Entanglement

The complete entangled togetherness of two bodies is what is timeless. The interminglednes of limbs. It is always difficult knowing what to do with your two arms, never mind with four. Lying makes you ache anyway. Yet the awkwardness of limbs is part of the beautifulness of it. You adjust one gently, the other body stirs, murmurs perhaps, a slight rearranging of arms and stillness returns. It's like when the cat sleeps on the bed, and everytime you disturb her by moving or turning over she purrs, pleased to be reminded from sleep that she is with you.

And perhaps a paw kneeds at the mound of blanket, as hand or shoulder among the mingled limbs might press for a moment whatever flesh is by it. And even in the aching hours when it is unsustainable and awkward, and you have to extricate your interwoven tentacles and refold them back against your own body, and perhaps turn over, some imprecise part of the other body follows to fill an angle here or press against you there. A knee or a breast.

Daytime is different. The two bodies move by themselves, there is air between them. What was tactile is severed, and vision becomes the thing that links. We can exist in air, separated and moving even out of each other's sight, beyond rooms and gardens, our limbs serving us independently. Yet even air carries, in the way of contact, something that tells your skin if the other is coming nearer, if the separateness is closing. Sometimes you can reach and make momentary contact, a tactile purr.

But the vision, the vision that dissolves at night leaving only touch, is an astonishing thing, not just the seeing across a void of air the body, the limbs that have their own existence, but seeing the seeing of yourself by the separate other. You see the eyes that follow you in your separateness, as they see the eyes that see them seeing. Nothing needs to fill the space between, as long as the eyes bridge it, as long as the air carries its faint tingle.

■

It isn't always this way. There are times between. If I think about it, there is probably much in between. There may be decades. Memories and dreams are too vivid, and are always with you; it is difficult to tell time in years and decades, to tell if a night was recent or long ago, if it was a dream or real. Or if dreams are real.

If I'm in my house surrounded by air, how far does it go and how long does it take before it touches the flesh of the other body? is rippled by the movement of the other arms? Does time matter in this separateness? To be alone seems a physical thing, it seems to be only to do with the air outside. What's inside the body is different. It is all night-time stuff. Yet it has neither eyes nor touch. I don't know if it's real or not.

I go for a walk. There is a large amount of air and distance. It is all somehow surreal. I move between houses and gateways and trees; a paddock contains several of those cattle that have fringes over their eyes and long horns; I walk around the outside of a church. Unlike the houses, it is not private. I return by the roadway. I return to my house. The cat waits to greet me as if I've been gone for a long time.

So who went with me? The narrative that accompanied me was not for myself, it was like taking an idea for a walk. Like mulling over a script. I might dream tonight that my arms are entwined with other arms, that a knee nestles into my side, that a hand squeezes and then slips from my shoulder. And how shall I know tomorrow which is true? which was true?

■

The worst thing, as memory fails, is how clear the memories are. I know it was so once. Another person's body was with me. It may not have been in this house. What became of us? Did we just separate imperceptibly, so that I've only recently noticed, years later (if it is)? only recently noticed that I never noticed?

There's always that nagging feeling that something catastrophic happened, too terrible to recall. Or is it a feeling that I should have done something and never did? Picked someone up from a hospital; waited for someone outside a coffeeshop. Presumably I've forgotten everything except what I remember. It was probably much longer ago than I think.

I remember standing by the window, deep into the darkness of night, waiting. I remember the daytime view from the bedroom, a gently dipping hill like a body asleep. We chose it for that view. I remember the complete entangled togetherness of two bodies. The warmth of it, the pleasure of slight movement, the unclaimed limb that lay across the pillow. The joy of waking and going to sleep again. A spasm of limb just as you dozed; whose was it? A sleepy head nuzzling a shoulder.

How vivid these were, if they were only dreams. It's no use, no matter how hard I try I cannot forget them.

■

I wake up and wonder if this arm under my neck or across my chest is mine or another's. I move it gently, and turn another way. A knee pushes into the back of my knee. My shoulder aches in the dawn light. Birds are twittering. I turn over and push my head into the pillow. Is it my own soft warm belly my hand accidentally rests upon? I sleep again.

After getting up and using the bathroom, I once more search the house. There is no one.

■

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Dog

The dog has no idea, no concept of evolutionary time. No sense of time, except that now is the time to be barking. No idea that it is not the time it was, way back, when ...

On some vast savanna, flat all the way to the sunset, undulations only of vegetation, grass here, scrub there, a tree or two, the pack goes off and leaves you and disappears into long grass. You were so content and complacent and stupid and subservient in your sunny bed of grass you didn't notice. Now is the time to be listening. The giant predator sleeps. Grass has its various sounds, fascinating with uncertainty. A yelp at a distance, halfway to the sun, is your yelp, your telegraph across the green sea. Now is the time to run towards it. It is what you are part of.

A thousand years later. Or ten thousand, in dark forest, no horizontal distance at all, no sunset, a dark herd of obstacles in all directions, tree-trunks, scratchy branches, brittle bracken, full of noises that go all the way up to the glints of light. You are always getting mislaid, you are always bumping into things, or getting left behind as you curl content and stupid in your dark bed of leaves. Now is the time to be sniffing. The dark monster is smellless behind every trunk. Everywhere the rank vegetal dampness is stained with smells, footprints and puddles. A trail of signals, tree to fern to tree, is your trail, your string out of Hades. Now is the time to be following. Reunion is full of sniffs and whimpering.

Another barely perceptible eternity, millennia into the future, or hundreds of millennia. The pack has built a house, with chairs for trees and doggybaskets for grass, and they make sounds and they make smells, your sounds and smells, you love them. Content to be and programmed to be content to be fed after their hunt, to be groomed and petted and played with, to follow where they go. But there they go again, and you stupid and complacent subordinate pack member that your ancient DNA makes you are left behind again, no sounds, no smells. Now is the time to be barking. The house echoes back, sanitised, finite. The only solution is to bark and bark and bark. And bark and bark and bark and bark and bark. Somehow, eventually, they'll hear you, at work or at school, and follow your barking back. They always lose you, but your barking always brings them back, you and this house are what they are part of.

The dog has no idea. No sense that it's anything other than the time to be barking. No concept that it's gone on and on, every day, year after year. No notion that it's not necessary, now, now that a new deal's been done, now that its instinct is a million years out of date.

o()o

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Why did you stop writing poems?

A lot of poets wrote their poems when they were young, and then died. Nowadays that's not so easy.

You go on to write short stories or criticism, and people say: Why did you stop writing poems? You think of the answer hours later, in the middle of the night.

Your friends don't gather all your stuff together and publish it posthumously, it just lies in a cardboard box.

If you haven't written a poem since you were 30, no poetry magazine's going to do a special issue for your 75th birthday. Instead they're planning their Emily Bronte bicentenary, their Keats double-issue.

I read through my collection of friendly rejection slips from Howard Sargeant, saying how much he likes my work.

I still often think of the words of a poem I once wrote, haunting and wise and mysterious. Yet its title ruins it, it's called: Towards a Twentieth Birthday.

I can't be bothered any more. I've got all this tidying up to do, and all these papers to throw away.

o()o

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How to Deal with a Squatter

Come to think of it I *have* had the sensation, several nights recently, of someone coming to me, someone smelly and rough climbing into my bed and gathering me to him ...

I seem to think he was fully clothed, coarse filthy smelly damp clothes, like someone who'd come straight from the boozer via the ditch. And although he pushed my nightie up and seemed to feel for my tits with rough stubby fingers, and find them, I don't think anything was happening below. He just made the motions, and grunted a bit. I felt nothing actually trying to get in me. That's why I assumed it was just a nightmare, a recurrent dream, even though I thought I could still smell the smell in the morning, and even though the bed was all crumply.

Still, it's probably why I wasn't all that surprised, when I went in the big dark room downstairs just now, the one I don't use, and there he was, this filthy unshaven fat smelly tramp in a big brown coat, drunk on the old settee, surrounded by bottles and newspaper. Sit down and have a drink, he said, and patted his thigh and belched. The whole room stank, as soon as I opened the door, though what made me go in was the sound of a slight movement. I thought it was a rat.

I'd just had a bath, I'd just finished drying my hair. I felt soft and sensitive all over, and smelled of apples. I had a dressing-gown on over my thin short nightie, nothing else.

I opened the dressing-gown and let it fall behind me, rested a knee on the seat beside him, pushed him over on his side, pulled his stiff smelly trousers off like emptying a sack, whatever underwear and some newspaper coming with them. I straddled him and dangled my tits over his bleary eyes, teasing his face with nightie and nipple. I pulled the nightie over my head and threw it on the floor, lowering the nipple on to his lips. He opened his mouth, let it fill with flesh, and sucked.

Then I moved down a little, rested my front on his greasy waistcoat, pigeon-holed his head between my hands and lubricated his flabby smelly stubble-covered face with my lips and spit. I clamped on to his mouth and ran my tongue around his gums, his three or four broken bad teeth. He was hard now. I felt it in no uncertain terms, twitching under my thigh. I raised my bum and brought myself to meet it, to allow it into me, to welcome it in. He penetrated me. I enclosed him and squeezed, and sank down to bring him as far into me as I could.

Now fuck me properly you smelly bastard, I said.

o()o

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Not Dead

It isn't the vampires we're frightened of. It's the chaffinches. It's the birds that wake us each morning at our window. After another sleepless prescience of eternity. After another terrified night.

We know we're not dead because we walk about. We walk from room to room, bald and bare, and always hungry. Urinating involunt'rily, our thighs wet and sore. Our bulging eyes sore, our anuses dangling polyps.

Confined to the temp'ratureless house we stare from room to room, from window to window. Stark with cold light, the light that shuts us in, surrounding the whole house. Room after room after room. Window upon window. We walk.

Knowing our skin is cold only by touch. Taut and vellumy, wrinkled at the belly, our buttocks cratered with old boils. Walking bare and bald from room to room, oppressed by windows. Our sunken gums sore, our nipples dry.

Until the sleepless night returns, the long stillness. The long waiting returns, the wait by our window. We wait for the terrible dawn, the light you can't shut out, the twittering. It isn't the vampires we're frightened of.

o()o

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Elf Girl

The elf girl first came on an autumn evening. She came in through my window. She was just a tiny little thing, like a six year-old but nicer, less fragile, a bit skinnier, and nude, completely nude. She came in through my window and straight into my bed and ... well, what was I supposed to do?

After that she came whenever I thought of her, in the evening. In through my window. Straight into my bed and ... she left at dawn. I don't mean she was gone at dawn, like in the stories. No, she was there at dawn, tiny and beautiful, and nude. I stroked her front and kissed her and ... she did that cute little shiver of hers, a warm shivery spasm, a thrill. Then she went out through the window.

Till the next time, next time I thought about her. In the evening ... and left at dawn.

Now she comes every night. I think of her every day, I have to, I can't help it. And so she comes every day, in the evening and ... she leaves every dawn.

She doesn't grow older. I do, I grow older, I've grown much older. But she doesn't grow older, or grow larger, or grow at all. She doesn't change. That cute little squeak she does ... her arching her little back, her little front, like she does. Her little shiver ... doesn't change, hasn't changed. But I change, I've changed, I've become older and fatter and slower. My fingernails are getting brittle, my foot hurts. I've grown old but she hasn't.

Yet still she comes. Unchanged. Changeless. Every day now, every evening. Her boyish hair just the same, her girlish smile. Tiny and beautiful, and nude ... and leaves at dawn.

She'll come one day and I'll be dead. I'll be lying there pale and dead. I'll have thought of her that day, of course I will. Just before dying perhaps. And so she'll come ... and find me dead.

She'll be just the same. She won't have changed at all, or grown, or grown older, or grown old. She won't have died. She won't ever die ... she'll come and she'll be just the same, tiny and beautiful, and nude. Her tiny little knees, her skinny little elbows, her pointy little nose and ears. The small of her back, her cute little bottom ... alive and slightly warm, and nude. Nude without blemish, nude without shame.

She’ll come through my window. She’ll come straight into my bed. She’ll come into my bed as usual and ... well, how can I know? She’ll have known nothing of death, nothing of tears, nothing of growing old. And she’ll leave at dawn.



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Wooden Daughter

I made a wooden daughter. I chose a shapely branch. I worked with its natural curve and swellings. I didn't go for realism – it was more like peeling a potatoe than carving. It was more like caressing her into existence. Fine sandpaper wasn't just for finishing – hours of patient massage formed her figure and limbs. She was warm.

My smooth beautiful daughter – know how I love you. How I brought you to be by my firm caress. How I shaped you, how I gave you existence. Know how I know you all over with my large hands.

Through pale summers of honeysuckle. Through tearful autumns of apple. In frost-ferned log-bearing door-bolted winter, drying hair, rubbing through a blanket, clutching the hot mug. We yeared and seasoned through fairy-tales and clanking of buckets. Through storms of leaves and restless hooving horses.

My beautiful daughter – know how I toiled in darkness. Know how I fought the wind to build a barn. How I girt my legs with coppiced alder. How I brought ice in a cloth with numb fingers.

The hens came in the yard and walked about. Clouds moved beyond the scuffed hill. A corner greened with budding hawthorn – milk swirled in a barrel. I have found a moment to stand on the hillside and face the distance. All things go in cycles – but I grow older. Spring coming reminds me how long ago it was. How soon I shall die.

My bare beautiful daughter – know how I love you. How I brought you to be by my caress. How I gave you existence, how I formed you. Know how I know you all over with my hands.

My wooden daughter.

o()o

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A Stranger on Boxing Day

A stranger came. He knocked at the door and we immediately let him in – as you do a stranger on this day. He removed his hat and was courteous in greeting us with bows, he bowed even to little Chrysanthemum, which made her giggle. We hung his heavy greatcoat and his hat behind the door, which seemed apt as well as convenient, and he sat without invitation, though of course we wanted him to, and gestured just in time. He sat in father's chair, by the fire, and warmed his hands. We gave him a pipe, and he filled it from father's tobacco tin as Humfrey lit a taper in the flames. The stranger leaned back with a contented breath – not quite a sigh – and drew on his pipe as he lit it with Humfrey's taper, and then he exhaled a chimney's worth of fragrant smoke, and lit it again.

Chrysanthemum and Humfrey exchanged their Christmas boxes, which they had prepared in secret, but it was our suggestion they keep them for the noon of the day and exchange them before the stranger, knowing it would give him joy. He watched with a glint in his eyes – and the fire's reflection – and laughed at the childish delight with which little Chrysanth discovered her shiny sixpence or unwrapped her clothes-peg dolly, and the wide-eyed relish with which she tasted her crystallised cherry. She extended her hand to offer him one. He removed his pipe and took it, and sucked it away with a similar look of pleasure, ruffling her curly head before he leaned back into the high-backed chair and resumed the savouring of smoke.

The warm punch was brought to the table, a whisp of steam and a new fragrance arising from the bowl. The children and I had a small dose in little wine goblets. For the menfolk as ever the pewter tankards had been unhooked from the Welsh dresser, cleaned of their year's worth of dust and then warmed on the mantelshelf. The stranger drank with barely a pause, and accepted readily the proferred refill. We all touched our drinking vessels – large and small alike – and wished each other and everyone the fortune of the season.

As the short day declined and disappeared I lighted the candles all about the room. Indeed it had stolen a march on us, as it will – the day's noontide – for darkness had fallen already while we were distracted by firelight and fruity rum punch. The stranger rose and took his heavy coat from the door, and while helping him into it I assured him he need not venture forth, now it was dark and had begun snowing – he was welcome to bide the night and break fast with us on the holy morn. He held his hat in his hands and smiled upon us, each one of us I think feeling the smile and his bright eyes directed upon ourself. Then come again in your time, I said, you are always welcome at our door and hearth.

After he left we all, as we always do, and always will I think, felt a little sad, as if time was stilled, in those moments, and something had ended. Until Humfrey, in his thoughtful way – the age he is, so full of curious uncertitude – said: Who was that stranger? And we all laughed heartily, and began to live another year.

❄

Note

Before there was the mince pie that is magically gone in the morning, and to eat it Father Christmas, who we are often reminded was a Victorian invention (though that's not true of course), there was the Boxing Day stranger, who is welcome in every household and brings a year's worth of good fortune with him. Strangers *were* magical, before they were demonised; like shaking hands with a chimney sweep. And hospitality was virtuous, and unquestioning. Like many aspects of the lost magic of traditional society, the spell is simple: the fortune and happiness the stranger brings are already there, in your heart and at your hearth, the heart of your household, and are released in the very exercise of charitable hospitality. Give charity as if the recipient were giving *you* the greater gift; receive with the grace of knowing that the act of giving is a sacrament. For gifts, after all, originate as offerings to gods, including the god of the hearth; and like Jesus after the resurrection, gods are always strangers, while there's always the possibility that a stranger might be a god. I was going to add that it was Laurence Whistler's lovely book *The English Festivals* (London, 1947) that reminded me of the Boxing Day stranger – I certainly wrote the story while reading it, and retained a conviction that it was my source. Yet oddly (or appropriately?), now that I come to add this note a year or so later, I cannot find anything in the book about him.

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