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In the Days of Lee Harwood



A trail of bookmarks, a trail of postcards
I found around the house after you left
tick tack toe through the little labyrinth
a string of shining beads in a lost currency
and his many different faces came and went
in the days of the days of Lee Harwood.

Poet most alive living nowhere now
clues come fluttering from the shelves,
late arrivals from not the full story,
that walk we never made across the Downs
Grasscut CD 1 inch ½ mile, map and voices
drilling holes in the discontinued calendar.

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(The Sinking Colony Revisited)

‘The inventory seemed endless’
but I’ll return to that. It wasn’t something
we talked of at the time, my young wife and I.
Nor did we discuss the aims of the Raj
and she never referred to the department reports
she must have known even then I hadn’t sent.

And yet on the evenings (many as I now remember)
when the musicians despite their promises
failed to appear on our verandah
we talked and talked, very often of our recurrent
apparently synchronised dreams of the Arctic.
Moose, snow shoes, sledge, yes the inventory again
but not the one I mean to reconsider.
It was a rare evening one of us neglected to mention
our feeling we had never left the base camp,
our bungalow down in the foothills. There we were
in the mountains, in our 'mansion set in magnificent grounds'
with the latest agricultural machinery, dehumidifiers,
heavy iron gates ... yet in our minds we were
still in the lowland with binoculars trained on
those faraway peaks. But the inventory, the other one ...
'Printing press', not stating it was old as Aldus.
'Pig (logo)', whatever that meant in those days.
'Cauldron with flowers', make of that what you will.
'Road map', of England, no use to us.
'Calendar' as my friend writes 'discontinued'
but then of future date. 'Portrait of young lady
with floral hat', which prompted me to ask
'Haven't we been here before?' –
my young wife, not in white as in the poem
but in 'fancy dress'? No, as she was, at another time.

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This was all so but from another time
the reminders kept arriving, the paths not taken beckoned,
that secluded bay in the heat of the afternoon
after the rains finished and a translucent curtain opened
across the whole vista of their other ways.
And though the scheme was for the benefit of all,
the metropolis and the dominions let's say,
there was a groundswell and unexpected events;
the radicalisation of the tennis club,
the close down of the baking circle,
the preference for autochthonic dance.

Your soft linen like a wing swept the verandah
analogous to the mystery of the rain-washed view,
another season of calculations, of glad-handing
the nabobs and salesmen, their butterfly wives.
At least the women set the air alight, a sort of fragrance
I never knew if it was sex or absent-mindedness,
lost deep in the intricacies of the local dialect
itself a version of an implacable, closed book,
it might as well have been shapes scratched on rock
or pitter-patter feet around the bay for all I grasped,

I just never knew and none of us saw it coming.
I like to think our expeditions were genuine,
were not always for cover but for pure geology.

Later I learnt Captain Harwood's reports were correct,
they predicted the whole thing – you just couldn't tell,
he was so unassuming, gentle in his detachments,
and the reports were filed in Government House,
under a heading of Fanciful Imaginings At Large.
I suppose the engine of the age can run on,
can drive every detail of our lives and loyalties
and we don't talk about it, we just don't see it
and I came to think that's because we're inside it
encompassed and blind, duty-bound, modern.
I still thought this when she left for England,
that she had failed, fallen into a character flaw,
and I lay there every night under vague imaginings
pretty ghosts circling the mosquito net, entwined
low susurrations of an erotic folk literature
released from their red mouths all night.

I must close, be done, you have been very patient,
there's no final account and the inventory continues,
a delivery of leather buckets for the collection of Yak milk,
wrongly dispatched, bullets of incorrect calibre,
non-regulation dubbing, polo mallets and hegemony cranks.
All I can do is wait for the cargo boat to arrive
let it edge its way into the bay without reprisal,
I doubt they even know the name of this place.

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'And that,' he murmured, shutting the album,
'was what my great-uncle told me
forty years ago.' Then to break
what to me felt too long a silence
but to him was a necessary pause
anyone might fill more gracefully than I:
'So when the cargo boat finally arrived
he came back to his house on the Downs,
to his wife?'

He crossed the room,
stood looking out of that floor-to-ceiling window,
in that way he had of seeming to belong
to an age much friendlier than ours, eyes fixed
on that steepest of streets reaching down to the seafront,
the shocking dazzle of the late summer sun on the water,
children skimming pebbles on the incoming tide,
three tankers on the skyline heading east
towards the Strait.

‘The address she sent him
didn’t exist. He heard later that she’d changed her name.
Bigamy, perhaps. They never met again.’

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Trail of postcards to nowhere then, unaddressed
straight through the winding Platonic streets;
England crouches, its back turned to the continent
resentful, effaces history and dreams an America;
despite this you can see the sea from Brunswick Place
and poetry leaps at the high windows then,
you meet an old friend go to a bar and the stars appear.

Take the scenes connected over the years in turn,
each one designed by Donald Evans open and at rest:
poet and old friend, the years relived in one night;
poet tackles bank robber, receives public acclaim;
poet in a foreign city at one, making it his home;
poet in labyrinth turns, follows the sound of the sea;
poet scales the final mountain, everyone’s there, it’s ok.