



darren francis  
belong

**Belong**

**Darren Francis**

For my twin lost loves; L and A.

For everybody that L and A lost, and that I lost, along the way.

My blessings.

**In**

'Let's go'

he says, takes my arm, we walk bright streets and the buildings are attentive. We met at a party, back in all directions, and then to his flat. Friend of a friend of a sometimes friend. To a squat where he leads me with sunny hands, shows the path by flashlight past vacant floors to his room. Feeling seems the most I can do for now, just slips and streams of people that I can't make me. The bodies are interchangeable. Only the slightest detail makes them shine.

His room is bare. A bed against one wall, a rack of clothes at another, scattered paperbacks and porn mags. A table, a bottle of whisky, an open packet of cigarettes, a line of CDs. I always admire people who can strip their possessions down to barest need.

'What did you say your name was?'

he says, and I tell him, he says

'yeah, I'm Joe,'

scratches his scalp with his left hand, two fingers missing above the knuckles, says

'lost them in the Gulf. Better than some of those guys.'

Looking out of the window you can see the whole of London, river mid-ground and the road below. People run and Joe shoots them down with his hand. Cars flicker like pineal signals. The river floats black like oil.

'Don't stand too near the window,'

Joe says,

'the floor's not safe there, it could give.'

'Jesus, how do you live here?'

'It's fine as long as you know where you shouldn't tread. Do you want a drink?'

He moves the whisky bottle from one side of the table to the other. I nod and he pours and I slug. Have no worry for tomorrow; it seems so far away. He pushes incense sticks into cracks in the walls. I go to the toilet and when I get back he's already undressed and under the covers. Slim kiss of one I could grow to. I'll take any opportunity to pass some time, to push fewer minutes between me and the next intersection.

There's no oxygen here. We breathe refracted starlight. Make sex, sheets dirty with someone, I take his hands, fragile as bird-skulls, place them on my hips. Could almost fall for the bearer of such hands. From me to the stratosphere. His spin dazzles me. I'm an Alice rabbit-chasing. Trace freckled skin like a map of stars. Occasional cigarettes. He turns a feather in his fingers. I want a perfect body like the body in his mind when he holds me. Cut a

name into my skin, my arms bent around like scythes.

Only scraps of light remain. I set my mind to wake me up at eight. As I slide into sleep I hear him coughing, says

'my ideal lover is one third man, one third woman, one third angel,'

that's not me, I know. I pull his body in, adapt to its mass and volume, sniff paths across his shoulders and neck. A body can only be respite, an illusion of saved and never the genuine thing.

I wake up and my mouth tastes metal. It's still dark. Still his four walls and floor and ceiling. My skin itches from his burnt-corn stubble. Can never sleep in unfamiliar rooms. He gives me his business card, but we both know I'll never call him. On the way out of the flat I turn a wrong handle, open the door to a man bent on cushions wanking at a magazine. Our eyes connect then he dips away. I mumble and close the door.

Then I'm back on the street. I navigate to the nearest tube station, via the nearest pub.

All I need for now. Hours exposed to strangers and fluid interactions. I carry with me the salt-water pulse that makes them who they are. Don't track names because names are insignificant, tokens given at birth. All I know is my hair in a mirror. But beside Joe last night I remembered

out at sea and all clocks dissolving to needless. Blue in every direction. Nothing but water between me and something solid. Wind chases waves across the ocean. Currents pull heat across the globe. My father and I stand on a ship, watch basking sharks laze past. No senses, only sun. Nights we walk the beach, under stars so thick and bright I can feel their weight. The one true time I felt power over my father or over anything; he pointed to a star, asked me its name and I said

'Antares',

and I knew that the light received by my retinas left that star more than five hundred years before he was born -

familiar with nothing. History falls into place around what's presumed to be true, until it's breathed as real. It's like when you hold a sea-shell to your ear and it tells you a story about where it came from. Listen. On my back and counting stars. Light from long before me. Travel where wheels caress, into an adult world of metal and light

and motion. Can go to any place I want now, but always still see the same stars. This land was once water and will be water again. Forget the colour green. Do the stone walls and fences remember?

The human body is such an obsolete design. Where is evolution when you need it? Where are my wings, my photosynthesis, my telepathy, my vacuum-breathing lungs? Still shaking off sleep, I've got so much to do.

'The reason I love you is because you're a wandering minstrel;'

the old turn on the radio trick. Ex-lover Fiona taught me that, she and I umbrella-hunched, hiking fields of rain. if you want to know the future in any given moment, you should turn on the radio and the first line you hear will give you a clue as to you what you need to do.

At work I sit in front of a PC and tap away my days. Wide windows fill me with the city. My hair is tied back. Hands too used to ink, drink, nicotine. Nails chewed. I input people's names and addresses, their age-group, social habits, which brands they buy, their finances, the make of car they own, which news channels they watch, where they buy their wallpaper, etcetera. When I've finished each person I click

'Enter'

then

'Send'

and their details go two floors above me, where other people decide which products best suit each entry's needs. I sometimes wonder who the respondents are, if the forms I copy from are genuine, if it would make any difference if I invented the answers. Sometimes I do invent the answers. I get paid by the hour, after all. I have slipped through jobs for the last five years. All of them temporary, all of them in offices. Can never hold on to what I get, never a skin I'd make home. Same work, just different faces and buildings.

As always when I'm working I smoke too much,

'think I'll take up smoking too,'

a colleague who I think is named Matt says,

'you get more breaks that way.'

I move pieces of paper from one pile to another, try to prevent new pieces of paper from

catching up with me. The elevator carries me from floor to floor. The server carries my work ahead of me. Trains take me from city sector to city sector. Just places I spend time in. Just movement. Like I was pushed out at birth and am carried by momentum. Every day on the way to the tube station I pass the same man who always says,

'can you spare some change please?'

and every day I ignore him. City square and falling sunlight. I walk through demonstrations. Out from job all I want to do is fuck, eat junk, sup beer.

In a Bloomsbury pub I drink and watch the sun go down. Fans twist air around the room. I feel so out of place in a suit, just the uniform I wear when I go to work, not me. Scarce-shaven Robin drifts through, stops for a stout then on his way again. We talk of storm-whispers, the relative quality of draught ales, and the etiquette of burglary.

'A guy in my department got broken into the other day,'

Robin says,

'he got home and found a steaming turd on his garden path. The police said it was common. Burglars get scared, they said.'

He strokes his watch, says

'how's work?'

'Dull. You?'

'Good. I've got this really cool new project, I'm designing this new game, it's called Kill Yourself Tonight. It's a suicide sim. If that last one I did, the terrorist one, sells enough, I think they're gonna let me do it.'

We watch TV news and weathermen above the bar. Future slit open and disemboweled. See the melting skin on digital video. See a road in Africa, checkpoints festooned with bone. Tracer lights are pretty Halloween. Information shrinks the skin of the globe. Brings it all in here to see. Flamingos scissor through the Etosha mudflats. I can not drink when I want to, but I do want to most of the time.

'They reckon that's where we came from,'

Robin says, gesturing at the screen. I say

'flamingos?'

'Etosha mudflats. Cradle of life. It's incredible,'

his arms spread wide to take in the planet,

'all this from a muddy freak of chemistry. Like, we've come this far and we've still got

so much further to go. Yeah, the future looks good to me sometimes. Everything linked up and interchanging, yeah?'

'Yeah, only because you're rich.'

'I can't help who my parents are,'

he shrugs,

'We either use the world or we let it use us. Technology doesn't mean anything. It's like language, it's there to be abused. Anyway, you're just jealous.'

'I'm gonna fucking do you, pal,'

someone shouts at the barman,

'I'm gonna come back tomorrow and fucking do you. I'm not scared. I've killed people before. I'm too drunk now, but don't worry. I'm gonna come back tomorrow and fucking do you.'

Robin squints, frantic not to miss any detail, the kind of person who'll watch a film frame by frame. I say

'Do you miss Ridley?'

'I don't know.'

'Do you think about him much?'

'Sometimes. I don't know. Sometimes it feels like he's just gone away again, and any day now he could just turn up, or he could never turn up again. I don't know.'

Drunk man ejected, the barman switches off the television, and the jukebox bang bangs to Losing My Religion. Robin says

'I'd best go, I need to catch up on my email. See you soon, yeah?'

I watch him empty his glass, gone and now a blur. People never register with me, remain shadows even when I know them well.

'I work long hours but at weekends I get to lie in,'

someone on a nearby table says,

'that's the way the world turns now.'

A woman skits through my vision, shows me slender nails. Gone with tanned legs capered and hungry, handsful of Disneystore carrier bags,

'my life is strewn with the cow-pats of the Devil's own herd,'

she says. I smoke too many cigarettes, before going on my way too. Don't want to do anything, just something. Walk through shining concrete fields to city thoroughfares where

people gather. No skin except each other. NEW HOPE FOR AIDS VICTIMS, a headline reads. A tree every third or fourth street. All shop-fronts gleam to a place where coins slide and reproduce. Streets peel me red. City lights soak up stars. I can't penetrate any of this. It's just a mass of buildings held together by the gravity of history. I feel in my pocket for stray coins. Gone on what appeals. To be inside is the only key. Cables by the sides of railway tracks. Birds take flight over the river. So much rain for such tiny clouds. 4am, a foreign window, watch a dog-star rising. Home again I drink into the membranous brain-pan, murk there before scooping the contents, drink more beer and surf the net, make myself a place to curl up inside and sleep.

Over the last three or four months I've been aware of something alien, like a seed deposited underneath my skin. At the onset I felt it creep over my body in a low goose-bump shiver, aligning itself so perfectly with my cells that I seldom know it's there now. Sometimes, on the brim of sleep, I can feel it germinate inside me. I know I can't explain it to any friend because they simply wouldn't see it, like when you try to show somebody constellations, your fingers and your words striving to delineate, but all they can see are random points of light.

The last time I saw Ridley we were sitting in his kitchen, television on in the background, Ridley was spooling a cassette with a biro and I was trying to catch the news-reader's words but the volume was too low. On the screen, trees were falling and suicide bombers were exploding and people were running in all directions. Fast cut to the newsreader, then a tanker leaking black into the sea around it. Ridley set the pen and tape down on the table in front of him. Outside, the sun shone calm through turning snowflakes. He said

'what time's your flight?'

'I'm okay. I don't need to leave for another few hours.'

Some people you need to know for a long time before you can feel close to them in any sense, others slip effortlessly inside your life until it feels like they've always been there. Ridley I knew for three months. I said

'why do you do it all?'

'It's common sense. Maybe not common sense, but logical sense. Sensible sense.'

Somebody has to make the effort. Most people think they can't, or that they shouldn't, so they don't bother. But if somebody else does, then maybe they'll realise that it's okay.'

Swift dissolve to us standing on a bridge and the Thames' slow flow below us. Half an hour since his flat, sun behind cloud, snow deliquescing on Ridley's clothes. He held a camera. Walked to the edge of the bridge. Picked his footsteps carefully. A rusty coil of copper wire bled into the ground. I was content, knowing that I was going to the other side of the world but that something of me was stored in his camera, not knowing that it was really the other way round, that it was me that needed to store memories of him.

Friday. Two days since I last ate and my mind assumes new frequencies. Time bending over. Seasons turning in on themselves. Too hot here for April. Some days it's too hard to formulate, everything expanding endlessly, mass that spirals in on itself, galaxies colliding and everything moving away from everything else at x hundred miles per second.

Home alone, I do just the frequent things. Make some food. Process cigarettes. Listen to the sixties on re-mastered CD. Tim Buckley, Love, Pearls Before Swine. I know there is a sun in the sky. In my sky or someone else's. Sat here is an illusion of serenity, like watching clouds and thinking nothing happens inside them. An explosion on the news, bomb in a baby carriage, the bodies wrapped in plastic like microwave meals. I hate the way songs live out of control in my head, the way magazines film on my fingers. Mind so permeable. By day a suit defines who I am. Evenings and weekends it's more fuzzy. Sheets stained with too many lovers. Every fold kicks up a face in my head. Another empty beer can. Want to see friends but don't want to explain, don't want to be the me I am for them. Chain-smoke and stare through the window at the lighted web of streets at the steady blip of traffic. Three men argue on the corner but I pay them no heed. Noise diluted by glass. I need to be out there, too. A street or any street. Always after dark, always away from my flat. Dull to four walls and air. Know there's stuff out there to forget me in. Show me a purpose that isn't distraction. Further than stars, all of it

THERE ARE NO STRANGERS, JUST  
FRIENDS WE HAVEN'T MET YET

says a sign above the bar. Dykes in cowboy hats push past me in a knotty scuff of elbows. I run fingers round the rims of successive pint glasses. My nerve-ends jitter like wires. This pub is one of many places where I drink and watch the money go. Born poor and inherited poor. Every drink only wants another. The music is louder than my head. The alcohol is a separate organism, moving through and acting on my cells. I met Ridley in this place. Am wary because my friend Lydia drinks here, Robin sometimes too, and I don't want to be with anybody I know. The flash of someone I want streaks past, someone I ought to be fucking. Her face magazine-good, shoulders and thighs so three-dimensional. I light another cigarette, sometimes take each drag as far as it will go, just to see what will happen.

'Of course with computers we don't even need bodies,'

a woman on a bar-stool in a conversation near me observes. I don't want to be with anybody, just somebody. Drunk to give me bended limbs, a body I can turn to me and cracked lips that can whisper me. Need belong. Need foundations for identity. Ghost rider by Suicide starts and I make my way to the dance-floor, through the transvestite couples dressed up in each other. People all around me spin into each other like contact binary. The blood is thick in my temples. I don't care for what America is killing. Just movement of light and sound. I move my body to the music then return to the bar for another drink, push down the soft skin on the back of my hand and it springs back into place, leaves me perplexed by the hot part of me that cools for alcohol and for nicotine. I never asked for this body, just grew up inside it and learned how to use it; its games, its parameters. Before I could even speak my character was decided. Everything was ordained and I only pass through. From a father who had dreams of being a gynaecologist, spent hours with books and studied photos of female genitalia, traced pages with hands lined and crumpled like fossil trilobites.

'I'm Lisa.'

John Lennon glasses and a crazy scuff of hair. Face like the Queen of Diamonds. She scurries at the floor, a bag somewhere, digs for change and for cigarettes, digs for the third world. I order more drinks. Stand by the bar turning bank-notes in dry fingers, it's only printed paper. I hate spending money but love the taste of it, an empire in my hand. Lisa ducks up, and smiles. I sort my coins as we talk. She talks, mostly. I nod to give her punctuation, always thinking, which words do I use now? I never understood small-talk. How does it happen? Where does it come from? How do you do it? Never much of a conversationalist. It always seemed just a precursor to sharing beds with strangers. We talk anyway, words falling from

my head like shot birds from the sky, and after another few rounds Lisa says

'I want to go. I'm bored with this place. You can't even hear your own thoughts. You want to come?'

'Sure. Where?'

I don't mind. I'm kind of staying with friends at the moment. Where's your place?'

We walk out through the in-crowd. I pull Lisa close and she smells like New York. In the taxi to my flat we exchange star signs.

'I'm a Leo,'

she says,

'you can kiss me if you want to,'

and I do. Her lips hot and dry like sirocco. My arm around her shoulder and she strokes my fingers. I feel like I could change her life, for now at least. I want a soul that shines the bluest light, whatever or not that means. We speed through the city. Lines of river streak like anything. Black sky crossed with satellite trails. I kiss her face. Touch her perfect complicated skin. Want something I can cry for.

'I wish I could be the moon,'

Lisa says, her voice scratching to falsetto,

'silver and perfect and far away from anything. Or a star so distant that nobody has named it or even tried to catalogue it.'

Back to my flat. Only four walls. Just the foundations of light. I drop a tee-shirt over the bones of a three day old takeaway. Push a candle into an empty wine bottle, Lisa tries to light it with her cigarette; laughs, strikes a match, then we hold by candlelight.

'Do you go to that bar a lot?'

she says. I think on that for a second or two, think on her lips and their kissing for a second or two, say

'yeah, I guess, kind of. It depends what you mean by a lot.'

'Well I've never been there before, that was my first time, it reminds me of the bars back home. I like it. It's easy to meet people. They don't judge you by your clothes or accent or any of that stuff.'

'Yeah, I met my best friend there.'

'Where was he tonight?'

'He's dead, it was a long time ago, or it feels like it.'

'I'm sorry. Oh that sounds really dumb, like it was my fault. You know what I mean.'

'Where are you from?'

'Huh?'

'You said that bar reminded you of home.'

'I was born in Auckland, but I guess I'm from all over the place.'

'I'd never have guessed, from your accent.'

Her fingers dance over her buttons, she says

'I don't have an accent. I've spent so long in so many different places, the only accent I've got is a mix of everybody else's accents.'

My head everywhere but now. Wax splashes like globular clusters. Satellites over the Persian Gulf. I watch Lisa's silhouette squirming free from her jeans.

'I'm glad I came here,'

she says. We hug, nuzzle, kiss, tug off the rest of our clothes. Everything contained here. Candle flickers in bottle-neck. Time compressed like language.

'I always wonder,'

she says,

'when the wax melts, where does it go?'

Holding her, another person's skin, slight on mine like stockings. Touch her hipful body. Two moles tight together like binary stars. Explore her skin cell by cell like microworlds. We flirt with the idea of condom then forget it. Lose tethers and our bodies drift together, knowing and untouchable. Having an orgasm inside another person's body is such a weird idea. I follow lines of lovers like blips up and down her skin. Cells break off in mutiny to my fingers, not from any body I intimate with. I rest on the cushion of her belly, the candle dies, and she sings me to sleep. The golden age is a fiction.

The sun wakes us, so rude at the window. I want to draw the curtains, had kept them open for night and for starlight in my room, but Lisa stops me.

'What?'

I say. She pauses, watches me in morning's first dust-light with one hand on a windowpane and the other on a curtain.

'Go, thou art healed,'

she says, and laughs, and curls herself into the duvet. Then I knew I had to see her again.

Bare sun warms the floor to my feet. I watch her half-asleeping, hair on my pillow shines bright as elsewhere, lights a liquid path to angel. Then I blink and it's just Lisa and a room and me, no realer than the light that compiles her image on my retinas.

When I was a child, when it took little more than rain on glass or waves on waves to make me happy, I dreamed the same dream every few weeks. A guide comes to me and takes my hand, leads me into welcome night. We slide through sky like whispers, watch the world spread open before us and ride each gleaming darkness. Pyjamas, toys and stuffed rabbit forgotten. My parents just a shadow. My guide and me are all that is real, our glowing bodies spread wide to take in the sky. We float above everything so easily and contain it. Becoming mountains and plains and draining every ocean, are the pulsing sky and all sands of the sea. My hands open to take in the stars, and not even a thought for the bones in those hands or a care for the folds and scars of the skin that will bind them.

'Attaining freedom is easy,'

Ridley once told me;

'the difficult part is knowing what to do with it.'

Nothing is contained. I talk to my pen and it puts down words for me, to pages that hate to be filled. The room smells like late Summer evening. Twenty-eight today, the weathermen said, too itchy-hot to sleep, night and I watch from my window, to sodium blur and my lungs hang heavy in my chest. Sirens regular as hour hands. Cars as far as eyes. The chime of stolen ice-cream vans.

Some nights don't need lovers. I look in the mirror and nothing stares back at me. Half-done bottle of wine on the table. Another empty on the floor. Most of the time, I hate the taste of wine.

'Everybody instinctively knows where they should be in this world,'

Ridley says,

'but they don't do it. Their true will. Where they should be and what they should be doing. It's not difficult.'

I smoke the cigarettes Lisa left behind, her crumpled packet of bent Camels, was trying

to quit but there's always an excuse to feed my habit. I turn in my hands a coffee cup she held. Watch through eyes that saw her here. Finger the objects she left behind, hollow now she'll never touch them again. Didn't wash my clothes because I wanted to still smell of her. Didn't toss into the bin the beer can she drained because her lips had met the rim. It's amazing how much mental effort smoking steals from you, always thinking next cigarette, next cigarette, when next cigarette comes you take it in, then brief dead time before you want it again; next cigarette, next cigarette. I think if I gave up smoking my mind would be a far more cluttered place. I'm hardly sad that Lisa isn't here. Thought I would be. Even though she preoccupies my thoughts, I don't feel it. Most days I'm not sad and I'm not happy. Most days I don't feel anything.

'What are you looking for?'

Ridley says,

'and what makes you think I can give it to you?'

I go to bed, ready myself for sleep. Curl my legs up, pull a pillow to my chest, close my eyes and will sleep nearer. Used to sleep so eager. Anticipate what travels I might make each night. No longer differentiate between what happens in sleep and what happens in waking. When I remember old dreams they seem as real to me now as memories of actual events.

'Most of the time I look at all the people around me and feel like I'm a different species,'

'Ridley says,'

'do you know what I mean? Do you ever get that?'

I get up, look out of the window at the sky, at the light and the weight of buildings, at the people wrestling and glassing each other in the street. I have to get up for work tomorrow, but now I don't care about that. Want another drink. Beer, wine, spirit, whatever is on offer. Spirits would be good; there's a welcome metaphysical significance there.

'They're all idiots,'

Ridley says,

'they don't even know why they're alive.'

Ridley died six months ago today. Each passing cab still makes me anticipate his footsteps to my door. Makes me anticipate his bright white turning fingers. Wipes his nose from the left side first. I remember all the things his quick eyes and hands showed me. What they showed and what they stirred in me. I lost myself somewhere along the line from that day to now.