

DIRTY SHORTS

A collection of short plays
By Tim Luscombe

Draft One March 2010
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Don't look a horse in the mouth
Don't let a frog get you down
Don't be dragged around
Like a dog on a lead
I'm all you need

[The Divine Comedy]

1. You Ain't Got No Knickers On

Alf
Bengy
Callista

2. Lovely Up Here

Dez
Enid
Felicity

3. The Praxis of Benny and Bjorn

Gary
Harry

4. Some are Frootz

Izzy
Jack
Kuhn Soo

5. Puppy

Laleh etc
Manouchehr etc

6. Air Heart

Noreen
Olga

7. Peregrine, the Wandering Drunk – short play in three acts

Peregrine

8. Factory

Q
R
Saik

9. Pastoral

Tammy
Ursula

10. Vladimir in Hollywood

Vladimir

11. In a Very Real Sense

William
Xandra
Yitzhak

12. Multiple Futures – a monologue for a redheaded boy

Zed

13. Late in King Otto's Reign

Adi
Brand
Claus

The collection could be performed with up to 29 actors! But if you're looking for a more economical way to do it, the most sparing way would be a follows:

TWENTY-NINE parts allocated to FIVE very versatile actors:

Young man	Alf, Harry, Jack, Laleh etc, Zed, Claus
Older young man	Bengy, Gary, Manouchehr etc, R, Vladimir, Yitzhak, Adi
Older man	Dez, Peregrine, Saik, William, Brand
Young woman	Callista, Felicity, Izzy, Olga, Q, Tamara
Older woman	Enid, Kuhn Soo, Noreen, Ursula, Xandra

The casting compromises involved in doing it this way would have to be balanced against the economic gains, and the fact that a lot of fun can be had for the audience and the actors alike when few actors play many very varied characters

Production history:

A few of these plays were originally written for The Factory Theatre Company's Round 1 and Round 2 events in 2008 and 2010 respectively.

The alphabetized character list is an idea that pleased me while writing, and gave me some obstacles to overcome. Please don't feel the need to stick rigidly to it if you prefer to rearrange the plays, or drop some of them, in production

1. You ain't got no knickers on

Bengy: You ain't got no knickers on.

Alf: I ain't got no knickers on? What do you mean?

Bengy: What do you mean 'what do I mean I mean'? What I say. You ain't got no knickers on.

Callista: How do you know?

Bengy: I looked.

Alf: When?

Bengy: When you bent over.

Alf: I didn't bend over.

Bengy: Yeah you did. And I looked. And you ain't.

Alf: So?

Bengy: I wondered what you meant by it.

Alf: I didn't mean nothing by it. I don't mean nothing by it. It's an innocent gesture.

Callista: Oh, so it is a gesture. You are trying to convey some meaning by it?

Bengy: Is it about sexual availability? Or is it that you're a mucky pup?

Callista: Or poor. Or got no clean knickers.

Bengy: Are you defending him?

Callista: No, I'm just saying.

Bengy: Sounds like you're defending him.

Callista: I'm not. I'm just saying you haven't covered all the bases logically.

Bengy: I'm not trying to be logical.

Callista: Do you like him?

Bengy: I don't know yet. I was initially a bit disappointed when he got in. I have to say, I was not hugely drawn to him. But now I know he's not got no knickers on, I am reevaluating the situation.

Callista: Are you turned on by him?

Bengy: By the fact that he's got no knickers on maybe. A bit. I'm not committing myself.

Callista: Course not. You take your time.

Bengy: I will.

Callista: Would you say though, without committing yourself, that you think that maybe he might be your cup of tea, all things being equal?

Bengy: I don't know, I told you.

Callista: What do you need to happen to find out?

Bengy: Time.

Callista: Time?

Bengy: More time. I need more time.

Callista: What has to happen in that time?

Alf: Here, why are you talking about me as if I'm not here? I am here, you know. Sitting here looking at you. In here with you.

Callista: He's getting restive.

Alf: What is this?

Bengy: Do you like it?

Callista: It's cosy, isn't it?

Bengy: It's not cosy; it's erotic. Well, it's meant to be. Sometimes it's more erotic than others.

Callista: Depends who we have in here with us.

Bengy: Today it's you.

Callista: This afternoon. Might be someone else in a little while.

Bengy: So, as I was saying. You got no knickers on.

Alf: So what?

Bengy: Do you always got no knickers on?

Alf: No. Yes. Sometimes.

Bengy: Why?

Alf: I like it.

Callista: Do you like it?

Bengy: I like it on some people. Not saggy people or old people. Or workmen. Unless they're cute. Obviously.

Callista: Obviously.

Alf: Obviously. You gonna tell me what's going on?

Bengy: It's apparent, isn't it?

Alf: No.

Callista: Yes, it is.

Bengy: It is what it seems to be.

Callista: Are you gonna do him or not?

Bengy: Patience.

Alf: Do me? What do you mean 'do me'? Kill me?

Bengy: Do you want me to kill you?

Alf: No, of course not.

Callista: "Do you want me to seduce you?"

Bengy: Don't be asinine.

Callista: Sorry. Well?

Bengy: I told you I need more time.

Callista: Well you're gonna have to make a decision one way or another pretty soon.

Bengy: Why?

Callista: We can't keep him here forever without making a decision one way or another pretty soonish.

Bengy: Why?

Callista: Why? Because he might rebel. Attack us. Run away.

Bengy: I don't think he's the type. He seems pretty supine to me.

Callista: Anyway, the longer you hang about not deciding, the less erotic it is.

Bengy: Why?

Callista: Just is. It's better if we don't have so much intercourse with him.

Bengy: Is that so? I don't agree. I think intercourse is a good thing. It can build suspense and heighten the excitement factor. And thus lead to a whole better experience all round, so to speak. So anyway, I think we were trying to ascertain why it is that you ain't got no knickers on. Whether it's coz you're horny, sloppy or poor. And I don't think you're too poor to own knickers. No one in this town is too poor to own knickers. Not with knickers being as cheap as they are.

Callista: Or can be, if you shop sensibly.

Bengy: That's right. No one.

Callista: Well, maybe a few people.

Bengy: But you're not one of them. So it's horny or sloppy. Which is it? Would you say? Would you say yourself?

Alf: I have absolutely no idea what you want me to say.

Bengy: It's not a test. I just want you to tell us your truth. Speak from the heart, knickers wise.

Alf: I've had enough of this bollocks. If you don't mind –

Bengy: I do mind.

Alf: You do mind? I can't go?

Bengy: Nope. Wait! Stop! You don't want us to fight you, do you? Restrain you? That would be a shame. No. Listen, Alf. I'd like you to want it. Do you think you might want it?

Alf: What?

Bengy: Want me.

Alf: Want you?

Callista: Do you want it, Bengy? Do you want Alf?

Bengy: That's the question, isn't it.

Callista: That we've established. What's the answer?

Alf: Whatever. You can't have me. Bengy. Do you understand?

Callista: He's calling you by your name.

Bengy: Cheeky.

Alf: Bengy, you can't have me.

Bengy: Oh, go on, Alf. Let me.

Callista: *Now* you want him! Now he says you can't have him, now you want him. Honestly, you're all the same. Only want what you can't have. If I were you, Alf, I'd make yourself available – then he won't want you.

Bengy: I think you're horny.

Alf: Fuck you.

Bengy: I mean horny rather than sloppy.

Callista: That's a compliment.

Alf: So?

Callista: So say thank you.

Alf: Are you kidding me? What is it with you two? What is this? What is this?

Callista: It's nothing.

Bengy: It's just fun.

Callista: It's just our little fun.

Bengy: Callista's idea.

Callista: Was it?

Bengy: Yes.

Callista: Was it?

Bengy: Yes.

Callista: So... Do you want him?

Bengy: I think so, but I need more time. You're both rushing me. Stop it.

Alf: There's no such thing as time.

Bengy: Yes, there is. I've got a watch says there is.

Alf: What if all the humans were taken off the world and you asked a tree or a horse what the time is. They'd laugh at you.

Callista: If they could laugh.

Alf: They'd laugh and they'd say 'What sort of question is that? The time is now. Obviously.' It's only humans who have the concept of past and future. It's a terrible burden.

Callista: Maybe that's what they mean by the human condition. La condition humaine. We're all hijacked to the concept of time.

Alf: Yes, it's true. Past and future. Phantoms. It's very sad.

Bengy: Thank you for that, Alf.

Callista: So will you make your fucking mind up, or we'll have to let him go.

Bengy: You're being so proscriptive today. Will you just chill? Yes? Please?

Callista: Ok. Sorry. I am tense. I just feel like he might get stroppy in a minute, and I hate it when they put up a fight.

Bengy: Callista? CHILL!

Callista: You're right. Sorry.

Bengy: Let's just all relax and take it easy. Take a few breaths. And then let's see where we are. Thank you. Ok. I've made my decision. I don't want him. I don't like his attitude.

Callista: Really?

Bengy: Yeah.

Callista: Sure?

Bengy: I said.

Callista: Oh. Ok. I thought this was going the other way. I thought you'd have this one.

Bengy: Really? Why?

Callista: He's pretty cute. And considering we've abducted him, he's being very reasonable.

Bengy: Yeah, well, it's chemistry, isn't it? You can't force these things.

Alf: Right.

Bengy: Don't push your luck, mate. I don't really think you're horny. I think you're sloppy. I only said you were horny to make you feel a bit better about yourself.

Alf: Sure.

Callista: You're free to go.

Alf: Really?

Callista: Yeah.

Alf: Ok. Right. Thanks.

Bengy: Don't tell anyone, will you?

Alf: No. No.

Callista: Promise?

Alf: Yeah, promise. Thanks. Right then. Bye-bye.

Callista: Bye.

Bengy: Bye.

Callista: You do realise that's only 1 you've had out of 4? That means you've got to have 4 out of the next 6.

Bengy: Yeah, I realise that. I thought he wouldn't be much fun. I thought he was a bit uninteresting. I didn't think he'd have much of a sense of rhythm, if you know what I mean.

Callista: I'm not sure you can afford to be that choosy really, Bengy. Up to you though.

Bengy: Yeah, exactly. Up to me. Where shall we go now?

Callista: I don't know. Maybe drive round a bit – see if anyone else takes your fancy?

Bengy: Alright.

Callista: You wanna drive?

Bengy: Your turn.

Callista: Alright. Give us the keys.

2. Lovely up here

Enid: Ooh, it's lovely up here. ... Catch your breath. ... Right, come on.

Felicity: Tired.

Enid: Lazy muckworth.

Felicity: It's miles. We done miles and miles.

Dez: Gonna take all bloody week. It's all brush. It's scrub.

Enid: Got to be done.

Felicity: Miles and miles. I'm exhumated.

Dez: She's breathless. Take a breather. ... Harsh. Bitter terrain.

Enid: Not what you'd call beautiful, but it has a certain rugged charm.

Dez: Like the Wild West. Half expect to see the cavalry coming over the hill.

Felicity: Fat chance.

Dez: We're the cavalry.

Felicity: You've got an imagination! The cavalry!

Dez: We're the closest thing they got to the cavalry.

Enid: Poor little mite.

Dez: Just think.

Enid: Poor little sausage.

Dez: Can't credit it.

Enid: Can't bear to think about it.

Dez: Horrible. Horrible. People are evil. Who could do such a thing?

Enid: Oh, you couldn't.

Dez: Not even if you wanted to.

Enid: You'd hold yourself in.

Dez: You would.

Enid: You wouldn't allow yourself, would you?

Dez: No, you wouldn't.

Enid: You'd seek help, that's what you'd do.

Dez: They don't.

Enid: They just do what they want. Follow their urges.

Dez: Carnage.

Enid: What's going on in their minds?

Dez: Just imagine.

Enid: I can't. ... We shoulda bought water.

Dez: Why didn't we think a that?

Enid: That's me. I shoulda thought of that.

Dez: We were too keen to get out and lend a hand.

Enid: That's right.

Dez: Well someone had to.

Enid: No, I'm saying.

Dez: Police doing nothing.

Enid: Nothing.

Dez: God-forsaken country.

Enid: Look at it.

Dez: Not raising a finger.

Enid: Typical.

Dez: Dago mentality.

Enid: And I thought it was such a lovely place.

Felicity: You got them lovely doggies.

Enid: What?

Felicity: Them dogs. Them raffia things. Lovely they are.

Enid: They were pretty, but they're...well...doesn't mean nothing.

Felicity: You liked them pots and that. And the sombreros.

Dez: Olé.

Enid: Doesn't mean the country's any good.

Dez: Rotten.

Enid: Evil.

Dez: Harbours the sort of man –

Enid: The sort of man –

Felicity: Might have been a woman.

Dez: No.

Enid: Impossible. We know who we're looking for.

Dez: It's a man.

Enid: A darkie man.

Felicity: Mum.

Enid: Never coming here again.

Felicity: That beach was lovely.

Enid: What beach?

Felicity: Empty 'cept us. That sea urchin we found.

Enid: That urchin shell!

Felicity: Lovely it was.

Dez: Evil place.

Enid: Allowing such a thing to happen.

Dez: And then doing nothing to try and find her.

Enid: Well, we're making an effort.

Dez: Yeah. Show them how to do it. Wouldn't trust 'em to lead an investigation.

Enid: Not further than you could throw 'em. ... Poor little thing.

Dez: Little eyes looking at you out of that bit of paper.

Enid: Little eyes.

Dez: Little vacant eyes.

Enid: Not yet seen anything of the world.

Felicity: Have now.

Dez: Pretty eyes.

Enid: Oh, yes. Pretty.

Dez: Beautiful.

Enid: Wide-eyed and innocent.

Dez: Gorgeous little face.

Felicity: Oh don't. I'll start again.

Enid: No good crying. We got to help. That's the only thing to do.

Felicity: I can't go much further. I got blisters and sunburnt soldiers and a sore leg.

Enid: She's got her leg.

Dez: What's wrong with her leg?

Felicity: Sore. Got to rest.

Dez: Let her rest. Have a proper breather. Then we can go on a bit further. ... Look at them.

Enid: They're all the way over there.

Dez: Yeah, they would be. Bloody ponce. Did you see what he was reading at breakfast? Bold as brass and twice as whatsit. Bloody Guardian. And she's no better. La-di-dah.

Enid: Bet they've got water. ... And the parents. What they must be going through!

Dez: Oh, hell! Hell! That's what they must be going through.

Enid: Lovely couple.

Dez: How do you know?

Enid: They are.

Felicity: They are, Dad.

Dez: You met them?

Enid: No, but on the telly.

Felicity: They're lovely.

Enid: You can tell.

Felicity: She dresses everso well.

Enid: And he's decent.

Felicity: Give him one.

Enid: Felicity.

Felicity: I would. He's lush. Come on, admit it.

Enid: Not in front of your father.

Dez: Don't mind me. I'd give *her* one.

Enid: Your rotten swine!

Dez: In her doctor's uniform. Corr.

Enid: You perv. Perv!

Felicity: Oh-ho, got you going. Doesn't take much.

Enid: Come on. We gonna do this or sit here like fried eggs? She might be under any of them bushes. We gotta look.

Dez: Lurking, hidden, frightened as a rabbit.

Felicity: Or all chopped up.

Enid: That's right

Felicity: She ain't, though.

Dez: How do you know?

Enid: There's a chance.

Felicity: She ain't, is she? She's been taken away to Africa or somewhere.

Enid: Well yeah, probably.

Felicity: Morocco, Tangeria. One a them places.

Enid: We gotta look. Come on.

Felicity: I'm going back to the hotel. Might be more about it on the telly.

Dez: He got on the telly. Did you see? The Guardian reader. Course he bloody did. Bloody marvellous, innit. Pushing himself forward. Sports jacket. In this weather.

Felicity: I wanna go back to that beach. Can we go? Can we? Where we found the urchin. All maroon –

Enid: Purple!

Felicity: Maroon! And pink, and prickly. Alone on a long white beach. Blue sea, blue sky, long white empty beach. A maroon and pink, prickly urchin. Washed up. Empty. Dead thing. So pretty.

3. The Praxis of Benny and Bjorn

Tipsy Gary meets paralytic Harry

Gary: Hello.

Harry: Yer alright?

Gary: Super. Smashing. Do you smoke?

Harry: (*Meaning no*) Yer alright.

Gary: No. Very bad habit. I shouldn't. Actually I'm out. You don't...? No, you wouldn't. Silly me. Where are you from? No, don't tell me. I know the accent. You're Liverpoolian.

Harry: (*Meaning yes*) Yer right.

Gary: Yes. It's distinct. Do you, erm, work, do you have a...? Sorry. Not important. Like Californians want to know straight up, what car do you drive, we ask about work. Silly. Just as silly. 'What car do you drive?' Honestly. (*Smiles*) I'm an academic. Yes. No. It's not very interesting. Well to me it is. Well, when I say I'm an academic, I'm not actually. Well, I am. I mean I'm doing a PhD and a little bit of teaching. Just the minimum required. I'm over explaining. I'm not patronising you. I wouldn't. You're lovely. Sorry. You are, though. Sweet. Very manly. A bit...rough. Nice. Sorry.

Harry: (*Reassuring*) Yer alright.

Gary: Thanks. I'm not, I'm a girl. Yes I'm doing a PhD in the incidence of grammatical errors in Abba lyrics. It's very interesting. To me. It's absorbing. I was studying the differences between the archaic writing systems of Sparta and Corinth, but then I thought, no, come on Gary, you really ought to do something contemporary and relevant. So. Anyway, sometimes it's nice to get out and see other things. People. Like you. One can have only so much Benny and Bjorn before you start losing your sense of which side is up. I mean, I spent the day investigating the prevalence of cliché and non-sequiturs in Dancing Queen. A cornucopia of surreality if ever there was one.

The night is young and the music's high

The night is young – cliché. The music's high – nonsense. Music can't in itself be high, can it? Well, of course it can, but I don't think they're referring to pitch. 'She was dancing to some very high-pitched music'? No.

*Harry sort of sexily dances, perhaps for Gary's benefit, humming
Dancing Queen*

Ha ha, yes. No, it's fascinating. I mean, at first I was exclusively targeting any questionable use of the conditional.

Harry looks bemused

For instance? For instance the classic 2nd verse of Money Money Money. The melange of present, simple future and 2nd conditional:

If I had a little money, it's a rich man's world

Id est: 'If I had a little money *it would be like living in* a rich man's world'. But of course, that wouldn't scan. And that's important. You see, I'm not actually suggesting that my version is better. I'm simply observing. Observing and recording. A dispassionate eye.

Harry: Aye aye.

Gary: Aye aye, yes. Ha ha. And judging. Though, to be honest, if you say it like they sing it, it makes complete sense, doesn't it?

If I had a little money, it's a rich man's world

Although, actually, if you say it too often it sounds like utter horse gush.

Harry is now eyeing Gary. Gary is aware

If you change your mind
I'm the first in line

Oh, horror. Mind you, they're courting conditional cacophony with six uses of 'if' in the opening verse. So, um, yes. Then I broadened my ambition to include any kind of verb mismanagement. And once I'd done that, the whole thing opened up to me like a giant...giant. I became transfixed by the unhappy gerundives. 'My chasing lover' in Under Attack. I mean, for heaven's sake, what's a chasing lover?

Harry: Yerright!

Gary: You were humming to yourself and softly strumming your guitar
I could hear the distant drums
And sounds of bugle calls were coming from afar

Have we leapt from past perfect to past continuous, or is there a missing demonstrative adjective?!

Harry slowly shrugs

It's elusive party feeling
Somehow something turns me on
Some folks told me
See them in it
We don't miss them when they're gone
Another feeling in the air

It's a syntactical clusterfuck. That sestet alone is mired by nine grammatical question marks. Mind you, of course, out of so-called error, sometimes genius is born. Viz, the confluence of two elements of nonsense in The Winner Takes It All

The loser standing small
Beside the victory
That's her destiny

Is it a balls-up or is poetry? Linguistic alchemy! 'To stand small beside the victory'. They've coined an idiom. It's evocative, isn't it? 'Yes, Bob, I found myself standing very small bedside that victory'. So. What was I saying? Oh yes. So I felt I needed a breath of fresh air. Meet someone real. Have a chat.

Harry: (*Coming on, approximately*) Yer alright.

Gary: Ha ha.

Gary, hot under the collar, sort of sings. Is he serenading?

Now we're old and grey, Fernando
Since many years I haven't seen a rifle in your hand

They smile at each other

You've identified it, haven't you?! Arresting misuse of the subordinating conjunction. Would you like another drink?

Harry: (*Meaning no*) Yer alright.

Gary: Oh, ok.

I could hear the distant drums and sounds of bugle calls were coming from afar

Or as Anni-Frid likes to sing:

Gary does a Swedish accent, a la Anni-Frid, making all the buzzy 'z' sounds into hissy 's' sounds

I could hear the distant drums (s) and sounds (s) of bugle calls (s) were coming from afar

Though we never thought that we could lose (s), there's (s) no regrets

Harry finds this amusing

Heavenly, isn't it? Z, dear! Z!

When I called you last night from Glas- (s) -gow

These (s) old familiar rooms (s)
Children would play

Note the revelatory missing preposition in that one.

Harry, blurrily enchanted, takes Gary's hand

(*Flummoxed and thrilled*) Ah, oh, ooh. See, it doesn't come naturally to the Swedes to distinguish between 's' and 'z'. Very much like they don't – Swedish having the smallest vocabulary of any Indo-European language – make a distinction between 'fun' and 'funny'.

Money, money, money,
Must be funny
In a rich man's world

She doesn't mean funny, does she? She means fun. 'Having money must be fun'. Also the limited vocabulary means there are lots of compound nouns of course, and no word for wit. Interestingly. Which is neither here or there. Necessarily. National stereotypes, very bad. You're generalising one minute and liquidating the next. No. They can be quick – though rarely are. But not witty, as such. They're too dark. Too aware of the closeness of death. I mean, my God, Sweden before electricity. Grim. And, of course, Fernando is an absolute template for one of the archetypal Abba-ish philosophical givens, which is that lust shall always be unrequited. No, the nearest you get to consummation in Benny and Bjorn's dialectic is to yearn for it longingly:

There's not a soul out there
No one to hear my prayer

Harry: Yer alright.

Gary:

Gimme gimme gimme a man after midnight
Won't somebody help me chase the shadows away?

They are now very close

And Mama Mia too. All about falling and yearning. Never actually declaring it, never actually achieving it. Summer Night City: wanting it, desperate for it.

Tell me please
Coz I have to know
I'm a bashful child
Beginning to grow

Harry touches Gary's face

If I trust in you
Would you let me down?
Would you laugh at me
If I said I care for you?

Could you feel the same way too?
I wanna know

They are about to kiss

But Gary awkwardly pulls away, throwing himself back into a vortex of frustrated pontification

You see, there simply isn't the expression of – there isn't in fact room for the declaration of. Love just isn't. It can't. They don't. They won't. And, in fact, when they try to, it's horrible:

I love you
I do, I do, I do, I do, I do

Bathos!

I can't conceal it, don't you see, can't you feel it?
Don't you too?
I do, I do, I do, I do, I do

Risible, ineffable, limp. When they let love off the leash, genius deserts them utterly.

Harry sniffs, puzzled and disappointed

You may very well scoff. I do I do I do I do I do must be the nadir of the entire output. Well, Bang-a-Boomerang offers pretty stiff competition.

Harry: Yer alright?

Gary: Alright? Absolutely yes, very alright. I'm excited. I'm sorry. I'm going on, aren't I? I'm nervous. I get like this. I'm a bit. Not drunk, but. I get voluble. Not eloquent sadly, just verbose.

Harry, a little reassured, comes closer again. Gary dares to touch him

My my
I tried to hold you back but you were stronger
Oh yeah
And now it seems my only chance is giving up the fight
And how could I ever refuse
I feel like I win when I lose

The dazzling summit, surely – touching, as it does, on fate and destiny. Encapsulating, as it does, the central praxis of the oeuvre. Pointing, as it does, to the very heart of the dichotomy which Benny and Bjorn want us to consider. And why Waterloo, art wise, lays claim to perfection. The thrust of it all, the modus operandi, the dare I say, gestalt. Love is a bitch. To have it is to lose it. The punishing awareness that

Voulez-vous (ah-ha)
Take it now or leave it (ah-ha)
Now is all we get (ah-ha)

Now is all we get – and yet crucially, we can't enjoy it. We can't appreciate what we have when we have it. It was only good when it's over. It's the melancholy worm in the apple of triumph.

Facing twenty thousand of my friends
How can anyone be this lonely?

It drips like sad tears from the dreamily Dante-esque Winner Takes it All. It shines darkly through the economy, the exquisite elision of Knowing Me Knowing You:

No more carefree laughter
Silence ever after

Harry: (*Sad*) Yer alright.

Gary: And one is left – oh, the harsh logic of northern Europe – only with a lingering goodbye. The heavy realisation that In Abbaland one never arrives. That the loved one is in the past or is in the future. That one is moving towards, or one is moving away. As Benny and Bjorn would have it in Like an Angel Passing Through My Room:

Like the embers as they die
Love was one prolonged good-bye

Gary is so self-absorbed that he doesn't notice Harry wander off

The youthful butterfly, the lustful monkey, the lion of summer, the raven of winter – a menagerie of the past. Everything is lost. One has spent so long examining it and judging it, one has failed to notice that it has, in fact, flown away. And we look back sadly. And try to see what it has meant to us. To discover what, if any, satisfaction can be wrestled from the struggle. And the answer comes. None. None! It has meant nothing at all! Bjorn and Benny can't get anyone to take their new stuff seriously. Anni-Frid? Well, where to start with the tragic course of her life? And... Oh, Agnetha. The unspeakable darkness.

Now they've come to take me, come to break me
...It isn't unexpected
I've been waiting for these visitors
Help me

The Nordic scream, the metaphysical angst. 'I have it – I lose it – I can only see meaninglessness in it'. Yes, the chase was the thing. But that was a long, long time ago...

Gary still hasn't noticed that Harry has gone

But perhaps not all is darkness. Is there not – though outside the bitter fury of a Scandinavian ice storm has laid waste to the land – the promise that the warm glow from a pine wood fire awaits us indoors? One is older. One has survived. Now we are two restless, battered, wily old foxes, exploring the autumn of our lives alone. No, don't speak! What more can you say? No! We'd much better leave it to Benny and Bjorn.

Now he is spent...but, as well, does he dare to have what? hope?

Like a roller in the ocean, life is motion
Move on
Like a wind that's always blowing, life is flowing
Move on
Like the sunrise in the morning, life is dawning
Move on
How I treasure every minute
Being part of it, being in it
With the urge to move on

Oh, those gerunds.

4. Some are Frootz

Kuhn Soo: You need more than a lotus leaf to cover up a dead elephant. That's what she says. 'This elephant's dead, Mum'. But what else can I do?

Jack: Most are mingers, the Russians the most criminally. Pandemic levels of arse-spread. And great big overripe melons rolling around everywhere, except where they ought to be. The girls are knockout – stick-thin and hot, with pert little tits like conference pears. So what the hell happens? The Mums wake up on their 31st birthday and they've turned into SUVs? Is that how it works? Or maybe they just leave the normal ones back home in Russia. Nah, I think they're all like that. Waifs or whales.

Izzy: Ok. I swam. Swimming – done.

Jack: This new one, on the other hand, is cute.

Izzy: Now what? Sit here.

Jack: It's not rocket science.

Izzy: Not too tricky. Sit here.

Jack: She's like super-white. Fridge white. Any whiter, she'd be blue.

Izzy: Read your book.

Jack: And skinny. Wooh, she's skinny. But skinny's good.

Izzy: Get a tan.

Jack: And with lips like that...

Izzy: And Don't Buy Any Food. Is that too difficult?

Kuhn Soo: Num's eggs and squids. A yoke and two panniers. A little oven on one side balances the food on the other. Lek's towels, carpets and scarves. Strong arms he's got, carrying all that colour. Colour from our first TV that never really worked. Orange, azure, fluorescent pink. Ton's DVDs and tattoos. And I'm fruit. A yoke, like Num's, across my shoulders, and a machete in my hand. At the start of the day, the fruit side's heavier. By the afternoon, the fridge side's heavier. With any luck.

Izzy: I hate bikini straps. I hate sun cream. I hate fat people. What on earth kind of impression do we make? Vast, pasty people from some unknowable faraway place where money flows like water.

Kuhn Soo: The Russian kids are hard like pineapples, fast and sharp. The old ones like cows, with beautiful spirits, larger even than their bodies. Like big blond Buddhas, but crosser and tired.

Izzy: Under the trees, the boys are singing, 'Shut up and drive'.

Jack: 'Shut up and drive'.

Izzy: I can hear it from here. Singing and drinking and swearing, and talking about hard-ons and partying. All they talk about. Hard-ons. Partying. Constant. Hard-ons. Partying.

Jack: 'Shut up and drive. Shut up and drive'.

Izzy: What is it about England? How come we churn out these morons? The Germans are sportier. A bit drunk – Now They Must Swim. But they don't swim. They jump on each others' backs, and dive through each others legs and stand around talking – secretly noticing the way water meanders across each others' chests. Up to their waists in sea, discussing things, as if that's what they do all day in Leipzig and Bremen – stand around in water looking serious. God, that old man over there looks like such a perv.

Jack: There's a geezer over there who looks like a real perv. Screentan – even after a week on the beach. You can so tell he gets his rocks off giving it

to poor people – the chocolate fuckbabes he doesn't have to dream of anymore.

Kuhn Soo: The German boys are here today. A bunch of green apples, shiny and complete – waiting for woman to marry and munch them. And my little man from Ireland's in his usual place, as round and red and hairy as a delicious rambutan. This morning the old Dutch couple are getting massaged. They grow them big in Denmark. He's as bald as a green coconut, and she's as puce as dragon fruit, with lovely big thighs – the skin so overworked, holding in all that rich meat, it's become finely corrugated like the insides of banana peel.

Jack: And there's definitely something funny about those krauts. Not all of them, but some are fruits I swear. They're just too polished and sleek, jumping on each other's backs. That one's got an arse so round and firm, it's like a pair of coconuts – unreal. Why don't you just swim, for God's sake, like normal people? Standing around talking. Hogging the ocean!

Kuhn Soo: Apparently, Ireland's near America. But mostly they're from Europe. I come from the mainland.

Jack: Here she comes. The Mrs O of fruitland. No English, except baht (in multiples of ten) and 'Where-you-from?' Her shtick: She says 'Where-you-from?', and, if you say 'England', she says 'Manchester United' and laughs. She thinks it's a scream. 'Manchester United hahaha'. 'Where-you-from?' 'England'. 'Manchester United hahaha.' What's *that* about? You wanna say, 'Well, in my opinion, they're a bunch of overpaid, stuck-up tossers managed by a psychotic diva – you should try watching a West Ham match', but instead you go 'hahaha' and hope she goes away smartish. Next day, back she stumbles, with half a ton of fresh, overpriced papaya, and, fuck me, she's remembered. 'Manchester United hahaha' – and stands there, taking the weight off her wonky knee, with these bloody great panniers slung across her shoulders and a friendly grin. I've never eaten so much fucking fruit. I hate fruit. It's just coloured water in shapes. Ooh the new one's taken off her sunglasses. Nice eyes. She's lush.

Kuhn Soo: I chop open a couple of coconuts for two teenage twins. My machete provokes them to rise, as one, and make a little show for me. They fight-dance with invisible knives. So I'm not concentrating on the coconut, and spill some juice on the hot sand where it's sucked under by an invisible force, leaves a damp stain the size of the ten baht coin they pay me, which lasts for a second and then is gone completely.

Izzy: I swear that girl hasn't stopped pulling about her flash white bikini, with gold – gold-I-ask-you – straps -

Jack: (H&M £24)

Izzy: - since I arrived. Non-stop tit adjustment. Skanky bitch.

Kuhn Soo: A man from Italy flexes his muscles, like he's from a cartoon book, to show me he thinks I'm strong.

Izzy: Wherever you look there's some new horror show.

Kuhn Soo: I get chucked under the chin by a boy from a place called Czech.

Izzy: Oh my God that is so disgusting. To sit like that – legs splayed out, with her sarong all undone. Really grim. Reading the Brothers Karamazov and all the world can see her vag. Shit, I forgot, I took my shades off. She caught me looking. Well, at least she's closed her legs. Doesn't she know how rude that is? I mean, it's not like Muslim here or anything, but you'd think if she can be bothered to read Dostoevsky she could bear to look up a few "do's-and-don't's" before she paraded her bits in front of I-was-going-to-say-the-natives but you know what I mean.

Kuhn Soo: Loud boys from China with muscly tummies, each one as confident as a chunk of pomello.

Izzy: God, look at that girl in aqua marine.

Kuhn Soo: As handsome as a tangerine. And the boys from France like warm papaya, stewing in the sun.

Izzy: Slurping out of coconuts, trying so hard not to spill the juice on their flower-patterned trunks.

Jack: (Pierre Cardin 36 Euros)

Izzy: Christ, this is torture.

Kuhn Soo: This one is new. She's the colour my fridge used to be before the sea started eating it. Her hair – salt strands like seaweed. So pale and thin. Nothing more to her than a beautiful word. A rose-apple. Where-you-from?

Izzy: Oh. Um. Leicester.

Jack: That's stumped her.

Izzy: England. Sorry. England.

Kuhn Soo: Manchester United hahaha.

Izzy: She unloads the yoke, failing to disguise pain and relief, staggers a bit, and smiles. A kind smile.

Jack: It's a fine act.

Izzy: How much is one of those?

Kuhn Soo: Ten baht.

Izzy: What's that? 20p.

Jack: That's twice what it would cost you on the mainland.

Izzy: Oh, er, I'll have five.

Kuhn Soo: Five?

Jack: It's her lucky day.

Izzy: I want to touch her, to show whose side I'm on. I reach out but I panic. I see immediately my gesture's about me, completely redundant, and possibly weird. But my hand is out there, I've got to touch something, so I stroke her hat.

Jack: That's weird. She stroked her hat.

Kuhn Soo: She put her hand on my hat.

Izzy: Which is even weirder. Why the hell did I do that? I'm so stupid. I hate myself.

Kuhn Soo: Perhaps she wants to gauge the temperature of my head. And she buys a lot of apples.

Izzy: How could I not? My heart went out to her. This tiny bird-like old women traipsing around a fridge and a pile of fruit all day. Her right knee's like comically bugged. She's obviously on her last legs, if you'll forgive the expression. And the heat. How do you do it? That must be so uncomfortable. How on earth do you do it?

Kuhn Soo: Manchester United hahaha.

Izzy: Oh God. So there goes my food plan. I'll Skype my sponsor at lunchtime and talk it through. Time difference! Shit. Then I just won't eat them. I only bought them out of guilt. I could give them back to her, but maybe that would be taken as an insult. I know keeping your shoes on indoors is bad but... Oh look, surely I'm capable of sitting here and simply not eating them. I'm not hungry or anything. Well, perhaps...maybe I could have just one. There's nothing wrong with a piece of fruit mid-morning, right? Right. Except it's not on my food plan. Which means it's a slip. Oh Jesus. This is how it starts. One piece of fruit today, two tomorrow, and the next day I'll be searching for cake. I know me. That's what I'm like. I haven't done six years on and off in 12 step programmes not to know what I'm like. And once I'm into cake, then all bets are off. Caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes. Next thing, I'll be mainlining with tramps under railway bridges. You think I'm kidding? You should have seen me in 2004. I was the size of a house with a drug habit to shame Amy Winehouse.

Jack: I reckon she's like one of those chicks that really *gets* men. Course, I don't know, but looking at her, I just bet she is. She looks nice. Jesus, I've got a hard-on. Emergency rearrangement.

Izzy: (Energie £29.99)

Jack: Later on, she showed her true slapper colours and shagged the deckchair guy. Wide shoulders and a 24-inch waist. A sexy young avocado, with enough give in him for a good time. While he fucked her, he thought about shit. All the shit the foreigners make. The rivers of shit that float out to sea and clog up the ocean and change where the fish go so his father has to take the boat to other places. And afterwards he felt used, and he hung around for a tip.

Kuhn Soo: The sun hits the sea, and the sand cools, and we head back to the quay and the mainland – Lek and Ton and Num and me. And, though the load is lighter now, my knee, like most days, hurts a little more than yesterday. I imagine a time when the muscles and ligaments – those little miracles – will fail to make their necessary adjustments, and my knee will be gone from under me, the fruit falling, the juice sinking into the thirsty sand and disappearing forever. I make my prayer for another day like today. But I know she's right. It's a dead elephant I'm trying to cover up with a lotus leaf. And I ask her then, what else she thinks I can do?

5. Puppy

A short play for six characters and two actors

Manouchehr: You're strong. You're the strongest man I know.

Laleh: I'm weak. There's something wrong with me.

Manouchehr: You're fine. You're better than them.

Laleh: Then why am I here? What's different? My hair or my eyes or something? The way I walk?

Manouchehr: Not you.

Laleh: Do I look different?

Manouchehr: You look the same. You look like one of them.

Laleh: But they're not here. I'm here. You're here. We're here. They're out there. They're all out there.

Manouchehr: We're not here.

Laleh: Yes.

Manouchehr: No, we can't be here. We don't exist.

Laleh: But I'm definitely here. If we don't exist, how come I'm here?

Manouchehr: So that we don't exist. Geddit?

Laleh: You're the strong one.

Manouchehr: If you weren't here, I'd have gone crazy. You understand me?

You eat anything?

Laleh: Kidding me – no way.

Manouchehr: I did.

Laleh: How? See, I couldn't even do that. They give you a shirt and trousers?

Manouchehr: Yep. Quite smart.

Laleh: You're shitting me. Cheap shit.

Manouchehr: I think it looks smart. Bet you look good in yours.

Laleh: I look like I'm going to a funeral. It's ironed though.

Manouchehr: Hey, Laleh. When I saw you the first time I thought, he'll never look at me. He's a lothario.

Laleh: You thought what?!

Manouchehr: He's a lothario.

Laleh: He's a *what*?

Manouchehr: A lothario. A player. Got a shit load of girlfriends.

Laleh: Manouch...

Manouchehr: But when you held me in your arms I knew.

Laleh: I can't do this.

Manouchehr: You're mine. Your strong arms. You're life.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO READ THE REST OF THIS PLAY PLEASE CONTACT
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