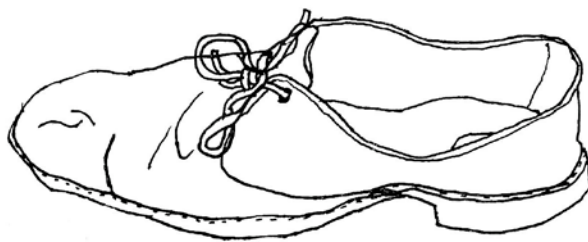


# Five Dials



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... and indeed more.



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*Five Dials* is brought to you with the help of JAMES CHANT, MATT CLACHER, DEBBIE HATFIELD, ANNA KELLY, NICK LOWNDES, JULIETTE MITCHELL, ELLIE SMITH and SIMON PROSSER.

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## On Translation and Sebald

ONE RAINY Friday afternoon I met a translator in Soho named Frank Wynne. A specialist in translating from the French, he smoked quickly, spoke faster, and by the time the meeting was over I had gained a couple of insights into the lives of those who shift words for a living. Any translation is a new version and the enemy, for a translator, is the writer that kind of, sort of, nearly speaks a language. Wynne breathed out a plume of smoke. ‘There are some authors who have what on a CV is listed as a “good grasp,”’ he said. ‘Grasp being the operative word.’

Ask a few questions and you begin to glimpse the complexities – translators love writers, but love dead writers more; they feel both enraged and humbled by the work around, especially the large projects. ‘There were six translators for the latest Proust,’ Wynne said, ‘even though his was a single voice that evolved and grew over time.’ One of the translators of the series, in Wynne’s opinion, should have been horse-whipped, but others were sublime. ‘Lydia Davis. Her *Swann’s Way* trumps Scott-Moncrieff at every turn. Moncrieff is fine,’ Wynne assured me, referring to Proust’s first English translator, ‘but he was Edwardian. Proust is not an Edwardian writer. Moncrieff does not know what to do with the sexuality. He’s very prudish and the book is filled with Christian symbols, which is bizarre given Proust is a Jew. Lydia Davis is precise, limpid, and takes Proust at his word.’

Learning the right word isn’t enough. Language functions as part of a culture and a translator, Wynne said, had to be fluent with irregularities, the phrases we know without knowing we know them. If this doesn’t happen he becomes like the

befuddled French translator searching for a reason someone would ask ‘how long is a piece of string’ while their English counterpart struggled with the equivalent: How old is Rimbaud? A translator immerses herself in the culture and reacts with empathy. ‘If you don’t have empathy,’ Wynne said, blowing more smoke towards the tourists next to us, ‘you’re Google Translate.’

I’ve always had a few questions for those translators whose names are tucked beneath the bylines. How does Czech turn into English? What do the Chinese object to? And what about language in the world of international business? It’s one thing for a famed translator like Anthea Bell to wrestle with W. G. Sebald’s long and winding sentences but what about the import and export of



business English? Is there any beauty in the French word for ‘spreadsheet’? In the fifth *Five Dials* we’ve attempted to answer these questions with the help of a few experts.

Sebald’s sentences, by the way, were a joy to translate, Anthea Bell told me on a pleasant day in Cambridge. She and Wynne sit on the opposite end of the translating spectrum, at least in appearance. She spoke slowly, sipped white

wine and unwrapped egg and cress sandwiches while cats wandered in and out of the room. ‘Max Sebald’s English was excellent,’ she said. ‘And just because his English was so good he was comfortable and willing to believe me when I pointed something out.’

Sebald’s name hovered around the conversation, as it does in many conversations here at *Five Dials*. He has become a ghostly presence, or perhaps one of the persistent and living memories he wrote about so beautifully. As Joe Dunthorne points out in his dispatch from East London, Sebald is now part of the strata, the same strata he once examined through his most famous character, Austerlitz. A visit to Liverpool Street station does not just bring to mind the structure and the history of the place, but now Sebald himself. For the uninitiated we have an introduction to Sebald’s work by a fellow wanderer, the late Roger Deakin, and an A–Z of Sebald by Simon Prosser. Most importantly, we’re lucky to have received an unpublished collection of

Sebald’s wisdom nearly eight years after his death. It did not come, as some fans might have preferred, on a torn postcard, or a ghostly scrap of ephemera pulled from a battered rucksack, but in a Word document from two of his former students at the University of East Anglia. Like Austerlitz, they too wish for a more complete memory of the time, an ability to revisit every last detail. They might not have transcribed everything Sebald said in class. His ‘Maxims’ on fiction writing will have to be enough.

After speaking to Anthea Bell I loaded my own slightly battered rucksack and took the train back to London. Over the course of putting together this issue, we here at *Five Dials* have come away with a lot of loose facts, like the lifespan of an Abkhazian and the meaning of ‘Blümchen’. It seems to confirm one of my favourite pieces of Sebald’s advice: ‘There has to be a libidinous delight in finding things and stuffing them in your pockets.’

— CRAIG TAYLOR

# The Dying Breed

*Oliver Bullough meets the last of Abkhazia's long-livers*

**E**FROSINIA LEIBA had gorgeous eyes. They were clear, clear blue flecked with green and hazel, like the deep sea or a mountain stream. They belonged in the face of a young woman, and when I looked into them I forgot the sunken cheeks, the liver spots and the thinning hair. She might have been 105 years old, but her eyes were enough on their own to make her beautiful.

She had a wit to match. Even translated from the swishy consonants of the Abkhaz language, she was hilarious, with an unexpected talent for off-colour one-liners. She waited for each of her sallies to be decanted into staid Russian prose, then giggled with delight.

'See this young man,' she said, lifting a shrunken hand to caress the neck of a stylish Muscovite who was sitting on the bench with her. He shrank away from her touch, perhaps afraid for his cream sweater. 'He'd better put a ring on my finger or I'll have to take him to bed illegally.'

Her hoots of laughter were echoed by the whole gathering. Even the young Russian allowed his smooth cheeks to crease a little. He was clearly finding life hard in this Abkhaz village. When we arrived he had been gingerly washing his hair from a bucket of cold water in the garden.

The village was luxurious by Abkhazian standards. Its houses were in good shape, and a light car could navigate the roads while still in second gear. But it was too remote for the young Russian, who was missing the showers, the coffee and the comforts of Moscow. While he washed, a calf, two dogs, a handful of chickens, their chicks and a goose either watched or ignored him, depending on their characters. The Russian was here on holiday, but was clearly counting the days until he could get back to some relaxing work in Moscow.

Leiba was the kind of woman I had come to Abkhazia to meet. A tiny little ex-Soviet territory on the Black Sea,

Abkhazia has long boasted that its people live longer than the people anywhere else in Europe. Anthropologists have studied the phenomenon, and been baffled.

In 1954, according to Sula Benet's book *Abkhazians: The Long-living People of the Caucasus*, two out of five Abkhazians who reached sixty would live to ninety, as opposed to less than one in five Lithuanians, and more than one in forty Abkhazians lived beyond ninety, as opposed to only one in a thousand in the Soviet Union as a whole.

Benet, like many visitors to this lush slice of hills and beaches, where the people like nothing more than to entertain their guests, fell in love with Abkhazia. According to her book, published in 1974, the Abkhazians' social system did not allow the elderly to feel redundant, so they carried on living out of a sense of usefulness. Combined with a healthy diet and Soviet social support, old people kept living far longer than elsewhere.

She quoted the case of a 109-year-old man who was furious that his son had upset his wedding plans by revealing to his young bride that the prospective groom was not in fact ninety-five, as he claimed to be. A 104-year-old friend of his explained to Benet: 'A man is a man until he is a hundred, you know what I mean. After that, well, he's getting old.'

Her investigation was part of a short burst of international interest in Abkhazia in the 1970s, which included a *National Geographic* article that quoted a Harvard professor as saying: 'No area of the world has the reputation for long-lived people to match the Caucasus in southern Russia.' But in her enthusiasm she missed the most important element of the story, which was that it was not true any more. Even while Benet was conducting her fieldwork, the hundred-year-olds she was interviewing had almost no seventy-year-olds to grow older and take their place. Abkhazians have lived to ninety or a hundred for centuries, but now, according to one estimate, only twelve people from the 250,000 people in Abkhazia are over a hundred, and ten of those are ethnic Armenians.

Abkhazia's Council of Elders, a state organization designed to help social cohesion, failed to find me a single person older than ninety-four. A local academic, who has studied longevity, also shrugged when I asked her to help. Abkhazia is



a small place, where people know each other. But even after a week of looking, Leiba was the only truly ancient ethnically Abkhazian I could find.

As we sat under a hazel tree in her front garden, with the calf snuffling us for treats, I asked her why it was that Abkhazians had stopped living so long. She said young people these days didn't eat the natural foods of their forefathers. They preferred Coca-Cola to matzoni – a fermented milk drink rather like a cross between yoghurt and sour cream. In restaurants they ordered chocolate rather than mamalyga – the traditional Abkhaz maize porridge that sits in a steaming mound on your plate.

She complained that people smoked and drank too much these days as well, but it was only when I pressed her on the fate of her contemporaries, and asked why they had not had the luck to live as long as she had, that I found the real reason for the decline.

She counted them off on her fingers. At least thirty-five people from her village – Chernaya Rechka, which can't have had more than 500 inhabitants – vanished in the repressions of the 1930s. Another forty died in the Second World War, including her second husband and her brother. Then there was the war against the Georgians.

Abkhazia fought Georgia for its independence between 1992 and 1993. It won, but the cost was terrible. Some 3,500 people died on the Abkhaz side: over one per cent of its tiny population. Georgia still demands the Abkhazians submit to its rule, and considers Abkhazia to be part of its territory, but it has no influence on events and no presence on the ground.

Russia recognized Abkhazian independence last summer, following a one-day war that drove the Georgians from their last toehold in the mountains. But the rest of the world – which still recognizes Georgia's claim to Abkhazia and is keen to avoid destabilizing the rest of the Caucasus – does not. Cut off from any external markets throughout the 1990s, and even now largely isolated, Abkhazia is desperately poor, and its infrastructure and housing remain half destroyed.

On the seafront of the capital Sukhumi, the Hotel Abkhazia boasted elegant lines and the best view in town. But it was open to the sky, its ground floor repugnant from being used as a toilet by a

generation of tramps. A pavement nearby bore the characteristic blast pattern of a mortar shell, like a giant bear footprint in the tarmac, while almost every house was pitted with bullet holes. Towering above them all were the blank windows of the gutted parliament building, burnt out in the war.

Leiba's house had not been immune. A spray of bullet holes rose diagonally across the façade, a reminder that war had crashed through this peaceful village too, and that dogs had not always dozed, thumping their tails in the sun. Her grandson took me round to the back of the house to show me where, as a young teenager, he had hidden Georgian neighbours from the retribution of the Abkhazian forces.

Leiba lost one son in the war, forty-nine-year-old Rudik, who vanished in a mountain battle and was never seen again. Two other fellow villagers also never came home. And, although there was now peace, there was not safety, since Abkhazians are not immune to the dangers of the modern world. The country's roads are collapsing, and its cars rickety, meaning accidents are daily events. While I spoke to Leiba, her grandson – one of her fifty-six direct descendants – was in hospital after a car crash, and the prognosis was not good. 'Long-livers' have had to negotiate repression, war, poverty, economic collapse and war again. Abkhazians were not dying early, they were being killed.

Leaving Leiba's village, we drove back on to the main coastal highway, and then almost immediately turned right towards the densely wooded hills that are Abkhazia's main feature. We were heading for another 'long-liver'. At ninety-two, he was just a child compared to Leiba, but his life needed to be counted in terms of experience, not years.

Viktor Dzheniya's house, in the village of Achandara, was just downhill from one of the seven holy sites sacred to the Abkhazians' traditional pagan religion. The peace from the site, where according to legend no cow will graze and no axe will bite, seemed to drift down to his garden where we sat in a pleasant evening daze.

Dzheniya wore a white shirt and dark trousers, his straight back betraying a military youth he has never shaken off.

He had been a Soviet conscript stationed close to the Polish border when Germany's army destroyed its Soviet opponent and cruised effortlessly towards taking control of the Soviet Union, from the suburbs of Leningrad to the Black Sea. His unit was vaporized, the officers ripping off their badges to avoid capture and execution.

'If you lifted your head up you were killed, you would not have had a head any more. It was 100 km from us to the border, and they just came past us effortlessly. It was terrible, terrible,' he said.

He was injured twice in the next four years of desperate fighting, and then was sent straight from conquered Berlin to attack the Japanese. He came home to Achandara in 1946, but 187 of his friends and neighbours did not. All of those people could have been in their eighties and nineties now, and their fate was referred to like a natural disaster. It was too huge a catastrophe to have been the work of man.

A whole generation was destroyed, and without them to sustain it the social system praised by Benet had slipped into disuse.

'The role of old people is to speak, to be concerned, but no one listens to us any more. The old people, we are sorrowful, because there is chaos everywhere. In my time, we listened to the old people, they spoke of clever things, of old traditions, of old ways,' Dzheniya said. 'There will not be old people like there were ever again. They have lived, all the elderly people have lived.'

Perhaps his pessimism was well founded. Abkhazia may have been without war for fifteen years but it is not at peace. Every second house has been gutted, and most towns and villages on the coastal plain between Sukhumi and the Georgian border are empty of people and animals alike. The houses are burnt out, vegetation reclaiming their once-tended gardens. The tea plantations in between are tangles of brambles and weeds, with just the jagged stumps of trees rising out of the wreckage.

Some 250,000 Georgians lived here once. They picked the tea and lived in the houses. Only 80,000 or so are left. The rest are refugees and cannot come home. The war they fled has ended, but peace has not come. Even while I sipped a beer on Sukhumi's promenade, I could see the

jagged silhouettes of Russian warships on the horizon.

Georgia massed troops on Abkhazia's southern border this summer, in what the Russians claimed was an attempt to take control of the region. Moscow took pre-emptive action, rolling into western Georgia to destroy the arms dumps and the army bases, forestalling any Georgian plans for the immediate future. Abkhazian troops seized the moment to drive the Georgian army out of the last corner of their land still under its control.

The Georgian inhabitants of that remote valley – the Kodori Gorge – fled before the Abkhazia advance, and their houses now stand empty and silent. Cows wander through the ground floors. The village dogs have already formed themselves into packs. There are already not enough people in Abkhazia to fill up the houses in the lush lowlands. It is hardly likely that native Abkhazians will move into this mountain village.

The Russian soldiers, with distinc-

tive black number-plates on their trucks, drove back and forth in Abkhazia constantly while I was there. Their tanks stood guard on the river Inguri, on Abkhazia's southern border, as they have since 1993. During a victory parade in Sukhumi this summer, which followed Abkhazia's one-day war against Georgia, Russian soldiers were mobbed by grateful Abkhazians. I saw one being photographed with a woman on each arm and one around his neck. The Abkhazians remembered the terror of the 1992–3 war, and were overjoyed that the Russians had spared them the indiscipline, the fighting and the looting that Georgia had previously unleashed.

Now that Abkhazia's independence has been recognized by Moscow, its people hope war is over for good. The rest of the world still thinks the territory is a part of Georgia, but as long as Russia remains their friend, the Abkhazians are sure they will be protected. The West can shout as much as it likes about Russia violating Georgia's territorial integrity, but the

Abkhazians don't care. They are safer now than they have been for fifteen years.

Under the Russian shield, they may be free to live simply again, and perhaps the four dark-eyed great-grandchildren that posed for photographs with Leiba will follow her into their hundreds.

If they do, Leiba is planning to be there with them. They crowded on to the bench with her, jostling to get into the picture. Her grandson in his pink shirt tenderly held her right elbow, while to her left two girls – the younger in the coveted position next to her, the older further away – and two boys, the smallest with his feet dangling in space, completed the family line.

'I am scared of dying, worms will eat my body,' she said suddenly, as I lined up the shot. Then she paused, clearly remembering something from her past.

'I went to the grave of my brother once, and there were ants there and they made me scared. I do not want to die,' she added at last. 'I want to live as long again.' ♦



# Austerlitz

*For Joe Dunthorne, its traces remain*

IN THE FIRST few months after I moved to London, I had an insatiable appetite for exploration. I bought a new bike and travelled out in all directions. I was obsessed with the idea of colouring in my mental map of London: filling in street names, linking boroughs, triangulating landmarks. Up until that point, London had been for me only a series of islands, each with an underground station for a port. So now, I got deliberately lost – which wasn't difficult – and then tried to work out a way home.

In W.G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*, the eponymous main character lives not far from my flat in East London, and he makes similar journeys, albeit on foot. 'I would leave my house as darkness fell, walking on and on, down the Mile End Road and Bow Road to Stratford, then to Chigwell and Romford, right across Bethnal Green and Canonbury, through Holloway and Kentish Town and thus to Hampstead Heath...' He discovers that 'you can traverse this vast city almost from end to end on foot in a single night.'

I had a similar realization – that London, particularly with a bike and an *A-Z*, is *small*. *Austerlitz* was a useful companion text for my arrival in the capital. As Austerlitz walks around the city he draws out its histories, seeing the remnants of other lives through gaps in the scenery.

Liverpool Street station is a recurring location in the novel. It must have been a familiar place to Sebald, as it was for me, being the train terminal that runs services to Norwich, home of the University of East Anglia. Sebald was a professor there when I was a student.

In the book, Austerlitz says, 'Before work began to rebuild it at the end of the 1980s this station, with its main concourse fifteen to twenty feet below street level, was one of the darkest and most sinister places in London, a kind of entrance to the underworld, as it has often been described.' He talks of the hospital for the insane – better known as Bedlam – that, in the 17th century, existed on the site of the station. Before Bedlam, he says, 'On the site where the station stood marshy meadows had once

extended to the city walls, meadows which froze over for months on end in the cold winters of the so-called Little Ice Age, and that Londoners used to strap bone runners under their shoes, skating there as the people of Antwerp skated on the Schelde...'

Arriving at East London in 2005, it was hard to make the connection between these descriptions and the fizzing, boozy, perma-lit streets of Bishopsgate and Shoreditch. But, with a little exploration, I realized that, although much has changed, there are still untouched corners.

In Sebald's novel, Austerlitz is shown around the Great Eastern Hotel and taken to see the Masonic temple. This is where he decides he wants to tell his own personal story. I was pleased to discover that, despite the hotel's many redevelopments (it's now known as the Andaz hotel) the Masonic temple still exists. It's hidden away down a warren of corridors and is available to hire for functions. It remains unchanged from Sebald's description: 'a vaulted ceiling with a single gold star emitting its rays in to the dark clouds all around it.' I don't know if he would have approved – my attempt didn't turn out like the sombre black and white pictures in his books – but I sat in the wooden throne and had my photo taken.

Austerlitz, as a character, sees only the past. Everywhere he looks he thinks of the ghosts of people who have lived before, their pains and struggles. He keeps his home in Mile End unchanged, as if it is a historical document. He toasts his bread on a flame with a toasting fork.

Now, cycling through Clapton, Hackney, Dalston, Bethnal Green, I think of Austerlitz, or Sebald, and the way they saw the city.

My first and only real-life encounter with W.G. Sebald took place in a large lecture theatre, with about two hundred other students, on a bright Thursday morning in Autumn. I was a first-year undergraduate and – living up to the cliché – I was hung-over and under-prepared. Much as I try to rework the memory of listening to him talk, much as I try to re-imagine his lecture as a vivid, formative moment, I can't shake the feeling that I was doodling on my note-

pad and thinking, This is boring.

It must have been a year later – after his death – that I finally got round to reading the book that I was supposed to have read for his lecture: *Austerlitz*. It became, and remains, one of my favourite books. It was a revelation to me that a novel that was – in all the ways in which I was used to judging literature – *boring* had grabbed my attention so completely and, more than that, had made me look at the world in a new way.

In reading more of Sebald's work, I've grown to love its particular quality of boringness: a sad, dreamy outlook; a grandfatherly wit; the pernickety details. Actually, 'boring' is not the right word, but I struggle to find a more accurate one. A large part of the appeal of his fiction is that I feel unable to express exactly *why* I enjoy it. I can't unpack the ways in which it 'works', which, as a creative writing student, is a terrifying position to be in.

When I finally felt confident enough to give books to my grandfather who had, it seemed, read everything, I gave him Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*. On walks through the Botanical Gardens of Edinburgh, my grandfather was able to recite, from memory, a poem for almost any tree or animal that we came across. In the manner of the main character in the *Rings of Saturn*, a walk was a form of meditation: on history, on literature, on beauty. My grandfather had, it seemed, the complete works of Housman, Burns and many others stored in his head. So when I felt confident enough to give him a book, it needed to be a good one.

When I'm waiting for the train from Liverpool Street to Hackney Downs, I like to think of Austerlitz and the narrator, sitting in the McDonalds at the top of the escalators, as they do in one passage of the book. They are characters who, although the book is set in the late 1990s, seem to be from another era and yet there they are, under 'the glaring light which, so he said, allowed not even the hint of shadow and perpetuated the momentary terror of a lightning flash.' From there (I like to imagine they each had a Big Mac) Austerlitz continues his astonishing story. It is great to think that, even under the golden arches, in a station that sees 123 million visitors a year, in a part of a city where nothing escapes redevelopment, nothing stays still, it is possible to pick out one person, and see the route that brought them there. ♦

# The Collected ‘Maxims’

*Recorded by David Lambert and Robert McGill*

*W.G. Sebald taught his final fiction workshop at the University of East Anglia during the autumn of 2001. In the literary world he was rapidly gaining renown: there had been the succès d'estime of his first three books, and then the publication of Austerlitz earlier that year. In the classroom – where David Lambert and I were two of sixteen students – Sebald was unassuming, almost shy, and asked that we call him Max. When discussing students' work he was anecdotal and associative, more storyteller than technician. He had weary eyes that made it tempting to identify him with the melancholy narrators of his books, but he also had a gentle amiability and wry sense of humour. We were in his thrall. He died three days after the final class.*

*As far as I'm aware, nobody that term recorded Max's words systematically. However, in the wake of his death, David and I found ourselves returning to our notes, where we'd written down many of Max's remarks. These we gleaned and shared with our classmates. Still, I wish we'd been more diligent, more complete. The comments recorded here represent only a small portion of Max's contribution to the class.*

– Robert McGill

## On Approach

- Fiction should have a ghostlike presence in it somewhere, something omniscient. It makes it a different reality.
- Writing is about discovering things hitherto unseen. Otherwise there's no point to the process.
- By all means be experimental, but let the reader be part of the experiment.
- Expressionism was really a kind of wilful avant gardism after the First World War, an attempt to wrench language into a form it does not normally have. It must have purpose, though. It hasn't really occurred in English but is very common in German.
- Write about obscure things but don't write obscurely.

- There is a certain merit in leaving some parts of your writing obscure.
- It's hard to write something original about Napoleon, but one of his minor aides is another matter.

## On Narration and Structure

- In the nineteenth century the omniscient author was God: totalitarian and monolithic. The twentieth century, with all its horrors, was more demotic. It took in people's accounts; suddenly there were other views. In the natural sciences the [twentieth] century saw the disproving of Newton and the introduction of the notion of relativity.
- In the twentieth century we know that the observer always affects what is being observed. So, writing biography now, you have to talk about where you got your sources, how it was talking to that woman in Beverly Hills, the trouble you had at the airport.
- Physicists now say there is no such thing as time: everything co-exists. Chronology is entirely artificial and essentially determined by emotion. Contiguity suggests layers of things, the past and present somehow coalescing or co-existing.
- The present tense lends itself to comedy. The past is foregone and naturally melancholic.
- There is a species of narrator, the chronicler; he's dispassionate, he's seen it all.
- You can't attribute a shortcoming in a text to the state a character is in. For example, 'he doesn't know the landscape so he can't describe it', 'he's drunk so he can't know this or that'.

## On Description

- You need to set things very thoroughly in time and place unless you have good reasons [not to]. Young authors are often too worried about getting things moving on the rails, and not worried enough about what's on either side of the tracks.
- A sense of place distinguishes a piece of writing. It may be a distillation of different places. There must be a very good reason for not describing place.
- Meteorology is not superfluous to the story. Don't have an aversion to noticing the weather.
- It's very difficult, not to say impossible, to get physical movement right when writing. The important thing is that it should work for the reader, even if it is not accurate. You can use ellipsis, abbreviate a sequence of actions; you needn't laboriously describe each one.
- You sometimes need to magnify something, describe it amply in a roundabout way. And in the process you discover something.
- How do you surpass horror once you've reached a certain level? How do you stop appearing gratuitous? Horror must be absolved by the quality of the prose.

## On Detail

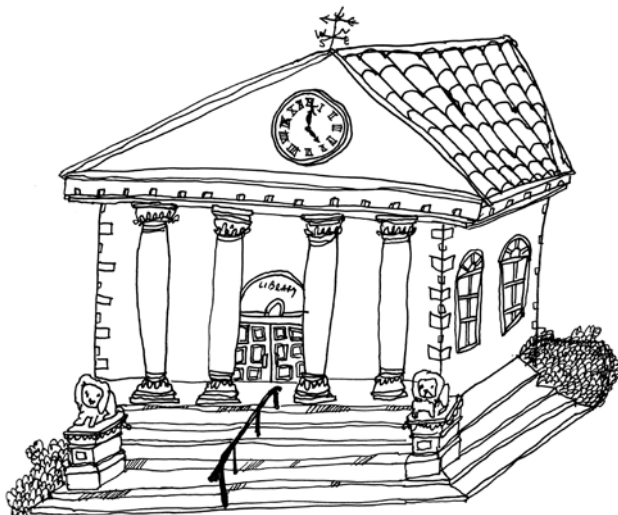
- 'Significant detail' enlivens otherwise mundane situations. You need acute, merciless observation.
- Oddities are interesting.
- Characters need details that will anchor themselves in your mind.
- The use of twins or triplets who are virtually indistinguishable from each other can lend a spooky, uncanny edge. Kafka does it.
- It's always gratifying to learn something when one reads fiction. Dickens introduced it. The essay invaded the novel. But we should not perhaps trust 'facts' in fiction. It is, after all, an illusion.



- Exaggeration is the stuff of comedy.
- It's good to have undeclared, unrecognized pathologies and mental illnesses in your stories. The countryside is full of undeclared pathologies. Unlike in the urban setting, there, mental affliction goes unrecognized.
- Dialect makes normal words seem other, odd and jagged. For example, 'Jeziz' for Jesus.
- Particular disciplines have specialized terminology that is its own language. I could translate a page of Ian McEwan in half an hour – but golf equipment! another matter. Two Sainsbury's managers talking to each other are a different species altogether.
- None of the things you make up will be as hair-raising as the things people tell you.
- I can only encourage you to steal as much as you can. No one will ever notice. You should keep a notebook of tidbits, but don't write down the attributions, and then after a couple of years you can come back to the notebook and treat the stuff as your own without guilt.
- Don't be afraid to bring in strange, eloquent quotations and graft them into your story. It enriches the prose. Quotations are like yeast or some ingredient one adds.
- Look in older encyclopaedias. They have a different eye. They attempt to be complete and structured but in fact are completely random collected things that are supposed to represent our world.

## On Reading and Intertextuality

- Read books that have nothing to do with literature.
- Get off the main thoroughfares; you'll see nothing there. For example, Kant's *Critique* is a yawn but his incidental writings are fascinating.
- There has to be a libidinous delight in finding things and stuffing them in your pockets.
- You must get the servants to work for you. You mustn't do all the work yourself. That is, you should ask other people for information, and steal ruthlessly from what they provide.
- It's very good that you write through another text, a foil, so that you write out of it and make your work a palimpsest. You don't have to declare it or tell where it's from.
- A tight structural form opens possibilities. Take a pattern, an established model or sub-genre, and write to it. In writing, limitation gives freedom.
- If you look carefully you can find problems in all writers. And that should give you great hope. And the better you get at identifying these problems, the better you will be at avoiding them.



## On Style

- Every sentence taken by itself should mean something.
- Writing should not create the impression that the writer is trying to be 'poetic'.
- It's easy to write rhythmical prose. It carries you along. After a while it gets tedious.
- Long sentences prevent you from having continually to name the subject ('Gertie did this, Gertie felt that' etc.).
- Avoid sentences that serve only to set up later sentences.
- Use the word 'and' as little as possible. Try for variety in conjunctions.

## On Revision

- Don't revise too much or it turns into patchwork.
- Lots of things resolve themselves just by being in the drawer a while.
- Don't listen to anyone. Not us, either. It's fatal.

## On Other Things

- The best academics are often Welsh. They come from a linguistic tradition which mixes the vernacular with the biblical.
- I went into my local video shop. It's filled with video nasties. A generation which has never known war is being raised on horror.
- *Tales from the Vienna Woods* was written by a Hungarian writing in German, who escaped before the Nazis invaded. He was exiled to Paris where, after consulting a clairvoyant who warned him to avoid the city of Amsterdam, never to ride on trams, and on no account to go in a lift, he was walking on the Champs Elysées when the branch of a tree fell and killed him.
- The English bury their dead higgledy-piggledy. As soon as you get to Düsseldorf it's a different story. ◇

# An A to Z of W.G. Sebald

Simon Prosser

**I**N JANUARY 2003, just over a year after Max Sebald's death, I was invited to speak at a University of London symposium in his memory. A little daunted, I enlisted the help of several writers, whose words are included in the piece that follows, alongside my own memories of Max in the last years of his life, when I was his English publisher.

*After Nature* · Max's first literary work, a beautiful, long poem in three parts, was first published in Germany in 1988 and much later, in a translation by Michael Hamburger, in the UK and USA. Max told me that he began writing it on a train journey when especially disillusioned by academia and academic writing.

It contains within it many of the themes, ideas and emblematic locations which he would revisit in his later writings: the railway station, the battlefield, the hospital, the altar, the mountain landscape, the night sky, the sea, the buried past, the burdens of grief and history, the repetitive cruelties and stupidities of humankind, madness, dreaming, flight, exile and death.

*Bavaria* · Max was born in 1944 in Wertach im Algäu in the Bavarian Alps, which was also where he grew up. His father, who had joined the German army in 1929, fought for Hitler in the Second World War, was interned in a French prisoner-of-war camp, and didn't return home until 1947. Max recalled that his father's experiences were never spoken of at home, and it wasn't until a documentary film of the liberation of Belsen was shown at his school that he began to have an inkling of the enormity and horror of Germany's recent history – a subject he would return to again and again in his work.

*Climate* · One of the most distinctive characteristics of Max's writing, as Robert Macfarlane has noted, is the substitution in part of climate for character:

'His novels have their own weather systems. In *Austerlitz*, there are "mias-

mas", "imperturbable fogs" and the air is "hatched with grey". "Drizzle" pinstripes the pages. In *The Emigrants* there are "veils of rain", in *The Rings of Saturn* "veils of ash". "All forms of colour," writes Sebald in *Austerlitz*, "were dissolved in a pearl-grey haze; there were no contrasts, no shading any more, only flowing transitions with the light throbbing through them, a single blur from which only the most fleeting of visions emerged."

*Digressiveness* · Max's ornate, stately sentences appear to wander as widely as his narrators on their travels, following winding paths of digression, disappearing into side-streets, and pausing to examine objects or images of particular interest. When asked by an interviewer from the *New Yorker* how he came to write *The Rings of Saturn*, he replied:

'I had this idea of writing a few short pieces for the German papers in order to pay for the extravagance of a fortnight's rambling tour. So that was the plan. But then, as you walk along, you find things. I think that's the advantage of walking. It's just one of the reasons I do that a lot. You find things by the wayside or you buy a brochure written by a local historian which is in a tiny little museum somewhere . . . and in that you find odd details that lead you somewhere else.'

Digression is at the heart of Max's work. As Dave Eggers puts it: 'The digressiveness follows the path of memory, which is rarely orderly. The uncovering of the story through the thicket of the mind – that's the plot in a way.'

*Emigrants* · The first of Max's major works to appear in English, in 1996, and published in Germany three years earlier, *The Emigrants* caused something of a sensation. It was as if a canonical writer had sprung fully formed from the apparently dead tradition of twentieth-century modernism. An astonishingly original

and captivating work, it documents and interweaves the lives of four Jewish émigrés with overwhelming moral and emotional force. Susan Sontag summed up the response to *The Emigrants* when she wrote: 'Is literary greatness still possible? What would a noble literary enterprise look like now? One of the few answers available to English-language readers is the work of W.G. Sebald.'

*Fiction* · Max described his works *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* as 'prose fictions' to distinguish them from the tradition of the 'novel', which he characterized as a kind of clanking machine emitting dreadful noises as it all-too-obviously changed gear:

'The business of having to have bits of dialogue to move the plot along, that's fine for an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century novel, but that becomes in our day a bit trying, where you always see the wheels of the novel grinding and going on.'

In their effect his books might seem close to what we now call 'creative non-fiction' but on careful examination they are full of fictional devices: the emptying out of landscapes, the repetition of images, the elision of characters, the defamiliarizing of the real and the invention of details.

*Genre* · At heart Max's writing is uncategorizable and that is one of the things that makes it so special. As Ali Smith puts it:

'In the meld of fiction, biography, autobiography, travel-writing, history, memoir, poetry, documentary, essay, theory, illustration, natural history, aesthetic analysis and quiet but profoundly urgent story that makes up the text of practically everything he wrote, Sebald found new literary form (and in finding it I think he also suggests new literary possibility, subconsciously suggests all literary forms are themselves in some way multiple). His writing ignored the fake – and, he more than hints, even dangerous – borders and fortifications between people and places in the same way as it does the differentiations between literary genres, in what turns out in the full run of his books to be an act of dual generosity and atonement.'

Nobody wrote like him, and he has transformed the literary imagination with the few books he had the time to write and we have had the luck to read.'

*Humour* · Max's sense of humour is often underestimated, perhaps because it seems at odds with the overwhelming seriousness of his subject matter and the apparently archaic style of his writing. Yet it was a vital weapon in his armoury, and personally one of the sources of his considerable charm.

His visits to our offices would begin, typically, with a mordant account of the trials of his journey from East Anglia to London, made all the more amusing by the comic gap – of which he was well aware – between the details of his travels (leaves on the line, phantom connecting trains) and the mournfulness of his delivery.

Anyone who doubts Max's humour should reread his narrator's account of eating armour-plated fish and chips in Lowestoft in *The Rings of Saturn* ('the fish... had doubtless lain entombed in the deep freeze for years'), or look at the max-ims printed in this issue of *Five Dials*.

The critic James Wood was delighted when he met Max to find him as quietly funny in person as in his writing:

"What is German humour like?" I asked him. "It is dreadful," he said. "Have you seen any German comedy shows on television?" he asked. I had not. "They are simply indescribable," he said, stretching the word in his lugubrious German accent. "Simply indescribable."

*Images* · One of the most striking features of Max's work is his use of images. The great prose fictions, from *The Emigrants* to *Austerlitz*, were illustrated by Max himself, who was a fanatical collector of old photographs, postcards and newspaper clippings, and the use of these found images, together with photographs taken by Max himself, has been the source of much discussion by readers, critics and, more recently, academics. (The definitive study to date is by artists' collective the Institute of Cultural Inquiry, whose publication *Searching for Sebald* runs to 632 large-format pages.)

On Max's death, while little unpublished writing was found, a very large number of his photographs were discovered. For a time, his great admirer Susan

Sontag contemplated making a selection from these photographs and writing a text to accompany them. Sadly, she died before being able to commit to such a project.

In *The Emigrants*, Max's narrator wrote of looking at photographs that we feel 'as if the dead were coming back, or as if we were on the point of joining them'. And Max himself remembered that 'In school I was in the dark room all the time, and I've always collected stray photographs; there's a great deal of memory in them.'

At the heart of debates over Max's use of illustrations is the question of whether they actually *illustrate*. The art critic Brian Dillon has suggested, rightly I think, that 'they suggest instead a ceaseless shuttle of meaning between word and image', as in 'the endless and ruminative contemplation of materials that defy introspection'.

*Jaray* · In 2001 the painter Tess Jaray exhibited an extraordinary sequence of sixteen prints responding to passages from *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*. Once a part of the loose grouping of artists who formed the British Pop Art movement of the 1960s, she found inspiration later in life, first in the spiritual patterning of Islamic art and then in the patterning and moods of Max's work. ('Morocco and Max' was

how she put it when I met her.)

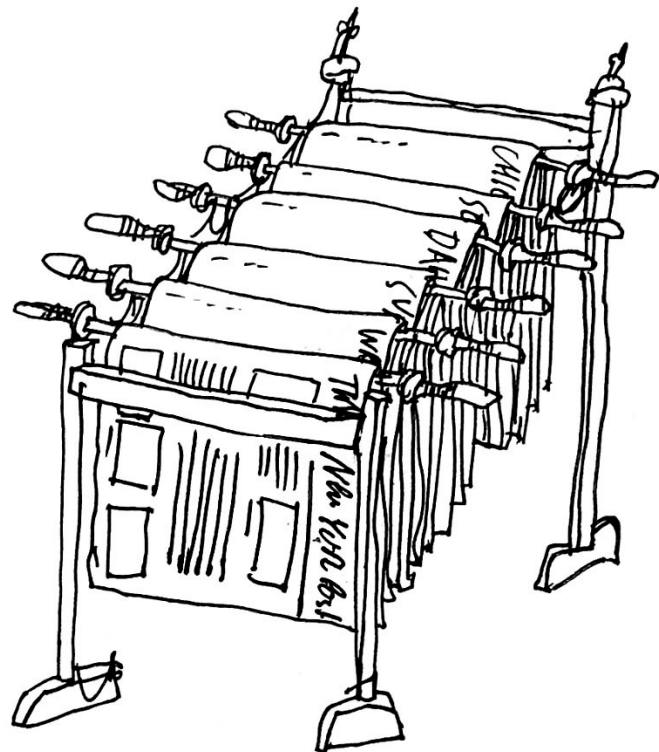
My favourite of her prints, 'At Regensburg he crossed...', hangs in the Hamish Hamilton offices and also above my sofa at home, never failing to evoke a memory of Max.

Having befriended one another, Tess and Max collaborated on the beautiful collection of texts and 'micro-poems' published in 2001 as *For Years Now*, which introduced the mysterious haiku-like writing of Max's last years. The final poem reads:

For years now  
I've had this  
whistling  
sound in  
my ears.

*Kant* · One of the most fugitive of Max's works, which I have never managed to track down, is a radio play which he supposedly wrote for the BBC on the life of Kant. Does anyone know where we might find a copy?

*Lac de Biemme* · In perhaps the last interview with Max before his death, with Arthur Lubow for *The New York Times*, Max was asked if there was any place in which he had ever felt at home:



‘He thought of one spot: the island of St Pierre in the Lac de Biemme in Switzerland, famous as a refuge of Rousseau in 1765: “I felt at home, strangely, because it is a miniature world,” he said. “One manor house, one farmhouse. A vineyard, a field of potatoes, a field of wheat, a cherry tree, an orchard. It has one of everything, so it is in a sense an ark. This notion of something that is small and self-contained is for me an aesthetic and moral ideal.”’

*Music* · Much might be written about the musicality of Max’s work and it is intriguing to know what he himself enjoyed listening to. At the *Evening for Max* that was convened by his closest colleagues at the University of East Anglia in June 2002 – the nearest to what might be termed a memorial for Max – the following works were chosen to be played, as music that he knew and loved: *Four Sea Interludes*: ‘Dawn’ by Benjamin Britten; *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* by Gustav Mahler; the second movement of *Symphony No. 1*, also by Mahler; and finally Schoenberg’s *Strauss Transcriptions*.

*Norwich* · The University of East Anglia in Norwich provided Max with a home following his departure from the University of Manchester, which was where he first studied and taught on leaving Germany. A professor of modern German literature for thirty years, he also set up the first British Centre for Literary Translation at UEA, and much later, at the very end of his life, taught on its famous creative writing course. The maxims in this issue of *Five Dials* date from this period. For many years he lived nearby, at the Old Rectory in Upgate, Poringland – a place he described as, ‘very much out in the sticks. And I do feel that I’m better there than I am in the centre of things. I do like to be in the margins if at all possible.’

Max died in a road accident on the way from the Rectory to the train station, killed in a crash with a lorry while negotiating a left-hand bend.

*On the Natural History of Destruction* · Max’s major work of non-fiction centres on a brilliant 107-page examination of ‘Air War and Literature’, delivered as a series of lectures in Zurich in late autumn 1997. Immediately controversial, his thesis that

the majority of German writers have remained silent about the mass destruction of German cities during the Second World War – and his explanation as to why – heralded a more widespread examination of Germany in the last few years of the country’s painful recent history. Max argued in the book’s preface that:

‘When we turn to take a backward view, particularly of the years 1930 to 1950, we are always looking and looking away at the same time. As a result, the works produced by German authors after the war are marked by a half-consciousness or false consciousness designed to consolidate the extremely precarious position of these writers in a society that was morally almost discredited.’

Of all Max’s works this is the only one in which anger is allowed to rise to the surface of the writing – and it is also perhaps the closest to an explanation of why he abandoned Germany for England as a young man.

*Psychoanalysis* · Commentary on Max’s work has tended to avoid psychoanalytic analysis, although the analyst and writer Adam Phillips recently delivered the plenary address at a conference on Max’s work. Of his own melancholia Max did speak a little, mentioning that both his

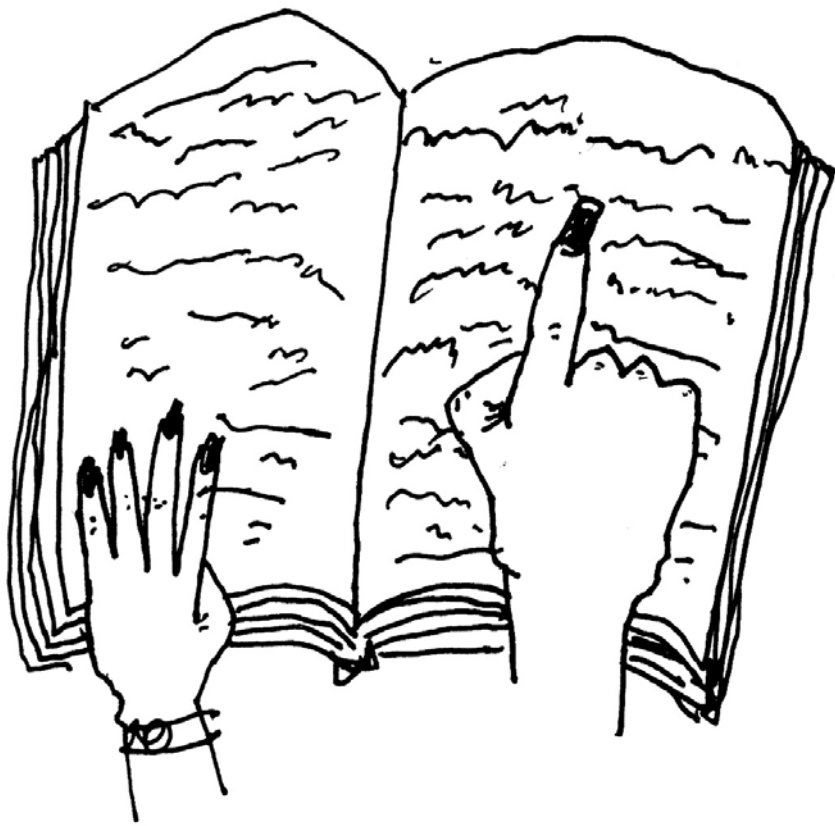
father and grandfather had spent the last years of their lives morbidly depressed. As Arthur Lubow recalls from his late interview with Max:

‘His father, who in Sebald’s telling resembled a caricature of the pedantic, subservient, frugal German, didn’t like to read books. “The only book I ever saw him read was one my younger sister gave him for Christmas, just at the beginning of the ecological movement, with a name like *The End of the Planet*,” Sebald said. “And my father was bowled over by it. I saw him underlining every sentence of it – with a ruler, naturally – saying, ‘Ja, Ja.’”’

*Queen Elizabeth Hall* · The last time I saw Max was at London’s Queen Elizabeth Hall, for a reading from *Austerlitz*. Uncomfortable in the formica surroundings of the Green Room, he suggested a short walk along the Thames, in which he talked a little of his recent trips to France and of his plans for a new prose fiction, partially inspired by his research there. Sadly, as we now know, no substantial part of this work-in-progress survives.

*Rings of Saturn* · For many readers this is the most beloved of Max’s works. It begins with the narrator recovering from a bout of illness which is often assumed to be psychological. When I asked Max





about this he said that the problem was in fact orthopaedic, and based on his own experience of a damaged back following his months of tramping the East Anglian coast with one foot slightly raised above the other due to the angle of the sloping shore. (Though in writing this, I wonder if I dreamt this conversation.)

*Smoking* · Max was one of those smokers whom it suited to smoke. When I asked Max whether, like me, he had plans to stop, he raised his eyebrows as if to say, ‘Why – with so many other ways we might die?’

*Translation* · Although he might easily have written his books in English, Max chose to write them in German, then to work extremely closely with his translator on the English version. He was blessed in his choice of translators – latterly Anthea Bell, who has written movingly about their collaboration:

‘We worked on the text mainly by correspondence, Max’s preferred method

and indeed mine too. There are not so many people now who really like writing proper letters, but it so happened that both of us did, and I treasure (for he was the most generous of authors) Max’s kind remark in the winter months that one of mine had “helped dispel the cafard in which I tend to get caught up in this dark part of the year.”’

*Unrecounted* · Several of the texts from *For Years Now* also appeared in the posthumous collection *Unrecounted*, which is a collaboration with Max’s oldest friend since school days, the artist Jan Peter Tripp. The translator of this book was another old friend, the poet Michael Hamburger, who spoke for many when he wrote:

‘What sets these reductive epiphanies apart from the earlier works is not so much their extreme brevity, spareness and seeming casualness . . . but their break with the narrative thread in all the preceding works.’

They were, he felt, written ‘at a time of crisis in my friend’s life and work, full of

enigmas, conflicts and contradictions he chose not to clarify.’

*Vertigo* · While visiting Venice in *Vertigo*, the first of Max’s mature prose fictions, the Sebaldian narrator is kept awake by the noise of traffic outside his hotel room and has an epiphany which sums up a great deal of Max’s thinking on the nature of extinction:

‘For some time now I have been convinced that it is out of this din that the life is being born which will come after us and spell our gradual destruction, just as we have been gradually destroying what was there long before us.’

While he never wrote explicitly about the environment or climate change, there is an ecological resonance in many such assertions in Max’s work.

*W.G.* · Although christened Winfried Georg, Max chose to go by his middle name, Maximilian.

*X* · Coincidence, the point where paths cross, is at the heart of Max’s writing – and the X at the end of his name always seemed emblematic to me. When I asked him once about the role of coincidence he said that whatever path he took in his writing he always, sooner or later, came across another path which led quickly back to some detail from his own life. He also said that the more one was attuned to look out for such things, the more frequently they occurred.

*Young Austerlitz* · The perfect introduction to Max’s prose fiction, this 60-page excerpt from *Austerlitz* was published as Pocket Penguin No. 28 in 2005.

*Zembla* · Perhaps the best short introduction to Max and his writing was written by Robert Macfarlane for the winter 2004 issue of *Zembla*, named after the distant northern land in *Pale Fire* by Vladimir Nabokov, one of Max’s favourite writers, who makes a cameo appearance, with his butterfly net, in *The Emigrants*.

The A to Z above is of course highly subjective and we would welcome any further contributions from *Five Dials* readers which might be added to it. ◇

# W.G. Sebald

## *Thoughts from the late Roger Deakin*

**I**RELISH Max Sebald, as I love Thomas de Quincey, for his fearless digressions, for the sheer scope of his curious, cosmopolitan imagination and for his powers of free association.

As a Suffolk man I have a special affection for *The Rings of Saturn*, although the Suffolk coast Sebald evokes is nothing like the Suffolk I know. It is a landscape transformed by a particular state of mind, gloomy but compelling. The place he describes is outlandish, like the writer, who is an exile from his language as well as from his land. In this respect he is the very opposite of writers like John Clare, Les Murray or Basil Bunting, whose work is grounded in a detailed appreciation, even mapping, of certain particular tracts of home country – Helpstone, the Wingfield Brush, Briggflatts – often in a home dialect with which they enjoy an easy familiarity.

These are writers I love, so why would I enjoy Sebald so much?

Because he is a great writer of Landscape and Memory: an archaeologist forever trowelling his way through the layers of the stories he always senses beneath every meadow or pavement. All his haunts have their ghosts. He has a special nose for the secrets and lies that underlie the sadness in lives: Edward Fitzgerald, nursing unrequited love for his dead friend Browne, living on bread and butter and tea in a tiny cottage, self-exiled from his vast inheritance; Michael Hamburger, still mourning the pet budgerigars that were confiscated as he entered England at the age of nine. Every story of exile is Sebald's own, and the landscape mirrors his state of mind. Wandering through gorse thickets on Dunwich Heath: the intensity of their yellow burns into him and engenders thoughts of fire, bush fire raging through Californian forests. Gazing, as in a dream, at the pattern of Suffolk hedgerows beyond the heath, he sees a 'labyrinth', 'a pattern . . . which I knew in my dream, with absolute certainty, represented a cross-section of my brain.'

For Sebald, everything feels unfamiliar, or so he says. What soon becomes

familiar to the reader is 'strange', 'peculiar', 'forlorn' or 'melancholy'. Yet so often I find myself haunted by the most vivid, detailed image, like the beetle the writer notices rowing itself across the surface of the well-water outside Michael Hamburger's house in Middleton. A black beetle on black water. Getting himself lost repeatedly on Dunwich Heath, 'that bewildering terrain', Sebald is eventually overcome by a feeling of panic, as in a nightmare, and has no idea how he finds his way out of it except that 'suddenly I stood in a country lane', and he has regained his bearings. There is an allegorical feel to much that Sebald writes.

Perhaps we should place him in the visionary tradition of William Langland and John Bunyan. He is forever on the brink of sleep, or actually dreaming, or wandering 'as if in a dream'. How like William Langland, falling asleep on a May morning on a Malvern hillside by the bank of a brook and dreaming of his fair field full of folk, and the story of *Piers Plowman*. 'I felt like a journeyman in a century gone by, so out of place,' says Sebald as he wanders through Suffolk.

Sebald, of course, famously empties out his landscapes and town squares – 'the place was empty', 'there was not a soul to be seen' – clearing the decks, like the dramatist he is, for the telling detail or those sumptuous, prodigious lists of objects or imagined people from the past.

How like John Bunyan, too, wandering the land on his *Pilgrim's Progress*, perceiving the Chilterns on his way to London as Christian's Celestial Mountains.

Bunyan/Christian was terrified that he would be pressed down into hell by the weight of evil he was carrying, just like Sebald, who must have felt he had to bear the whole weight of Germany's dreadful, much-denied, recent history.

Ronald Blythe has pointed out how, when Mr Valiant-for-Truth passes over the river of death and has 'the trumpets sounded for him on the other side', Bunyan is writing about the trumpeter he heard sound the curfew each night by

Bedford Bridge, Bunyan's home town. Sebald often does something similar, transposing a familiar or actual place into fiction and metaphor, like the antiques bazaar in Austerlitz, full of memories of the holocaust objectified à la Roland Barthes, all unavailable for inspection or purchase because the shop is closed. No one should ever underestimate the seriousness of Sebald's moral concern.

In its atmospheric majesty, its sudden horrors and swooning, altered states of consciousness, Sebald's work is almost Gothic. He often wanders into deliberate archaism. As he stands on the crumbling Dunwich cliffs, 'Crows and choughs that winged the mid-way air were scarce the size of beetles.' There is the coffin-like, Kafka-like beetle again, as black as a crow or a chough. Such creatures are all drawn to the dead. The passage is characteristically reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe: the voice of the narrator in *The Maelstrom*, perched on a Nordic cliff-top above a raging sea beneath a 'leaden sky', drawn by the nightmarish tug of the maelstrom that has traumatized his life.

Sebald's formal, mesmeric, sonorous prose is deliberately musical in its composition, building up sometimes to torrential outpourings, like the single ten-page sentence evoking every detail of life as it must have been for Austerlitz's mother in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, as he eventually breaks through to a full realization of the agony of her last days there. A bass-line of profound anxiety runs through all Sebald's writing, like the elephants in Forster's description of Beethoven's fifth symphony in *Howard's End*, a kind of silent scream like Munch's. Sometimes it erupts, as in moments like the bolting of the hare on Orford Ness, its eyes almost popping out of its head with fear.

The genius of Sebald's dreamlike way of writing is that it enables him to fly like Robin Goodfellow and 'put a girdle round about the earth', to take us effortlessly wherever he wants in time or place, without the need for narrative sense. He can take us from the Southwold Sailors' Reading Room to the Congo, from the twitching of an archivist's temple vein in a Prague lift to a lizard's throbbing throat.

Reading Sebald, I can't help thinking of Marlowe's line: 'Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.' ♦

## Permissions

The veil of weather, the hopeful smell  
of just-cut grass, the who-knows-what  
that goes on behind closed doors –

all commingle, become strange companions,  
if we can make a place for them.

The ocean, its undulations  
and its calm, the variety of what it hides,  
the ways it crashes and recedes,

are clearly one big thing,

and those unaffordable, grand vistas  
at the end of cliffs, and the poor bastard  
on his porch peeling an orange

could meet in some macrosphere,  
if such a place can be made.

Blueberries for the picking  
in a neighbor's field, ten cents a box,  
a snake sunning itself on a rock –

'the power of the mind  
over the possibilities of things',

permitting even the impermissible,  
yet also, in the gray  
shimmery air of our best intentions,

the easy lie, the forced resemblance.

# ‘A Little Trick of the Mind’

*Four translators discuss the world’s second oldest profession*

Gail Armstrong

*Nor ought a genius less than his  
that writ attempt translation.  
— Sir John Denham*

LITERARY TRANSLATION is a labour of love. It has to be: the pay is crap. But it is as close to glamorous as the job ever gets. The only other times translators make headlines are when blowing the whistle on shady government deals, being gunned down in war zones, arrested for spying or kicked off the job for sexual leanings (*Just whose team are you on, son?*).

And still we wonder why we arouse suspicion.

Despite working in what has been referred to as the second oldest profession, and widely associated with the words ‘traitor’ and ‘lost in’, most of us spend our time obediently typing away in the quiet anonymity of a home office, churning out a daily quota of words, each one counted and billed to the client – any forays into daring confined to toying with terms outside our usual idiolect.

While the majority of translators soon realize the need to specialize in a particular field – the more arcane the jargon involved, the higher the price of each word – there will always be those who’ll take whatever work comes their way (*Five thousand words on the latest neurosurgical techniques? Sure, why not?*), relying on dictionaries to bluff their way through. You would think that most clients would prefer a native speaker with some expertise translating their nuclear power plant assembly instructions, but you’d be amazed at the compromises made in the name of penny-pinching.

The darlings of these budget cutters, promising extreme savings and my eventual obsolescence, are the makers of translation software. They’ve been promising that for ages. Already twenty years ago, the head of the translation department where I worked would flex her managerial muscles by storming through the cubicles, brandishing a floppy disk and

barking: ‘This! One day I will replace you all with this!’

Thankfully our craft has not yet been tossed in the dustbin of history, alongside scribes and papyrus farmers (and word is that this manager was usurped by some nifty productivity software). Plus, I don’t imagine it ever will be entirely, despite the hopes of certain clients, like the inevitable retail’s-for-suckers ones who snap, ‘Hey, what do I look like? A rube? I’m not going to pay for each time you translate the word “the”!’ To which the only proper response is: ‘Then kindly remove all those you don’t want translated.’

For sheerchutzpah, this person is only just edged out by the neighbour who once solicited a freebie – and not a birth certificate or diploma, mind you, but rather five pages on polymers – with the phrase: ‘Well, of course my nephew could translate this but he’s away at camp so, uh, would you mind?’ Adding that having it by noon would be ideal.

After I stopped laughing, I realized that this was a pretty good summation of how most people view our craft: reading words in one language while typing them out in another. What could be easier? I do, however, suspect that my colleagues who translate into Latvian or Turkish or Swahili don’t get this kind of grief. There’s a special brand of stupid presumption that goes with translating into English, because everyone speaks it a little bit – always just enough for them to think they know what they’re talking about.

So you will invariably have client feedback that goes something like: ‘This word here, are you sure that’s a word? I lived in New York for a month back in ’98 and I never heard that word. I don’t think it’s a word. Find another one.’

This is usually the same person who experiences the occasional burst of brash and decides to write his report on telecoms in Europe directly in English, asking only that you give his work a quick little polish.

It will begin like this:

Penetration in the Sweden is one of the hardest and deepest in Europe.

Making you sit up a little straighter, eager for what comes next. What comes next is:

The all numbers of subscribers has surrounding 3,1 millions and the repartition by operators is supplying at the chart following.

Aw. You slump back down, and down and down as it continues like that for another fifty pages. Non-stop gibberish that you only understand because you speak French and know what he’s trying to say (it’s what you do for a living, after all). Every word reads like it has a thick accent. The kind of accent that hits on strangers in airport lounges – inexplicably certain of its appeal.

The man writing this is not aware that it is not English, but rather an ungainly patchwork of the skeletal remains of secondary education plus a few night classes, padded out with movie taglines, pop lyrics and vernacular picked up from the rah-rah web and the travelling minstrels of industry conferences – that wretched facsimile known as International English where everyone is on a first-name basis, and no one’s quite sure what all those apostrophes replace.

It has no style, no poetry, no nuance and no purpose other than to do business. It is indeed the new Lingua Franca, and will only ensure that monsieur will get his martini dry, find a room for the night and increase his third-quarter earnings. It will not equip him to enjoy James Joyce, or even Dr Seuss.

It is what he hopes to find when he reads my translation of his work. He composes his French so that the English will blend in seamlessly with the crowd. I cannot tell you how depressing that is.

The problem is compounded by the fact that one of my areas of speciality is IT and telecommunications – an area in which my knowledge far outweighs my enthusiasm. Oh, man, it’s dull. And I know an awful lot about it. I’m talking *Mastermind*-level quantities of uninteresting information. Things like the number of cable subscribers in Slovenia and what



a quadrature phase shift keying modulator circuit is used for. Two things that TDMA stands for – one of them is *too damn many acronyms*. Which there are. And when one doesn't exist in French, they'll put in the English one. So you've got to know your acronyms. God I hate acronyms. ГИНА.

Outside of my work there is nothing to do with this knowledge. I do occasionally spring it on an unsuspecting neighbour at a dinner party after I've had a little too much to drink, but that never ends well. So mostly this great lump of stuff just loiters in my brain, kicking the dirt while contemplating the advantages of mutualized civil infrastructure and wondering why it has no friends.

Having this area of specialization also means I translate two kinds of text. There are deliberately ambiguous government documents that have all the elegance and playful brio of concrete blocks. Hundreds of pages of sentences apparently modelled on Stalinist architecture, where epochs elapse between subject and verb, forming paragraphs more lengthy and drab than a French civil servant's summer holidays. If bottled, they could induce coma. And then there are market reports, by and for totally psyched, choir-preaching, high-fiving, point-oh-faced, social-networking, micromessaging, cross-platform-marketing wienies leveraging the convergent synergies and brand equity of the latest killer app to monetize eyeballs and get us all on the winning side of retail Darwinism.

The brass ring is to have their white paper read by one of the big boys, i.e. someone just like them, but that you've heard of. So it's champagne all around when I get a breathless email from one of my usually just-coasting middle managers, suddenly swooning with exclamation marks: *Your translation was quoted at length in a Morgan Stanley report today!!!*

Oh! It's like being asked to the dance by George Soros!

When told by a reader that his stories read better in French, James Thurber replied, 'Yes, I tend to lose something in the original.' If I know that consciously working to improve on the source text is against the rules, I have to confess that when I sit down to translate some of these voiceless pages, it really does seem like the only humane thing to do.

## Anthea Bell

*Anthea Bell has translated the Asterix books, Freud, Sebald and countless other authors. Her study has a shelf to hold her thick reference books and a shelf for the works of her father, Adrian Bell, who chronicled the Suffolk countryside and compiled The Times crossword. It is also the resting place for a considerable amount of ribbons for excellence in cat breeding. She used to name her new cats after Shakespearian characters, and got through most, though she decided she would not offer up a pet with the name Lady Macbeth.*

*When I asked her about the solitude of the job she looked at me for a moment through her large glasses before offering a shrug and a loud laugh. It was nothing new to her, this writing life. She watched her father go, without fail, into his study at 9 a.m. to clack away until midday. In the afternoon he cycled the back lanes of Suffolk, freeing his mind to think of the next day's crossword clues.*

I LOVED LEARNING languages when I was a girl, though my degree is not in French and German. I studied English but went on reading French and German and became a translator quite by accident. My then-husband worked at what was called the National Book League and he knew a lot of publishers. One day one came in and said 'Any idea who could read a German book for me and give me an opinion?' My husband said 'I guess my wife could do that' and after that it was the grapevine. I had small children at home and I remember translating my first book on the kitchen table with a manual typewriter and a baby asleep in the carry-cot beside me. Before coming to this house, about twenty years ago, I'd never had a separate room where I could have all my junk and not have to tidy up because I'd work at the dining table or in the spare bedroom.

*What is the first thing you do with a book?*

Read it, of course. I know two people who say they prefer not to have read a book first. I'd be terrified, actually, because suppose you didn't like it when you embarked on it? It's very risky unless you know the author's name and take it on trust. I do a lot of Stefan Zweig. He's rather difficult to translate. He appears absolutely lucid and clear as anything on the surface but when you get into him

you think 'What exactly was he getting at here?' And of course he's dead, so I can't ring him up and ask him. So I read the book, then I do a draft, and then I revise and revise. Finally I print out and read through only for the English. A translator's got a double duty to the author and the readers of a translation. You have to balance between the two of them.

*What are the challenges?*

You come across unique problems. Max Sebald, for instance, famously wrote in an almost nineteenth century German which reintroduces you to the joys of the subordinate clause and the long, long sentence. In his *Austerlitz* there is a sentence that is all of nine pages long and when I was drafting that, and Max was still alive, I remember about two pages in I put in a full stop. I did it without thinking and didn't have to wait for Max to tell me no, he didn't want it. I took it out again because the whole vast passage describes the way the Nazis were prettifying up the camp of Theresienstadt when there was going to be a Red Cross delegation and they were going to be giving the impression it was a holiday home for Jews, and the whole, long nine pages described the frantic and utterly pointless activity and that's why it goes on and on like that in one huge interlinking sentence. So it was quite a challenge.

*What were conversations with Sebald like?*

Max was not a man for technology. You correspond with practically all authors by email and email attachments, but not Max. They delivered a computer to his room at UEA and, after his tragic accident, it was still found in its box there. It hadn't been opened and set up. So I would draft a chunk and I would send it off to him and while I was drafting the next chunk he would make comments and suggestions and send my previous chunk back to me.

Both *Rings of Saturn* (which Michael Hulse translated) and *Austerlitz*, they are full of moths. He was fascinated by moths. I actually have a full-blown moth phobia. I will run screaming from the room. There are three months in summer – July, August and early September – when I have to be very careful of opening the door or window to a lighted room after dark. My son said

to me once, What do you do now that we're not here at home anymore? I said, I fling. I wait for it to settle if possible and I fling a very heavy dictionary on top of it and leave it there to die. I told Max I had this phobia and he was rather amused. He told me Graham Greene had a bird phobia, which I didn't know before.

*Are there words you dodge?*

There are certain words. I spend my life trying not to use 'so-called' for German 'sogenannt'. In German it's just a throwaway word but in English if you say 'so-called' it looks as if you're implying something is claiming to be something it's not. It's like the little French habit of punctuating sentences dying off into a three dot ellipses. In English that suggests to me there is something sinister yet to be told.

*When do you have most freedom?*

The Asterix books, of course, where you've got to be free. Albert Uderzo had developed a very sophisticated drafting style for the illustrations, and René Goscinny was at his most inventive in what I call the good mid-period Asterixes. With those, of course, you get a pun in French and you get the names in French. You get the terrible bard Assurancetourix, which means car insurance in French. That doesn't make a name when you translate it anyway, certainly not ending in -ix. He comes out as Cacophonix in English because he's the worst bard ever. For those, you have to reinvent the pun.

Of course you have to keep it all in tune with the size of the speech bubble and the expressions on the character's faces. Every time I translated there was a solemn little contract saying nothing shall be changed from the French version. The whole essence of the thing was to change it quite a lot. You can justify it, you have to, by saying you are being true to the spirit which is more important than being true to the letter.

I used to draft out a translation and type in 'joke needed here' or 'this is tricky' and then go back. I don't do crosswords, even though my father compiled them. Reinventing the Asterix puns are the closest thing I've ever done to solving or compiling a cryptic crossword. It's a

trick of the mind working the same way.

The humour in those books ranges from the absolutely obvious to the nuanced. 'The slaves are revolting' gets a simple laugh from the eight-year-old, and then there are extended cultural jokes. Asterix takes on a Roman legionary in a rendering of the swordfight from *Cyrano de Bergerac*, composing a ballad while he fights. As it was, the most famous swordfight in English literature is probably between Hamlet and Laertes and so the whole thing, practically a page, where there were Rostand quotations in the French, there are now quotations from *Hamlet* in the English. It's practically a page of Rostand quotes in French and Shakespearian quotes in English. Is an eight-year-old going to know that?

René Goscinny died in a very sad way and yet he would have laughed at it. He did have heart trouble. He was only just fifty, I think, and he was a very rotund, good-living Frenchman who went into a clinic for a check-up, and got on one of those exercise bikes where they monitor your blood pressure and heartbeat. They connected the electrodes and he died then and there. It was the saddest thing but I couldn't help but think if there's anything on the other side René Goscinny is sitting there roaring with laughter writing the story up.

*How do you deal with the constraints of the speech bubble?*

If you're reinventing a joke it may come out a little too long for the speech bubble and so then you have to rethink it again, counting letters on your fingers all the while.

*Do you belong to a certain school of thought?*

There are two schools of thought now. The modern school of thought is that the translator should be visible. You should be aware of the translator working on the book. I am far too old to adopt this fashionable viewpoint. I like to be an invisible translator and hope that it will read as if it's been written in English in the first place. I was asked once to give the keynote speech at a seminar on translation organized by a couple of young lecturers. I was asked to give a speech about the new ideas of visible translation. I said, I can't do this for you. I simply

don't agree with the new ideas of visible translation.

*What happens when translation goes wrong?*

I revise more if I can see that it doesn't sound right. I did a title in the new Freud series. My book was *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and my particular problem was the term invented in English especially for the first translation of this book – 'parapraxis' – which was invented to translate the famous 'fehleistung' – the Freudian slip – which literally in German means a failed or mistaken performance or achievement. You set out to say or think or do something and it comes out other than you intended. Parapraxis. Was I going to keep it? I thought about it and thought, no, I'm not. My mind was made up. It's a non-word that was invented particularly for the translation of this book. So I wriggled around it.

That book is about slips of the tongue and the pen. I've often said my translations range from Freud to Asterix, but one day I thought, no, those two examples are not so far away. When you're translating a pun or substituting a pun, in effect you are trying to do on purpose what the Freudian slip of the tongue does accidentally.

*How do you force a slip?*

You puzzle away at the words and how they might go wrong and that is the trick of wordplay. It's a word going ever so slightly wrong.

*There's a benefit in being a little inaccurate?*

If it is truer to the spirit of the original. That is always the dichotomy, the spirit and the letter.

*How do you hone the ability to perceive spirit?*

I think it's a little trick of the mind, you know. First of all, I suspect you are partly born with it. I think the mind lives in a little space between the two languages for a moment. With luck you then come down on the right side in your own language. There's a little no man's land between the languages where nothing but the meaning and the feel of it exists. For a minute you inhabit it and, of course, if you don't come down right away you've got to go back and do it again.

## Paul Wilson

TRANSLATORS SHARE the same urge to self-display as other forms of life, but they've learned to hide it. They can't satisfy that urge in their work, where the point is to stay invisible, so they find other ways of doing it. One of these ways is talking about translation. Thousands of books have been written about the art, or the craft, of translation. Some of them are works of cultural criticism, because translation lends itself to the posing of big questions about how meaning is transferred from one person, one language, one culture, one age, to another. George Steiner's *After Babel* is such a book; it takes the long view, examining translation as mode of understanding and a touchstone of civilization, which is why, for those of us labouring in the trenches, *After Babel* is a feel-good book. Others, like Gregory Rabassa's recent memoir, *If This Be Treason*, are practical, anecdotal, confessional. Secure in his reputation as one of the best modern translators from Spanish and Portuguese, Rabassa writes as the wise old elder of an obscure tribe, who understands that, when it comes to the work of translation, practice trumps theory.

But for all that palaver no one, as far as I know, has properly explored the psychology of translating – that is, what happens inside translators' heads while they are at work? Douglas Hofstadter's massive 1997 tome on translation, *Le Ton Beau de Marot*, might have attempted that because he is, after all, a professor of cognitive sciences. But not being first and foremost a translator his interests are too eclectic and his mind too restless to settle for long on a single aspect of translation.

It's a curious gap in our knowledge. We know, or think we know, a great deal about the creative process, especially for writers. At the very least, we're curious about it. Writers almost never make it through major interviews without being asked how or why they write, or what goes on in their minds when they write, or where their ideas come from. Translators, if they are interviewed at all, tend to get asked about 'their' author, or how they learned the language, or what special problems their author, or that language, presents. If they are interviewed by fellow translators, the questions tend to be

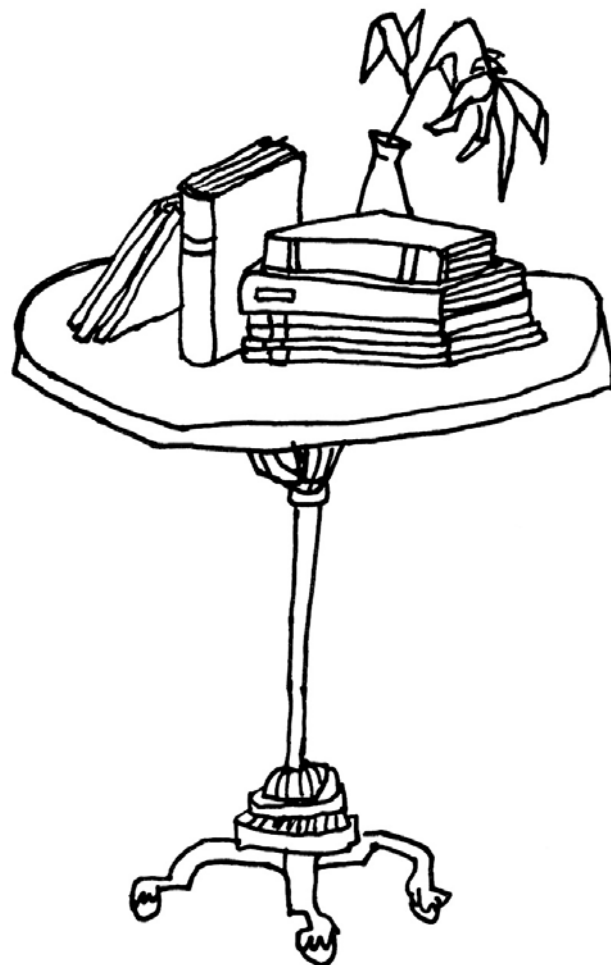
technical: How do you deal with puns? How do you recreate the author's 'voice' in another language? Are translations possible at all? (The answer to this last question is usually, 'No, but you have to take a shot.' Translators, in general, are a dogged lot.)

I've spent a good deal of my waking, working life trying to wrestle essays, stories, and novels from Czech into English and, in odd moments of contemplation about what exactly was going on inside my mind, I've come to some conclusions.

In the first place, sustained translation is an unnatural act, or at least it is for me. I lived in Czechoslovakia for ten years, and learned the language directly, as far as possible without reference to English. Rather than studying its grammar, I learned its patterns, and built up my vocabulary from the simple to the complex, via Czech itself. I trained myself to think in Czech, repeating simple phrases

to myself over and over again as I walked through the streets. I spent time in bars, talking to people, my tongue loosened by the beer and the camaraderie. During my first year there, I graduated from Czech 101 (ordering a beer) to Advanced Czech (impassioned discussions about democracy and its perils – this was 1968, the year of the Prague Spring, the year of the King and Robert Kennedy assassinations, the year of Soviet Invasion.) I also became pretty handy at Extracurricular Czech swearing and talking dirty.

And here's where it got interesting. In conversation, I could go back and forth from Czech to English as easily as flipping a switch, but when I started working on formal translations, going back and forth became hard work. It was not just that the only dictionaries available were either pre-war tomes (excellent, but dated) or communist ones (limited, bowdlerized); the difficulties ran deeper. I was working



in what amounted to a cultural vacuum: there weren't centuries of commerce between our two languages, the way there is between, say, French and English. Moreover, because of how I learned it, I had no ready connections between Czech and English in my own mind, certainly not for the more complicated ideas in the works I was starting to translate. So, with the help of Czech friends and the great Dr. Peter Mark Roget and his Thesaurus, I started to forge what I visualized as a network of neural pathways between the part of my mind that contained Czech and the far more developed, deeply rooted part that contained English. That network, I believe, is the terrain where the real work of translation takes place.

I developed a rudimentary theory based on how I perceived my mind to be working: that in bilingual or multilingual people, each language occupies a separate area in the part of the brain responsible for language. A few years ago, something happened that appeared to confirm this. A colleague, Jaroslav Koran, who translated many of the works of Kurt Vonnegut Jr. into Czech, had a massive stroke that left him unable to speak his native language but still able to communicate quite handily in English. For me, it was a Eureka moment: there must have been a physical separation between the two languages in his brain, otherwise would not the stroke's electrical storm have disabled both? Fortunately, Jarda eventually got his Czech back, but, as far as I know, he doesn't translate any more. Perhaps the job of rebuilding those neural bridges between the two languages was more than he could face.

Recently, neurologists have attempted to crack the mystery of translation using brain imaging techniques, like PET (Positron Emission Tomography) or fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) to see what happens in brain areas where linguistic activity ('phonological, lexical, semantic aspects of language') is thought to take place. According to *Journal Watch Neurology*, published by the New England Journal of Medicine, scientists took six right-handed men, mostly in their thirties, who were fluent in both German and English and scanned their brains while they were reading or translating groups of words in both languages. Here's what they found:

Compared with reading, translation increased activation in anterior cingulate and bilateral basal ganglia structures, the left insula, the left cerebellum, and the supplementary motor area. Relative to reading, translation deactivated some areas previously associated with semantic decision tasks, including the medial superior frontal gyrus, the left middle temporal gyrus, the left posterior parietal region, and the posterior cingulate and precuneus.

So there, in the poetry of clinical language, is what some neurologists think happens in your brain when you translate. If I get their drift, the tendency of the brain to cough up the meaning of the source language is suppressed when you start looking for equivalents in another language, thus freeing your brain to focus on finding the right word.

Well, maybe. But absent the technical jargon, translation, when you engage in it, feels a lot more complicated than a series of 'semantic decision tasks'. When at work, literary translators exist in two worlds at the same time. These are not the classic dualisms like mind and matter, or body and soul, or of fact and fantasy, or dreams and reality, or even the subjective and the objective. The translator's dual world is a little like being on two sides of a mirror at the same time. If we think of language as a complex and powerful sensory organ, as a means of perception and a repository of experience, and not just as a collection of semantic units, then the translator's dual vision is of one world perceived through the instrument of two languages. The best translations bring these two views together in a single stereoscopic version, in which it is the slight differences, the blurry areas, the imperfections, that give the view its depth, its third dimension. It's what makes a good translation a work in its own right.

But there's a phenomenon I've noticed while translating that connects it with a far vaster mystery of the mind, that of memory. Suddenly, usually in moments of greatest mechanical concentration (in the middle of a 'semantic decision task' perhaps), my mind cuts loose from the material in front of me and releases a bubble of memory. It is always a memory from my time in Czechoslovakia and it

is always exceptionally vivid, almost like a brief, waking dream. I can usually see a person or a place or recall an incident with great clarity, often with vivid memories of tastes and smells to go along with it. Moreover, it is usually something I had completely forgotten, something I could not have voluntarily recalled. But it is always real, not a mere daydream or a fantasy, not an invention. And there is never, as far as I can tell, any direct or obvious connection between the memory evoked and the word or phrase I am struggling with. This, too, is part of the psychology of translation. Sometimes, on their way through your brain from one language to another, words can become like Proust's madeleine, astonishing you yet again with their ability to evoke entire worlds.

## Howard Goldblatt

*Howard Goldblatt has inhabited the often mystifying world of Chinese literary translation for more than 25 years, frequently in collaboration with his wife, Sylvia Li-Chun Lin. I recently worked with Howard on a collection of short stories – I as editor, he as translator – and was consistently impressed with his deft approach to the idiosyncrasies of Chinese writing; for instance the absence of personal pronouns, or the indifference between the singular and the plural. On this day, however, he was at times frustrated when pressed to explore these nuances. I had the distinct impression that, for Howard, talking about translating Chinese was just as complex and full of discrepancies as translating it.*

*His translations – more than 30 novels and short story collections to date – include seminal work by Mo Yan, Wang Anyi and the Taiwanese author Chu T'ien Wen. Last year, his translation of the novel Wolf Totem by Jiang Rong won the Man Asia Literary Prize. Howard splits his time between the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and Notre Dame University, where he is Director of the Centre for Asian Studies. He spoke to me on the telephone from his home in South Bend, Indiana.*

– Jakob von Baeyer

*Have you ever been stumped?*

You mean in the last fifteen minutes? Yes, it happens all the time. [laughs] I've just run into a problem in a Wang Anyi short

story, and I'll have to ask Sylvia. Allusions creep into Chinese literary texts all the time. Some of them are quite ancient. They have become modern terms, but they have an ancient grounding.

Let me step back a bit. Chinese is an even language. In Chinese it sounds best – to those of use who read and speak Chinese – if there is an even sound. So it's four characters, eight characters, sixteen characters. Oddness jars a bit. Of course when you're having regular conversation that doesn't count. But when you're writing – and this goes back to the earliest book of poetry – almost all of the Chinese sayings, these hoary and sometimes quite mystifying sayings, are in four character lumps. It sounds good because of the tones. In translation I try really hard to keep the rhythm going in English. But I almost always fail to take it very far because English has no preference for the evenness of sound. In Chinese it's the most common literary device.

I've run into a difficult passage in Wang Anyi's story where she is talking about a child. As the child grows it cries all the time. It could be scared of lightning or its mother's milk is inadequate. In the passage someone writes a message on little slips of paper and sticks them up on lamp-posts. I have no idea why they do that. It's a cultural thing and I'll have to find out somehow. And we have no idea who this person is because it's not given in the text. I translated the message as 'We have a cry baby in the house'. The next line is a four character phrase: 'Zhong shen zhu fu'. 'Zhong shen' is all the people', or 'all the human beings in the world'. 'Zhu fu': 'cry out for a benediction', or something like that. I understand the meaning, but I have no idea what it's doing there. I'm going to have to play with it for a while. I'm going to have to add some text. In Chinese it's compact, it's neat, and it sounds good when you read it to a Chinese person, yet in English, if I were to translate it literally as 'all humanity thinks a benediction' it would be utterly meaningless, and people would think I have completely lost my mind. These are the kinds of things that we run into that mystify. And they don't mystify because we don't understand the words, or how they work together. What we don't understand is how they work into the text. What are the links to what preceded

and what follows? It happens all the time, particularly when you have writers who are quite literate, like Wang Anyi.

*Internal rhythm in Chinese poetry and prose seems to exist on a micro scale, whereas English writers tend to focus on the rhythm of paragraphs and longer passages.*

I agree completely. Chinese focuses on the micro term, clause, sentence and seldom goes beyond that. You will probably notice that paragraphing is a 'sometimes' thing in Chinese. Punctuation is hit and miss. We [translators] clean that up, and usually editors will say: 'Should we have a paragraph break here?' Sure go ahead, it doesn't make any difference because the Chinese writer never considered it. And if I think there is intent I will go to the author and ask 'Is it okay that I do this because the editors wants it'. And sometimes they will say, 'No.' Mo Yan is a good example: 'I want a four page paragraph.'

Chinese love big books, they love long paragraphs, they love long sentences separated by commas that go on forever. Those are mechanical things that we do all the time, because the Chinese, as I say, don't care much. A comma means you've stopped. The niceties of colon versus semicolon just don't exist.

Some writers will put an exclamation point after every other sentence. I'll say: 'Do you know that's like putting capital letters in an email message? Do you want people to know you're shouting?' And they'll say, 'No'. It was like they found a new toy and really wanted to play with it, so they play with exclamation points. This sounds judgmental, like they've not yet risen to our level of quality, or nuance. I hope I don't come across like that. I don't mean it that way. It's just not important to a Chinese reader, and if it's not important to a Chinese reader, than it's perfectly acceptable to me. But I have to do something with it for an English reader. It's something Chinese translators need to do all the time. That's why I envy people who translate from languages closer to English, who have the same body of understanding of how a text works.

*Have any of your writers ever questioned your translation?*

Yes, sure. And it's almost always those who don't read English. So they get

friends who do. Let me give you an example: I translated a book called *Wolf Totem*. They brought me out to China. The Chinese publisher had bought the English language rights to my translation for sale in China only and they printed 50,000 copies, for crying out loud. And so I was there and I talked to people and signed hundreds of books. I was interviewing from eight in the morning to six at night. I was the most famous man in China for a about a day. All the newspapers had photographs. I was in the Forbidden City. It was just wonderful.

They were able to talk the author into having a public dialogue with me. I thought it was a great idea. I had met him before and we got along fine. So we were sitting there in front of about a hundred people, half to two thirds Chinese and a third Westerners. And my first question to him was: 'What do you like least about my translation of your book?' He reads English, but only with dictionary help. He can read words at a time. He said: 'Well, what I like least is on page one.' And I thought we were off to a bad start. He said that I translated a passage when an elder Mongol man turns to the protagonist and says, 'There's fear of wolves in your Chinese bones.' It is a direct translation of the Chinese, with one exception. The word for 'Chinese' he had down was '*Han yan*'. The '*Han*' are one of the five ethnic groups in China: The Hans, the Mongols, the Tibetans, the Uighurs, the Manchus. And he said, 'The Mongols are Chinese, too.' And I said, 'Yes, in a geopolitical sense they're all in China, but they're not Chinese.' He said, 'Of course they're Chinese.' And I said, 'No, in the West if I said "Han" most readers would not have a clue what I was talking about.' I could have tried to [foot]note it, but that's something I don't like to do. I said, 'If we talk about Chinese, we immediately sense that ethnic Chinese and Mongols would be different.' He couldn't accept that. So we put it up to a straw poll and all the Chinese agreed with him and all the Westerners agreed with me; that Chinese in this case meant Han. And I said, 'You write for Chinese, I translate for Westerners.'

There was another case he disliked. He has an opening to a paragraph when they're trying to take a wolf cub to a new pasture and he doesn't want to go. He's

digging in with his paws, they're getting bloody and the cub absolutely refuses to leave. The opening line is something in the order of, literally, 'You can pull a tiger, you can pull a lion, you can pull a bear, but you cannot pull a wolf.' That's the literal translation. I said that doesn't work. So I translated it: 'You can tame a lion, you can tame a tiger, you can tame a bear, but you can't tame a wolf.' That's exactly right in my view. But he said the word tame is too tame. One of the Chinese stood up and said, 'What about the word tug?' And I said this is not an improvement. Again, the Chinese tended to agree with him. But with this one I tended to do a little better. I said: That's exactly what

you're really saying. Literally, you cannot pull a lion, you cannot pull a bear. If you tried they'd kill you. In Chinese this has metaphorical value that it doesn't have in English, and it requires another term.

*It seems to me there's a lot of logic involved in the decision making.*

You have to understand what he's saying. You're right. In this case if I had translated literally it would have been a really bad translation because no English reader would have appreciated the idea. 'You can take a rope and pull a lion, and you can pull . . .' And they're thinking give me a break, this is like a traveling circus. But taming is something altogether dif-

ferent. You can tame lions and bears and tigers. People do it all the time. But a wolf is untamable. I thought the word tame was anything but tame. I thought it was a pretty powerful image. He kind of bought into that one. But he wanted to hold back on absolute approval. There was another one, but I don't remember it. So as it turned out there were three things in a 500-page book that he didn't like.

Later, a couple of the young women who came down from a Beijing translation institute as simultaneous interpreters knocked on my door, and came in and said, 'We think you're right. We just couldn't say it.' I said, 'Thank you, but he's right too.' He's right to a degree. ◇

FICTION

## Night Song

James Attlee

THANK YOU very much for inviting me to come and speak to the Anglo-Spanish Friendship Society. It is a great pleasure to visit your city. It was clever of your Secretary to have found out about my early, short-lived career as a translator from the Spanish. The internet is a wonderful thing. [Laughter]. When I received his invitation, I thought that, as I would be visiting the area in any case, it would perhaps not be too presumptuous to come and share a few words with you about a writer who particularly interested me at one time for reasons that today I am not entirely sure of. As happens so often with what we read, it is hard, now, to disentangle the sound of his voice from the clamour of my own life, or to separate his observations and experiences from my own. In any case, I sat down a week or so ago and wrote down my recollections of the on-off relationship I had with his work, over a period of years, and this is what, with your permission, I will read to you. It is a minor story, but I hope it may be of some interest.

I remember clearly when I first heard of the Argentinean writer Alberto Fusi. It was during the brief period when I was officially a student – unofficially,

of course, I have remained one ever since – during which, I must confess, I spent more time studying people than books. It is not surprising, therefore, that I found myself one afternoon in a basement drinking-club in London, in the company of a small, bearded Chilean poet and his beautiful, if largely silent, female companion. My own girlfriend must also have been at the table, along with a number of other fellow travellers; to her exasperation, I would have been ignoring her, absorbed by the latest in a connected string of chance encounters that was taking up much of my time and leaving little opportunity for progress in either the academic or emotional fields. The poet's friend was Mexican; she was working as a showgirl, as I recall, something entirely different to an exotic dancer (the poet was clear on this point) and we had arranged to meet up with her during a break between performances. She had pulled on a baggy sweatshirt over her costume. On the velvet plush of the banquette on which she sat lay her headdress, a kind of diadem or crown decorated with long, dyed feathers, an object of fascination for the Chilean, who stared at it continually. 'Put it on,' he kept whispering to

her urgently, leaning towards her across the table, 'put it on', but she ignored him, her eyes for the most part downcast, her face expressionless, a silent yet powerful presence among us. So absorbed were they by their relationship, which to the outsider appeared to manifest itself as a kind of ritualised struggle, that they acted as though they were completely alone. Eventually he wore her out. With a small sigh, she picked up the headdress and placed it on her head, raising her eyes to meet his without a word. She was transformed in a moment into a Meso-American goddess, timeless, proud, impassive, the kind of deity you might meet in the dim light of a museum half a world away from its rightful kingdom, carried there by a party of long-since vanished ethnographers. They sat there, the poet and the dancer, staring at each other. The talk around the table died away. We were all watching the Chilean when he leant forward again and said, very clearly and with savage intensity, his eyes locked on hers, '*I dream about you during the day.*' And she lowered her eyes again and smiled slightly and glanced at her watch and soon she was gone, walking up the steps toward the exit with her headdress stuffed into a plastic bag.

The Chilean began drinking then and I asked him, to make conversation, what he thought of Pablo Neruda. I knew little about Chilean culture but I had acquired a second-hand copy of Neruda's *Memoirs* and had read some of his love lyrics and the poetry he wrote about the Spanish

Civil War. I know that some people find his autobiographical writings a little irritating, the work of a self-mythologizer, but they didn't seem that way to me. I was nineteen years old! Here was a poet who was both intensely serious about his art and politically active; who spent considerable time on the run from repressive governments; and who was literally taken to the heart of his readership, which on occasion both hid and fed him. There was one incident that particularly moved me. He arrived at the mouth of some salt mines in the inhospitable far south of Chile, at the end of a shift. As he tells it, when the men coming out of the mouth of the mine saw him there they began reciting his verses spontaneously – they knew them by heart. In my country this was the kind of reaction a rock star might get on the street, or a comedian with a popular TV show, but a poet? Impossible. Of course I realize now that, for a certain kind of Chilean (most particularly an unknown poet), being asked questions about Neruda was probably rather insulting. He was the only Chilean writer much known beyond the country's borders at the time, the sole example of its literary culture the world had deigned to notice. Far from ingratiating myself I had merely revealed my own gaucheness and lack of knowledge. 'Ffffft,' was the reply the poet gave to my question, pursing his red lips comically in the middle of his beard, which was impressively bushy and Castro-esque. 'Neruda was a good man, but really, as a writer, a bag of hot air. If you want to read Latin American poetry you should read the Argentinian, Alberto Fusi.' And with that he proceeded to ignore me. I nodded dutifully and wrote down the name in my pocketbook, where it remained, presumably, until the book went missing on a 24-hour expedition into another part of the city, the way most of my disposable possessions did at the time. I never saw the Chilean again, or his girlfriend. (Or was she his girlfriend? Perhaps he was merely wooing her in his own peculiar way and she belonged to someone else; this would explain the electric current that crackled between them through what passed for air on that long, subterranean afternoon). But clearly, I did not completely forget Fusi's name. The next time I came across it, with a small *frisson* of recognition at

the connection to a long-lost and now near-mythological time, was in an article in a literary magazine that compared extracts from poets' journals with their published poems. The quotes from both Fusi's journal and his poetry concerned the moon. I wrote them down and this time didn't lose them. The journal entry comes first.

June 10 1934

*The sky tonight, the moon glimpsed amid boiling clouds, reminds me of something.*

*What is it – oh yes, washing a fountain pen in the sink, the way the blue-black ink coils as it spreads through the water, obscuring the white porcelain.*

Then came two very short poems:

ON A CLOUDY NIGHT

On a cloudy night  
The moon is a silver coin passed across  
a table –  
Visible for a moment  
Then made to vanish by a gambler's  
sleight of hand

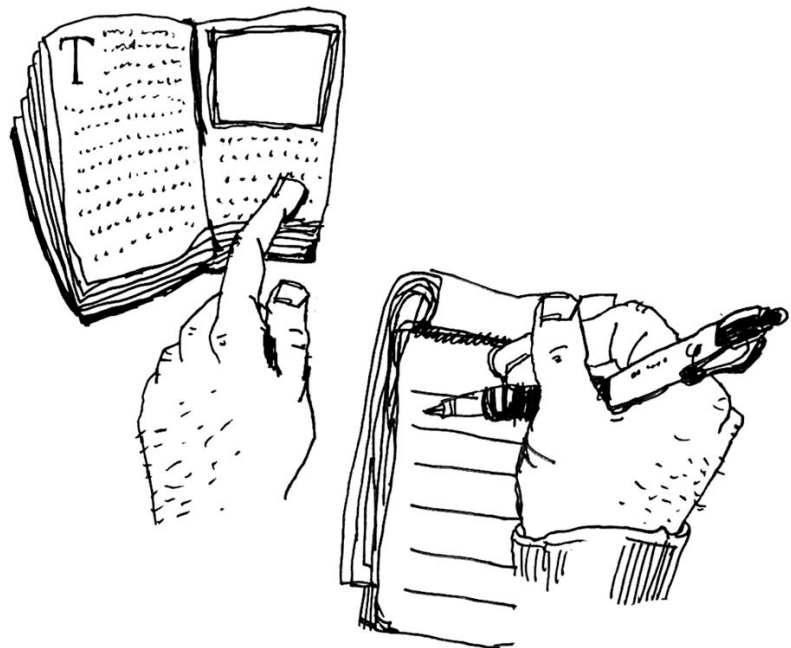
FULL MOON

God and the devil agreed to spin a coin  
for the soul of man.

The devil span the coin high into the air  
So far it has not come down

As these were translations there was no telling what I was missing by not reading them in the original Spanish; somehow I suspected that translation itself, a process that can add an echoey distance to a writer's voice, as if it is being heard over an old radio, rather suited this understated Argentinian. The biographical note at the foot of the article was brief. 'The Italian-born, Argentinian poet Alberto Fusi published one book of poetry and a collection of essays in Argentina in the 1930s. His poetry was almost exclusively about the moon. He worked as a union organizer in a cigarette factory and disappeared shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War.'

I was at the earliest stages of researching a book with a lunar theme at the time and so I put my notes about Fusi into a box file with various other scraps of paper, newspaper cuttings and postcard reproductions of moonlight scenes, awaiting some future moment when I would have time to deal with them. Once again Fusi settled to the bottom of my consciousness, like sediment in a pond. Two more years passed in the way years



do, a mixture of work, love, frustration and writing; of missed opportunities and, thankfully, some small achievements. When the time came to open up the box file and try to animate its contents, like a scientist looking for the right combination of elements to initiate a reaction, it seemed as though Fusi had risen to the top; only by finding out more about this marginal figure, whom no one now seemed to remember, could I breathe life into my own researches. I had long ago abandoned the odyssey I had been engaged on through the city, but I still paid attention to chance encounters. At a party at the house of some friends, who had taken to renting out their attic room to foreign students to help pay the bills, I met their lodger, a young literature student from Buenos Aires named Angelina. She had arrived in the country a few weeks previously. Her English was not good and she had retreated to the kitchen on the pretence of getting some more trays of food but really, I think, to escape the torture of having to field the questions of the other guests. I was there for the same reason. Fortunately I had drunk enough wine to feel unembarrassed about the quality of my own Spanish, which was rudimentary. She ignored my stumblings, out of a sense of relief, I suspect, at being able to abandon her English for a few minutes. She made no attempt to speak slowly for me, but revelled in the linguistic extravagances of her own tongue, at the same time eating voraciously and seemingly at random from the plates of food spread on the table. We spoke of her studies and of Argentinian writers she admired, including Puig and Borges. She was a keen advocate for the literature of her country and clearly talented in her own right. I hoped my fascination was not too apparent.

‘Perhaps you know the poetry of Alberto Fusi?’ I asked, rather proud to have the name, which had risen unbidden from the unreliable databank of my memory, at the tip of my tongue. ‘I read some of his work some years ago, but haven’t come across it since: I don’t think he is much translated.’

She paused with a canapé halfway to her mouth and gave me a quizzical look.

‘Fusi? Oh, I am afraid he is not much in fashion now. Perhaps he is still read by some older people, I don’t know.’

The face of the Chilean poet came back to me suddenly, with his pursed, disdainful lips. Had he been mocking me when he recommended I sought out the work of this obscure and minor figure? Had he detected, perhaps, with the heightened sensitivity of the lover, my interest in his Mexican companion? (I had visited, later that evening, the stage door of the theatre where she was performing, but had not gained admittance.) At that moment someone entered the kitchen through a door behind me and Angelina’s face changed completely and in an instant, as if a light had been switched on; in an equivalent passage of time I neatly folded and put away any hopes I had begun to entertain of getting to know her better. She ran across the room to the figure in the doorway, a young man in a faded red t-shirt with a large bag at his feet, and wrapped herself around him. They cooed to each other in Spanish and rubbed cheeks, like doves. Remembering my presence, he shared some of his smile with me over the tangle of her hair spread across his chest and I raised my glass to him in salute.

That should have been the end of my interest in Latin-American literature. Two enigmatic and unobtainable women and two unambiguous put-downs in response to my enquiries should have been enough for anyone. A couple of weeks later I agreed to meet up for a beer after work with the friend who had given the party; he rang to say he had something that had arrived for me. As I sometimes used his house as my postal address when I was between flats, I expected a handful of unpaid bills and a selection of glossy brochures, trying to sell me credit cards or foreign holidays. When we sat down he rummaged in his bag and pulled out a travel-worn jiffy-bag with my name on it. ‘Angelina sent this for you from Argentina,’ he said. ‘You must have made an impression.’ He leered momentarily (and unattractively, I thought) then became gloomy. ‘She turned out to be a real pain in the ass. She left, a couple of days after the party; her boyfriend came with a ticket and took her home. I think she was unhappy. We’re in a right mess; we still haven’t rented the room.’ He lapsed into silence and began biting the nails of his right hand with ferocity. I didn’t wish to hear about

his financial troubles, which depressed me for being so much less serious than my own, and turned my attention to the package. Inside was a tattered paperback, an anthology of twentieth century Argentinian poetry published in the 1960s, together with a note, written in English.

Dear—, it read. I enjoyed our conversation at Mike and Michele’s party. You were the only Englishman I spoke to in the three and a half weeks I spent in your country – apart from my tutor, who was very old, like a tortoise, and spent most of his time sleeping – who was interested in literature and didn’t spend all the time staring at my breasts. I found some Fusi for you – in Spanish! You can translate it, it will be good practice for you. Your Spanish is really terrible! But he is not such a great poet, I think, and so you will not be hurting literature too much. (By the way, for Argentinian girls he is not a very good chat-up line.) Come and visit us in Buenos Aires if you like. Your friend, Angelina.

It was a good letter and it made me laugh. It didn’t put me off Fusi. I did work on translating the half-dozen poems I found inside the book and a few others I tracked down subsequently, and he helped improve my Spanish, although the vocabulary I learned was probably rather unsuited for everyday conversation. I enjoyed the way he combined surreal or romantic imagery with elements of folklore and vignettes of everyday life in a modern city. In bringing my story to a close, I offer only one of my efforts, a translation of a poem by Fusi called *Night Song*, that epitomises something of this mood.

#### NIGHT SONG

As I stood at the window  
I heard a woman at the street corner  
singing to the moon,  
Her voice liquid as a bird’s

Come down Oh Moon, she called,  
Come down, my breast aches for you

I lay down on my bed  
Trying to take comfort from the cool  
white sheets  
Her voice filled my mind like smoke

Somewhere a dog barked  
Joining the chorus  
Until a man threw a boot at its head  
With an angry curse                   ◇



# The Agony Uncle

*Alain de Botton will sort you out*

*Because of my work, I have recently been forced to move from a small and beautiful village in the Lake District to the centre of Glasgow. Ever since I was a child, I have had a deep hatred of city life – I can find in it none of the beauty that I can see in the countryside. I can't understand why some people say they love big cities like London, Paris, New York. Do you have any suggestions on how one might learn to be happy in a city?*

For people who think of city streets as nightmarish environments of noise and litter (and for whom happiness is a hut in the hills), Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) may be the perfect guide to a particular charm one can find in urban life.

In his prose and poetry of the 1850s and 60s, Baudelaire described walking down city streets as one of the most exciting adventures open to mankind, far more dramatic than any play, far richer in ideas than any book. And he settled on a word to capture the attitude he felt one should adopt when walking along the streets. One should become, he suggested, a *flâneur*, translated literally as a stroller or saunterer, though Baudelarians normally keep it in the original.

So what do *flâneurs* do that ordinary people on their way to work usually wouldn't? Perhaps the defining characteristic of these *flâneurs* is that they don't have any practical goals in mind. They aren't walking to get something, or to go somewhere, they aren't even shopping (which is as near as most of us get to this Baudelarian ideal). *Flâneurs* are standing in deliberate opposition to capitalist society, with its two great imperatives: to be in a hurry and to buy things (as a protest against the former, there was, in Paris, a brief vogue for *flâneurs* to amble around town with turtles on leashes).

What the *flâneurs* are doing is looking. They are wondering about the lives of those they pass, constructing narratives for them; they are eavesdropping on conversations; they are studying how people dress and what new shops and products there are (not in order to buy anything – just in order to reflect on them as important pieces of evidence of what human

beings are about). The *flâneurs* are avid enthusiasts of what Baudelaire called 'the modern'. Unlike so many of Baudelaire's highbrow contemporaries, *flâneurs* aren't just interested in the beauty of classical objects of art, they relish what is up to date, they love the trendy.

It's a paradox of cities that, though they bring together huge numbers of people in small spaces, they also separate them from each other. So it's the goal of *flâneurs* to recover a sense of community, as Baudelaire put it, 'to be away from home and yet to feel everywhere at home.' To do this, *flâneurs* let down their guard, they empathize with situations they see, there's a permanent risk they will be moved, saddened, excited – and fall in love. Baudelaire's poem 'À une Passante' in *Les Fleurs du Mal* is one of the finest poems on the mini-crushes one can, as a *flâneur*, develop on city streets. A man walks past a beautiful woman in a crowded thoroughfare. He sees her for only a few seconds, she smiles at him and he is filled with longing and a sense of what might have been. The poem ends with the sigh 'Ô toi que j'eusse aimée' ('You whom I might have loved').

Crucial advice on how to become a *flâneur* and enjoy Glasgow: 1. Read Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris* and his art criticism. 2. Buy a turtle.

*I love reading fashion and glamour magazines. Every month, I buy all the big glossy ones and often read them in the bath and on my travels. I love seeing pictures of elegant clothes and beautiful locations. Nevertheless, all this expensive beauty also leaves me feeling a bit sad. Why can't my life be more like that! Why can't I glossify my life? Do you ever feel this? What can I do about this feeling?*

It's easy to feel a little depressed after reading most lifestyle sections of newspapers and magazines. Despite their finest intentions, they often unwittingly leave us with a vague sense that our own lives are rather lacking in glamour and interest when compared with the kind of scenarios we've read about. They feature houses infinitely more

stylish than ours, they interview people who are far wealthier than we are and who seem constantly to fall in love in thrilling ways, or have a lovely time making films, or else look grave and important jumping out of ministerial jets. The contrast with more ordinary lives can be painful.

The Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer (1632–75) seemed to understand only too well how depressing it is to be surrounded only by beautiful images of fancy interiors and exotic people doing dramatic things, which is perhaps why he spent most of his short life painting incredibly simple everyday scenes, the kind we all know from our own lives, but which rarely feature in works of art, let alone in glossy magazines. In one canvas, a woman is sitting by an open window reading a letter, in another, a woman is sleeping in her kitchen at a table beside a bowl of fruit.

It's all incredibly simple, and at the same time completely beguiling. We might explain the beauty of Vermeer's work by saying that there was probably something unusually pretty about Holland in the seventeenth century and about the kind of women he was painting. We might claim that the *View of Delft* was attractive principally because Dutch towns were much more picturesque than they are now because there were no electricity pylons or skyscrapers with rotating signs saying 'Mercedes' or 'Holiday Inn'.

But that would be to miss out on Vermeer's whole message. It's true that Delft probably was a bit prettier than London or the Hague are today, and that Vermeer's women (for example, his lovely *Girl with a Pearl Earring*) wouldn't have difficulty finding a date. However, what ultimately makes his paintings so special is not what they feature, but how they are painted. There was nothing remarkable about the famous milkmaid pouring milk; there was something remarkable about the way Vermeer looked at her. He knew how to find beauty in places we don't even look – because we are snobbishly trained to expect interest only in the lives of film stars and grave-looking politicians.

Vermeer's excellent idea was to remind us – through the example of some everyday scenes in Delft – that there may be profound beauty, interest, even glamour, in the most everyday scenes, in cleaning the patio and pouring a bowl of milk for breakfast. ♦

# Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya

## The pet names

*They were linked to the great cultural figures of the time but wrapped tightly in each other. Their relationship was tempestuous and unlikely, ending in a European divorce before being given life again on a new continent while everything their collaborations embodied in Weimar Germany burnt away. He was bald, bespectacled and could spend all day composing alone in a room, while she felt most alive after stepping on to the stage. Because of his travels, many of Lotte Lenya's letters were lost on the road to Amsterdam or Paris or New York. Lenya stashed Kurt Weill's responses and they survive to show the composer's grand passions, his petty complaints and, even better, the joy that came with the convergence of his music and her voice. 'For me all of you is contained within this sound; everything else is only a part of you; and when I envelop myself in your voice, then you are with me in every way.'*

*Their collected letters brim with declarations, gossip and insights into the lives of their contemporaries, but as a composer states his intent by choosing a key, their relationship was made unique by its own private language – the key of Weill and Lenya. The collection of letters gathered by Lys Symonette and Kim H. Kowalke, published under the title *Speak Low* (When You Speak Love), contains an appendix listing Weill and Lenya's pet names and signatures. All the themes of their life together are here in miniature. Over the years, through the tumult and the affairs, Weill and Lenya loved each other in a broad and complicated way, which is perhaps why 'little baldy' and 'little ass', and 'famous one' and 'dung blossom', can all be found below.*

### WEILL'S SIGNATURES

- Affenschwanz: 'monkey tail'
- Äppelheim
- Bibi
- Bibiboy
- Birühmti: 'famous one'
- Boy
- Bubü
- Buster
- Dany

- Didi
- Freunchen: 'little friend'
- Frosch: 'frog'; Froschi: 'little frog'
- Glätzchen: 'little baldy'
- Hubby
- Jésus; Jésus-Bub: 'Jesus-Boy'
- K---
- Knudchen, Knut, Knutchen, Knütchen, Knute, Knuti, Knuuuuti, Knut Garbo, Knut Gustavson
- Kurt, Kurti, Kurt Julian, Kurtio Weillissimo
- Mordspison: 'big shot'
- Pünktchen: 'little dot'
- Schnub, Schnüb, Schnübchen, Schnube, Schnüberich, Schnubi, Schnubinchen,
- Schnutz
- Träubchen, Trräübchen: 'little grape'
- Trrr, Trrrrr, Trrrrrr
- Weili, Weilili, Weillchen, Weilli, Weillili, Weilli-Knut
- Zappelfritz: 'fidget'
- LENYA'S PET NAMES FOR WEILL
- Bitrübelchen: 'little woebegone one'
- Bläumchen, Blumchen, Blümchen, Blumi: 'little flower'
- Boy, Boyly
- Darling, Darling-Tröpfli
- Döfchen: 'little dummy'
- Fröschlein: 'little frog'
- Glätzchen: 'little baldy'
- Herr Johann Strauss-Weill
- Hollywoodpflanze
- Honey, honeyboy, honneychild; honneybär: 'honey bear'
- Knutchen, Knuti
- Kurtchen, Kürtchen, Kurti, Kurtili,
- Pflänzchen: 'naughty boy'
- Pfläumchen: 'little plum'

- Pi: 'pal'
- Schäpschen: 'little schnapps'
- Schnäubchen, Schnäubi, Schnäubschen
- Schnäützchen: 'little snout'
- Schnubchen, Schnübchen, Schnubschen
- Schnube, Schnübi, Sch-sch-sch-sch-nubi
- Schwänzchen: 'little tail'
- Schweenchen: 'little piggy'
- Sir Weill
- Sugar
- Sonnenblume: 'sunflower'
- Träubchen, Trräübchen, Traubi, Träubi, Träuby, Trrrrröubi: 'little grape'
- Tröpfchen, Tröööpfchen, Tröööööpfchen, Tröpfi, Tropfi: 'droplet'
- Trrrrr
- Weilchen, Weili, Weilili, Weillchen, Weilli

### LENYA'S SIGNATURES

- Blümchen, Blumchen, Blumi: 'little flower'
- Blüte: 'blossom'
- Carolinchen, Caroline
- Jenny Lind Lenya
- Karoline, Karoline Weill
- Kleene, Kleenchen: 'kiddo', dialect for 'little one'
- Kneubchen Träubchen Schleubchen Läubchen
- Lady Weill
- Linderl, Linerl, Linnerl
- Lollie
- Lottie
- Madame Weill
- Missi
- Nibbi
- Pips
- Plänzchen
- Schnüb, Schnübe, Schnubi
- Träubi: 'little grape'
- Tülpchen: 'little tulip'
- Weib, Weibi: 'wife'

- Wilhelmine
- Zippi: ‘little tip’
- Zybe

WEILL’S PET NAMES FOR LENYA

- Ameisenblume, Ameisenpflanze: literally, ‘ant flower/ant plant’, but probably better ‘flower of the Ameisegasse’ (Lenya’s address in Vienna)
- Betrübchen: ‘little sad one’
- Bibi-Schwänzchen
- Blümchen, Blumchen, Blümelein, Blumi, Blümi, Blumlein, Blümlein, Blümlein: ‘little flower’
- Blume: ‘flower’
- Blumenblümchen: ‘little flower of flowers’
- Blumenpflänzchen, Blumenpflanze: ‘flowering plant’
- Bubili: ‘little boy’
- Darling, Darling honey, Darling-honey, Darling sweet; me/my darling Caroline
- Delicious
- Diden, Diderle, Didilein
- Doofi, Dooooofi: ‘little dummy’
- Duchie
- Girly
- Honey-chil’, Honey chile’
- Kleene: ‘kiddo’, dialect for ‘little one’
- Lenja-Benja
- Lenscherl
- Liebchen
- Liebili: ‘dear little one’
- Lila Schweinderl, Lila Schweindi: ‘little purple pig’
- Lilipe Lencha: ‘dear Lenya’, in Saxonian pronunciation
- Linderl, Linerl, Linerle, Linnerl, Liiiiinerl
- Linercherl sweetheart, Linnerl-Weibi, Linntchkerl, Linntschkerl, Linutschkerl, Linschkerl, Linscherl
- Littichen
- Lottchen
- Mistblume: ‘dung blossom’
- Mistfink: ‘dung bird’

- Muschelchen, Muschi: ‘little mussel’
- Negerkindl: ‘pickaninny’
- Pflänzchen, Pflanze: ‘fresh, sassy urban girl’, ‘city chick’, in Berlin dialect
- Pilouchen: ‘little flanelette’
- Pison, Pisönchen: ‘little person’, ‘buddy’, ‘pal’
- Pfläumchen: ‘little plum’
- Pummilein: ‘little plump one’
- Rehbeinchen: ‘little deer leg’
- Roadscheinchen: ‘little road hog’
- Rosenblümchen: ‘little rose blossom’
- Schätzchen, Schätzli, Schätzlein: ‘little treasure’
- Schmöckchen
- Schnäpschen, Schnapspison: ‘little schnapps’, ‘schnapps person’
- Schnäubchen, Schnäubi, Schneubi
- Schnäuben-Träubchen
- Schnäützchen, Schnäuzchen: ‘little snout’
- Schnübchen, Schnube, Schnübe, Schnübelein, Schnubelinchen
- Schnubenblümchen, Schnübenblümchen
- Schwämmi: ‘little mushroom’
- Schwänzchen: ‘little tail’
- Seelchen: ‘little soul’
- Spätzlein: ‘little sparrow’
- Süsse: ‘sweet’
- Sweetie
- Sweetie-pie, Sweety-pie, Sweety-honey-pie, Sweety-honey-sugar-pie
- Toby Engel, Tobili
- Träubchen, Trrräubchen, Trrrräubchen, Trrrrräubchen, Träube, Träubi, Trräubi, Trrräubi, Trrrräubi, Trrrräubi, Träubili, Träubilein: ‘little grape’
- Träubchenpison, Träubchen-Pisonchen, Träuben-Schätzchen, Träuben-Spatz, Träubenspatz, Träubenträubchen, Träubentröpfchen
- Tröpfli, Tröpflein, Trröpfchen: ‘little droplet’
- Trrrrr
- Tütchen, Tüti, Tütlein: ‘little paper bag’; also, a playful colloquial term for someone slow to understand

- Tüti-Pison
- Weillchen: ‘little Weill’
- Weilliwüppchen: ‘little Weill woman’
- Wüllichen, Wülili
- Zibelineerl, Zibelyne, Zybeline, Zybelineerl, Zybelineerl, Zyberlinerl
- Zippi: ‘little tip’

PRIVATE EXPRESSIONS IN DIALECT OR INVENTED LANGUAGE

- Affenschwanz: ‘monkey tail’
- auf Wiedili, auf Wiiiiidisehn, Wiedi, Wiedisehn, Widisehn: ‘bye-bye’
- beese (Berlin dialect): ‘angry’
- Berühmti, Birühmti: ‘famous one’
- Bobo: ‘fanny’
- büsschen, Bussi: ‘little kiss’
- Feinlebe, finelebe: ‘the good life’, ‘living it up’
- Gi, Gazette: ‘newspaper’, ‘tabloid’
- gilant, gillant: ‘elegant’
- G’schamster, Gschamster: ‘kowtowing minion’
- ich küsse ihre Hand: ‘I kiss your hand’
- Klugi: ‘smarty’
- Knüschen, Knüüschen. Kn ö ö ö ö ö ö schens: ‘little kisses’
- Lebe: ‘farewell’
- niedelich: ‘cute’, ‘nice’
- paperchen: ‘little newspaper’
- Pison, Pi: ‘person’, ‘pal’
- Poo’chen: ‘little fanny’; Popo: ‘fanny’
- primi: ‘first rate’
- Sächelchen: ‘trifles’, ‘small items’
- schliepeln, schlippeln: ‘to sleep’, ‘to snooze’, ‘to go beddy-byes’
- schnecki: ‘sluggish’
- Schneckidibong, Schniekedibong
- schneepeln, schniepeln, sneepeln *see* schliepeln
- Schniepelpison: ‘sleepyhead’
- Schweinerei: ‘mess’
- Warschi, Arschi: ‘little ass’
- Zippi: ‘little tip’

# The Interrogation

*Looking back to 1964 with J.M.G. Le Clézio*

*Last October, a few weeks before J.M.G. Le Clézio was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, the New Yorker printed one of his short stories entitled 'The Boy Who Had Never Seen The Sea', which followed this particular boy until he did. Le Clézio's debut novel, published forty-four years before, also features a young man who goes to live alone near the sea. The short story is elegaic while The Interrogation is blunt and confrontational, and its protagonist, Adam Pollo, is less interested in the life-giving properties of the ocean and more worried about the shifting nature of his own identity. He's a brutal, troubled man and Le Clézio brings him to life in a swirl of body odour and cigarette smoke. Why is he on the coast? Has Pollo deserted the army or just been let out of an insane asylum, and, more importantly, will he be able to hold onto his mind? The question is especially pertinent in the following passage, where Pollo meets the other resident of his temporary accommodation in an abandoned seaside villa.*

IT WAS A FINE, muscular rat, standing on its four pink paws at the far end of the room and staring at him insolently. When Adam caught sight of it he lost his temper at once; he tried to hit the rat with a billiard ball, meaning to kill it or at least to hurt it badly; but he missed it. He tried again several times. The rat didn't seem to be frightened. It looked Adam straight in the eye, its pallid head stretched forward, its brow furrowed. When Adam threw his ivory ball the rat sprang to one side, with a kind of plaintive squeak. When he had thrown all the balls, Adam squatted down



on his heels, so as to be more or less level with the beast's eyes. He reflected that it must be living in the house, like himself, though perhaps it hadn't been there so long. It must come out at night from a hole in some piece of furniture, and trot upstairs and downstairs, hunting for food.

Adam did not know exactly what rats ate; he couldn't remember whether they were carnivorous or not. If it was true what the dictionaries said: 'Rats: s. Species of small mammiferous rodent with a long annulated tail.'

He could not remember the two or three legends related to the subject of rats, in connection with sinking ships, sacks of corn and plague. To tell the truth he had not even realized until today that there were such things as white rats.

Adam stared at this one, listened hard; and discovered in the rat something akin to himself. He reflected that he too might have gone to ground in the daytime between two worm-eaten boards and roamed about at night, searching for crumbs between the floor-boards and being lucky enough now and again, in some recess in a cellar, to come across a litter of white cockroaches that would have made a fine treat for him.

The rat still stood motionless, its blue eyes fixed on him; there were rolls of fat, or of muscle, round its neck. In view of its size, which was slightly above average, and of the above-mentioned rolls of flabby muscle, it must be a rat of advanced age. Adam didn't know how long a rat lives, either, but he would have easily put this one at eighty years old. Perhaps it was already half dead, half blind, and past realizing that Adam wished it ill.

Slowly, quietly, imperceptibly, Adam forgot that he was Adam, that he had heaps of things of his own downstairs, in the sunny room; heaps of deck-chairs, newspaper, all sorts of scribbles, and blankets that smelt of him, and scraps of paper on which he had written 'My dear Michèle' as though beginning a letter. Beer bottles with their necks broken, and a sort of tea-rose that was spreading the ramifica-

tions of its hot-flower perfume, minute by minute, between four walls. The yellow scent of a yellow rose in the yellow room.

Adam was turning into a white rat, but by a strange kind of metamorphosis; he still kept his own body, his hands and feet did not turn pink nor his front teeth lengthen into fangs; no, fingers still smelt of tobacco and his armpits of sweat, and his back was still bent forward in a crouching position, close to the floor, regulated by the S-shaped bend in his spine.

But he was turning into a white rat because he was thinking of himself as one; because all of a sudden he had formed an idea of the danger that the human race represented for this breed of small, myopic, delicate animal. He knew that he could squeak, run, gnaw, stare with his two little round, blue, brave, lidless eyes; but it would all be in vain. A man like himself would always be sufficient; he need only resolve to take a few steps forward and lift his foot a few inches, and the rat would be killed, crushed, its ribs broken, its oblong head lolling on the floor-boards in a tiny pool of mucus and lymph.

And suddenly he stood up; he had turned into fear itself, been transformed into danger-for-white-rats; his head was full now, of something that was no longer anger or disgust or any form of cruelty, but a kind of obligation to kill.

He decided to set about it rationally. First of all he shut the doors and windows so that the creature should not run away. Then he went and picked up the billiard balls; as he came closer the rat drew back a little, pricking its short ears. Adam laid the balls on the billiard table and began to talk to the rat in a low voice, making strange, hoarse, throaty sounds.

'You're afraid of me, eh, white rat?' he muttered. 'You're afraid. You're trying to behave as though you weren't afraid... With those round eyes of yours... Are you looking at me? I admit you're a brave chap, white rat. But you know what's ahead of you. They all know, all the members of your species. The other white rats. And the grey ones and the black ones. You've been waiting a long time for what I'm going to do to you. White rat, the world is no place for you. You're doubly disqualified for living: in the first place you're a rat in a man's world, among men's houses and traps and

guns and rat-poison. And in the second place you're a white rat in a country where rats are generally black. So you're absurd, and that's an extra reason . . .'

He counted the balls; there was one missing. It must have rolled under the cupboard. Adam scraped about with the bamboo stick and brought out the sphere of ivory. It was a red one, and cold, and held in the palm of the hand it felt bigger than the others. And consequently more lethal.

When everything was ready, Adam took up his stance beside the billiard table, resolute; all at once he felt himself becoming a giant, a very tall fellow, ten feet or thereabouts, bursting with life and strength. At a little distance against the back wall, close beside the square of pale light falling from the window, the animal stood, planted on its four pink paws, displaying great patience.

'Dirty rat,' said Adam.

'Dirty rat!'

And he threw the first ball, with all his strength behind it. It crashed against the top of the skirting-board, an inch or two to the left of the animal, with a noise like thunder. A split second later the white rat squealed and leapt aside.

'You see!' exclaimed Adam triumphantly. 'I'm going to kill you! You're too old, you don't react any more, you beastly white rat! I'm going to kill you!'

And then he let himself go. He threw five or six balls one after the other; some of them broke against the wall, others bounced on the floor and rolled back to his feet. One of the balls, as it broke, fired a splinter at the rat's head, just behind the left ear, and drew blood. The rodent began to run along by the wall, with a kind of whistling draught emerging from its mouth. It rushed towards the cupboard, to hide there, and in its haste bumped its nose against the corner of the piece of furniture. With a yelp it vanished into the hiding-place.

Adam was beside himself at this.

'Come out of there, you filthy brute! Filthy rat! Rat! Filthy rat! Come out of there!'

He sent a few billiard balls under the cupboard, but the white rat didn't budge. So he shuffled across on his knees and poked his bamboo stick about in the darkness. It hit something soft, close to the wall. Finally the rat emerged and ran

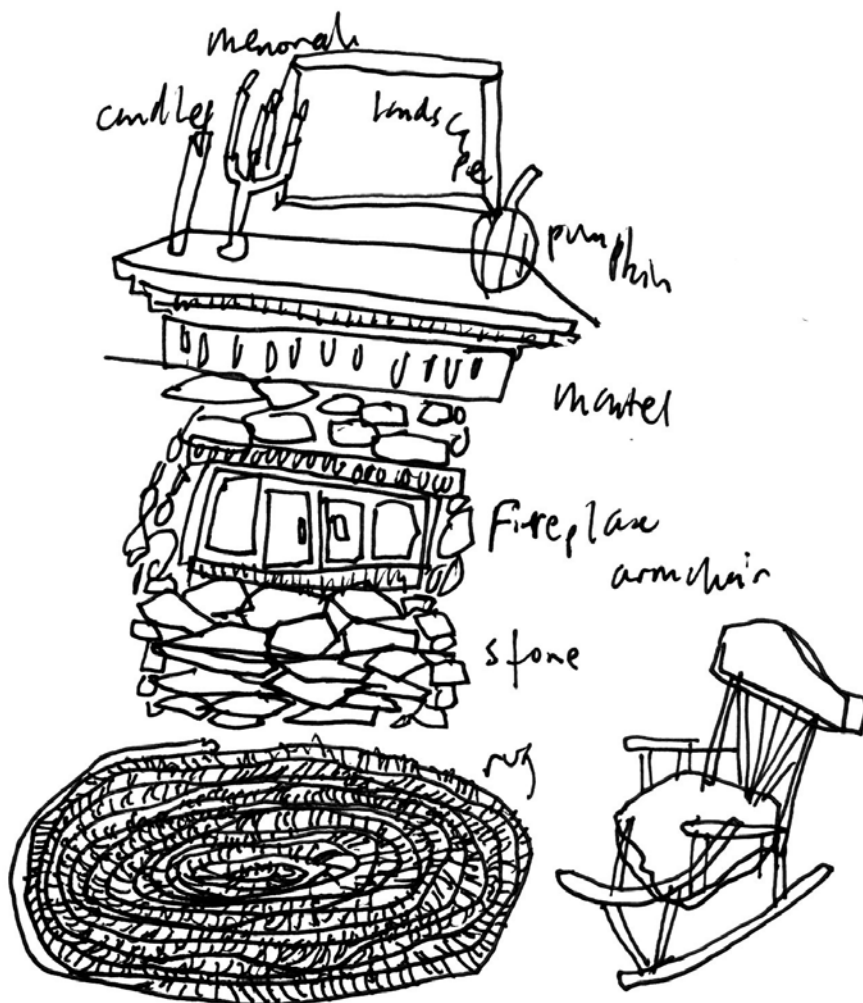
to the far end of the room. Adam crawled towards it, holding his kitchen knife.

With his eyes he thrust the animal against the wall; he noticed that the stiff fur was slightly bleeding, the ribs rising and falling spasmodically, the pale blue eyes bulging with terror. In the two black rings set in their limpid centres Adam could read an inkling of doom, the anticipation of an outcome heavy with death and anguish, a moist melancholy gleam; this fear was mingled with a secret nostalgia relating to many happy years, to pounds and pounds of grains of corn and slices of cheese devoured with quiet relish in the cool dusk of men's cellars.

And Adam knew he embodied this fear. He was a colossal danger, rippling with muscles – a kind of genetic white rat, if you like, ravenously craving to devour its own species. Whereas the rat, the real one, was being transformed by its hatred and

terror into a man. The little animal kept twitching nervously, as though about to burst into tears or fall on its knees and begin to pray. Adam, moving stiffly on all fours, advanced towards it, shrieking, growling, muttering insults. There were no such things as words any longer; they were neither uttered nor received; from intermediate stage they reissued eternal, veritable, negative; they were perfectly geometrical, sketched against a background of the unimaginable, with a touch of the mythical, something like constellations. Everything was written round the central theme of Betelgeuse or Upsilon Aurigae. Adam was lost amid the abstract; he was living, neither more nor less; occasionally he even *squeaked*.

He grabbed some of the balls and hurled them at the beast, hitting the target this time, breaking bones, making the flesh clap together under the hide, while



he yelled disconnected words such as 'Rat!' 'Crime! Crime!' 'Foul white rat!' 'Yes, yeh, arrah!' 'Crush...' 'I kill', 'Rat, rat, rat!'

He drew the knife, blade foremost, and drowned the white rat's words by shouting one of the greatest insults that can possibly be flung at that species of animal: 'Filthy, filthy cat!'

It was by no means over yet; the myopic little beast, maimed though it was, bounded out of Adam's reach. It had already ceased to exist.

At the conclusion of a life full of concentrated memories it was a kind of pale phantom in ghostly outline, like a dingy patch of snow; it was leaking away over the brown floor, evasive and persistent. It was a lobular cloud, or a fleck of soft

foam, disassociated from blood and terror, sailing on the surface of dirty water. It was what remains from an instant of linen-washing, what floats, what turns blue, what traverses the thick of the air and bursts before ever it can be polluted, before ever it can be killed.

Adam saw it gliding first left, then right, in front of him; a kind of fatigue added to his determination, sobering him.

Then he stopped talking. He stood upright again and decided to finish the fight. He took a billiard ball in each hand – nearly all the others were broken now. And he began to walk towards the rat. As he moved along beside the skirting-board he saw the famous spot – he would mark it later on with a charcoal cross – where the white rat had begun to lose its life.

Nothing remained on the parquet floor to testify to the beginning of the massacre except a few tufts of light-coloured hair, some scraps of ivory-like splinters of bone, and a pool. A pool of thick, purple blood, dulled already, which the dirty boards were swallowing drop by drop. In an hour or two, the time required to penetrate bodily into eternity, it would all be over. The blood would look like a stain caused by no matter what liquid – wine, for instance. As it coagulated it would harden or become powdery and one could scratch it with a finger-nail, put flies there and they wouldn't be drowned or be able to feed on it.

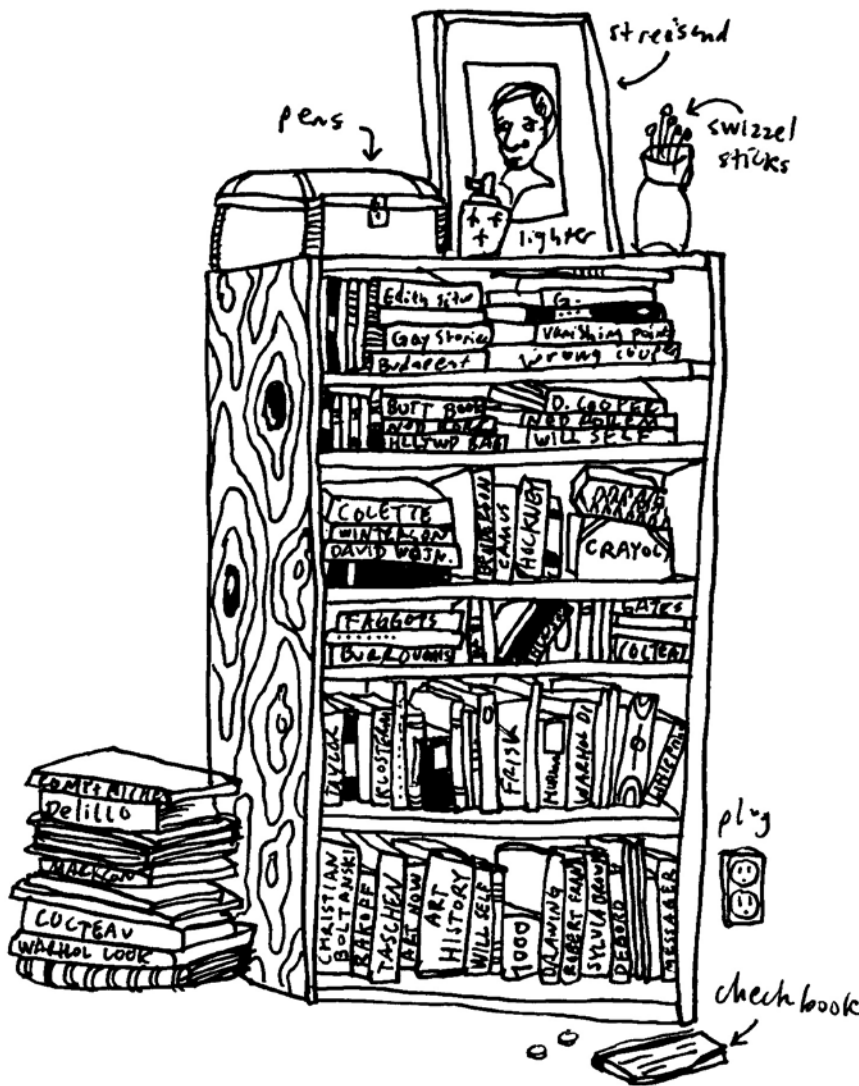
With a veil of moisture in front of his eyes, Adam walked up to the rat. He saw it as though he were trying to look through a shower-curtain, a nylon hanging with little drops of water trickling down it and a naked flesh-coloured woman concealed behind, amid the dripping of rain and the smell of soap-bubbles.

The white rat was lying on its stomach, as though asleep at the bottom of an aquarium. Everything had drifted out of its ken, leaving a naked, motionless space: now very close to bliss, the rat was awaiting the ultimate moment when a half-sigh would die away on its stiff whiskers, propelling it for ever and ever into a sort of double life, at the exact meeting-point of philosophy's accumulated chiaroscuros. Adam listened to its calm breathing; fear had left the animal's body. It was far away now, scarcely even in the death-agony; with its two pale eyes it was waiting for the last ivory balls to come thundering down on its bones and dispatch it to the white rats' paradise.

It would go down there, partly swimming, partly flying through the air, full of mystical rapture. It would leave its naked body lying on the ground so that all its blood could drain out, drop by drop, marking for a long time the sacred spot on the floor that had been the scene of its martyrdom.

So that Adam, patient, should stoop down and pick up its dislocated body.

So that he should he should swing it to and fro for a moment and then, weeping, fling it in a wide curve from the first-floor window to the ground on the hill-top. A thornybush would receive the body and leave it to ripen in the open air, in the blazing sunshine. ◇



# The Best Bit

Tony R., Harlow, aged 41, on *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett

STEVIE DIDN'T MISS any of the early meetings at our am dram society, and he did come to a read-through when his wife was one week overdue. Because it was Susie's first pregnancy, and they had to be in close contact, he was allowed to keep his mobile on while we read the play, and obviously it was his awful ringtone that went off during Lucky's speech. One of the most important of Beckett's speeches was somewhat tested by having to compete with 'Push The Button' by the Sugababes. And why? Was his young wife calling from the hospital? It was just a message from her saying all was well. 'Hope UR OK 2.' It was a message, in a sense, about nothing, nothing at all. That's the kind of people they are though. You see a lot of them around here – always communicating at length about nothing.

Last year we put on *The Wizard of Oz*, which was great fun, and I did appreciate the helping hand Stevie gave with the set, but he's got this hands-free earpiece so he can, in effect, paint and talk at the same time. Our backstage workshop is not large – the am dram society has yet to receive funding from Mr Lloyd Webber or his ilk – so I was sitting quite close to Stevie, gluing red sequins on the shoes, which meant I was privy to every word. At first I thought he was talking to himself, but how many times can a person ask himself, 'So what are you doing now?' Then I noticed his earpiece. At one point he said to his wife, 'Tell me what you're wearing', but they had already covered that subject ten minutes ago, so he said, 'Then tell me about your shoes again.' They talked about shoes. They talked endlessly about shoes, just to fill the empty void of their lives.

Back at the annual meeting in May,

when we were discussing which play to do, Stevie announced that Susie was pregnant and he interrupted the budget discussion to scroll through endless photos on his phone – *that* phone – as if anyone at the AGM truly wanted to see her belly in digitalized close-up. The room was briefly aflutter with all the usual baby optimism we're obliged to display, and out came those clichéd and banal congratulations you hear everywhere before I could finally bring the tempo down by announcing my ultimatum. It was a speech I had been practising for a while, a request that this year the society for once produces a serious classic, a play that might not necessarily feature red-



sequined shoes – and I could have gone on. Anticipating a reaction from the less enlightened, I had more text prepared, but Stevie looked up from his phone momentarily and said, 'Sure. As long as it doesn't have any girls in it because all the girls are busy with the *Mamma Mia* revue.' I had reasons to convince them to do Beckett, and would have been happy

to present these. I could have convinced them. Never mind.

Stevie got to play Vladimir, obviously, and he is not bad in rehearsals when his wife isn't having a baby. We had been rehearsing the section where Vladimir and Estragon discuss 'the last moment', a searingly beautiful passage, when the Sugababes interrupted and Stevie yelped, grabbed the keys to his Astra, and was out of the door without having taken off his threadbare tramp's coat.

Susie couldn't be kept away. She came to rehearsal with the baby on the day we tackled the best bit of the play, my personal favourite: the speech at the end when Vladimir glimpses the pain, hollowness and futility that rests at the core of our lives and realizes that our lives are, in effect, a brief dash of light that comes as we tumble from our mother's womb into the great, dark maw of the open grave. Susie was sitting in the front row at the rehearsal, looking tired but elated

and very aware of every shift of the tiny, pink person in her arms who had already been swathed in some sort of West Ham baby blanket. Her ringtone, Madonna's 'Vogue', beautifully interrupted our first run-through of the speech.

I had to correct Stevie, slow him down, ask him to stop fiddling with the old, beaten bowl-er in his hands and truly listen to the words. He did. He slowed his delivery down and, instead of taking my note, he turned and delivered the speech to her, in the front row, instead of to Estragon. 'Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries.' He moved a few steps away from the stark tree.

'But habit is a great deadener.

At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on.' There were no ringtones to break the flow of his delivery. It made sense. It made wonderful, awful sense, even in the Essex accent, and not just to me. Susie was sitting in the front row looking back at him, holding their bundle. ♦