

One after the other

Vit Hopley

Selected prose for voice and documentary. In sequence: Wisdom; Forsake; Caravan; Cranefly; Mystery; A world not yet divided. Vit Hopley reading from new writing and *Blissful Islands*, (Copy Press, 2018). Running time 30 mins.

Wisdom

A picture.

A child is held tight, restrained—that’s dramatic. A child is held tight, loosely shackled—still dramatic. A child is held tight within her arms. Her, that is my mother. I am held tight within my mother’s arms. Look, everyone is looking. Everyone, that is my family, looking towards a camera. Five forthright faces look directly; as for the other 26 faces negligible distractions skew the ideal, yet they are all smiling for the moment. And me—ah yes—there I am, held tight in my mother’s arms, hair in disarray, contorted. I, apple of my mother’s eye, wriggling like a maggot in windfall.

A maggot, the smallest of serpents. Poor old serpent: Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed you and who can I blame?

Making history.

Two women are sitting side by side at a kitchen table with their backs against the warmth of a stove. One near blind, eye bags sodden, trembles all over, and the other a frail shell lost amongst a sack of loose skin. On the brink. The room is dark. The room smells. Stone floors, rotting apples. The kitchen table, dark oak. Opposite, held against the warmth of my mother, I am wriggling like a maggot in windfall. My mother speaks very loudly. She says—Hold still. She says—Behave. She says—When will you learn. She says all this and proclaims even more on my behalf. Across the kitchen table.

The distance between us is vast. In the middle of the table there stands a solitary glass of apple juice, cloudy with sediment slowly sinking. It is waiting for me. It always is. And as always, before coming here, my mother has said, as her mother said to her and her mother’s mother said to her—There will be no argument, when the juice clears you must drink, not before, and only then may you go out to play. Sour apples. A lesson in

patience sinking in: apples from trees generations-old pressed dry, what does that tell me? A lesson in trust sinking in: apples from trees generations-old pressed dry, what does that show me?

My mother, insistent that I have a question to ask, tightens her grip and tips me forward—rattled, tongue rolling in an empty mouth, not word nor sound will be found in me—and over my head she asks after the trees; she asks after the apples; she asks after the sweetness of juice; she asks the same questions every time and more on my behalf. Opposite, the women speak; words rise deep from the belly only to be caught at the back of the throat; guttural babbling swallows them up while mother's tongue acts quickly to salvage anything it can.

So here we all are. Again.

My mother speaks of harsh winters past, violent storms, trees falling, her mother their mothers, apple canker, my school report, the roof, a hip, a knee, nothing short of a miracle, the doctor and two doors down. —Hold still. The old garden wall, wasps, maggoty apples. —Behave. Sunlight from the garden is caught amongst leaves of geranium plants sitting on the windowsill; sporadic rays streak brilliance across the dim light of the room. How much longer must I wait? Opposite, in amongst the wrinkles, old and wise, a lifetime squeezed dry touches eternity. —When will you learn.

Sediment falling.

For as long as it has taken and my mother's grip loosens enough for me to fall freely out of her arms, in no time the juice is drunk, and in no time she is calling after me. —Not yet. And I am already half way up the garden path. —Wait. Running towards the old orchard. —Careful. Don't the first moments of independence come with limitless freedom. A pile of rubble is all that remains of the garden wall and, within, a dozen apple trees, knee-high weeds, nettles and thistles; an upturned chair and bucket beside a knife stabbed into earth; another chair under a tree, a wooden ladder propped against a trunk and knotted rope hangs from an old metal climbing frame.

Sharp afternoon shadows fall.

I am absolutely alone. Here, a wasteland. Every sound, every shape a noisy play of light and shadow. Dewdrops glisten, leaves flutter, ground squelches. Swinging from the top bar of the climbing frame, cold metal grips my skeleton. Letting go, thistles prick through my socks. Moving between trees, jumping shadows; tripping over a stone, whatever lives underneath will have the world as they find it. I have found the knife and I am using it to flick open moss-filled cracks. This is it. Looking over my own shoulder I am an archaeologist, a pioneer who finds no shame in not knowing everything in the world as if from birth. In this dilapidated orchard, behind my back the sun is setting.

In no time, I am being called.

Forsake

Tongues, drawl, tails and wet paws. And dogs tugging at leads. Her wrist is chafed raw. Damp, cold, metallic tasting; morning dew. And the smell of cracked paving. Her foot slightly twists as she falls. Barking, barking mad; down she goes, grazing her knee and cracking her head; nothing can break her fall. And the neighbours watch.

Get up, get up, for god's sake get up: tongues are wagging.

Tongue: bare word spoken noisily with the mouth. And wind, shadow, storm and sorrow speak incessantly. In tongues: babbling, twittering, chattering, whispering the most ancient and holy of languages that to our ears is more than the heart can think. Confounded. Me: simple word pawing and licking, sweet and delectable; and I, falling and rising, caught between heaven and earth like a dog's howl, unable to speak for myself. Maddening. Her foot is not wholly in her shoe. And her shoe is not wholly on her foot.

Someone calls the doctor, someone calls the priest; and everyone calls each other. No one calls her; she is presumed dead.

Caravan

High hedges, narrow roads bend, there in that small clearing on the corner a caravan has been parked for longer than anyone can remember. How it got there, who put it there, no one knows. It grows out of the hedge covered in moss; two small windows look out and as each day ends a light burns into the night. The caravan belongs to the corner, it belongs to the hedge, it belongs to the night sky.

He lives in the caravan and has done so for as long as anyone can remember. When he arrived no one knows. The anyones and no ones would prefer the caravan was not there. They say in strong words it is a hazard, a danger. They want to say he should move on. What can they do? The land in the corner belongs to no one anyone knows, who probably owns the caravan too.

They belong to the village and the village is a mile down the road. A mile down the road is a short drive. A mile down the road is a short walk on the road. He walks, they pass quickly in their cars. Even when it is raining. You see, the sun shines; they pass quickly, he blurs into the hedge, a smudge. Every day. He walks into the village, past her house.

Her house, a white stone house with four windows and a front door; the village, settled in a hollow, has a single road running through. The house is in the middle of the village. Once it belonged to the farm but the road separated the farm from the house and the house from the farm. Now the house belongs to her and it is close to the road; nothing passes without rattling the windows.

She stares from the kitchen window. Every day, looking at nothing in particular, thinking nothing in particular; at a standstill, her silence unfurls air without a word to wrap itself around. You see, she is alone watching a world go by. It all happens out there and stays out there. They say she should

not live on her own. They say she is isolated. Days pass quickly. Every day waiting, waiting for another day.

On this day the skies have opened. There he is, bowed, caught without cover, his hands making a small shelter above his head, heavy drops splashing back high. There she is muttering, caught by surprise; rain hits hard against the window, mouthed words fall to the ground. Continual rain. Rivulets run down the road, streaming across the window, her hand involuntarily wipes aside, demystifying the view; he walks on water.

And on this day, she sees something, something that takes her away from the window towards the front door. She grabs an umbrella, steps outside into the pouring rain, and sets off in his direction. He has passed her house and is already half way up the hill towards the village shop. Drenched. She runs, runs up the hill gesturing – You – You, the umbrella points.

There they are, at the top of the hill, under the shelter of the umbrella, in a circle of spray. She and he, face to face. You see, they are looking at each other; eyes wide open, she falls into black holes and he too, deeper than he can go. Yet, with nothing between them, they share an unthinkable closeness only to be repelled by their own reflections. She sees herself, he sees himself. You see, a small break in the cloud momentarily caught in drops of rain glistens.

Glistening. A split second, caught in the glint of an eye, a fathomless puddle. Now he is holding the umbrella and she is walking down the hill towards home; she uses her free hands to make a small shelter above her head. Light dances in rain, clouds slip from shining puddles, black holes open. You see, grasping this moment makes your eyes water, takes you back.

She is looking out of her kitchen window. It has stopped raining. There he is, walking by, a bottle of milk in one hand and nothing in the other. The umbrella has been forgotten, left behind on the step of the shop, dripping. He might remember tomorrow. The skies open. Afternoon light, full of flare, streams through her window; her hand instinctively rises to shield her eyes; he is bathed in light. Blinding. Time passes quickly.

And this day ends, every day a procession of time; the setting sun drops out of sight, darkness sits in the hollow, the house disappears but for a thin line of light shining through the split between the curtains. You see, the day returns to the night, it belongs to the night, it belongs to the night sky.

Cranefly

Come back. Her refusal of this command placed her firmly in a world of past and future. There was no going back; for the first time in her life she had direction, she was looking forward; she was in search of happiness. Where better to find it than amongst autumn leaves, where better than in spring buds, where better than in dappled summer sunlight, where better than in a winter haw frost? Come back. Where better than in this instance of refusal?. In a moment that pays heed to a history that repeats itself, she has found eternal happiness. Dizzy. Barefoot, ankle deep, she squeezes decaying leaves between her toes as autumn colour rustles around her. Come back. A line must be drawn here lest her legs buckle and she meets her descent albeit with the grace of the crane fly, whose long limbs fold to create the frame that keeps its body held above ground, suspended, for eternity.

Mystery

Why the architect became a monk is a mystery. And how it was that the monk happened to be an architect is a mystery. Did the architect, before deciding to become a monk, have a plan? And the monk, did he have a plan? Monk architect: monk and architect falling together, divinely human.

The monk architect built Quarr Abbey.

And he decided to build in brick. Brick, the common brick, man made to fit in the hand; and he chose not any brick but a particular brick – small, rough Flemish brick for its warm reds and yellows, earthly as from the beginning; and in each brick made, fired handprints became trace fossils. And he used plenty. Two million bricks. Brick by brick by brick laid by hand, set apart together and the Abbey, with its interior buttresses, high arches supporting the roof, and two towers, was built in brick alone.

The Abbey.

Outside, the fact of each brick testifies to its building; inside, light through small yellow glass windows glows, the mix of colour and hue taking the Abbey to the arché. And monks robed in black move about reflected through shadow and reposed through silence. A monk's life, a rule of life, lived in prayer, in contemplation, prostrate and not from here. It is a mystery.

And life is it ever by design? I am at a crossroads, forever at a crossroads and I am not the only one: going over and over before and after before then; facts speaking louder than words, it is an eternal drama. Life. How I judge! I take a pew and I am not the only one looking from the outside looking in. There I am looking to the past for understanding as though it were the cause of all things. Am I not the author of my life? Did I not decide then and then and then – its history! – And then? Inside looking in, there I am at a threshold, in crisis. What next!

Putting then aside even though it is now, what is manifest has never been; before and after falling together, and rising up without design is a mystery.

The Abbey was it built for this? The Abbey, each brick chosen, handed over, is its gesture over and over again; and all that action coming together hollows into bare warmth. Inside. The nave is immense. I am there, a fact of then, going over and over before and after. A monk passes through the Abbey. Moving silently. And there, a confrontation of shadow and silence – shadows or afterimages or black habits? In the air burnt incense is redolent, an atmosphere not from here lingers. Outside in. I am there, immersed in a warm glow and bird song begins to fill the nave; and then an apparition – a black cat pouncing and leaping with its tail curling; a black cat chasing shadows all the way to the high altar to for ever dissolve in golden light.

This is the truth. I testify to myself. Going over and over, before and after before then – (here, a moment of elaboration: bricks, reds, yellows, glow, aroma, monk, bird, shadow, cat: there a moment arising) – what takes me here is not of here. This is the truth. Over and over, before and after before then, there is here and there is elsewhere; there is someone and there is someone else: there, a decisive confrontation – the temporal and the eternal falling together – and its divinely human. This is the truth. I am not myself today. What a drama! And there, the authority to write this word by word by word.

A world not yet divided

If I am not there, there is a stream at the bottom of the garden,
I am kneeling at the edge awed by water boatman back
swimming; if I'm not there, I have crossed into the field and
I am under the tree jumping in and out of cow's hoof prints;
if I'm not there, I am in the tree as high as I can go; if I am not
there, I am being someone else in my world; if I am not there,
the school bus chugs and I am beating its tune on the back
seat; if I am not there, I am drawing faces in misty windows; if
I am not there, I am in the classroom writing days in joined up
letters; if I am not there, there is a shop that has jars of coloured
sweets, I am wondering which sweet lasts the longest; if I'm not
there,

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