, but I do know that truth is not self-serving. You enter conversation as if it were a debate (debates are hollow constructs in which winners and losers are defined). Truth is not about victory. I have been around people who pride themselves on their ability to debate and I conclude that debate is a form of psychosis valued by manipulators and engineers.

I want you to stop, think and shut up. I want you to close your eyes and actually really ask yourself if you believe in the things you're saying? Is there not a flicker of doubt in there somewhere? A little candle-light of indecision flickering gently between your ears?

If so, then please pay attention to that, as pausing to think is not a sign of weakness. By doing so I'm sure we can all come to some kind of arrangement — be it on the street, at the pub or in the houses of parliament...

If not, then we're all truly fucked.

Yours,
Doubt.



Rembrandt at The Glass House

Rembrandt is limping down wet London streets. The night is drawing in and cold frost permeates the air as icy winds hit his bloody bulbous nose. The kicking he received outside McDonald's last night was no good. He could handle it at first — almost a novelty — but the fear of these unprovoked beatings, each more ruining and paralysing than the last, coupled with the night's plummeting temperatures are starting to take its toll.

Last night's belting was real bad. He had learnt from hard experience to not discern their faces, preferring instead to hunch into a tight ball, like a bearded porcupine. This act of weak subservience seemed to make it pass quicker.

One of the boys had stamped his ankle with such venom, that he heard an unnatural crunch as the force ripped his tendon. The pain made his stomach curl, a stream of warm piss soaked his matted hair as steel-toe-capped loafers hit his kidneys, spine, chest and groin. Perverse pianists hammering home brutal discordance. The Blockheads, they never bother talking, there's no explanation of the act — the violence itself acts as its own explanation.

This morning the wind rose quickly where last night he slept, just off Oxford Street. It's like a wind tunnel when the air picks up. He was shivering violently at 6am and knew it was time to move. As he began to stand, Rembrandt found a £5 note miraculously under his urine soaked cardboard-bed. He wondered if The Blockheads had left it there for him? As some kind of penance to themselves, it reminded him of the churches and the way his community behaved in them. That was a long time ago now.

Rembrandt now had £6.37 in his possession, the other £1.37 had been left over from his previous days expenses. His time in Holland had trained him to count money with the zeal and foresight of any city trader. He had enough to get a tea and a few cans of K, perhaps even chicken and chips once the shops opened up around midday.

Throughout the day, Rembrandt thought what a pleasure it would be to go for a scotch in a warm pub and to think nothing particular, to just stare and dream.

Walking, rickety, down the dimly lit staircase of the Glasshouse Stores, he did just that. Taking what felt like an eternity to reach the bar, Rembrandt failed to see the barmaid's cat-like stare; cruel, nocturnal and unusual. She clocks his piss-soaked hair, rotten clothes and is additionally repulsed by the sight of a large blue bottle fly buzzing around his ear. She feels an original and profound disgust.

"A small scotch please", Rembrandt says softly.

Swiveling without acknowledgement, she pours a house whiskey and pushes it towards him with the tip of a lacquered nail,

"£2,49", she says curtly.

Counting out the change in his large hands, he manages a weak smile, outstretching his arm to offer the money in a lightly closed palm. Anticipating the prospect of touch, the bar maid recoils. Rembrandt is quick to realise this and slowly lays the change on the counter. She looks at the change, then at him and then back to the change, quickly swiping each coin into her hand with her sharp stiletto nail.

Taking his drink, Rembrandt finds a booth in the back of the pub and sits to face its inhabitants. Putting the cheap scotch to his lips, he carefully takes a small nip, knowing not to drink too eagerly. All at once he notices a young man in the booth next to him, dressed in grey tracksuit bottoms, canvas shoes and a grey tie. It's a smart, casual look that Rembrandt finds alien — like most things of recent. The man catches sight of Rembrandt and nervously looks away.

The quiet chatter of the bar under the dark oak beams of its ceiling begin to send Rembrandt into reverie. The beams are heavy and austere, they bow at points and there's a sadness to them — the grain is hypnotic and Rembrandt begins to discern patterns which transport him back to the great oaks of his youth — of wind, rustling leaves, nature's stirring silence.

The barmaid, pink and grotesquely cherubic, unknowingly positioned under the central canopy of the roof's oak beams, reminds Rembrandt of the Ox before the cull, at the apex of crucifixion. Another small nip of scotch, allowing his eyes to close, he feels a brief peace.

Looking up, the man in the tracksuit has left, an empty coke bottle and a small black rectangle remain on the table. In the past, when Rembrandt has sat idle in summer parks, tracing his surroundings with a dirty finger in the dry dust, he had noticed these bizarre rectangles. He remembered thinking how these objects are like appendages, reminding him of a walking stick or a wooden leg — Rembrandt still has no clear idea as to the function of the object — he just notices them held to peoples' ears as they speak alone.

Curiously, Rembrandt reaches over to pick the object up. In the black glass he can barely discern his face, the dried crusts of blood around his nose and the lank hair are somewhat hidden by the dark reflection of the glass. Vexed with confusion, he thumbs the rectangle over in his great palm, stupefied he stares back.

A painting of himself from almost 500 years ago greets him. He remembers that figure, vaguely, as one is able to hazily recall a single moment from their childhood, marooned from the surrounding events of that time.

Standing to take a final nip of scotch, Rembrandt limps up the stairs, wondering in what ways things will continue to change.



Overcrowded
prisons. The cure. Injections of intense
experience — the sentence of 1000 years,
delivered via the hypodermic needle. Rush
into the veins, ten seconds of actual time, an
entire internal millennia in one prison cell,
23 hours a day for 365,000 days.
The worst acid you could
ever imagine.

—
Vladimir's Oyster, 2079
—

Vladimir the Vampire is crossing the flyover above 12 lanes of traffic shooting off in both directions. A wonderful inspired sight he thinks to himself. Crossing a small slip road, he offers his right thumb to the turnstile, pausing a moment as the gates of The Great World Park open, like parting palms, he elegantly walks through.

Adjusting the small tube in his nose that connects with the oxygen supply, Vladimir notices patrol cars circling the perimeter, possibly to keep protective watch over a group of wardens in testudo formation complete in high-vis suits. Tannoy speakers line the park, majestic with their mechanical necks, like black swans ready to muffle the roar of the motorway.

Vladimir enjoys the park and its rural restraints. He is happy to see everything so well ordered. The trees caged in their bullet proof shells, floral capillaries entombed inside transparent plastic monoliths. He pauses, noticing a small conker on the floor, what a delight to think that conkers come in the long summertime now. Passing the NO HOMELESS signs and into the children's play area, he thinks about the future, what is possibly left he asks himself?

This thought provides Vladimir with a twinge of stirring melancholy, as he arrives on the edge of the children's play area. Vladimir catches sight of a lone man being swallowed by the bright yellow gaze of the testudo formation.

Fifteen batons beating, clockwork lances, bang, bang, bang, an incredible sight. This must have been the purpose of the patrol he thought. The patrol disperse, uprighting themselves, flowering slowly, like an evolutionary chart morphing into single lone figures, as their truncheons, boots and quiffed hair are united by an oily, light-dense black. The lone man winces on the floor, struggling to breathe, his jaw dislodged at an impossible angle, a pool of dark red blood leisurely surrounds the now motionless body.

The man strayed too close to the children's play area without the correct permit, Vladimir thought. He knows the rules, everyone does. His guilt is sacrosanct. A patrol vehicle arrives and two more figures lift the lifeless body onto the flat bed of the vehicle's tail, quickly driving off, unaware of their heroic status. As the children in the playground bounce ecstatically up and down, choruses of patrol!, patrol!, patrol!, echo throughout the park.

Vladimir was proud of himself. It started to dawn on him, that his life's work was nearing completion. Ever since he organised the underground gladiatorial combats in his home town of Leningrad in 1923, he had felt a growing sense of profound happiness. Watching two men fight each other to the death had been a stark revelation. Granted, the men in the ring reacted to violence in different ways, but Vladimir was more interested in the crowd as it was they who remained the same.

It was within the wild ecstasy of the crowd that Vladimir began to understand what society really wanted. The mass, they were the real killers. As it was they who vindicated the existence of the fighters in the first instance. Their insatiable desire for violence united groups, acting as collective executioner, swarming at the foot of the scaffold.

His next thought was to introduce opposing combatants — people who had held long-standing feuds were invited into the arena. Given the opportunity to project their own grievances onto the warring parties, how would the crowd react?

Vladimir carefully selected contrasting groups to fight; favoured vs maligned child, employee vs employer, vexed wife vs adulterous husband. Vladimir jotted down the variables with a hungry diligence. As men, women and children ripped each other limb from limb, he noticed everyone's reaction was the same — revenge was a natural currency enjoyed by all.

This tribalism that Vladimir cultivated provided a purpose that plugged a void. Over the coming decades, Vladimir was able to mobilise the masses against themselves — only on a larger scale. He knew that the gladiatorial combats were experiments in manipulation — if the conditions were right people would fight but most importantly he knew that people would watch. What he needed was a simultaneous, large-scale lack of questioning.

Vladimir realised morality and ethics were not absolutes — there was no baseline for right or wrong. Morality had an uncanny knack of slamming its doors shut once violence was instigated. Revenge obscured ethics which could be used to stir compassion. And this was Vladimir's prime objective.

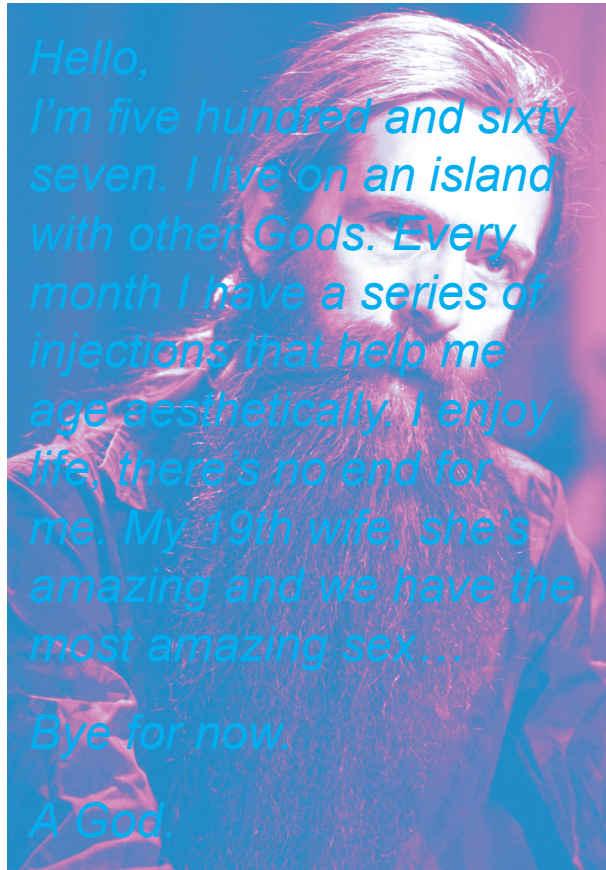
By deliberately manufacturing a mythical image of a collective past, Vladimir was able to dissolve individual identity, replacing it with a collective tribalism. The individual was vanquished to a vast bottomless sea of a communal soul. And this came to complement people's new sense of collective identity that valued difference as opposed to similarity.

Vladimir began to manipulate the direction of people's anger by introducing rampant economic inequality over several generations. He introduced an economic system that undercut local communities which had long identified themselves with work — anger and resentment brewed. He militarised the police and made people distrust the news. Protest was suppressed at a whim. Vladimir, like a chemist in a laboratory, was able to channel fury and rage along a sideways chain of interconnecting social systems. This ingenious method, Vladimir knew, would ensure his own power and longevity.

Over the course of generations, the lessons of the gladiatorial arena as an experimental microcosm began to hibernate in backyards, shopping centres, pubs and communities. Entire generations began to lose political conscience, their apathy coupled with economic defamation and consumerist lust, created a profound distrust. These successive generations, acting on impulses of violent revenge opened an insurmountable chasm that could not be crossed.

Walking with a bashful ecstasy towards the turnstiles of the park's exit, Vladimir chuckled. He really couldn't believe he actually had done it. Too much time had passed between the past and present — people had forgotten who they truly were.

The world now, really was Vladimir's oyster.



St Sebastian Embracing the Dragon

Leant back against a great oak tree, soothing waves of euphoria pulsate through his body as St Sebastian pierces his flesh with another hypodermic needle. Seventeen needles in total hang from his pockmarked skin; he resembles a hedgehog with drooping spines.

The heroin spreads through St Sebastian's junk-loving-cells, a warming fuzz quickly alleviates his jitters and he melts, contently back into the tree. Finding it difficult to discern the texture of the oak's rough bark with his own track-marked skin, St Sebastian sits slumped, enjoying the sight of his two bare feet, as he slowly nods off.

St Sebastian was always beautiful. Big dopey-dough eyes, pleading, loving, wondering upwards. He was a Saint amongst Sinners. His natural athleticism envied by the thuggish, brutish horde. However, Sebastian, like most of the other Saints, had lost their real jobs once God had fully died. Some did manage to find other careers, Saint Matthew and Saint Leonard both enjoyed relatively illustrious vocations in both the banking and criminal sectors, however, the majority of the Saints seemed to fall on hard times once the siren call of God ceased. And for St Sebastian it was no different.

The loss of St Sebastian's earthly job was not unexpected. His office colleagues found his martyrdom irritating and condescending, they were secretly envious of his ability to communicate with the opposite sex with compassion and quiet dignity. In the infancy of his employment, St. Sebastian's colleagues, fresh and exited at the prospect of a marathon Friday night drinking binge, would ask,

"You down with us at the Spoons tonight, Seb?"

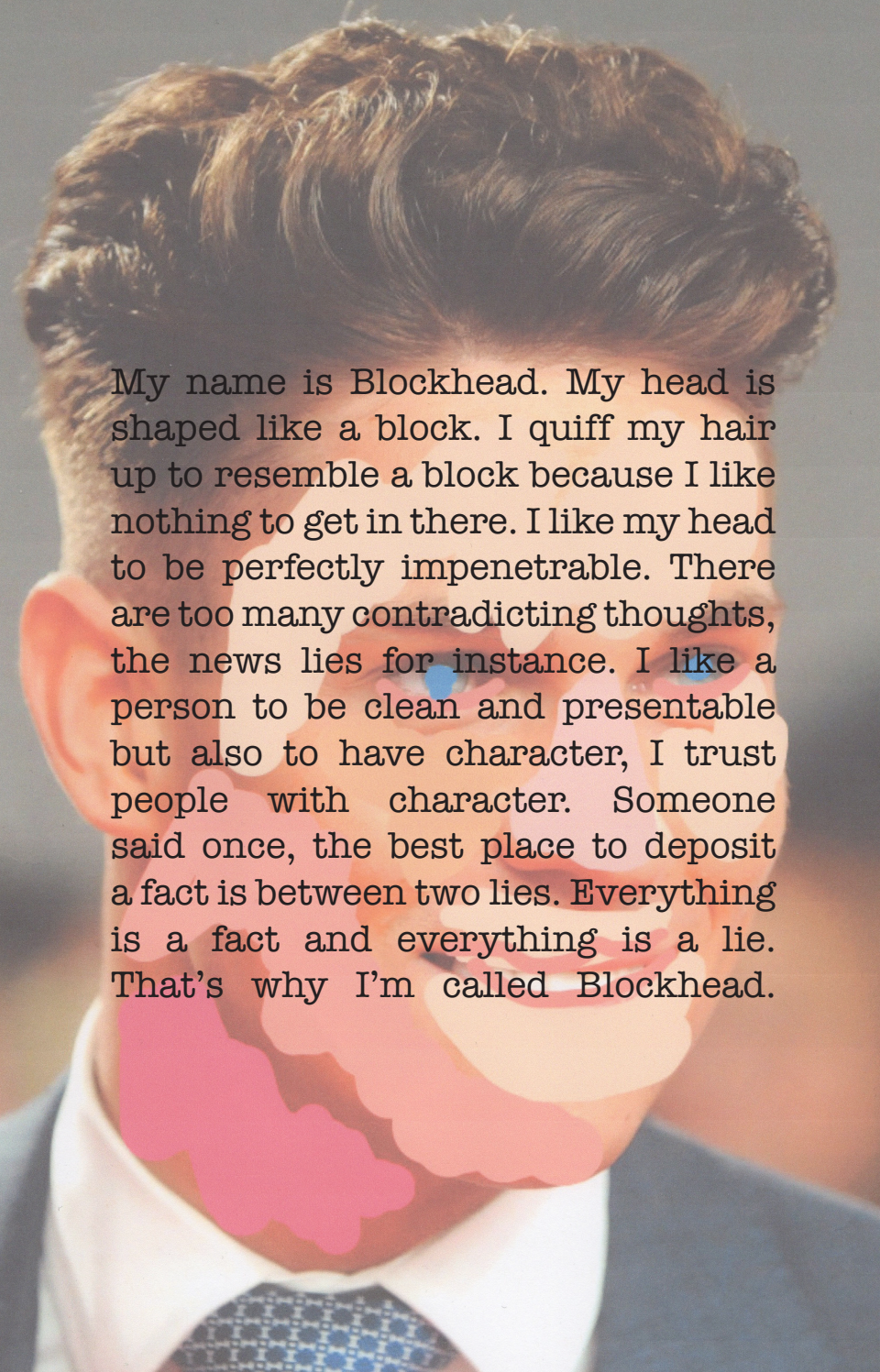
He'd thank them courteously, but always refrain

"I can't tonight. Thank you though."

St Sebastian found his colleagues coarse and rough. He wondered if their idiocy was in part to do with their age, but he suspected that that

wasn't the total reason for it. Their conversation irritated him, it was crass horseplay, often the games operated around verbal subjugation and humiliation. They could be cruel and would sneer at any idea that didn't celebrate — cars, sports or new clothes. None of this was of any interest to St Sebastian.

Drifting in and out of a warm consciousness against that great oak tree, St Sebastian thinks carefully about his life. How did it come to this? At what point was God replaced by the needle? The answer wasn't clear to St Sebastian. It was as if the bonds that held him to life had been severed once God began to ignore his pleas. He remembered it well, the first time he realised he was truly alone. Walking the city's nights, a terrible crushing loneliness descended directly from the heavy clouds. Thick rains ready to burst from fluffy seams. He tried to get on in life, he really did. He had various jobs, a few friends — the semblance of a normal life — but something still didn't fit right for him. Once he found the warmth of the needle, that intense internal burning glow, it become clear — the image of himself renewed, afresh, for the time that now lived around him.



My name is Blockhead. My head is shaped like a block. I quiff my hair up to resemble a block because I like nothing to get in there. I like my head to be perfectly impenetrable. There are too many contradicting thoughts, the news lies for instance. I like a person to be clean and presentable but also to have character, I trust people with character. Someone said once, the best place to deposit a fact is between two lies. Everything is a fact and everything is a lie. That's why I'm called Blockhead.

Dear Child,

I grew up on the southern fag butt of England. There is a collection of seaside towns where, if you were to take a walk through, you'd see letter boxes flapping like delirious-nosey-tongues, curtains with grey eyes peering through slits, malevolent smirks as you wait 20 minutes for a bus. It is a place where suspicion is still achingly tangible.

I've always felt there to be a thin sliver of sadism that underlies the English psyche — and perhaps it's that quiet lurking sadism that I recognise now on the TV screen, when I watch our politicians making impenetrable statements — about goodness, fairness and what's right and wrong.

Now, after only a few decades it seems to me that politics has started to respond to this distrust by channelling it directly into their policies. Instead of us challenging it directly, I wonder if we've come to accept it — I mean, what can we actually do?

I got drunk the other month at dinner and shouted to my friends who weren't really in the mood, "We're fucked, because everything we believe in is gone". Apparently I fell off my chair after that point, making a fuss about how this brilliant point had been sabotaged by a faulty chair. Yet when I woke, I still felt right.

The fickleness of politics reminds me of school. I hated school for that reason. If you knew what to say you could get by, I feel quite lucky in a way as in those days I knew what to say — perhaps I could even have been a politician? But I don't think I went to the right school.

The main thing school taught me was how you could manipulate situations to fit your own ends. It's easy to do — you can play people off against each other, covering yourself, which takes the heat from you. It's natural in a sense. But in school, the good thing is that you're young so no one takes you that seriously.

In one of Derek Jarman's journals he wrote something along the lines of "politicians display all the seven deadly sins and politics itself is the eighth". He was good, Jarman. He had the wit of a viper and the mind of a Saint.

The question people often ask is how the next generation will come to judge the last, I think it's equally as interesting to ask the same question the other way round. How will my generation come to view yours? I can only speculate.

Perhaps you won't even really question things that much — that's fine. I imagine you'll be too busy. I imagine your sense of freedom will be defined by escapism — which is similar to my generation, as we escaped off into drugs — but your escapism might be virtual? Perhaps freedom for you will be the enhanced reality of VR?

Imagine coming home from a tedious mind crushing job of the future (I know people are saying currently they won't really exist, but I think they will for some, either as a form of social penance or through some other cruel injustice), and you slip beyond the everyday into the virtual. Where you can actually see photons vibrating from shards of distant starlight as you discover a unknown planet. Or do anything else, that you can't do here.

My intuition though, is that this virtual world is a trap. Like drugs, which force you to relinquish control over the very thing that we need to have total command over — ourselves. Our actions form our identities in the real sentient world and without that sense of autonomy, you will forfeit your political, social (therefore moral), and even artistic independence to forces that will have no interest in you.

Don't make that happen.

Yours,
Me.

Limited edition of 100

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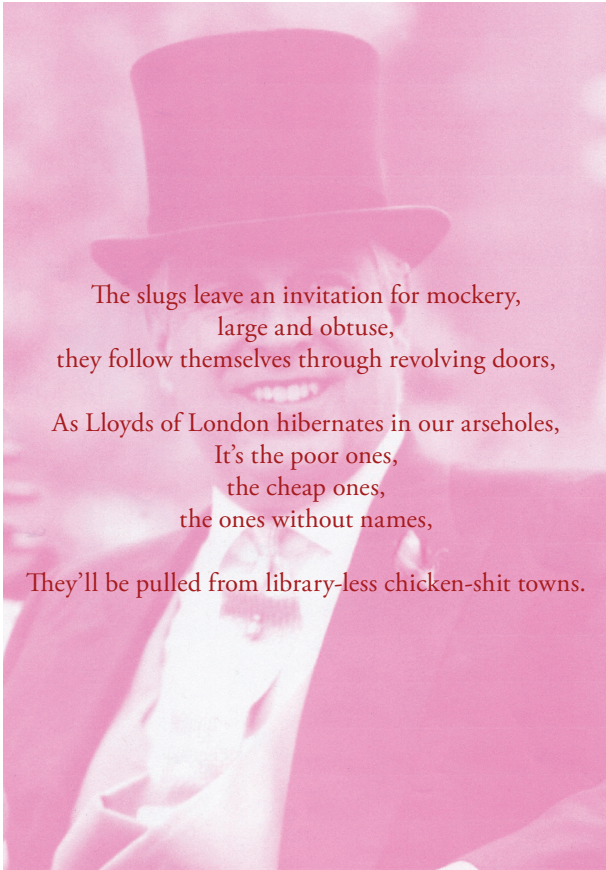
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Grant Foster is primarily a painter who lives and works in London. He was born in 1982 and grew up in Worthing.

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The slugs leave an invitation for mockery,
large and obtuse,
they follow themselves through revolving doors,

As Lloyds of London hibernates in our arseholes,
It's the poor ones,
the cheap ones,
the ones without names,

They'll be pulled from library-less chicken-shit towns.

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