

Los Alamos Mon Amour

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Los Alamos Mon Amour

SIMON BARRACLOUGH



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For Breda and Lorraine & in memory of Clive

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Los Alamos Mon Amour

The second before and the eternity after
the smile that split the horizon from ear to ear,
the kiss that scorched the desert dunes to glass
and sealed the sun in its frozen amber.

Eyelids are gone, along with memories
of times when the without could be withheld
from the within; when atoms kept their sanctity
and matter meant. Should I have ducked and covered?

Instead of watching oases leap into steam,
matchwood ranches blown out like flames,
and listening to livestock scream and char
in test pens on the rim of the blast.

I might have painted myself white, or built a fallout room
full of cans and bottled water but it's clear
you'd have passed between cracks, under doors,
through keyholes and down the steps to my cellar

to set me wrapping and tagging my dead.
So I must be happy your cells have been flung through mine
and your fingers are plaiting my DNA;
my chromosomes whisper *you're here to stay*.

Saturn on Seventh

I've been giving the miraculous a whirl
but what have I got? A stomach crammed

with cheap chimichanga, a shoulder-check
from Christian Slater and, though I don't know it yet,

a cloned credit card number. The Empire State
is a popsicle dipped in its Christmas reds

and greens. "Let's eat and drink ourselves
into hospital." The waitress only just

brought you round with ice-water fingers
on the cubicle floor between courses

and flaming, straw-melting cucarachas.
We came to celebrate this town

but dragging ourselves up Seventh Ave.
back to the peeling *Pennsylvania* room,

we sway wasted and weary past
stacks of Japanese *Playboys*, Brazilian

Vogues, battlements of L. Ron Hubbard
remainders, a trestle table over-stacked

with cheaply-stitched-together baseball caps:
all the naff globalised tat we've come

to expect from the greatest city on earth.
And then this charcoal-on-cardboard sign,

See Saturn for a dollar, and the giggling line
of clubbers where a homeless astronomer

has angled a prized and battered telescope
at a quarter of the sky to the right

of the Chrysler Building, which tonight
looks like it might have been piloted here

by Buster Crabbe. I toss a dollar in his cap
expecting nothing but empty night,

rest my brow against the rubber cup,
sealing out the street-level light

and there, in a black starless spotlight:
Saturn, as fat as a two pound coin,

fluxing with my pulse conducted through
the sensitive instrument, tilts its tipsy

rings towards Manhattan. I don't want to leave
its impeccable silence but you've paid

your money too and I step aside.
A random reveller asks me, "Did you see it?"

Is it real?" and "Was it in colour?"
You take your fill and turn away, smiling.

We continue up the hill in silence,
our minds in parallel universes.

Psycho

I heard at the heart of things
there's a massive black hole.
Gigantically coy but given away
by x-rays and the teetering
of attendant stars.

The blades of the Milky Way
Moulinex through space
as I shudder in your arms
and wait to be accused
of hyperbole again

because I saw the universe
drain down the plughole,
swirl back through the disc of your eye
and all that was lost was reborn
in the still silent face by my side.

A Tall Story about a Pushover

A little knowledge can be a deadly thing.
The most glamorous woman of all time :
thief, liar, cheat ; she was all of these things and he knew it.
Out of her curtained past came a man past all forgetting,
the most charming brute who ever scorned a lady,
the man who put the *man* in romance.
Strange, strange, their irresistible love ; dark, dark, their inescapable
fears.
Spies, playing the game of love and sudden death.
Three thousand miles of terror,
an ordinary necktie used with a deadly twist,
the guest who's dead on time,
a bomb plot, a killing, justice.
In his arms she felt safety ; in his absence, haunting dread.
"You don't love me, I'm just some kind of wild animal you've trapped!"
For a moment he forgets he's a thief and she forgets she's a lady.
Who goes primitive first : a man or a woman adrift in an open boat?
See and hear it. Our mother tongue as it should be heard.
Crushed lips don't talk.
If a woman answers, hang on for dear life.
Somewhere, somewhere, there must be the right man.
You must see it twice.
Suspense ! Azione ! Sorpresa !
Don't give away the ending ; it's the only one we have.

Thanks to www.imdb.com

Fusing the Braids

Three times a year you overhauled your hair,
firing the helical fuse that transformed
tightly-raked rows into electrical storms
of static and dandruff and ionised air.
Then, your black nimbus would radiate past
the edges of photos, pillows on beds,
reducing your face to a shrunken head,
leaving you other, untethered, distressed.
So for a weekend I became taboo
while expert fingers, with love, rebraided
the separate warring strands within you,
so I could return, all conflict evaded,
to pass a candle flame from tip to tip,
fusing hair and plastic, lip upon lip.

The Open Road

What if colour film came first
and all these searing sunsets, curly copper mops,
pink-fringed parasols and gaudy frocks
were so much *blah* to an eye that thirsts

to watch an ashen rose unfurl,
see the charcoal sheen of a peacock's tail,
a seascape rolling in drab grayscale,
dun smudges on the cheeks of girls;

dancing flames of heatless brume,
rockets spraying asterisks of chalk,
greybells blooming on pallid stalks,
the world's flags starred and striped with gloom?

We wouldn't dress our hearts in motley threads
and fix the world in greens and reds,
projecting all the loves we said
we'd never leave but left for dead,

and might not glimpse the widening seam
between the separating reds and greens
of everything we'd thought we'd seen
on our memory's monitor or silver screen.

Contacts

Jolts awake in the early hours,
eyelids crisp as courgette flowers,
turns towards the bedside blur
and sees the clock unusually clear.
4.50 a.m. with his contact lenses
Epoxied fast to his corneas.
Feet arch on tile as he peels back the lids
and pads at an iris with fingertip
but fails to find the lip between
the contact lens and all he's seen.
He's never known them so dried on,
must be the wine, the parching sun,
unless he's nudged them round the back:
two jellyfish in the lightless black.
Unfolds a hotel razor blade
from its envelope but he's not that brave
or desperate yet. Resumes the pincer
of thumbnail and index finger
and snags at last the stubborn seal,
with focused effort starts to peel
first one lens off and then the other
and lays them on a small hand mirror.
Unscrews their double-siloed case
to find them waiting in their place.
And on the mirror, torn asunder:
asquint Picasso, boss-eyed flounder.

Unleashed

The years we kept it out the back—chained to the stake,
the firkin well within the reach of searching lips
and agile tongue; the years its oily fur grew rich
against the rain, and talons kept in check upon
the family tombstone propped aslant the drystone wall;
the years we fed it titbits from the table and dared
to pat its lengthening snout—were peaceful on the whole.

One restless night you saw the circle it had worn,
felt for the collar and finally unclasped our hold.
It pounced from the chain and the mist took its tracks.
So now we're blamed for the trampled crops, the upturned bins
and gutted sheep; there's been a sighting near the school
and at dusk the torches in the woods, the hue and cry,
the ancient howl, let us know that it's near,
though it may not know where it belongs or how to hunt or who
to trust
or how to find its way back to us, even if it wanted to.

Pike

Teriyaki tigering the golden
deep-fried flesh and a flask of hot sake
fuming like a factory chimney.

This china smoke stack takes me back
to failing mills and Warcar Reservoir:
the stagnant pond that used to juice them

before profit migrated East to the land
of synthetics, cheap worsted, cheaper labour.
The summer of *Jaws* and tucked-up legs,

invented verrucas, sliding Sunday nights
down the gullet of the weekend bath:
feeling like Quint kicking at teeth, puking blood.

Pike were our local great whites but we had
no pike nets, pike repellent, strychnine jabs,
no police chief or ichthyologist.

We had hunks of drystone wall, giant bobbins,
window gaffs, rafts of unhinged doors,
to protect us from the monstrous fish

that Ted Hughes himself might have reared
and delivered overnight on the back
of a flat-bed lorry.

We knew the tale of the kid who dived
onto a rusting Cortina,
swam to the cobbles and bound up

his intestines in a pinkening towel
and almost made it home. But we knew
the pike had done it, though we watched

the council land the dribbling chassis
with a crane. We dared ourselves
back into the green water,

rafting down the overflow when it rained,
stooping under child-sized Niagaras,
leaping from the millstone-gritty walls.

I never saw a pike in the res
or in a keepnet and now I have one
in a dish, spit-roasted on a skewer,

I'm sorry for its cooked-blind eyes,
seared-off fins, flaking muscle.
I take it apart with chopsticks.

At Least

When I was a kid and the radio said:
“At least two hundred pilgrims dead . . .”
“At least twelve local fishermen drowned . . .”
“At least a thousand bodies found . . .”
“At least four casualties at the scene . . .”
I thought those southern voices mean
to sound relieved that the best attempts
of famine, war and pestilence
had at least some booty for their travails.
At least we weren't like that in Calderdale.

Frigidaire

There was plenty of danger at home
but we sought more in the bowels
of textile mills, reservoirs,
rubbish tips. Swings over dams
turned gallows or put us in traction.
Unleashed Alsatians coursed us from
building yards where we bathed in silos
of multi-coloured sands, sliced ankles
nimbling over Slinkies of razor wire.

“I dare you.” I watch his muddy calves
shuffle into the maw of the derelict
fridge. His shoes catch its rubber lip
and sneer it back. I grab the chrome handle
and whump it shut. It takes hours
for the rocking to stop, the chilling appeals
to peter out. Who’d have thought the tattered
seal would give such suck? Now it’s dark, and there’s
battenburg and *Sing Something Simple* for tea.

Seroxat ®

Monday to Sunday, calendar-packed,
blister-wrapped; stepping stones
across a tinfoil plain that would jag
like metal on filling were it not
for these chalky Sherpas,
ushering me from and to my bed.
These are my morning-after, evening-before,
afternoon-during pills.

My parents led me deep into the woods,
so I shed a trail of white pellets,
only for the birds to snaffle them up
and leave me stranded. But they fell
from the sky as a thudding black rain;
I followed the broken birds home again.

Celestial Navigation

Days adrift, waiting for the horizon,
waiting for a fix. The edge of the world
has been rubbed away by the clumsy thumb
of this depression. Isobaric whorls
weave an ancient tale of serial crimes
as the ocean takes the prints, rolled in and out
of the ink of this pitching sky.
My scattered charts have grown cataracts,
protractor and dividers sprout
crabby limbs and scuttle across the cockpit sole.
My sextant wilts, a spider plant starved
of light, starved of familiar sights.

I bailed my supplies overboard:
bloated macaroni and risotto
sloshed out to sea with my spices, herbs,
freeze-dried coffee and tea until there spread
from the stern a salty paella
of foamy food. I know I haven't drifted far
for I sometimes taste my old provisions
in the long drafts of water I drain from
my bailing bucket. Poseidon has so much
to offer, but I have no horses to drown
and I pray the ship's cat passed muster,
mewing bubbles as I held her under.