

VIII

Quarantine Notebook

WEEK 8 • 17TH May 2020

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MUSCALIET

SIMON SMITH

BREATH

(the poem for Flick Allen)

I am floating without connection between bodies
the quick in bits
& to hear the bird
all seasons rolled into a ball & tossed away
pinged to counterpart
a breath out
what makes a body think
exhale the song of a common nightingale & composer
lucid as memory on the spot prising open
its everyday song part & where to find happiness
& the scores for endless disruption
of invention over discovery
its upward aspiration
its wager & aerosol stops & reeds
from aspirins to aspirators

to sing it & wing it
from all things in my DNA without a set list
'you can't love if you don't tell the truth'
the song is the bird not you not me
that's its message
& language
on my breath & yours all imperfections
instantaneously
taking in the sun coppice & scrub
to report to to echo incomprehensible
to yes add yes to a secret to tell the fold
counterpoint
to sing the flood
just when you thought
tuned to where-is-now
is to hear bits & stuff
you & me flattening it out
the science is unstable & the wobble in the air
then so be erased on the air

cyberspace is where you touch me
nocturnal earthward to dwell
where the living & the dead mingle
& the bird sings out
the green leaves in a haze past the Abyss
tree pollen out of the woods

PHILIPPE JACCOTTEI, TRANS. IAN BRINTON

THE DROPPING OF THE CURTAIN★

And so:

no movement, no further foot forward, rather just recoil, nothing but repeat.

Not an original thought. Nothing but moods; shifting moods, increasingly discrete; nothing but crumbs, snatches of a life, mimicking thought, preserved or teasing shavings of a life. Scattered fragments of disjointed days, strewn words that once had caressed a stone more cold than cold itself.

In fact, far far from daybreak.

These words cannot be unuttered all the same since one has felt them: the hand inviting cold from the stone.

The dead can no longer read the sketchy signs of swifts in summer sky and I who still in joy can watch them am not uplifted into blue. Below them just a glimmer in unknowing. A brief shard escapes impulsively to climb and then a long withdrawal down to pebbles, a long retreat.

Like snow which never can retain the footprints of the heart: distress in flight. Like cloth which cannot hold a shape of either face or hand.

(Someone will write again about the clouds)

★ Translator Ian Brinton notes that Jaccottei, who is 95 this year (!), published this piece titled 'Après Coup' in 2001.

DUNCAN MACKAY

AS IF

(After reading Ian Brinton & Michael Grant's Mallarmé)*

A jazz-funk bustle bodes well until
flux & fixity prompt
a meditative shuffle
percussive & sparse
how it was
in the grit of things where only lineation fit the bill
still even a fly knows when the light will shift
& recurrence a third rhythm plots that enact
what do we make of elaborate webs of reference
poetic licence
let loose where no language
just because
your own is real
witness wetness
crossing that street
simple
coffee house take-away
no longer taken for
granted keeping distance
sound pip for end begun old assumptions
plots of threat subterfuge hiding & reinvention
of silence & reinvention
where 'no things
but nameless things no names
but thingless names'

between the two a space of slippage
self-erasure retracing old
motifs mistranslated
motives misunderstood
language
makes it impossible
to not be poetic
is it a roll or has it been cast
admitting all thought.

* [Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Poems*. Translated by Ian Brinton and Michael Grant; comment by J. H. Prynne. Muscaliet; Colchester, 2019.](#)

PHILIP TERRY

MR UBU

A SKETCH TOWARDS A COVID-19 FANTASY

ACT THREE

SCENE THREE

A Care Home in the environs of Norwich, next to a Park & Ride converted into a Mortuary.

Several CARE WORKERS are assembled. From time to time STRETCHER-BEARERS appear to remove the bodies of the elderly.

CARE WORKER [*entering*]: Hey, did you hear the news? The Queen is dead, and all the Civil Servants as well; young Wotsitnow has fled to the mountains. And you'll never guess what – Mr Ubu has seized the throne!

ANOTHER: Never.

CARE WORKER: It's true, look, it's all over the front pages of *The Telegraph*. And here's something else. I've heard that they're going to double taxes and that Mister Ubu is going to make the rounds in person to collect them.

ANOTHER: I'll believe it when I see it.

ALL: Great God! What's to become of us? Old Ubu is really intent on fucking us over this time.

Two STRETCHER-BEARERS pass, carrying an empty stretcher.

CARE WORKER: Let's at least give him a chance. Maybe he's collecting the taxes so that he can supply us with the PPE he's been promising us for so long?

ANOTHER: And the hand sanitiser!

ANOTHER: And the toilet roll!

ANOTHER: And the tests!

CARE WORKER: Listen. It sounds like someone's knocking on the door.

ANOTHER: Unless it's our delivery at last, you're not to let anyone in.

A VOICE [*off*]. Hornstrumpot! Open up! By my Boris bike, open up! By my mother's purse-strings, I've come to collect your taxes!

The door is smashed in. MR UBU comes through the hole, followed by POLICE.

SCENE FOUR

MR UBU: Right-ho, let's not beat about the bush. Which of you is in charge here? [*A CARE WORKER steps forward*]. What's your name?

CARE WORKER: Stanislas Leczinski.

MR UBU: Passport?

STANISLAS: Here. [*MR UBU looks at it then throws it over his shoulder*].

MR UBU: Right to work documents?

STANISLAS: Here. [*MR UBU shuffles through papers then tears them up and tramples them on the floor*].

MR UBU: Right, prick up your ears or these gentlemen will extrude your brains from your nostrums. Hey, listen will you?

STANISLAS: But Your Excellency hasn't said anything yet.

MR UBU: What! I've been talking for an hour. Do you think I came all this way just to amuse myself with listening to my own voice?

STANISLAS: No thought could be farther from my mind, Sir.

Two STRETCHER-BEARERS pass, carrying a covered body. ALL cross themselves except MR UBU and POLICE.

MR UBU: Alright, then. I've come to ask you, no, instruct you, and inform you, that you are to produce and display your ready cash immediately and forthwith, or you'll be arrested and locked up, and your wards will be thrown out on the street. Get it? Step up, you Peelers, bring in the ducat-buckets.

Buckets are brought in.

STANISLAS: Sire, our carers are all down on the tax register for unskilled workers earning a net wage of less than two hundred Brexit-Dollars per month. The entire tax bill for our franchise comes to only one hundred and fifty Brexit Dollars, which we have paid in full over six weeks ago by direct debit.

MR UBU: That may well be so, but this is a State of Emergency, haven't you heard?

CARE WORKER: Of course we've heard, we're front-line workers, though nobody would know it from the way you're treating us!

ANOTHER: Where's all the PPE you promised? Why should we pay any more taxes if you can't deliver on your promises?

ANOTHER: She's right you know. So far all the PPE we've got we've had to pay for for ourselves!

ANOTHER: And its nearly crippled us!

MR UBU: Right, that's enough! Arrest them at once!

POLICE officers seize two of the trouble-makers.

MR UBU: Now, quieten down, and listen up. I've changed the government

and announced in the official tweet this morning that all taxes have to be paid twice over, and all those I may think up later on will have to be paid three times over. [Aside.] With this system, I'll soon make a fortune, then I can kill everyone in the country and bugger off to the Caribbean for good.

CARE WORKERS: Have mercy on us, King Ubu, we're poor care workers, and we barely make enough to live on as it is. And without us to look after the elderly, who will there be to protect the vulnerable?

MR UBU: Fuck the vulnerable, I couldn't give a shit! Come on, cough up!

CARE WORKERS: But we can't, we've already paid all we can.

MR UBU: Fork up! Or I'll give you the works good and proper: bollockstwisting, compression of the ovaries, neckstretching and decapitation! By my Boris bike, am I or am I not your King?

ALL: In that case, grab the zimmer frames girls! Long live Wotsitnow, by the grace of God, King of England and Wales!

MR UBU: Forwards, my loyal Peelers, and do your duties!

A fight ensues. The care home is trashed, and only STANISLAS escapes and flees across the Park & Ride. UBU stays behind to scoop up the cash as a number of residents, attracted by the commotion, begin to emerge from their bedrooms.

STAYING ALERT

Down there,
the swifts are back, ceaseless,
ripping past
burnt out chestnut candles

larks
(what larks!)
climb the updraft from the field below this hill
frantic with song
like torched paper butterflies,
and russet hares crouch smouldering in the grass,
then run like flames
along the clacket pheasant hedge.

Two red kites have repossessed the patch of sky
above the motorway.
Circling
in unblinking synchronicity
one poised way up above her mate
from time to time they casually flex their painted sergeant's stripes.
They've got all day
for the resumption of road kill.

THE PIECE OF BLUE

this last lost print out of the heart

circulation being the model & the breathing form

every day the same everyday

raggedy in the dirty turnover of waves

connect how to provide the connective

tissue to listening to the breath

break from the least sayable

how to so the air moved

with circulations of the heart

the thump & bump of it

tell the moan from the rain

pestilence lies & silence

from photofit

where light rattles

the printed circuit

& gulls flap & shriek disturbed from their night roost

like late night radio in the short waves

confused with the static or white noise

listening to the charts one Saturday lunchtime in the 60s

confused with the background to the universe

I am your shape shifter your shape

the fault in the universe

ghost mark in the air

shadow hawk trapeze artist

trapeze artist a kind of angel

to memorise to mesmerise

to hoax the woozy music from the big top

to imprint & hold then swing free

is to listen in to the heart the puzzle

I'll walk out slam the door opened so far

I'll bump the coast

with shadow understanding

how are you dad conjured from the board

good to see you here

to sing out the answer in the blues

for my supper & more

send the ripple out

to shudder

doors thresholds gone

hinges torn

off the valves shot

listening in to the hearts

& the sky-blue skies

blue as an ocean

as an ocean without water

