



Fragments

Peter Shukie

Fragments

The Fragment by Seamus Heaney (in *Electric Light*, 2001, London: Faber & Faber - p.57).

'Light came from the East,' he sang.
'Bright guarantee of God, and the waves went quiet.
I could see the headlands and buffeted cliffs.
Often, for marked courage, fate spares the man
It has not marked already.'

And when their objection was reported to him -
That he had gone to bits and was leaving them
Nothing to hold on to, his first and last lines
Neither here nor there -
'Since when,' he asked,
'Are the first and last line of any poem
Where the poem begins and ends?'

Exactly, I thought. And did not know the interplay between Beowulf and Heaney and swimming and moving country. I know risk. Of losing a job at an age of danger, of working classness as an everyday risk. Not so much the courage to face that which we take but the shame we face down.

And I know fragments and that life is not pinned to these single stanzas and pages of life that flick one after the other to create order where there was none. Make it to death, the end, the end that makes it all seem that was fine all along even if it never felt fine at all. And now it is, they are not even here to see that it was. Probably that means it was not at all fine.

And so *Fragments* takes from Heaney the semblance of a poetry that is not all about poetry at all. More like Zephania who talks about Bought and Sold poets in fact, in being a poet who desires no prizes but does require a publication. No matter what is rhymed or reasoned, the world unfolds in uneven lines and crevices and different paper thickness makes for smooth and ruffled edge. The page before does not relate to the one after, not always. What sticks in us is the electric burn of accident. We would love the golden glow of love or achievement to be what lingers. we do not get to choose and so we can be burned by acidic memory or tainted by dull aches of not very much. These are the fragments that tell the tale of a life.

Since when? Since forever. And here the attempt has been to string something together like pearls without string, falling over the edge of unclothed tables in backrooms onto hard floors. Bouncing into memory banks, not placed there with white gloved archivists.

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The idea of Fragments is wild in the challenge to brings to how we see our past, our experience, our memory. Not wild as ragged or without form. Wild as in open to change and the space for transformation. We are not bound by our pats and they are not fixed entities. they provide the material for our fabulations, or imaginations, our paces of being and of our becoming. Neither is ever completed.

The stories here indicate a series of events with the pattern of activities rendered vital through how they shape the nowness of the author. If you think of your own, the ways your own fragments are created is a meeting point, of then and now, not as causation but as exchange, of engagement and encounter. We shape and our shaped, continually.

Red Clogs

Granda's history was better than schools
his stories showed through his body
'where's your legs gone grandad?'

'One lost to a broken pitprop, t'other to coal dust in the veins'

On the mantelpiece, in a frame, his eyes beautiful looked out optimistically
him and grandma married in sunshine
Now his sky-blue forever behind constant watery discharge
when he smiled
they dropped as tears
onto his blanket where his legs once stretched

Grandma dragged coal up the yard
trying to keep this back kitchen warm
rented for 53 years, no indoor loo
she would haul him down the yard later
all his warmth from the coal would evaporate
His coughing fits spraying black and red fleck on white handkerchief

"Red Clogs' he said, "was from the East, like your grandad
when the mine exploded
he held up the last prop
allowed his mates to escape
they did,
but they did not go back
for him"

"He was crushed by a million tonnes of earth and coal,
every bone turned to powder.
Now he haunts the abandoned shafts,
warning others of the perils
for those that plunder from the depths"

Now warned, I later heard them talking

"eeeh, Joe, He's too young for them stories"

"bit of horrible helps sometimes, keeps 'em away from t'pit" he rasped

Wiping away the blood from his last coughing fit.

Cultural Exchange: Duende

Every child needs a generous adventurer.

One who does new stuff, and shares it, not hoards it.

We had Ken, mum's brother. The youngest, a plumber,
he gave me the Ragged Trousered Philanthropist when I was 10.

I did not understand it.

He told me that people who mocked us because of our name were idiots.

He was the first person we knew to fly, he went to Spain in 1978.

brought back a doll for my sister.

Black lace, black hair, red dress, long arms aloft.

Dancing.

We got castanets, one pair, wooden, mysterious.

'Spaniards have duende, a fire inside that only comes out through music' he said.

Out front, on our terraced street,

against the fumes of a main road,

we danced.

I clicked and clacked and created castanet chaotica

five of us wild dancing

singing what we thought Spanish must sound like

A cardboard drum beat an even deeper rhythm

Arms shaped like our doll guide, we swept higher and wilder

and felt the blood fizz

of duende

of freedom.

Cars disappeared from our consciousness, except one

a van, slowing down, window opening

a fat head lolls out

yellowed teeth exposing bitter anger

'get back to Russia'

"it's spainthuania' shouts back my sister, doll thrust outwards like a spear.

The Whale

Fern Gore Avenue, 1995, the council come to tidy round the shops
we lived opposite

They put in some plants, blew a leaf blower over the litter

Came at 10, gone by 12.

When I went out there was a wooden trellis, still concertinaed shut
thrown in our garden

behind the fence

I was ecstatic, it was pristine, the only new thing on the street!

I needed canvas and this was my gift

I covered it partially in papier mâché

started to add the litter left by the blower - which was all of it

This was a sculptor at work

with wire and more soggy paper to bind cans and wrappers

The trellis became a whale

I saw it clearly mid point

an indictment to man's destruction of the planet

of course it was

a whale of litter

just waiting for me to find it

a Whale on a 6 foot by 3 trellis

It needed paint, I had white emulsion.

I could get turmeric and sage, from Shab's shop.

He had been watching my garden studio anyway

he said I could have the sage

But I'd have to buy the yellow spice

I mixed it with the white gloop

sage is green but lent blue green to the paint

the whale had a sea sheen now, blues, greens, dusty yellows
magnificent

Shab said,

'I think it probably tastes better than it looks'

I put it on the bedroom wall
above the bed
Dominant and golden now, aluminium of Tizer, Coke, Tenants Super
sparkling in the late evening sun
We lay under it
our reminder of planetary destruction and our resistance
through art
Months later
it fell off,
maybe it recalled its own weight
there was some blood, not a lot
and not mine
The whale went out the window
later in the bin, sent off with angry words
from a head with a plaster on it

I have thought since,
if only they had an Open Exhibition in them days
would the whale have made it through?

Wizard of the Moors

He had been out picking them magic mushrooms
up Haslingden Moor
Does it very year
probably why he is how he is

He is in hospital now, touch and go but looks like he is going to pass over.
like, die.

I was there when they found him, brought him down from the tops.
He was barely conscious but told a fantastic tale
before he dipped out.

but the medics said confusion and delirium could be down to the hypothermia

He sounded so convincing though, so compelling. He believed it.

He said he was in here, well, next door in the bookies
before he came in here for a pint.

Readying himself for the walk up there.

Told me he'd met an astral being, in there, the doorway of a bookies!

He had already had some of them mushies, I could tell

He met a familiar figure, or felt familiar, drew him in, his eyes were like clouds
from another world

he said he spoke deep and like a projection from a pagan past.

Told him to look for a wizard on the moors,
he should find a wizard!

been up there 9 hours looking for a wizard,
got absolutely battered when the wind and sleet started
but he would not come down.

Took a chance encounter with the ramblers and a helicopter
to get him down at all.

Bloody mushrooms eh! I can see clouds in your eyes, mind, a bit like you now I
expect, seeing the reflection in them shades. HaHa, Anyway, I'm off, don't do
anything I wouldn't.

As he left, I thought, I did see him outside the bookies,
and I told him to look out,
there's a blizzard coming.

Mirror House

Part of a class I'd mentioned sharing a bedroom
With my brothers and. Sister
Terraced, two bedroom. Red brick

Amina, year two, Undergraduate
Brilliant
Afterwards

She Asks about the house,
nothing about the two hours of theory I'd prepared for hours.
I live in a terraced now, there's four in our room, sisters only.

I'm always scared to say. Seems to
Be a thing to not talk about but you come out with it

I know, I say, I didn't always, I still don't often

Me and Amina

Talking about our houses as kids
My grandad built a church, not just him, a few of them
Italian, Polish, Irish, Lithuanians
My grandad built a mosque, not just him, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Kenya

They lived there all
Their lives after the first move, until the mines shut
Until the mills shut here

Our families sizes the same, 5 + 2

Scarves would be the difference, says Amina.

My mum and grandma always wore scarves too I say
Grandma would do dance if the seven veils when she baby sat us a limitless kids

Ha! My grandma taught us dances from the movies sometimes, when we were little

My grandad had chickens out back one time, she says.

We didn't but a man up the street did,
he had eggs but he had rats. I said

We had cats in the street, cats kill rats. Amina the solution finder

What kills cats, I say

Kindness, she says. Laughs.

We looked out over the rooftops of the terraced houses,
straight lines down steep hills
to where long gone mills lay in the factory bottoms

They pointed at disappeared mines in my town, I say

This old soul in young body and my young soul in old body shows me
that teaching is only powerful when we see that we often live on paths
that point at what's no longer there.

Learn from our shared wanderings.

'Peter, do You ever wish you'd been brought up
In a big house?

I say no.

Why? she asks

because I'd have met you today,
and we'd have had nothing to talk about.

Becoming Übermensch

The car screamed as it was flung around corners
every turn was a screech, every gas pedal push a roar
but he had to get to the stage door
His mum abandoned, spoon in mid air
when the call came
he imagined her soup stained moustache mouthed
'go'
surely she understood?
The future called.

He scraped yellow pot noodle stain on thigh
sighing
His taxi flung itself forward, this metallic provider, food, rent,
years of late night labour, but never a day like this one
The day she got in
American
actor

beauty his soul felt before his eyes saw
They connected, he saw it immediately, eyes held firm
a light that would replace this never-ending struggle

After the show,
she called him
Amidst the accolades and the bouquets
she
called
him
She, back again on rear seat Prius pleather
She, this vestal vision,
framed by rose petals and unearthly aura
She, white teeth, scarlet lips
She glowing
He powered her
through dank streets
to her hotel hideaway
driving illegal tyres through polished steel gates
the hardness of potholed asphalt
giving way to crunch of white gravel
yellow lamplight and uniformed staff
She applauded as she alighted
She, goddess, returned.

Through rearview rectangle
He saw his new future,
her eyes had confirmed connection
before she disappeared
her face blue lit by phone screen

She gave him one star on Uber

he was late
and he stared too much.