

alastair white

#CAPITAL

a fashion opera

The logo for United Music Publishing Limited features a stylized, cursive ampersand (&) on the left, followed by the lowercase letters 'ump' in a similar cursive script. Below this, the words 'UNITED MUSIC' and 'PUBLISHING LIMITED' are stacked in a clean, uppercase, sans-serif font.

UNITED MUSIC
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Part I: This For That

This is an age of death. Where death
waits not but works in every hand. Orange
juice, yellow, from California heralds
black-clad bonehands pressed against the glass pane.
This printed ticket. In strips of orange and teal.
It is a summoning, it is a blood
splattering — irrefutable evidence of guilt.

That death chose us, worked through us. We lowered
button, button: buy now, book now, accept the terms
bitterly, yes, but still the button pressed. And
usher in the epoch that is death's. Orange
of *Easyjet*, *Shell's* yellow. Flowers press
-ganged like buttons into logos for death. Yet

what else could we have done? Often, I imagine
trials at hand. Where in sackcloth I stand over
precocious lawyers not yet born. O, year
2050. The world entirely death's and his lackeys
explain themselves. Must speak at last. *He*
commanded us not, we say. How? It cannot be
imagined. It is unimaginable,
lack of imagining-imagined, still,
racked kingdom of death (there are others — yes).
Brother, we'll explain ourselves. We will have to.

How to speak of absence,
quantify non-events?
Banality of evil, its workers.
Simplicity of cheeseburgers'
sonnet-like thickness. Dense
fundamental ingredients:
cow uterus. Pickle slice.
Mustard, ketchup, onion. Nice,
even delicious. I've eaten
thousands of these, with wages
bought metal for many a cattleage,
bull-semen pipettes, forceps for young
dragged from the belly and killed with a boltgun.
If I'm honest. I don't care:
banality of deliciousness, of bread, of beer
butter — toasted cigarettes.
Tomorrow, we say. O, not yet.

The proof is robust, endless, and wearing.
The prosecution's argument is that
this for that, now for then, us for
them, today instead of when (for
when, really, if ever), here forbearing
there so patiently — as an English
-man upon the sea or green, English
gardens under tea as hands cut maps'
parts: penned to epochs over pecking hens. "The
argument of me for who" — they'll say —

“exchanged. We’re here, now.” To make their own.

(The barrister studied oratory.
Liang Qichao, Benn, Demosthenes.)

This, then, will be my defence. Exchange — also.

Part 2: Dragon City

(Me, using a blackboard, the courtroom enthralled:)

The history of exchange is the archaeology of the metaverse.
The archaeology of the metaverse is the study of language.
The study of language is the philology of dematerialisation.
The philology of dematerialisation is the semiology of tokens.
The semiology of tokens is the taxonomy of the dictionary.
The taxonomy of the dictionary is the story of money.
The story of money is the study of representation.
The study of representation is the history of exchange.

(I clear my throat, undo my tie. Murmurs in the gallery. Then:)

I was 21 years old. My friend
bought a headset for parties
in Decentraland. Donning the goggles,
laughed, uncertain. "Headset calibration."
Bumbling around, blindfolded, her hands
clumsy on the controller's flick-trigger
she looked like an idiot, a fish
in plastic. "Wow, she said. "You have to see this."
Its plastic, unexpected, heavy
on my head as I looked down. The band,
velcro (or what they make black seatbelts of)
tightened not to slip. She watched: belt off,
glass of merlot in hand, I bent my neck,
took in the vastness of the screen's white thinness.
She laughed. And said, "you look ridiculous."

But I was a girl with orange hair down to my neck,
a pink dress, eyes like beetles. And no legs.
Aie! Libertine sybarite! I floated, flew.

Later she showed me the pictures. Shirtless,
I could see moles and hair on both my shoulders,
breastless, my hair short and black — and older,
I was 44. My friend had bought an Oculus
for parties in the metaverse. I was a
girl with black hair down to my back,
a beltless dress and eyes like goggles. I flew.
My friend was a girl with short orange hair
and as she pressed on the goggles I looked down to see
the hem of her pink dress swaying by her knees,
scars from a glass shard, embedded gravel.

On a peninsula, 40,000 years earlier,
a woman stands with bright orange hair.
The sun across the Atlantic is beneath the water,
colouring clouds on horizons beaten bronze,
a thin line, like rope, of pure, yellow light,
just at the edge of rain. She is politics,
the politics of change; her name is
unpronounceable. (We'll call her Jane.)
She is leading a delegation to the mainlanders.

Outstretched her arm, open her palm to show
precious shells dappled in the gloam.
She places one, a white, fluted bone
fan marked — with salt and dirt — upon the sand,
then peat sod, then an arrowhead. The shell
is arranged at the apex of the triangle, and she draws a line
from the shell to the fuel, and a line
from the shell to the weapon. She looks
up to see if the ambassador
understands. This, for that, she says. This for these.
Waves lap, washing, grinding, at their feet.

The pageboy looks on in wonder to see
the shell become neither the shell nor the weapon
or peat: once house to inanimate flesh
yet traversing the Atlantic! Now an
image of a shell, a shell in a shell's place.

Part 3: The Shell

At any moment we can become
something else. A shell becomes a shell
token. Physical men become inkwell
spills of colour under goggles. Some
things are not meant to be but change and swell:
tolling, beaten iron of a churchbell;
broken pots' hairlines; a cupcake's crumbs;
hairgel in a hat; or the skins of drums.
Underneath the sign of the shell, on
a London road beside a bowl of melon,
material's folded — dyed the colour of suns,
bulging bright lycra, jackets in orange.
The cut in the world that is fashion,
words, coins and code exchanges the bland
falseness of sense with material, hand
-made reality. It's a cut. A lesion.
As the knife through the melonflesh peeling
fruit, sweet, from the rind, so fabric and band
peel skin like the shell did the shell upon sand
till all that's left is hair lit by horizon:
the sun exchanged for orange.
In a studio above a market
a designer makes a handscarf, hat and puffer.
"Tomatoes, peppers, melon, fruit punnets."
"At any moment we can," he says,
"Become whatever we want, and nothing less.
Everything else is not too much to ask."
"Three bowls for a pound." "Three pounds a bag."

Three bowls of oranges, one pound.

Part 4: The Verdict

“This is the time of death? Death is nothing
but change: from this to that. Rib to raincoat,
word — lip. Finger, pixel. And gold to note.
Yes. You’ve spoken of change. Yet all’s the same. Bring
the scythe that turns living wheat to bread.
Like needles weaving silhouettes from thread?
A headset lighting black retinas with games?
You feared change. Kept everything the same.
Absence will be quantified.
This — an age of pelt and hide.”



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