



## Extract 4

### The Ghost of a Flea

A flickering tongue. A glinting, mad eye. Long, flexing fingers. With a bony, hunched spine, it stalks the boards with a loping gait. This miniature painting is perhaps the most haunting image of all by the artist William Blake (1757–1827). Poet, painter and print-maker, Blake was a visionary. At a time when most painters earned their living by painting society portraits, Blake stood apart, an underground artist who claimed that his poetry was dictated by angelic beings, and his paintings inspired by visions that he saw. *The Ghost of a Flea* is one such vision. With its scaly head, bulging eyes and voracious tongue, it represents a dead flea, the tiny insect that is just visible between its legs. The flea has become in death a grotesque and gothic monster, naked and muscular. Intent on some evil purpose, it carries a knife as sharp as a thorn and a stone bowl. Blake was imagining that fleas were the embodiment of the souls of bloodthirsty men.

He said they shrank to tiny parasitic insects that feed on the blood of other animals to restrict the amount of blood they could drink. This bloodthirsty creature treads the boards of a shadowy stage, slipping between stage curtains on its stealthy mission. In a way, it is Blake's answer to the glossy society portraits of his day: a portrait of a creature never seen and yet utterly believable, and memorable enough to stalk our dreams, or perhaps our nightmares.

