

An Illuminated Darkness

Jacques Coetzee ^{1*}

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Over the past decade or so I have been working towards an anthology of poems, eventually published during hard lockdown in 2020 as *An Illuminated Darkness* (Coetzee, 2020).

On one level the metaphor embodied in this title refers to blindness, to the process of learning to inhabit the world as a blind man and to write from that place. The anthology's reception confirmed and even celebrated this reading. Such an interpretive strategy placed the poems squarely on the side of life, of resilience.

But there is at least one other context in which the anthology can be read, and that is what I want to explore here.

Throughout the years it took me to write these poems, I was romantically involved with someone more than thirty years older than myself. The partnership was also a creative one, producing albums of songs as well as a shared book of love poems, called *The Love Sheet*. But from the start we both knew, perhaps more intimately than most couples, that time was limited. The poems and songs we wrote together, and certainly many of the poems I wrote for this collection, therefore became an attempt to curate the slow process of saying goodbye.

For most of that time, writing poems and songs provided the glue that bound our lives together. Later, as our needs slowly diverged, the poems and songs became attempts to frame particular moments of shared experience; gravity-defying rituals aimed at slowing time down.

Of course all such attempts are ultimately doomed to failure, certainly as far as the body is concerned. So the slow intimacy of celebrating closeness becomes, in the poems, the slow intimacy of letting go what cannot be preserved or held onto.

Deep Listening

It happened again yesterday:
in the middle of a fine conversation
about sublime and lofty things,
something inside me detached
and pulled softly at the pit of my stomach
as you stepped away for a moment
to pour wine for an honoured guest.

I could still hear the separate music
in our four voices, but the words,
the words had gone out of range.
The only detailed information then
came from the song of my blood –
subterranean, preverbal –
calling for your touch across the table.

There are no words for such music,
not in company, not when we're alone.
All I could say for certain then
to myself, under my breath,

¹ *Red Earth & Dust*, SOUTH AFRICA

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was that all lofty things,
raised up in defiance of gravity –
all the immortal words, and all great music –

seemed to be reconfigured there;
rooted again in the fire
that sings and sings, unheard,
in our hidden blood. (Coetzee, 2020)

Transparent Things

(after the diagnosis)

Today all things are
transparent – out of time; beyond language.
Even this face I have chosen
as I walk into your red room – I know
your eyes will see through
to the emptiness behind it.

Bereft of speech, I sit down
next to you; take both your hands.
We have entered a world where each word
must be weighed – calibrated, interrogated
for any signs of untruth; imprecision.

I would not dare to intrude here
armed with magical thinking. Already
we are being distilled, you and I,
refined until each fibre, each breath,
each slow, deliberate sentence
rings out, never to be repeated.

Come, take these hands; feel
their brittleness, now and to come:
this moment, this narrow
space, is all there is. (Coetzee, 2020)

From: Table of Elements

Today my beloved and I sit under the open sky
on an almost empty beach.
We've come to say goodbye; to celebrate you
as you set out on your very last journey.

We've brought a simple boat, made out of shell;
a stick for a mast; a paper sail,
emblazoned with your praise for the ocean,
where your blood turned into foam for a moment.

There are clear shards of sound from the waves
as they advance and retreat; from the cries of gulls
that fly overhead, not caring about us
who have nothing to give them.

(There are shards of light also, but
I will say nothing about them.
A cellphone camera is recording
what may be shared of this moment afterwards.)

We wait for the waves to take your vessel,
and – I believe, for a moment – you with it.
We wait a long time before it happens,
so that I am ready when it does:

when first the sail goes, and then the mast,
and finally it is only the two of us sitting here,
acknowledging the space you occupied
when we could reach across and hold you.

I could sing you the song the waves sung to us,
sung as if to say that what we'd lost would always return.
I could speak of the circle of small shells around yours,
the opening that suggested we might learn to let go. (Coetzee, 2020)

Morning After

Half past five in the morning: he comes awake
slowly; turns over on his back, floating up from sleep.

A long and lovely shudder runs through his body:
were they really together like that again, last night?

Then, between relief and bafflement,
he reaches his hands down the whole length of him,

of a body he knows he must learn to love again
as his. Then, only then, his left hand very slowly reaches across,

and gently (so as not to wake her)
finds her there, in the bed next to him. (Coetzee, 2020)

Always Again

You unlock the shutters, and the world
floods back into the room, as always. Then,
wanting even more world, we step out into it;
sit out of doors, under the autumn sky.

The first and last discipline, you say,
is to be empty enough to pay attention.
What do you hear now, right now,
in the silence the hadedas leave
in the wake of their beautiful, harsh calls?

Do you feel the coarse grain of the bread between your teeth? Yes.

Do you hear the song of your own blood? Yes.

Do you feel my mouth, warm, close to your mouth? Yes.

I take the warm bread from your hands,
a portion of the bread of the whole world;
I imagine myself at the corners of your mouth now,
which I have kissed, and will kiss again.
A hinge, a shutter opens in me, then
I disappear into everything else.
This is where we lose ourselves; this
is the clearing where the world is made anew.
Only be still now. Nothing has happened yet. (Coetzee, 2020)

I want to end with four poems that do not form a part of this collection, that inhabit a space that has perhaps not yet been illuminated. They circle the awareness that the process of letting go is ultimately chaotic, messy, open-ended, often apparently inaccessible to logic.

After the Bombardment

As long as I live, I'll never forget
the heavy blanket of silence that descended
over our room that morning. You'd just told me
the city had been utterly destroyed
from the air. I looked for words
of comfort for you, but
I could feel you were
in that place beyond consolation
where not even I can reach you.

And if I'd spoken, what would I have said?
That the city is not here, not ours to lose,
not this day, not this time? Ah, that would be no use.
What happens somewhere can happen anywhere.

'I'll make the bed,' I said, willing it
to be an adequate response:
doing the most ordinary things
slowly, deliberately, because we know again
that everything's at stake at every moment.

Halfway out the door to my office,
though it's only fifteen steps away from you, I turned back
to repeat the same old words of love
as before. When I turned again,
the news still playing behind me as I went,
my arms were still open, empty as now,
hungry to console.

Pushing and Pulling Time

Dearest, these are the days of maintenance,
of keeping strict tempo. You always loved me
for being flexible about time, for making it
slow down or speed up. But now

the clocks of our bodies tell me
it's high time to tighten up technique.
Listening to Chet Baker drift his way through
Almost Blue yesterday, I had to focus

past his lazy voice, the dirty trumpet sound
he got from having his teeth knocked out by an angry dealer,
to the tightness of the band behind him:
the piano and drums carrying that drift
and anchoring it. You could say

it's time to pull out the metronome,
to synchronise my two hands over the keys.
Or that gravity is against us now, and there's no-one
else who will lift us up
and frame us carefully in the moment. These words of mine,
these gestures—they must learn
to listen to rhythms not their own,
to be small, precise and terrifyingly sober
before they can push and pull time again.

Patterns

All these years I sat at your beautiful feet.
You were the singing-master, all that time.
And all we did was in service
of learning to be simple, standing
in the present moment.

Only now I can see them,
there in the shadows: the four-year-old child,
abandoned among strangers; the blind boy
vowing to sit at the top table of life,
where the wild things cracked open champagne bottles
like there was no tomorrow.

I never thought how much food they demanded;
never saw the patterns in the carpet
that were there long before we entered this room,
long before (latecomer that I am)
I accepted warm bread from your open hand.

In Search of the Wild Things

(for Maurice Sendak)

Even as a boy, you found a way
through to the next world: across the corridor
from your quiet, stoic family
to the tables of those Sicilian boys,
their parents drinking wine and raucous,
their lives still untouched by reports of holocaust.

Much later you showed us the way there, building escape routes
for the unlit, starving children in all of us,
cooking up a storm in the midnight
kitchens of our imagination.

But I love you best as an old man
tearful and joyous, only months before death,
coming from the ends of the earth to say:

'I am in love with the world'—
knowing that's the most dangerous emotion,
still able to cut through any system,
through any constricting form
to get to the raucous table, the flushed faces
on the other side of the world.

Once, on YouTube, I found an immense recording
(for gay choirs only) of that interview:
the crescendo building to a single note,
your final message to us: 'Live your life. Live
your life. Live your life.'

REFERENCES

Coetzee, J. (2020). *An Illuminated Darkness*. Durban, South Africa: uHlanga Press.

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