

Glints of Darkness



Raymond Tallis

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Glints of Darkness: Raymond Tallis
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A NOTE ON THE PRETERITE

"I remembered her" you said, thus
transposed twice-over to the preterite.

Your verb has the Dunlopillo give
of a springy new-bought bed,
though the suffix ages it:
its now is not here but
fixed in what lies beneath
the false bottom of the present tense -
the there that then was here and now.

Beneath the queasy turf our footsteps
sense a dark marzipan, loam
rich with the prints of buried feet.
Old sunlight branching down the mind
lights up the wrinkled face
of Great Aunt Nell aproned in the kitchen,
saying "I remember" in reply
to pointed questions from the smooth-browed young.

Word ferried, something puts out across the world,
scudding down the Fridays of our lives
towards the tangled endings of ourselves.

OCTOBER SONG

Time has reached its occident, the yellow world is sick:
occultation of the sunlight, darkening of the land.
A highly seasoned mist, smoke processes into space
from the pyres of time-wrecked Summer cremated in the dusk.
A white-for-winter dimness trims the edges of the day:
the cooling of the planet breeding mould across the light.

October, flanked by embers, ignites amid decay
its feeble tints of leaf-glow to fend away the dark,
expending sugar-light in woodlands thick with dusk.
The candle-dim candescence of ochre in the gloom
subsides to tawdry litter, the wake of Summerset:
milliwatts of brightness from megawatts of sun.

It's over, yes it's over, grins the jaundice of October ...
And the death-gold afternoon is a night-tinged octoroon as
the year declines through evening and the ripeness splits
to rot.

The sick, the old, the loners hear a howling in the air
as of wind-played ocarinas bewailing in the gloom
the light's diminuendo in the octopus of night.

FALLEN NEONATE

Time was never his to use or waste.
It never left his frantic little pulse
to cool in clocks or - portioned, numbered, tamed -
returned to perch, his servant, on his wrist.
He never owned his hours, caught tabled time
or mapped it into futures of his own.
He was Time's possession, Time that broke him up
and dispossessed him of his nascent world.

Knew ceaseless care but not who gave the care.
The uniforms who tended him in shifts
were nameless as the forms outside the glass
who kept the shiftless vigil of their grief.
No friends. Or enemies - he needed none:
his body was at total war with change.
And knew no fear. There was no space for fear
since he could not conceive a worse than Now.

The little ungrowing parcel of his flesh
(his hands remote to him as distant stars)
maintained a course tangential to the world
that missed the tangled voices, lights and shades
of days he did not learn to occupy.
The glimmer in his body's turbid toil
grew dim inside the gathering helplessness
and, somewhere in the unmapped dark, went out.

SMOKE

Combustion is corrosion fanned to rage, a
s impassioned air rapes its denizens,
inseminating them with emptiness,
and smoke the mongrel child engendered
by the air's enforcement of the solid world -
a compromise of things with nothingness.
Suspended, like a thought, between being there and not
its actions only adverbs of the breeze.

The languid mark of hectic scatterings
of beings seized by revved-up transience.
An upward flowing Styx sauntering to the sky,
it has no borders that eyes can navigate
but tangled oddments, bits of lines and hints
of edges crumbling into edgeless everywhere.
Elastic without limit, pliant to vanishment,
clouted into fading shapes by vagrant air,
lacking even water's self-command.
Sieves the light and stains it grey or blue -
but cannot stop the brightness passing through.

Among the Autumn's liveries of death,
this blueness growing, bleaching, on the air,
that slows to mushroom grey pooled in the pleats,
makes distances as vague as somnolence
and deepens all the hues of faraway.
A yawning declaration of decay,
its shrugging shoulders sighs made visible,
voiceless acquiescence in decline.

These evenings owe their tang to leaning smoke.
Its touches prick a dimness in the eye
as down its grace-notes, trills and curlicues,
October's swan-scent serenades decline,
and moments wave themselves a long goodbye
and run up handkerchiefs for passing time ...

The soul of resignation, it isn't out of self,
effaces to unbeing, undoes to nothinghood,
attenuating IS thinning out to WAS ..

The aftermath of smoke is only words.

FATHERS AND SONS

*The birth of the son is the death of the father. -
Hegel.*

A year ago I lived almost at ease
with knowing that my father had grown old.

There's nothing much amiss with growing old,
ageing's not an illness doctors treat.
That a body used through seven or more decades
is touchy, being a field self-strewn with mines,
is precisely what a healthy mind ignores -
like the heightened probability of pain,
of something going wrong that won't come right,
resistless drifting down decrepitude,
deportation to those camps fenced in with ills,
policed by strutting gauleiters of death.

Since that wind-blown Autumn, when my infant son
first raised his cries, his colours, in the air,
an equanimity has gone from me:
I see you, father, now as one afraid -
afraid like me for what the end may bring.
I had not feared for you as for myself,
as for my son whose every minor ill
makes time itself grow grimy with my fear.

But now at night, in the twisted edge of sleep,
I find myself imagining your life:
your waking every morning locked in age,
manacled in flesh to heaped-up time;
an exile in a drying pool of days,
neaped by all the ebbings of the world;
November chilling daily out of light
when Winter trails no promises of Spring;
an evening closing down to dawnless night;
a universe that's slowly drawing in;
waiting for your life to detonate.

Father, must the sons that we have spawned
observe our growing dark with stony calm
unbroken till the blows begin to fall?

META-SONNET TO THE DARK LADY

*Or shall I live your epitaph to make,
Or you survive when I in earth am rotten.*

There's nothing of you lives in these his lines -
they did not lift you clear of death in pain.
Long since, beneath the air that heard his rhymes,
you flowed away, dissolved like him in rain.
Your ghost shook off the flesh, its thrilling dark,
those evening tones his fluent verse acclaimed.
What's saved of you? The tetchy question mark
of rival experts squabbling when you're named.
Your smooth white neck was lost to red-lipped lust
when Night reclaimed the sable from your hair.
Dark Lady, arid footnotes, learned dust,
your absence, wide and sexless as the air,
behind the word-webbed nothing of your face,
makes these his sonnets crypts for empty space.

TILT SHOT

Little lamb, who ate thee?

Last night, I saw my life from underneath,
my eye among those things day casts in shade -
the hedgehog burst beneath important tyres,
unnoticed pain that metals worthy hours.
I heard the chicken's shriek the sandwich gagged,
the howls of abbatoirs between the veg.,
and tasted peasant sweat in coffee cups
and knew what pangs my comfort cost the world.

And underneath that underneath was fear
that some day I might pay back what I've cost,
my juices spice the gravy on the plate
of someone kind, good-natured (just like me)
whose only fault is mine of needing things
to make his life as civilised as mine.

IN MEMORIAM
ROLAND BARTHES
(Killed in a road traffic accident 1980)

*Combien de temps faudra-t-il à
la nature pour refaire un cerveau pareil?*

Profundity's like happiness - a castle built of cards,
its paper hinges stalked by hurricanes;
Venetian glass where earthquakes buck the streets.
The simplest things can cancel subtlest minds:
a crack across the head unseives a man,
a single blow spilt Barthes from space and time.

The impact bricked the windows lit by thought
as *mâitre à penser* curdled into flesh;
and if his senses lingered for a while,
they tasted senseless absolutes of pain
in darkness where the spaces of his mind
were groping strangeness stripped of native tongue.

The fender kicked the language from his brain,
a tapestry of signs was ripped to shreds.
The tarmac shattered sentences to sounds
and disconnected every sound from sense.
And signifiers, shook from signifieds,
dissolved like skyward birds in nullity.

The body and its name went separate ways:
the flesh returned to earth, the word to words.
So 'Roland Barthes' is sentenced for all time:
a word among those words he half unmasked,
he sorts with tokens, meets them noun to noun,
is tyrannised by grammar like the rest.

No-one will use his name to call him near,
or meet his gaze in bedroom, class or street,
or see his eyes decode a common world.
Poor Barthes is printed words and others' talk -
else something suffers there, beneath the light,
that absolute, alone, outside of signs.

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HEMIPLEGIA

Assassins lie in wait for Everyman.
Nature has to balance her accounts
so birth's an open ticket to the grave.

Sometimes her snipers hit the bull mid-eye:
the flow of days comes crisply to a halt,
the edge of light a cliff-face on to dark.

But often it's a winging shot that leaves
a hemi-death attached to half a life
and half a body glued to half a corpse,

a chimera where quick and dead are twinned
and half a self can half command respect
with half a will to trigger halves of acts,

a half-a-man half banished from the world
who owns but half a face to signal selves
that seep away down arid slopes of time.

A hemisphere is spared to feel the loss,
to suffer nonsense fill the gaps in sense.
Necrotic brains make Gulags of the world.

Marksman hold your fire and think on this:
the target of your hate may shoot itself,
his heart discharging bullets at his brain.

'Let Nature take her course' - she'll do your work.
She'll botch it up, what's more, and drag it out
and serve your wretched foe a ragged end.

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WINDOWS

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