

The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street

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TONY WILLIAMS



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for Katherine

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Sand

From the Kalahari to the Gobi—*a waterless place,*
very large and dry like the desert's own imagination—
the Empty Quarter, from Black Rock to Death Valley,
sand's names do little for its public image,

for all it cares, grinning spitefully
as it joins with the wind to clean lost livestock's skulls
and irritate the watery eyes of workers for western NGOs.
It is its own playpit. Quick or slow, it is always shifting.

Sand ruins seaside trysts and then betrays betrayers
by lurking on scalps and between the toes
to be discovered by attentive spouses. A minor nuisance,
it is the grain of dross in every pearl. It is thirsty and fugitive.

Sand would like to meet a snarling bactrian
by which to be stamped and spat upon, and with whom
to plot the murder by asphyxiation of foolish travellers
who stray to the still hollows of its dunes.

There are more grains of sand than there are
windows in the offices of hell. It morphs
and fuses into splinters of a broken bottle
under the innocent soles of children.

It bears as anti-effort the print of athletes' straining lunges,
the end of parabolas and the limit of records. It smoothes by abrasion.
Castles and condoms, bladderwrack and crabs
have learned to speak with sand, but can convince it of nothing.

It writes messages in itself until the next high tide:
'help' and 'I love you' are both erased by the surf's bitter laugh,
and you must take with a pinch of salt sand's claim
that an egg has cooked in the time it took you to read this poem.

How Good it Sounded

after Heine

Once I had a country of my own.
The trees there grew to a huge size.
The smell of the woods sounded like laughter.
The air tasted of the earth.

It was a dream, a long and wonderful dream.
For years it kissed me in English and sang
'I love you', and stroked my head,
and though I know it wasn't true,
how good it sounded.

I Leave Myself

after Tadeusz Nowak

I leave myself—leave my body like smoke
through the gnarled and inelegant chimney of my ear,
or rise in the usual way as a spirit from the vault of my chest.

No. I leave myself. Salt leaves, or is left by, the sea,
something of old ironwork
leaks from the end of a long tool like a hoe
left lying in perfect stillness on the ground
or leaning against a gate:
where iron nails attach the iron end to the wood
seems the likeliest place for such a loss, or escape:
among the flakings of rust and spider shit.

Dogs lean out from the boundaries they guard
towards the musk I exude, exhibit, which I am,
swirling the smell of the pigs in the woods
through a nest of hay, down to a kink in the river.

I'm not there, or anywhere else. There's a raspberry bush
modestly covered in dust from the road, where yokels
carry heavy items down the road
in ten-legged, hesitant crab-step, kicking up dust:
sleepers, roof lead, a grand piano, their plans for satisfying
sweethearts.

They happen to stop, pull off the fruit and dust it
on their sleeves, in the air, blow on its absent fire to cool it.
Their searching fingers play a little jazz medley on my branches

like a cosmopolitan priest counting rosaries,
come to the country under a cloud,
staring absently into the bishop's orchard
up through scented branches towards the open veranda
from where
the man's elder daughter disappears into the house.

He can hear her, then it isn't true that he can hear her,
he only imagines it; it's worse.

The suffocating heat under his cassock.
I sympathise madly but I am only a fruit tree
and he ignores me, kicks his heels
and pulls a dead strand of honeysuckle from the wall
with as much petulance as he'll allow himself.

From the top of the telegraph pole above him
which is
singing across continents about
matters it would be presumptuous to mention,
I can see a cloud of horsemen approaching.
I can see a haystack dreamed
in the murky cobalt of a
landscape reserved for dreams
and other untethered possibilities,
and beside it
two or three or four horses
standing placidly,
in possession of their horsey selves,
reaching down stretching their stringy ropes
taking sugar lumps, the tarts, from a man
no older than I remember—which seems rather suspicious,
a heaven I imagined when I was in a self
that seems laughable, a mere heaven. I leave myself.

The Matlock Elegies

*Ja, ohne die Liebe wäre die Welt nicht die Welt,
aber Matlock wäre doch Matlock noch.*

*[Yes, without Love the world would not be the world,
but Matlock, of course, would still be Matlock.]*

—J. W. VON GOETHE

Who, in Matlock, would hear me if I cried my heart out
at the end of a night on the lash? Half of Crown Square,
the massed crowds queuing at the Turkish Delight,
or for taxis to take them home. The ghosts of John Smedley,
Rum-Tum Billy Young's Son and Mickey Morris
scouring the streets for the sons of children they remember,
to bother and bore with their dead gossip
and stories we'll not need until they can't be found.
Traffic wardens, teachers, family friends and enemies . . .
A heartfelt laugh, of course, is all they'd give me
for my troubles; no town I know
is more sickened by expressions of emotion.
The smoke of their restrained disgust
curls up Steep Turnpike, Bank Road, drops
the wrong way down Firs Parade
and stops at Circle-K, as was, for a lottery ticket.

O my beloved Matlock! Market town
with barely a market to speak of,
my county town, my botched Eden.
Old Matlock, Matlock Green, Matlock Bank,
loop of the hated supermarket road,
the old quarry where the valley's
truculent aggression pools as sediment,
the satellites of Tansley and Elton, Winster,
Lea and Holloway. Matlock Bath,
tawdry jewel, I curse you as a tourist honey-pot;
you shadow me even unto Death. You slink

like a line of warts through the gorgeous
rock of my deliverance. A part of me
wanders forever round your amusement arcades
in an off-white polyester shirt smelling of stale teenage sweat
and a blue school tie. Another is sick in the woods.

Ah, Cromford, cradle of the Industrial Revolution!
Everybody needs good neighbours. Poor relation
in my heart to Matlock, The Matlocks, a town
so singular, so bountiful in the fruit of the soul
that it's sometimes referred to in the plural!
But rarely! Matlock, your faux castle
may not sit on an Italian headland, be owned by the cream of
Europe—
may have been redeveloped into a suite of posh flats—
but it starred the dreams of my youth, made me feel
that every life was a fairytale. Matlock, you bitch,
you deluded me. Your cinema has closed down. I love you.

Matlock follows you like a dog. You move away,
fall in love, get some perspective on the place. All of it helps.
You visit, it seems to mean less and less. Always
you carry Matlock with you, inscrutable, useless, undeniable.
Its denizens claim to know what you mean, then take their drinks
and sit elsewhere, mock you and your city fancies.
Matlock your sweet curse sits across my back.

For My Brother

The wall falls quicker and stronger and blanker than I can gesture love,
or having gestured, clarify the sense.

Walk with me along the sunlit road.
There are fewer roads and fewer walks than once there seemed.

The Rubicon

With luxurious dignity at a small table we played
piquet, klabberjazz, bezique. All good Scrabble words:
the entropy of culture into form,
to use an expression you wouldn't.

The *goods/not goods* that puzzled passers-by were not
value binaries but correctitude
as the flowering of love, high-church
quietism in a house of books and clocks.

Your heart stirs silently over another volume of Scott
as we age together at that great fixed distance.
To find you enjoying *Schweik* is the same as reading it myself.
We meet at weekends for our rituals—

drinks, an elaborate hand of cards, a walk—
and scan the local rag with professional scorn,
totting heady sums of typos, or 'literals' as you,
with your fixed Fifties English, insist on saying.

Gawain and the Green Shade

Over the river, on up the hill,
up past the circular house of the witch,
through the thin street to the top of the road
where the track runs down, and the old house is.

Away from the firing range of the soul
and the box where times before time are stored
and the threads which lead back somewhere else—
up to the woods on the hill I ran.

Through the thick mud at the derelict farm,
the water-logged gate that guards this hell,
and out into fields of ungrazed grass:
I followed the line of the hedge that had gone,

and looked where the paths led over the hill,
but then dropped down to the edge of the woods
and sat on the roof of a cavernous hole
and waited there for the man to come.

I watched the rabbits in the evening sun,
gave the strange trees new names. I had
no time for learning the strangers' names,
no love for the round house, end of the road,

the river, the place where I was young,
or the gate, or the track, or the ghostly farm,
or the viscous mud or going there
or the villages tucked on the sides of the hill

or the rabbit alert, facing the darkened wood.
I sat in the end of the sun, and time went by
as I waited for him, and the field was bare,
and the rabbits gone, and time went on.

The Lame Dog at Monyash

Its black unopenable door
is what the village really thinks.
Virgil's native name sits on the plaque,
licensed to bid your welcome nixed

to afternoons of Lethe Best
and tightness in the chest and neck
brought on by pressure at the desk
you work at to afford the move.

You should consider going back.
You'll never join the Us of Here,
or even Them of Over-There.
The locals all have history.

The white limestones are fixed
in ragged and deceitful smiles
across miles of saturated green
with paradisal lambs between

that bleat that things are looking bleak
and maybe you should ask your kids
about the role of revenant.
Leaving, you pass the desolate farms.

Their huge prefabricated sheds
proclaim the names of local firms,
contain fence posts, rusting plant,
oil drums, doomed livestock.

Landscape for August Natterer

Two darkened semis
blue eyes blazing

Malcolm and Sarah and
Chris and Leslie

staying up to watch
the final of the swimming

The Town of K., in the Province of M.

How to render it, then, the old bank's
neoclassical façade? The thump
and swat of raw materials, the hardhat suit
peering along the roofline counting pigeons,
syllables. Coming past it in the rain,
a grid vanishing quietly in the fumes
till the lights change and you swing on and out
to see it staring after you. Scotch eggs, bald-
headed clerks aswim in lunchtime alcohol,
scribbling lists of burial goods, their own—
Potter and Hart portray them as humble, caged
and dessicated sparrows—the dusty hope
that all large buildings squash and cherish. But this
is no waxwork frontage: the Two Ronnies
can be involved at some point, if they like,
and cheaper cuts wrapped up quaintly in paper
can do the rounds as currency to delight us
with the queasy air and bring to froth
the town's fat-man commerce, a meaty yeast . . .
Look at that girl walking in front of it: her hair
sends out wisps to tease the stolid columns,
stands blonde-white against the black windows.
They swallow the light that's been released from prison
and flings its sad radials towards the open
doors of alcohol—something to scoff at,
wastage, occluded ore in the local rock.
It's a valley of names. A sudden storm
dashes the may from the trees before its time.

A Missing Person

Where else do people start to look
for their loved ones but in themselves?
The nip to the shops, the route to town,
a place they stop with the wheelie bin
and just *look* and think of somewhere else—
the rhododendrons in the park,

the alley where you might have been
wherever you were going, why,
and who to meet; and then they think
of the jeans you might have worn, the pink
T-shirt and what its slogan, I
Don't Know You, quite what that might mean,

and while they're rummaging upstairs
to see what's dirty and what's clean,
which of your things are indispensable
and still there, they start to wonder where
you'd go if you were you. Or run,
according to the sort of trouble

you were in. And then they think
obscurely of the hardware shop
whose awning shades the silent street
below the town hall's hulk of soot,
grandfatherly advice, the stink
of metalwork and rubber clips,

and how from there a path might drop
between a graveyard and a gritstone wall
towards the centre of the place,
the domes of cobbles on the slope
pressing their feet, an infant school's
high hubbub out proclaiming peace.

A laughter in the local accent
floats across the pond. They sit
till nightfall at the swings' stilled
pendulums, watching a face concealed
by sky and mortar, stone and light.
I'm here, you say. The town. I'm found.

Notice of Death

Call in the council's legions to assist
in the great removal: send wagon and dumper,
dog van and red appliance, extant bus
whose passengers are late and cross, artiste
deserving of support and hospital driver,
cart from the sodden municipal course.

Send solemn alderman murmuring sweetly,
coughing director, unkempt registrar,
send nurses and doctors and carers and bills
and troops of out-contracted cleaners, and dealers
in furniture taken in lieu of rent. Send money.
Enter the data and confirm in gore

where sent and by what means the box in question,
obtain a letter from a Personage, and throw
a final number to complete the sum.
By this the heavy edifice shall *know*.
And at the signal take your place, sit down,
and listen in the echoes of the room

for something of the piece's closing chords
decaying to entreaty to be heard,
occluded by the weight of whispered lies,
the scrat of pigeons shifting on the roof,
or for that matter the offensive sigh
a youthful officer lets out, a cough,

like earth upon the blank-brassed lid,
a folder's flap when thrown down on a pad
echoing in the institution's ears
and yours also, who share these corridors
although you are mistaken what they prove,
and falter when you're told it's time to leave.