

Mudlark Chap No. 67 (2019)

Sand fire

by Tony Beyer

1

Rumi in one of his tavern verses
enumerates the many wines men drink

hashish they take
to mitigate consciousness

& the myriad ecstasies of love
of sleep & even religion

the woman whose name said aloud
resuscitated her fallen lover

the disciple so steeped in God
he thought he was God

having sampled a number of these
& the disillusion that follows after

let me pray I may become a good enough man
to taste the wine of truth

that neither intoxicates nor mars
but fills up all space with radiance

2

poetry is a language
anyone can speak

in droplets like rain
off the edge of a roof

or the brusque gush
of a waterfall

in Rue des Archives
the doctor's waiting room equipped

with a piano & African masks
a shelf of literary books in English

Eliot Joyce Auden
leaning shoulder to shoulder

—

currency used to be fixed
to the gold standard

so the folding stuff in your pocket
had genuine if notional weight and heft

times change & fashions
replace each other or unconsciously

or consciously repeat themselves
but in poetry there is still

the Greek & Roman standard
the Li Bai & Du Fu standard

the Shakespeare & Tranströmer standard
& the standard set by Bashō

—

so many of my heroes
came to me in translation

Rimbaudelaire
Apollinaire

their garlicky breath rendered first
as poetry then English

Rumi too & Du Fu transcending
not only tongues but time

of course only one kind of poem
is made of words in any language

sometimes the incoherent heart
might have to have a say

3

tea poured from up high
so it froths in the glass

sound as well as
fragrance in the room

a satisfied dog's growl
a long-furred cat purring

the quiet companionable level
of voices to follow

distinct from the pitch
of a thorn fire on the sand

men squat around & talk
in bursts like gunshots

helicopters & Kalashnikovs
woven into the pattern of the rug

suited to the warp & weft
of the desert loom

motifs perpetual as date palms
camels birds of paradise

4

a blast as loud
as an answered prayer

wherever the ordinary
might gather

market place
or place of worship

polling booth
wedding feast or funeral

the future returns
to the ground in shreds

so few words needed
assonance of bomb & God

hard enough to swallow
even in times of silence

5

bring the sander
round to Sanders Ave

one of those phone calls
complete with directions

resulting in atomised dust
of ten thousand meals

circling minutely
in the kitchen

as if our conversations
reduced to vowels

consonants diphthongs
were all to begin again

same sounds between
different silences

but in our case
the blast radius swallows itself

our normal
is restored

6

try painting a ceiling
without getting any on the floor

the consequence merchants
will bring up omelettes & eggs

acceptable losses
collateral damage

yet there must be a way of
neither losing nor winning

of engaging in full
the finite acuity of being

report on a scrap
of paper in the dirt

our intentions were good
like our training & equipment

but we just lost it went
blood-drunk as so often before

7

the idea was to find
a place close to the sea

then sprawl inland

like ink from the edge of a blotter

stopping only for impassable acclivities

until they could be dynamited

& road or rail

slick as Meccano channelled through

softer obstructions

flora fauna indigenous settlements

required no such

forceful decision-making

the earth & under earth

gave up their riches

anything else

a few place-names & an apology

8

in the bathroom of the ghost hotel

an ancient inhabitant

advised me on the minute particulars

of the shower taps

installed long ago

never inspected since

so hot was cold cold hot

like a man in two minds about everything

whose moment of decision
approaches without remorse

a finger pointing from heaven
or a side road acquaintances wait in

for their share
of the contents of the vehicle

expertly assembled salads
geometrically accurate sandwiches

vacuum flasks of milkless
sugary tea

9

just as there are no rhymes
in English for orange or silver

there's no colour to match the colour
of plumbago blossoms at dusk

blue is a feeble classification
of the cold glare they emit

in contrast to the dark setting of leaves
more stringent than Lawrence's gentians

more compelling than the distant
snow-coated facets of the mountain

these soft sticky nothings haloed
like us all by growing night

are the secretive lamps customarily lit
when a conspiracy begins or ends

10

smell of protective tar
from a black net on the jetty

boats going out thread ripples
through the teetering piles

a blue ship on a sailor's arm
sets sail for Drunken Ness

unoiled gulls' voices
hang still in the air & cry

curved silver bellies in the crates
handed up from the hold

rain slow enough to count
each drop as it touches the sea

there is the dangerous edge
between light & water

where siren-seals stand in the waves
& watch with molten eyes

our going out & our coming in
our tarred nets swollen with silver

the floating bones of ancient ships
dismasted & aground

11

walnut shells resemble
the human scrotum

& contain a dry skinned
oily fleshed kernel

not dissimilar in configuration
to the human brain

they were thus deemed
appropriate to be thrown

at the nuptial couple
at Roman weddings

symbols of both the conception
& education of the ensuing line

12

the combined secular café
& religious bookshop

might have done better
to exchange the two categories

wafers & wine in one
bestselling tripe in the other

or would the usual dearth
of customers continue

uncertain whether a daily fix
or crucifix was to be the go

13

what with restorations
transitions & strengthenings

going on up & down
the country lately

largely the result of
earthquakes or their likelihood

(surely in itself
a sign of God's hand)

I've been thinking a lot
about church architecture

& what blasphemy it is
given the promise of resurrection

to build places
of Christian worship

out of any sort at all
of so-called permanent material

after all the Second
Coming could happen at any time

& for the first
a cattle shed sufficed

14

following the wrong gods
inevitably leads to trouble

of one sort or another
sprigs of mistletoe

corybantic antics
likely to endanger both

the acolyte & celebrant
in some dull cave

where echoes too easily
become voices of ancestors

or the Minotaur's bawl
appealing to his human mother

to save him from the murderer
sent from Athens to conclude things

15

if you think about it
reticulation seems to be

the scheme of things
blood through vessels

food & its waste through
the body's soft tubes

then there are waterways
of all depths & widths

branches & leaf veins
sheen of a braided river

from the air like veins
on a woman's wrist

formations of mountains
& valleys rearranged

to deliver melted snow
even human imitations

plumbing gas-fitting electric
wiring follow the same course

& our concept of the vast
invisible connection

is expressed as a web or net
so whoever's idea this was

good on him
he was on to something

16

how little has changed
since you died

as if life moved as
slowly as death which stays the same

confirmed by a date on a stone
& in all references to your name

even our anecdotes
recalling you with affection

begin to congeal
as letters or diary entries might

but never poems
those deliberate survivors

at their best
outlast us all

& are never still
remaking themselves

in the eye & ear of each new reader
or re-read

for the first or third
or thirtieth time

change
& remain the same

17

the rose displays its secret
yellow heart & dies

firm petals drooping
softly to the ground

the colour & shape of drops
that follow the gored matador

borne in the arms of two clowns
to the barrier

while a third distracts
the bull with somersaults

cartwheels & flips unencountered
in the flower-strewn meadows of Andalusia

18

living in one of Calvino's
invisible cities

one is exposed to all manner
of affronts to privacy

porous borders transparent curtains
blunt snouts of CCTV

& who is that man I've
just noticed on the corner

pretending to read a newspaper
which in turn pretends

to contain anything
any of us would call news

19

thinking about the atom
remember school science

the proton & neutron
clinging together inseparably

because if they are separated
all hell breaks loose

& how this nucleus is orbited
by electrons tirelessly circling

busily invisible
in the human form

made up of billions
of such configurations

a pattern representative
of desire in its restless

questing & inescapable path
except that desire is requited

or expires while faith is indelible
wretched at times

susceptible to ridicule
as long as life lasts

& may even be
what desire truly is

20

desire & not its fulfilment
the engine that drives the world

we would be as nothing
with nothing to hunger for

when the Three
Kings found Jesus

he could neither
speak nor pray

but he could
make a star move

in the firmament
to lead them to him

& shepherds kneel
& oxen pause

the turning of their
cud to gaze

religion like politics
everybody talking it

no one doing it
the poor stay poor

the hungry stay hungry
the church just says be meek

those whose God
is a burning bush

the flames neither
wither nor destroy

underestimate those who say
their God is love

21

a wrist-thick rattan
steeped in buffalo urine

correction & cure
for all misdemeanours

neither conscience nor remorse
needs to enter into it

wrongdoers always make
their punishers feel better

unless instead of a renegade
the firing squad's target's

perceived as a man
in spite of the mask not unlike

the twitchy comrades
who fondle their triggers

& dug up & pardoned years later
the bones have nothing to say

22

purple gladioli

the sword lily named

for their attentive curve

seemingly towards evening

in our part of the hybrid world

resulting from colonisation

acclimatisation miscegenation & miles

of bad road in between

history is simply the compilation

of what can no longer be suppressed

changing as governments

& hairdos change

succour for the unemployable

who are appointed to chairs

to argue its integrity or disinterest

is to identify another partiality

23

the medals are always

handed out after a balls-up

Rorke's Drift after Isandlwana

Zeebrugge (eleven before breakfast)

heroic failure so much more the myth
than ruthlessly efficient victory

so we are left with the sour
& sandy taste of Anzac Cove to define us

achievers of the impossible
who die in the attempt

rotting beside their rusting equipment
up & down the gullies

our ghost ancestors who never lived
to become fathers & grandfathers

24

T E Lawrence's lesser known *The Mint*
treats of the fascism

inherent in military life
barking sergeants

officers anything but gentlemen
who without a war to fight

fought each other
& their hapless subordinates

learning nothing from the past
their traditions fetishised

25

party politics

are inimical to democracy

sniping into the next trench

instead of confronting the real

foes of the people which are inequality

poverty race hatred despair

not all crimes in themselves

but harbingers of crime

especially for those

on whom they are inflicted

all men are brothers

all women their sisters

every child belongs

to the same family

if only they'd look in each

other's eyes & acknowledge this

26

red flag black flag

red & black flag

dystopia requires

very little organisation

you're in it if you
sleep in the street

in one of the world's
ten most desirable cities

or the house of a man whose
voice & fists you can't escape

& the only flag
is black & blue

27

from the beginning
to the end of time

the lover speaks
to the beloved

if I could
I would choose to die

not with words on my lips
but your lips

not with silence
in my ears

but the lasting song
of your breath

no one should seek to deny
the truth behind this

28

like the princess whose face
may not be revealed

the poem
does not announce itself

as one form or another
one matter or another

it is instead
many things made one

by the persistent
pouring of the voice

29

the small florets
at the centre

holding together
the four-petalled

hydrangea flowers
are themselves

miniatures of the
larger bloom

intriguingly this
year (& possibly

all years) always
blue whether or not

the main colour
of the cluster

is pink or
white or blue

a memory
full of less

important things
has neglected this

like a small bird's song
forgotten but

heard again &
immediately known

as in a poem
the shaft of sense

rises through
descending words

30

never believe
what you read in a poem

the facts that is
not the integument

because poetry
has one subject

awake & breathing
in the face of extinction

the heart preoccupied
with blood & continuance

the spirit uncertain
about its future

& the solace
of others being likewise

31

In those days killing something
made a man of you

skinning it out
beside the cook pot

wearing the hide
against winter cold

all quite useful
attributes of the tribe

from the inedible you
took the pelt only

from the scalp
from the groin

the latter

an invisible trophy

32

at the beginning of force

replaced by strategy

the man of many

toils & travails

one to whom

all are strangers

rides his broken spar

towards the shore

hides naked in the dunes

while girls peg out their wash

& is discovered

by the chief among them

in beauty &

inscrutable guile

his equal whose

apparent likeness snares him

33

swallows mate on the wing

with the swiftest of kissing sounds

their cry like the cry
of Odysseus' bow string when strung

full of sorrow at leaving
exultant upon return

a touch
& then gone

—

Rumi also reminds us
that our yearning

for an answer
is itself the answer

as a dog asks & asks
with its eyes & tail

we do not know what we want
except for wanting to cease

Tony Beyer operates out of Taranaki, New Zealand. His work appears frequently online in *Otoliths* and his most recent collection, *Anchor Stone* (Cold Hub Press), was a finalist in the poetry category of the 2018 New Zealand Book Awards.

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