

ALL KINDS OF DISORDER

Nick Burbridge

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JUST LIKE THAT

My father tried to make
Sunday afternoons take shape.
He built theatres out of cardboard boxes
fixed with fairy lights and left me
to script plays with my swappets
while he scrubbed the oven
or got on with the gardening.

He spent one winter's weekends
building a papier-mache landscape
on trestles in the garden shed;
when Christmas came he set me up on a stool
in the middle, with a transformer,
and three new Hornby trains
to run on the circular tracks.

We went fishing in the Arun
when the sun came out;
I crouched on the bank, threading lead,
while he put up his chair
by the car and practised speeches
on the redistribution of Health Service funds,
and waved when I caught something.

We fell out when I was fifteen.
I got home late, stoned.
He barked at me in his pajamas: Don't stand there
like some demented Jesus, say something.
When he came to my bedroom to kiss me next morning
I rolled away. I heard him going downstairs,
honking and whistling as he wept.

He's eighty-five now. We don't see much of him.
But I think about his funeral.
It should take place in miniature
with a matchstick coffin and posed figures
on a plaster graveyard, water-coloured green.
I want to watch him watching
as they lower his body down.

And when he's gone into the earth,
let him turn and catch my eye,
the way he did one night
when we both laughed at Tommy Cooper
playing Hamlet on a tilting ship,
and for a moment recognized each other,
in an open space together,
like some other father and son.

DANCE No 6 Pt 2

When Dick's drunk at dinner with our friends
the set-designer and his potting partner
he takes off down the road to Laurie Booth's house
(while reviews hail him as a modern dance master)
and stands in the gutter, shouting:
Laurie Booth, you tosspot, you poser,
come out here, I loathe you!
And when no one appears to challenge him
goes back to the table, satisfied, victorious.

Dick sculpts in a small way.
A few years ago he watched his wife beat cancer,
only to fly through the windscreen,
fatally, one early summer morning,
on the way to Cornwall.
His son has some behavioural problems.

But he is not alone.
As I pass Laurie Booth
walking his dogs in the park
with his bald head and earrings,
goatee, shades and swagger,
I swear at him under my breath.

In a similar period
I lost my brother in an epileptic fit
and my obese daughter walked out.
Like Dick, I mess with forms,
obscurely. We are both blunted.
His knife remains sharper.

Laurie Booth's latest show sees him
give a breathtaking performance
among dripping ice cubes
to a unique electronic score,
fully funded, sold out,
and booked for a long tour.

His is a handsome house,
he has two presentable children,
and, presumably, a troupe of lovers.
Should a seminal creator
be the butt of so much vitriol?
I don't know the answer.
But, in this city,
Dick and I are not unusual.
Some men make you want to spit.

O!

City boy, city boy. Last week,
across the square, took on a phonebox:
put my fist right through the glass & laughed.
Saturday tonight, pissed up, pole-axed on a bench.

Here's how I put the city in my mouth:
sink my teeth into its flesh. Burnt shreds
ooze over my fingers onto leather.
I taste smoke & slit.

There is no earth,
and no animal.
In these stale streets
only television.

Stagger to the plastic bar.
Puke in the early hours. Sleep it off.
Look in the mirror: cult figure.
Wrists stained in blood, no, sauce.

CHILDREN

Somewhere among crisp packets and curled plasters,
where the nightlights can't reach,
push the door shut,
and come to me, naked and quiet.

Through brash hours, when they turn us in a shrill dance,
mark the half-glance that comes to rest,
the brush of arms: unstopped cadences
that summon and echo dark moments of belief.

And when we trail down to the bright shore,
laden with canvas and plastic, swim out, too far,
watch them in the shallows; where we are beyond them,
and ourselves, cleave to me, still, out of depth.

OPEN HOUSES

To Harry, the annual bloom of open houses
in the hotbed city is a dream come true.
He leaves his bags of materials
at the church centre and goes armed
with a toothbrush like a votive candle,
settles himself in a new-bought sofa,
absorbs the ambience, and explains
an unharmonious presence
in the manner of Kaspar Hauser:
I am an Art Lover.

His eye is immaculate,
his taste informed but catholic,
attention to detail unparalleled.
He likes bathroom interiors, toilet seats and brushes,
various kinds of tile and grout;
traditional and avant-garde,
he appreciates all two or three-dimensional artefacts,
puzzled only why some bear price-tags and some not.
Interrupted in his state of trance
he will come back with a variant: I love Works of Art.

Sometimes he spends several hours;
made uncomfortable by savage voices
no one hears or visions that don't sit easy
among watercolours of the garden
or Cubist portraits of the children
he takes a breather on the street.
There is always another haven within reach;
somewhere to overhear his hosts explain
inspiration and technique in intimate surroundings
where the void with no art is shut out.

It's hard on Harry
when festivities are over,
doors and windows close,
and each shangrila returns to anonymity.
He demands entry on his own terms,
expresses disappointment creatively;
impromptu performances
with a cast of professionals
as doctors, do-gooders, law officers,
and a violent exit from a disturbed set.

Harry is not impressed
by the anaesthetics of the closed ward.
The composition is clinical,
material and treatment, to his mind,
soporific, and the overall effect, drab.

But Harry harbours his exuberance.
Next Spring he will be back at large,
the streets festooned, as bar and theatre thrum,
and for an art lover like himself,
so many places to call home.

BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME FOR HOVE MUSICIAN

He decided to make his resignation public.
After two handfuls of blue-coated pills
and a bottle of Aqua Libra
he was bouncing off the kitchen walls
pulling the spice rack with him
to the floor and marinating
in turmeric, blood, broken glass.

The old woman downstairs
(who took care, later of his baffled dog
while his blood-pressure played hard to get
and he lay salted on an oddly aromatic bed)
stood on a stool and banged her ceiling with a broomstick.

Next door, the retired cleric
vexed by the merrymaking
shone a torch over the garden wall
but, faced with his tottering silhouette,
chose to pray over his biscuit and chocolate.

Two officers from the drug squad visited
when the ribbon on the taut rope lurched
irrevocably into dear life
and he was sent home to clear up,
but left soon afterwards,
disappointed by his lack of contacts
and the empty antihistamine blister packs.

It was a private party after all.
No column inches, not a worthy feature,
and certainly, for him, no art.
A few desultory phone-calls
as news drifted through tap-room and front-room:

Was there anything he needed?
He didn't think so, it was kind to ask.
Time, perhaps, and a new kitchen chair

UP IN SMOKE

I address this to old Doctor Bermingham,
who always asked after my mother,
prescribed the company of dogs, and caught pneumonia,
the keen new psychiatrist from Saudi Arabia,
or any other who might want to put on
a red suit and try out a few belly-laughes.

Don't bring medication that means parched lips,
hallucinations, delayed impact, or no thrust;
slow-release capsules that interact
with cheese and herring in fatal detonations;
or learned papers on the biochemistry of disorder;
how a minority fail to respond to invading forces
like renegades in a hill-fort surrounded by tanks and mortars,
determined to hold out for the dark cause.

Please substitute a more simple expedient,
in the name of goodwill and peace on earth:
a sense of time that passes on a well-paced linear path
where the loved remain in the heart
and we are this evening who we were this morning.
This has a name, but I forget.

I understand if it's too much.
Keep me the Perry Como album,
It's A Wonderful Life,
a half-bottle of Southern Comfort,
and a bag of pistachio nuts. Biscuits and brandy
are on the willow-patterned plate in the hearth.
The chimney was swept last week
by the new-age tree surgeon across the street.

I can't promise to be asleep,
but I can fake it.
I am sorry if the need to be good has been lost
in the effort to be perfect,
and for doubting you exist.
I write this in the hope you will not forget.

MOONDANCE

Stanmer Park, late afternoon;
we come for a partial eclipse of the sun
but Molly has us press-ganged
in the belly of the woods
to shore the bothy built
last time out from torn boughs
and broken bushes still in leaf
to masquerade as a night-shelter
for some lost family or other.

She knows what she does;
with each weft and bind of wood
the shadows of a dark man's lethargy
which circle her crookedly
and threaten her mother's strength
retreat as a pack from kindling flame,
and we are left warmly lit while we weave,
making of this what it is not: a stronghold
that lasts as long as she dreams.

But this is a rare hour;
as we climb back among scarred trunks
we reach a bowl where the sky arcs;
from blade to blade each spun thread's caught,
thicket and boulder burnished;
what seems to demand faith is naked, luminous,
and where shadows stretch and splay
in a strong hold of stained palms
our child swings across the sun.

OUTREACH

Tom got by with what H.G. Wells
wrote of a horse in difficulty,
a random redistribution of his legs,
extreme facial expressions
and rotation of the head.

Yet, if you bent your smooth neck
in passing and called 'right, Tom?',
he would make a complex halt
and bellow, 'right mate!

Tom hit a bad patch at the care co-op
where he loved and lost Belinda,
entirely without legs, a trunk of sharp pains,
and no inclination to take it in good heart.
He had to watch as her wires failed
and she fell silent in her steel chair.
His interest in carpentry and baskets dwindled
and, hailed on brief journeys, he answered,
but without his customary verve.

Tom appeared on St. James' Street
in a motor-buggy, driving carefully,
neutral expression, perfectly still legs.
Met with the mantra, his eyes remained set,
and he made no answer,
as if he needed his powers to concentrate.

The last time I saw him, to speak to,
was the day of the Family Parade
when bamboo and crepe-paper tribes of sea monsters,
pirates and cockle-shells multiplied in the streets.
Tom careered down the pavement trying to hit people,
collided with an alcoholic near the chemist
and lashed out with his sticks.
Some starfish intervened while I retraced my steps,
to meet, as if by accident, with a 'right mate?

He brought the buggy to a smooth halt
and hit me, askew, with one glance,
unscrewing the vortex of years:
his one love pinned in enraged stasis
only to expire as he dreamed her release;
the loss of his own redistributive movements;
the irk and trespass of the man in the street,
charitable projections, inward sighs of relief.
He said quietly: What do you think? Sod off-

These days I withhold inquiries.
I've been having meetings

in the American-style coffee-shop
with local bodies on innovative pieces -
short films perhaps - about the contrast
between disadvantage and conceit.
I have subjects pencilled in.
One has to tread carefully.
But, believe me, tears will be shed.

Tom, meanwhile,
motors independently,
up and down, outside.

THE POWER OF PRAYER

We have new neighbours.
They keep parking an old Ford
with no tax disc on the sidewalk.
They come back drunk at three
in the morning and row over the television.
Steve wears a leather and torn jeans.
Leila's about nineteen: long dark hair,
too much mascara and short skirts.

It's only a six month let.
But they keep the kids up.
I can see we're going to have words.
My wife tells me no.
She wasn't in last week
when this stranger was shouting on the doorstep
for some money they owed him
and Steve came down and beat him up.

Worse. They keep screwing about dawn.
She squeals and moans and shrieks.
He grunts like he's hitting a heavy backhand.
The wall shakes. But I don't think they notice.
Then the kids are up playing Pirate Ships.
I get a lot of headaches
and keep falling asleep at work.
I'm not what you call religious
but sometimes when all else fails
I go down on my knees
and beg for some kind of release.

I've seen them do it often:
come out of the house, rowing.
Steve gets in the car, pulls out and revs up
while Leila slams the door and lingers
on the sidewalk, biting her lip.
When we moved in
the agent called it a busy tree-lined street
which serves as a main bus route.

The old Ford wrapped itself
round our beech tree with the birdfeed
I haul in with a walking-stick. The horn jammed.
Steve's head came through the windscreen.
But his legs were mashed inside the chassis.
Leila leaped back into the doorway
with a few cuts. Some people
on the double-decker puked up.

We went out to help.

But there was nothing to be done.
The funeral's next week.
At the crematorium.
Leila says she won't be staying on.
I told her I'm sorry for what happened.
And I've been down to confess.
But this is what I worked for,
this is what I have to protect.
I think if he'd got the chance
Steve would have understood that.

FLEDGLING

The sky disintegrates
in off-white cascades
as crosswinds slam
the nursery schoolyard
ridging debris
of bikes, ladders,
tunnels, slides,
while dwarf shapes
in yellow capes and boots
investigate.

One is still,
who often screams
for territory, defies exchange,
and tilts for certainties
feeding streams of mucus,
three-fingered, from nose to mouth,
and haunts you on the hinterland
between waking and sleeping
where you listen to echoes of his struggles
with enemies too close for comfort.

Sentry by the giant pencil,
eyelids, lips and cheeks
melting flakes,
he turns,
leaving new prints
on the spangled sheet,
meets you with whirling eyes
and announces:
This is a blizzard -
so the swirling moment's fixed.

Who are you to tell him
as he learns this art
what the years may wreak on him,
how constant the vigil will be,
the search for harder terms?
This is his infancy. It has benefits.
As he stands apart
and you watch him transfixed,
through the frozen air, he knows
he has walked into your heart.