

EXPERIENCED DIFFERENTLY

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Foreword

The fountains at Heathrow's Terminal Five gather themselves and jump – is it for joy at a journey ended, or a glimpse of the one to come? – then, holding their breath, turn and dive back into sound. Perhaps that pause, its silent catch, locks in both flight and fall: gravity tugs us down, but grace calls to us too – from somewhere. When my daughter, a gap-year invincible, failed to come home, alive, my son's deployment to Afghanistan bid me gather myself and cast eleven (he was born in the silence of Armistice day) sonnets by way of a prayer. Caught between dread and desire, each one a breath suspended – like this water, steeling itself, mid-air.

1

A history experienced differently
says the notice in three languages
but shared by Belgians and Congolese
alike. Is this commensurability?
Like the Nazis; the Jews and Gypsies.
Like the slice and severed hand. The constrictor
we see in Leopold's Museum of Colonies,
from whose huge unhinged jaw a wild boar
is hauled out whole, isn't any longer, its hinges
no hungrier, than this word or man's audacity.
At least *gedeelde* in its ambiguity
to divide; to share, acknowledges both stories.
What then of our own, our two-night story –
shared alike, experienced differently?

2

Shared alike, experienced differently:
from tyrants and tormented to lovers
– yes, even lovers in their intimacy
come back to themselves, the moment after.
The continuous spinning of the thread, its hum
(do you know what good clean fun is?)
and the structure of the web (what good is clean fun?)
Man is troubled not by things, said Epictetus
but by the view he takes of them. Witness
the three disparate definitions
of *colonise* in Flemish, French and English.
Not one of them was Leopold's. Nor are passions
to us, today, so fraught and full of anguish
as they were to the Stoics – unless.

So fraught and full of anguish, were it not
 for that saving shade of black. *To lose
 one parent*, said Wilde, *may be regarded
 as a misfortune. To lose both looks like
 carelessness*. Whose fate, fortune or fumble
 was it when the suicide bomber outside your camp
 blew himself up, alone – *no virgins for you, silly* –
 his body parts staked and strung by the Afghanis.
Not just hearts and minds, you write, *but shoulders
 knees and toes, knees and toes*. A leg swinging
 beside the only non-pedestrian entrance
 to your tank park has you asking, darkly:
*Would a painted red circle not turn it
 into a road sign, an apt reminder?*

And what of children? To lose one
 a misfortune. To lose both? A stab,
 after the turn and thrust of this question,
 that stops me dead. Forget wit, forget
 carelessness. Insufferable. A monstrous
 shadeless black. Yet to say *I suffer*
 is to fix pain, feed anguish. Much wiser
 not to fight the flow, this cosmic logos.
 I drift and dip – find comfort above
 the clouds, then fasten as the plane descends.
 And each descent persists, through trapped lives,
 longings – those boreholes of passion defended.
Looks like, from under the painted portico,
 this *may be regarded* one way to let go.

5

*The strange pleasure that comes of the certainty
that there is no certainty. Yeah, whatever.
But there's no intoxicating relativity
in that shoulder shrug and glottal, no humour.
Perhaps philosophy: Permit nothing to cleave
to you that is not your own. Stoicism,
dispossession or je-m'en-foutisme?
Nothing that may give you agony
when it is torn away. And there it is –
that strange pleasure, that divine flash
which reveals the world – no, not so much
the world in its moral ambiguity,
as the word in its cloven etymology:
cleave: to cling together; to split asunder.*

6

*OK, this is my theory of life,
you wrote on a scrap of paper I find
after your death. Time started all the same
as one big trunk but then things happen, or may
– not. And you draw the story of somebody
walking down the street: branch one, for when he trips
and falls; branch two, for when he doesn't. Branch three
(parallel universes at every step)
for when he falls and dies. I may well be
you say, on this rough sketch of the whole of existence,
the only one who understands it.
So if you die, you still live, in some sense?
My clever girl, my much-missed little monkey,
you're so right: words, in some sense, fail all mystics.*

How can a creation make its own creator
 you ask, on the same blue-lined note paper.
In a way it makes people God because
they created him. Maybe – and there follows
 what turns out to be an interminable
 pause – *I'll go into that more later:*
It's something that should be discussed.
 You see gambling as linked, *for some reason,*
 and a topiarist would have been impressed
 by the way you hedge your bets: *I have kind of*
created sort of Gods – Lords of fate, dice
will and men. I ask them for what I need
when I gamble. Mistress of your own fate?
 Who's to say we become that which we create.

It is a history where passions
and emotions live on to this day.
 Rubbing along, smouldering or at play?
 Euphemisms, in any language, stay mum:
Une histoire dont les passions et les émotions
ne sont pas éteintes, while in between, the gaps
 crackle, and may even (*oplaaien*), blaze up.
 Gaps crackle between us too. I mind them.
Let us be cheerful and brave in the face
 (no, not a mask – a mere pause mid-phrase
 since mum, so they say, 's the word) *of everything*
 – yeah, whatever – *reflecting that it is nothing*
of our own that perishes (Seneca). Empty hands.
 Neither clapping. No. Nor soundless either.

's the word. Did you know that *euphemism*,
 sniffed and sneered at today for the sugared gall
 it speaks of, was itself once a euphemism:
speaking well by not speaking at all.
 All ineffables – the tao, the logos –
 come to speak of themselves. Silence lies in wait,
 full centre of the city square, as Trojan horse,
 and in back alleys, fast through the fastened gate.
 Here it leans, like an echo under the eaves
 – so much said in the unsaid of a mere
 apostrophe. *Come now, let's leave, let us leave!*
 The former speaks to us alone; to our detainer,
 the latter. Who's in on it, who's out?
 Clusivity: the mother of all doubt.

Let us love this distance, wrote Simone Weil,
so thoroughly woven with friendship, between us.
 The black print fades as I refocus
 on the weave between her words – the worthwhile
 of insight, its magic eye. Boundaries
 articulate, silence gives sound its power,
 but only to those who heed these spaces:
Since those who do not love each other
are not separated. In the Pinkas synagogue
 I find myself in a book of names, dates.
 Black, red, gold inks mark white walls: the Jews of Prague,
 of an entire nation, line after line, one common fate.
 Nothing more is said, nor can be.
 Lives lost, retold now, in the spaces left empty.

We make the boundaries within which we drift:
 stories, journeys, a sonnet sequence,
 Gods, laws, the values through which we sift.
 Your news that you've handed in your weapons,
I'm now fully retired from my war-fighting,
so no more fretting, and your indignation,
We even have to wear berets in Bastion...
such REMFs! is a space that has me smiling
 at the difference in our takes. We define
 our own boundaries and those boundaries ...
(it's something that should be discussed). In each line,
 a make or break – in each, shades of revision too. See
 how the shadow of this votary flame turns playful:
 no light or heat, just the winged waves of a thermal.

Afterword

He's back at last, back from Afghanistan!
 You must be – the inevitable sing-song –
 soooooo relieved! I am, of course I am

but acquiesce in smiles, not in song.
 I am what I'm told I must be, no question.
 Very happy, yes, don't get me wrong!

Irrepressibly, each surging intonation
 breaks over me. My smile waylaid
 by exclamations, the king of weapons.

Beneath each down-stroke blade, a severed head
 – no call for questions there.
 After the medals, proud yes, prayers for the dead.

And after tea and thanks, grateful yes, departure
 to pastures new – no question then – it's over!

Whatever the *it of it's over* is.
 An ugly awkward sentence, that –
 like so many spears spat out as splinters

by an oversized pedant. Perhaps
that's what I am, a gowned crow scavenging
beyond the action, growing fat

on the shin scraps of parsing.
To cast and recast spare words, words spare
– is that how hexagrams came into being?

Take my aunt's life: broken over fear
for and *fear of* her son – the difference seems slight.
But nowhere near as slight as to breathe *in water*

and to *breathe in water* – my daughter's plight.
A puff mis-parsed, the snuffing of a light.

Above the battlefield, the ravens caw
– there are rich pickings in defeat.
Fallow, six hundred years or more

let's turn it over, stir it, seed it
with words of fire, with fire from fear.
Fierce fields where blackbirds love to feast.

Niko ne sme da vas bije!
A modal sweeter than the sweetest marrow:
cannot, dare not, beat you ever? The honeyed *ne sme*

of Kosovo Polje. And there is more,
endlessly more of the same delight.
Look here, in the graveyard of empires – at war

ever at war – stir it, seed it, send it in a soundbite:
British forces must henceforth own the night!

War on terror too dead a metaphor
to be worth italicising. But here, wings
flapping, claws scrapping, the old crows

cluster craven: here, here are fresh pickings!
What does it mean *to own the night*? Who cares,
says the Frum of this latest soundbite, winking.

Firefights at dawn, at dusk, through edgy days.
A bullet wound to show for it, near misses:
Stretchers, choppers, ammo, spares.

Spare men, men to spare. Silences that speak
within the din of footage.
What say you soothsayers? What is that in your beaks?

The plot is empty. *Look Mummy, I have a ridge
named after me – here, just above this crease.*
And there it is, bold in a field of carnage,

PANDA RIDGE. Questions, please?
Why *Panda*? Now this is one I *can* answer:
My son is half Chinese.

Notes

Sonnet 1: *A history experienced differently but shared by Belgians and Congolese alike*, is part of the introduction provided in English on the explanatory notice to the exhibition room 'Congo: The Colonial Era' in the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium.

Sonnet 2:

- "Observe too *the continuous spinning of the thread and the structure of the web.*" Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, iv. 40.
- *Do you know what good clean fun is? I give up, what good is it?* Tommy Cooper.
- *Man is disturbed not by things, but by the views he takes of them* Epictetus (*Enchiridion* 5). Epictetus (AD 55-135) was a Stoic philosopher who believed that suffering arises from our attempt to control what is not in our power, and our neglect of what is.

Sonnet 3: Oscar Wilde, 1895, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Sonnet 4:

- *I suffer* refers to Marcus Aurelius: *Get rid of the judgment, get rid of the 'I am hurt,' you are rid of the hurt itself.* (viii.40)
- The *painted portico* refers to the *Stoa Poikile*, from which the philosophical school of Stoicism takes its name.

Sonnet 5:

- *Humour: the divine flash that reveals the world in its moral ambiguity and man in his profound incompetence to judge others; humour: the intoxicating relativity of human things; the strange pleasure that comes from the certainty that there is no pleasure.* Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*. Translated by Linda Asher, 1996.

- *Je m'en foutisme.*: indifference, lack of engagement. Literally, 'I don't give a damn-ism.'
- *Permit nothing to cleave to you that is not your own; nothing to grow to you that may give you agony when it is torn away.* Epictetus (iv.1.112).

Sonnet 8:

- *It is a history where passions and emotions live on to this day.* Part of the introduction to the Colonial Era exhibition, Tervuren.
- *Une histoire dont les passions et les émotions ne sont pas éteintes:* a history where passions and emotions are not extinguished. The Flemish reads 'where passions and emotions still flare up'.
- *Let us be cheerful and brave in the face of everything, reflecting that it is nothing of our own that perishes.* Seneca the Younger, *De Providentia*.
- *Mum's the word:* to keep quiet, say nothing (from mmmm, the sound made through closed lips).
- *Empty hands*, from Marcus Aurelius (iv.3): *Or is it your reputation that's bothering you? But look at how soon we're all forgotten. The abyss of endless time that swallows it all. The emptiness of those applauding hands.*

Sonnet 10: *Let us love this distance, which is thoroughly woven with friendship, since those who do not love each other are not separated.* Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*.

Sonnet 11: REMF (*Rear Echellon Mother F*cker*), a soldier with no frontline or combat duties.

Afterword:

- *Niko ne sme da vas bije.* ‘Nobody may/ has the right to / dares to beat you.’ Words spoken by Slobodan Milošević at Kosovo Polje in April 1987 to Serbs upset by Albanian police actions.
- Kosovo Polje (the field of crows), is the site of a Serb defeat in 1389 at the hands of the Ottomans. Milošević’s utterance proved instrumental in fanning the flames of Nationalism and catalysing the Balkan Wars which followed.
- David Frum coined the term *Axis of Evil*, first used in the State of the Union address by George Bush in January 2002. The phrase served as a catalyst for the war on Iraq the following year.