

Thomas Land

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READING FOR RUSH HOUR: A Pamphlet in Praise of Passion

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THE REED

I am the reed
translating the crude,
the boundless whine,
the pleading sigh
of the wandering wind
into formal song
in praise of the wonder
of wounded nature.
Kindle the wind
and stir up the storm:
the fiercer the wind,
the finer the sound.

THE LION TAMER

Beyond the bars, the circus crowd sits pale
to watch the beasts perform the tricks they loathe.
They hope that I, their tamer, may just fail.
But with my whip I will control them both.

I have outfaced the adulating crowd
and I have learned to ride the lions' rage.
My early quest for freedom had its shroud
in fame found here, within the circus cage.

For freedom, I pursued the painted lights
(while others fantasized in tame unrest)
in tearful longing past a thousand sights.
Within my trade, today I am the best.

I watch the crowd behind its fearful mask
and watch the painted lights that will seduce:
the lions' foolish master, thus I ask
if there's still time to put my life to use.

CASANOVA & THE MADONNA

Three Portraits

1

NAKED FLIGHTS

Yes, sweet cheeky smile, I like you too,
and yes, we could have a world in common up here
in my sun-splashed, squeaky bed just now and again
for an hour of your busy life that no-one might summon;
each tiny hair awake, your naked body
would bathe in the sky without – the weary, weather-washed
homes with their shiny moist roofs beneath us forgotten
in this room that women often compare to an eyrie.

Your shopping bag abandoned, your eyes would possess
the great city below and your thoughts would soar to poetry
and plays, nothing stopping their flight until the mother
and wife awakened inside you, frightened of more.
Being considerate adults, we'd seek to protect
your home from our passion, and let the madonna in you
take charge of the cheeky girl and bid her to sail
a safe course in the clouds – lest she be stained by the foam.

At home, the madonna would cheerfully tend to the needs
of so many brittle, exposed and raven emotions,
the madonna who feeds herself to the piercing milkteeth
of family, serving a sentence without committal.
A fellow martyr, your husband would play the blind page,
the most liberal husband-in-law one might have selected,

and his savage rage at your naked flights in the sunshine
would surface as faithful friendship – directed at me.

And I would play the intimate friend of the family,
I'd be the first with the flowers if you should give birth again,
a friend to relax with, on whom to depend, with my brand
of brandy kept in the house for our restful hours.
I'd warm my loneliness by your peaceful fire;
I'd repay your kindness, according to the rules,
in my favourite restaurants – only to make you feel
sublime, and him a sophisticate, and me foolish.

Our pleasantly prudent lives would stroll on forever
if the passion of mortals yielded to prudent control.
But listen! – the toll of decay is recording and setting
our finite lives by the absolute terms of eternity...
Listen! I like you. We may have in common a world.
But our naked affection up here in my sun-splashed bed
might free the alive and cheeky girl to summon
and to burn the madonna into a grey recollection.

2

FLOWERS

A lover prizing generosity in bed and at table,
I, Casanova, survey the town at play from my tall balcony,
delighting in the restless, resonant whirl of the world.
I watch the women. They are off to the shops, accompanied
by their curly babies and furry pets. They are naked in their hearts
beneath the lazy, unblinking gaze of the Mediterranean sky

and they softly purr their promising, moist preoccupations,
immersed in the golden honey heat of the early autumn.

I, Casanova, hold the horizon from this noble apartment
replete with the treasures of a graceful procession of beauties.
Each one has left behind, like a cherished bridal veil,
the memory of her very own fragrance and flavour and feel,
the weight of the testing peck of her kiss and the taste of her teeth,
her sighs and her sly evasions and cries, and her shy and hesitant,
humble, yielding, waiting, yearning, greedy, ravenous, arching ,
all-revealing welcome through the gates of her body –

I'm Casanova: I give and I take without counting the price.
I gain both ways. For the gift of one's person enriches the giver
allowed to share the secret trembles of a fellow creature,
as close to becoming one with another as two can ever reach.
I look and delight in the sight of this daily display of splendour,
the charm and beauty of colours, shapes and movements below,
this bedful of beckoning female flowers in the sunshine reminding
me of one who is briefly away and who took my heart with her.

3

THE BANQUET

Never dared he risk an error,
Casanova with a ring,
handsome, tame suburban terror,
Casanova on a string,
 Casanova, the best:
 a lovely beast, a beast to feast

from pillow to post,
a beast to boast.

Strictly keeping love on ration,
flagging unions he would fling
into quivering pain and passion,
Casanova on a string,
 Casanova, the best:
 from pillow to post,
 a lovely beast, a beast to feast,
 a beast to boast.

He was feared and much desired
through his life's eternal spring
till the repetition tired
Casanova on a string,
 Casanova, the best:
 a beast to boast,
 a lovely beast, a beast to feast
 from pillow to post.

He is tied fast where it matters the most
to Casanova... and the sting
still urges him on from pillow to post
when his wife chooses to tug at the string –
 O Casanova, the best:
 a beast to boast
 from pillow to post,
 a lovely beast served up for a feast.

READING FOR RUSH HOUR

I

Rational thinkers, what can you make
out of a nightmare seen fully awake?

Nightmare, funeral, watch it if you dare –
crawling at the crossroads everywhere:

slow hearse upon hearse driven nose-to-tail
by exhaling corpses, drawn and frail

and through each damp windscreen, the light will betray
your frightened features decayed with the day.

II

O, the faces, the faces I know. I am greeting
reliable Richard approaching; he cannot see me
on his way to his well valued vault with central heating,
airtight, sound in predictable monogamy.
He welcomed me there as a boy.

His clever spectacles blind, his moustache still growing,
he sells life insurance policies to the dead.
His tranquillised, loyal wife (I cannot help knowing)
dreamed of me in her spotless, guilty bed –
to his lukewarm, conjugal joy.

Yet he had been alive to passion and anger
and raged at foul indifference till, stage by stage,
he gave himself up to monotony's languor
for death alone could save him from middle age.

Richard worked. Outside, the living seasons faded.
Like so many, he grew valued in his trade
and his fierce opinions slowly lost their meaning.
Yet his feelings still can flare (as I have seen)
when he shelters refugees.

Dear Richard, rest in peace.

III

Here comes Orgie Porgie, absorbed contriving
manly new achievements, carefully driving
his hearse to his home below.

His swollen corpse of a child is slowly blending
into the business suit of his funeral day,
a fumbling toy manufacturer earnestly bending
to adult games – but he has forgotten how to play.

He buried himself in a hungry portfolio;
so well imitating the shades in the money profession,
he managed to die of repression.

But life penetrates the shallow graves like teeming
mould employed to re-manufacture the earth,
and when he's not counting his liquid assets' worth
poor Orgie Porgie goes on dimly dreaming –

He sees himself as a hesitant
visitor in a butchery-plant
where living beasts are stripped of their hides to increase
the marketability of their flesh, thus enriching
profit returns: alive and naked and twitching...

Gentle Orgie Porgie, rest in peace.

IV

That well known figure advancing like infection
is the corpse of Thomas Wonder-Land, Esq.,
a master of gaining the gullible graveyard's affection
for any truth without actually being a liar.

He boasts, for public service he never gave,
a newspaper by-line across his early grave.

He was once a poet
but poetry didn't pay,
so he chose to conform to a lucrative line and to tow it
hereafter: he died insisting he'd had his own say.

His women sought love; he pinned them in style
like leaves on his wreath, a mean lover displaying a lean,

sophisticated smile
where his sensuous lips had been.

Like a scalpel, he wields cautious views on communal affairs,
a cold writer scorched by private emotions he dares
not admit; but in public he does not scruple to giving
advice inciting the world to catastrophes
for even a rotten writer must make a living.

Wretched, unhappy departed, rest in peace.

V

Faces, dead faces, O
the faces, the faces I know.

Uniformed Roger drives a policeman's hearse
for he failed to become a musician, duty bound
to safeguard the graveyard's rest from the dubious curse
of troublesome souls who might raise a disturbing sound.

And property agent Alec so good at selling
he can disregard the essential use of a dwelling.

And the aircraft assembler returns without questions to bed
so deep he can't hear the bombers overhead.

And the scientist doesn't mind in his funeral ride
whether he worked on semen or humanicide.

A face that melts. A face that slowly hardens.
Unseeing eyeballs. Withering, yellow skin
shaded by windscreens. They're taking their daily place
devoid of intensity, mischief or love or sin
in an endless procession led by a hearse from space
with a corpse that forgot to cultivate the gardens.

Corpses, let it cease,
corpses, rest in peace...

VI

Rational thinkers, shall we ever
bridge or divorce from passion that drives
people to give up their precious lives
and rest in peace through their own endeavour?

Our sombre vehicles make their way
in endless, divergent lines that betray
the earth; unfeeling they coil with ease
and spread like maggots through a cheese.

I must take my place in my own unblessed
premature funeral, or try to revive
these volunteers seeking the final rest
before they bury the world alive.

ONLY A GIRL

Only a girl ran across the meadow before the disaster.

Vibrant, the grass sprang back celebrating her healthy feet,
clouds of insects whirled in her wake in a torrent of teeming
golden air, and salty moisture cooled the barefooted
girl, her head full of babies, running across the scented
meadow by highways whispering tension and stretching to restless
cities beneath a satellite's mindless, hovering sensors
that registered her movements,
still registered her movements...

Barefooted daydream, girl and grass and insects, and teeming
cities full of babies all withered in the sudden heat.

VERSE IN MY PURSE

1: FLIGHT

Flippant flight on a butterfly's wings –
life, adult life, life, life:
born from coincidence, changing, passing,
soaring above the riverbank's grass,
shaped from the yearnings of distant childhood,
venturing over the menacing waves,
lured by the nectar of pulsing flowers,
sharing the sun with invisible stars.

2: LIKE A RIVER

Like a river, you carry me down
washing over my senses

the fort of my seven skins has abandoned
the rite of defence to the waves

unsheltered, my nerve-raw flesh in its freedom
spatters into the current

like a river, you carry me down
between singing, mountainous shores.

3: WAR WOUND

Do your best, mate.
I'll survive anything
vile – save death,
and that can wait.

4: WEATHER REPORT

I know the icy gale that blows
its kiss inside my warmest clothes
beneath a howling moon.
But this wind whistles my tune.

5: CLARITY

Do not explain or clarify
your meaning or technique.
Let the poet sit silent. Let
the poetry rise and speak.

6: PLINTH POET, 2009

Among stern men of stone deprived of speech,
in the sky with birds and bygone soldiers, I've
just seen on a plinth a marvellous poet and teacher:
he was high on words and astonishingly alive.

LANDSCAPE WITH KNIFEWOUND

This is a landscape abandoned by gentle giants,
this edge of Cornwall where the calm
and soft, continuous curve of the rising hills
abruptly crashes into the ocean

down sheer and raw and ravaged, windworn cliffs,
down screaming depths to the boiling water –
its rockface baring the throbbing, layered structure
of granite beneath the stricken landscape,

exposing the sundazed pith to the lashing light
above and the gaze of hovering hunters:
the creatures of the heights and depths that lightly
approach the coastline from the ocean.

But landlubbers reach the coastline by navigating
their way along careful housing estates,
rogue industries, satellite dishes and rainsoaked farms
deserted by their young and the future;

and they arrive entirely unprepared
for the rupture, the urgent, brutal line
dividing the sullen soil that covers the cliffs
from the ocean washed by the splashing light –

the line of violence torn across the horizon
from end to end like a savage knifewound

too deep and keen and sudden and surprising
to hurt in the moment of its infliction.

Such landscapes of the soul inherited
from giants confront the innocent traveller
with a surge of passion at the edge of routine
experience, as in poetry or love.

LIFE INSURANCE

Insure me, please, against my silliness,
against the common willy-nilly mess
invading lives despite the best advice.
I need a sound risk policy, for a price –
Who knows an agent?
You'll know the grey gent.

A policy against a life in verse
with lots of praise to swell my empty purse,
against the view beyond my tidy fence
of beggar-bowls amidst the affluence –
Where is the agent?
You'll meet the grey gent.

A policy against... questioning why,
a policy against... needing to sigh,
a policy to answer every threat
in life, from passion, treachery or debt –
Who is the agent?
Death is the grey gent.

Bilingual Poet:

A POEM OF THE BARRICADES REFUSES TO DIE

ONE HEADY day during the Hungarian Revolution of October-November 1956, I attended an editorial conference of *The Independent (A Magyar Függetlenség)*, the flagship daily of the doomed anti-Soviet insurrection. I was an 18-year old high-school dropout employed on the paper as a cub reporter. József Dudás, our hugely charismatic editor-in-chief, assigned the serious tasks of the day to the senior correspondents. Then he turned to me: "...and what can you contribute to the edition?"

I offered to write a poem. "Make it good," he accepted, "and be sure not to miss your deadline."

My piece was ready on time, of course. It could have turned out a tad less sentimental. The composition comprised three quatrains fuelled by some clever cross-rhyming and employing the odd repetition of lines to save time and trouble. It described a girl on the barricades shot while distributing bread to the warriors. Unlike its fictitious heroine, the poem has refused to die for more than half a century.

Dudás and 228 others were hanged by the Communists after the revolution, some of them even younger than me at the time. Many more were sentenced to death and eventually reprieved. Tens of thousands were imprisoned.

I left Hungary with a Westward flood of some 210,000 patriots, most of them young and educated. Europe has not experienced such a mass movement of refugees again, until the present march of destitute Middle East migrants across this secure and prosperous continent.

Only some 40,000 of us have returned. More survivors may well turn up for a visit this year that has been devoted by the government to continuous celebrations to mark the 60th anniversary of the revolution.

The loss has been enormous for a small country deeply troubled by its relentlessly declining population levels.

I switched to English as soon as I could. I have spent the rest of my life as a freelance writer. I did my best during the early years to have nothing to do with my homeland – except for translating the Hungarian poetry of my betters into English in the hope of learning how to write English poetry.

The dead heroine of the poem also took on life in English through the translation of Western writers who read my effort in the columns of *The Independent* – although some of them, I am afraid, turned the girl into a boy. The most successful translation was done by the late Watson Kirkconnell, the great-grandfather of Hungarian literary translation into English, who was president of Acadia University in Canada where I read philosophy on a scholarship after the revolution.

In post-Communist Hungary, the poem is still being recited from time to time at public celebrations commemorating the revolution. It has been included in a mass-circulation anthology intended mostly for school children.

At last, the poem has seduced me. I recently edited its original Hungarian text (as indeed it should have been done by someone on *The Independent* before publication all those years ago) when it occurred to me that, today, perhaps I can do better.

So I have just written another Hungarian poem, this time about an old lady. I do not think that my voice has changed, but I have.

And the poem has taught me, to my astonishment, that words are far from the most important aspect of a poem. What matters most is the passion expressed by the words.

“Ha,” observed a close friend, a great English poet. “All you now have to do is... write it again, in English.” Quite, and that’s the easy part.

Here is the poem of the barricades:

INSTEAD OF A TOMBSTONE

Translated from the Hungarian

by Watson Kirkconnell

He shyly closed the lids of darkened eyes,
a small red flower blossomed on his breast.
A smile still lingered on his mouth’s surprise
as if at home he slept and loved his rest...

The little hero in the filth is laid
(around him fall his bread-loaves in the mud)
just as but now he paced the barricade –
in vain let fall his bomb, and shed his blood...

He shyly closed the lids of darkened eyes,
a small red flower blossomed on his breast.
Beside his corpse a steaming gutter lies.
The world sings victory, but signs a jest.