THE MASTERWORK OF THE CHEESE ORPHEUS

JEFFREY DENNIS

Buses pass, outside on the street: a great stir of lights going back and forth.

'Right under here,' said Marlow suddenly, pointing at the floor, 'that was the place.' After a slow pull on his drink he continued. 'The Tube's got forgotten corners. You're younger; perhaps don't remember the miniature public bar, right on the platform, serving pints, only four feet from the trains hurtling by. And once, following signs promising a quicker route – I forget where – I found myself on a link-line with strange, rounded trains, small portholes for windows, like a spaceship from a fifties comic. I never found it again.

'When they were building the line extension, that's when I came across the *Cheese Orpheus*. Never really met him; just once: a hunched figure at the top of some stairs – greasy coat, whiskery face, pointy, sagacious features, tugging a suitcase, lashed with string. I offered to carry it down. When I hauled on the gaffer-taped handle, it was entwined with safety-pins; dug into my hand.

'Heard about him? He's that artist; the "Auto-Entropy" one – stupid name! Entropy's always "auto", isn't it? He was actually moving into the station. This is what happens: in this arched recess, across the tracks from the platform – inaccessible, but facing the waiting passengers – he stacks enough *cheese* (Stilton, I think, creamy-white, blue-veined) to fill the space. Every night, after the last train, he works – carving, modelling the cheese – creating a fantasy of turrets, staircases, bridges, buttresses.

'Daytime, he lies low; but the emerging edifice is left on view, lit by a miners' lamp. Where the cheese is worked into thin membranes, it has a waxy, translucent quality in the gloom.

'This spectacle naturally attracts curiosity, speculation amongst the travelling public. For some, it has attributes of a wayside shrine: they make special journeys to view progress; leave tokens of luck or missives for good fortune and safe journeys.

'But the cheese started to "assert itself": first, the warm, pungent aroma of the delicatessen, but later, a sour thickness that stings the nostrils and catches in the commuters' throats. At the busiest times of day, when newcomers are assailed by the acrid twang, their collective exclamation – "*oooowwww… OOOOOOOWWWWW…*" – rises in waves, almost choral, resonating through the tunnels.

'The edifice doesn't last. The upper surfaces of the fantastic cheese architecture acquire fringes of soot; patches of spectacularly coloured mould blossom; lower edges are eaten away by mice. It starts to look more like the lime-scaled caverns of Cheddar Gorge; crumbling stalactites and stalagmites.

'The desiccated cheese fades and shrinks within its recess: the smell evaporates; the lamp is no longer lit. Amongst the accidental Abstract Expressionism of peeling posters and building work, the once-glowing cheese Xanadu is now a blackened, shrivelled relic. Eventually, it is indistinguishable from its surroundings.

'Official pronouncements? None. Commuters occasionally remark on its demise. Met with the incredulity of those who never witnessed it (I read your face, sir), they become… doubtful.'