

a.m.

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*To my extended family – the morning of life*



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Finally, I thank with love and respect those people to whom this book is dedicated: *My heart has only one limit ...*



a.m.

The stone which the builders rejected  
has become the main cornerstone



**a.**

But does the dialogue with the whole of our philosophical tradition – a dialogue in which we stand and which as philosophers, we are – need to be grounded? Does what has always supported us need to be grounded?

[GADAMER, *Truth and Method*]



## My Little Alphabet

My little Alphabet  
hasn't got to Z yet

My little Buffalo  
went to a rodeo

My little Chrysalis  
is partly that and partly this

but my little Dodo  
doesn't know the way to go

to reach my little Egypt  
whose pointed pyramids have slipped

into my little Filofax  
(with dates of silk and names of flax) –

and my little Alphabet  
hasn't got to Z yet

My little Gizmo  
is even fast in slo-mo

while my little Hong Kong  
sung and sung for so long

My little India  
likes to drink Pink Gin, dear

My little Jasmine tree  
has jasmine roots and jasmine leaves

My little Kilowatt  
is sometimes cool and sometimes hot

My little Lazybones  
spends too long on telephones

while my little Monotone  
goes on and on and on and on

and still my little Alphabet  
hasn't got to Z yet

But my little NASDAQ  
builds empires like the Aztecs

while my little Otto  
likes to eat a lot-o

My little Pumpkin  
is not a country bumpkin!

My little Quota  
was filled in Minnesota

and my little Robot  
always knows what's what is what

but still my little Alphabet  
hasn't got to Z yet!

My little Serpentine  
weeps endless tears of chilled white wine

because my little Tokyo  
hasn't got a yen to show

to my little Uruguay  
who turns away, and quietly sighs

My little *Viva!*  
lifts up the receiver

as my little Wallaby  
listens to a lullaby

for my little X-ray  
who won't let flesh get in his way

But my little *Yahoo!*  
always makes his welcome known to you

in my little Zanzibar  
(so full of moons and full of stars) –

and now that we're in Zanzibar  
where all the Zs are in their beds

it's time to sleep and to forget  
my little Alphabet . . .

## Der Turmbau zu Babel

Since you've gone, I've fallen so quiet . . .  
Days, I walk out onto Jesus Green, where the dawning cold  
makes a slowing world slur, growing numb, and speechless . . .  
Nights, I write of senseless things.  
I speak to senseless things . . .

On Jesus Green, the dogs are playing  
and there's light on their backs  
which runs as they run.  
The ground is one flowing, dazzling wave of frost.  
Somewhere a girder dully shebangs into another; the sound  
reverbs across the open spaces of the common  
and fades into the emptiness  
which waits, like a gullet, under all sky.

We're still building: the day goes on and on  
into its air, and is shored up  
with immaculate details . . .  
A chainsaw grunts and whines in the distance:  
I can see the puff of dirty beige smoke as it starts,  
and the men around it in their orange dungarees  
and dark-blue donkey jackets  
by the rusting Council truck  
parked on its spellstruck, parallel tracks on the turf . . .

A Weimaraner bitch with clay-blue eyes  
lopes, whips and bounces in vapour;  
other dogs run, sunshine fluent on their gleaming spines;  
the sawdust jets from the crackling tree  
as it's cut to the root;  
smoke rises from the battered brazier, moving straight up . . .  
Mist burns on the river . . .

It's a Dutch scene: and the still,  
calm light of the North  
bears down on it all

in its cool amplitude –  
but not one part of this light  
will ever touch you again;  
it falls on dogs, on grass, trees, on stones, and posts –  
but it won't touch the side of your raised face  
or make you gently flinch away with half-closed eyes.

How intimate Babel is.  
How thick with the material that comes to hand.  
Its foundations in a dog-eared *Genesis*  
in a freezing Sunday School shed  
where a boot's crimped piece of sleet  
is melting on the grubby floor  
to the hiss of a stove, a demon grin of three pink flames.  
In the hushed class, snail-like mucous is glistening  
and coughs ricochet into the rafters (timber hairy like coconuts):  
Eden smells of paraffin, musty leather and wet wool . . .

How carefully we build: day in, day out.  
Nursery books: Potter and Grimm.  
A tower of stacked, wooden alphabet blocks  
with their A is for Apple  
and Z is for Zebra,  
a vertical word raised from the crawling floor  
of the infant builder, a toddler in pale-blue dungarees,  
suddenly tumbling here, spilling down in a chunky wave  
at my feet,  
on the hard cold ground of Jesus Green . . .

And when Babel fell, what did it leave?  
A cloud of mortar, and the word for 'tower' in Iraq.  
A plastic tortoiseshell haircomb on a scuffed pine dresser . . .  
A wedding ring we couldn't pull from your finger;  
slippers and shoes – Singapore high-heels – shoes, and shoes . . .  
Whippets and dobermans, alsatians and springers,  
with their moist, sirloin tongues lolling out,  
running wild on the frosty grass.  
And a scent of burning plane trees . . .

I once said: "Every writer must rebuild Babel",  
and was proud of that little *aperçu*,  
standing in my dark-blue, second-hand suit,  
a young Mandelstam, a young Master.  
I didn't realise Babel was real.  
I didn't realise it was all for real.  
How it would take time to fall, and would take you.  
Or how I'd stand on the platform,  
waiting to come home,  
walking on the air of shock, all my world  
suddenly lighter than air . . .  
Caress like a shadow . . .

Caress like a shadow . . .  
Blond hair under a maroon schoolboy cap:  
grey hair at the temples, the head bare.  
A raincoat of black gaberdine;  
a second-hand jacket of mocha-brown suede . . .  
Light the blue touchpaper; and stand well back . . .  
And suddenly thirty-two Guys have burned  
through our Novembers . . .

Now I'm back down where the towers began  
in roots of alphabet,  
and your voice speaking, saying  
'A is for Apple,  
B is for Bear' . . .

But somewhere, childhood is running in Size 3 shoes  
across a sky-wide field  
ploughed and frozen  
and grey as pumice  
and scratched by crows.

Nothing is so white as these mornings.

October. We drank up the summer through a little straw . . .  
Now it's dry . . . At noon,