Forget Me Not

Like most people who live in my area, I pass the same stretch of railings a dozen or so times a week. Bordering the main thoroughfare to the supermarket, school and station, the yellow and green rosettes, and the computer-generated image of a child growing into a woman, with the question, Have You Seen Me?, bold and plaintive beneath it, have become commonplace. But one quiet Sunday last summer, as we stopped at the traffic lights, a man and a woman were slowly at work untying the rosettes. Carefully, one by one, the woman was removing the coloured ribbons and placing them gently into a paper bag held open by the man beside her. Involuntarily, I met the woman’s glance as she carried out this task, and she returned for a second a shy half-smile; her eyes, all the while, were solemn and faintly stricken. Madeleine’s grandmother, I guessed, knowing the McCanns to have relatives nearby, and I said so to my daughter as we drove on. ‘Does it mean they’ve found her?’ she asked with a child’s sudden glee. More likely, I thought inwardly, the hope-hour had stroked its sum.

I knew immediately where the words had come from, though I had not read the poem for twenty years. Thomas Hardy’s ‘A Broken Appointment’. The poem begins:

You did not come

And marching time drew on and wore me numb. –

Yet less for loss of your dear presence there

Than that I thus found lacking in your make

That high compassion that can overbear

Reluctance for lovingkindness’ sake

Grieved I,

Reading this when I returned home that day, I felt a little ashamed that I had been impelled by the sad distress I had witnessed to seek out a poem (was I being insensitively bookish?) more especially a poem about, of all things, being stood up! I had expected to be moved. I found myself startled instead by the un-lyrical quality of the verse and by its ‘numb’ feeling. I had remembered it as a poem of pain, but found it hard to locate the hurt – and this problem absorbed all my attention at first. Was the ‘missing’ pain in the poem’s defensiveness? What really injures the rejected lover is not rejection as such, he says, but the discovery that the beloved doesn’t have feeling enough in her – and certainly not feeling enough for him - to turn up anyway in order to save him pain. Some of the emotional cost of this self-protection is felt, sub-tonally, even in the abstract language the poem uses to distance feeling - when the impersonally moral ‘high compassion’ substitutes for the intimacy of ‘dear presence’, or where ‘lovingkindness’ stands in for the noun significantly missing from this verse of romantic disappointment: ‘love’.

There is one stand-out word of pain, of course - ‘Grieved’, the main verb in every sense. But this word feels jarringly in the wrong place, especially when you read the poem aloud, as I did the second time. Not only does it come before its subject (‘Grieved I’), but it comes at the end of the sentence rather than at the beginning (‘Yet I grieved less for loss …’ would be the ‘normal’ order), while still coming at the *beginning* of a line. The main verb is strandedly separate from the syntax it governs for the same reason that words come into connection within the poem that do not belong together. ‘I thus *found lacking* in your make’. This is a poem and speaker numbed by finding what *isn’t* there – not even simple loving-kindness in place of real love. This is grief *without* a commensurate object, disturbingly, painfully, out of place. Nothing could more effectively have thrown into relief the feeling I had witnessed on the woman’s face. Hers was a love terribly *in place* to which the substitution of Madeleine’s absence for her presence had cruelly made no difference: no secondary emotion in place of the first, still primary one was possible here.

What had really drawn me instinctively to these lines, I realised, was not their expression of thwarted love or even grief, but the experience they hold of time.

Grieved I, when, as the hope-hour stroked its sum,

You did not come.

Let’s say the lover was supposed to arrive at 2pm. If she had arrived before the hour had struck, then the lover’s hope would have been consummated in time: something would have been appointed. When 2pm arrives and she does not, the lover’s hope and the hour become separate. For at what time should he give up hope? At what time is the appointment definitely broken? How long does he wait? One hour? Two hours? What if she were to arrive just after he’d left? He cannot know for sure that she will not come; and worse he cannot know for sure *when* she definitely *has not* come. When the hope-hour has no certain end, when no moment validates the passing of hope, tolling the end of the future, when is it time to say ‘It’s over’? This, I felt, was what the ritual I had witnessed might really have meant: the courageous, almost impossible act of bearing to choose to give up, of making, arbitrarily, an end. How could you so choose? *When* should you? never forgetting that the missing loved-one was still a mere child.

Sometimes I am asked to suggest a poem to read for a special anniversary or birthday. People who are not poetry readers nonetheless believe that poetry, like the bible, has the necessary gravity of language for ordinary life’s more serious moments. It is a good instinct. But whenever I’m charged with hunting down the ‘off the rail’ poetic sentiment which suits the occasion, I always think of Gabriel Josipovici’s remark (when he is himself thinking of Proust) that books are not monuments but doors. When we look to poetry to elevate life, we run the risk of elevating poetry above life, instead of re-discovering through it the vulnerable human matter out of which the poem first came.

On this occasion, the poetry found me rather than the other way round. It was as though Hardy’s lines, unconsciously summoned by the moment, were using me to say, ‘This you are witnessing – amid the clichéd yellow ribbons, the morphed girl’s face, the drab railings – *this*, tragically enough, is poetry.’ Life is the all-important thing, was the poem’s message, more important than it could ever be. Yet, instinctively, I needed the poetry to tell me so – I needed its language truly to see the life. Even these tender grand-maternal offices (if such they were), sacred in their way, could not speak wholly for themselves.

I always resist the idea of literature as a specialism, and a great deal of my professional life is dedicated to trying to ensure that the literary work I ‘do for a living’ at a university is actually intrinsically connected to the living world around me. Yet what is striking to me about the moment I’ve described, is how it showed that poetry *is* special, or at least that its language has a special place within a human life. Perhaps it isn’t for the formal, special occasion that we chiefly need it. Maybe we need its sub-vocal presence most of all for those instances whose rich deep meaning is hidden within mundanity, and must customarily go unnoticed - happenings which do not have an appointed place or time.

During the same week last May, my son was revising for his AS exams and asked if I would ‘do’ some poems with him from his English Literature syllabus. The fact that English was ‘my thing’ had always put him off asking for help (‘too much stress’); but the pressure was lifted, I guess, since we both knew this was the ‘fourth’ A level he’d drop in favour of sciences at the end of the year. Anyway, he wanted a good AS grade.

I said I thought it best we start with something he liked. Since he was unimpressed by most of the set works in his ‘Love Poems Through the Ages’ booklet, this didn’t take long. He opened at Keith Douglas’s, ‘Vergissmeinnicht’. In the poem, the speaker is one of a group of British second world war soldiers, returning to a battlefield (‘over the nightmare ground/We found the place again’), some weeks after their tank has been targeted by enemy fire, to find the rotting, shell-destroyed body of the enemy soldier who had shot at them:

Look. Here in the gunpit spoil

the dishonoured picture of his girl

who has put: *Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht*

in a copybook gothic script.

We see him almost with content,

abased, and seeming to have paid

and mocked at by his own equipment

that’s hard and good when he’s decayed.

But she would weep to see today

how on his skin the swart flies move;

the dust upon the paper eye

and the burst stomach like a cave.

The appeal wasn’t simply that this was a male poem, as much about war as love. ‘You feel you’re there’, he said. ‘Look’ says the poem, making us present. It is the same fiction – hardly naïve – by which the dead soldier’s girlfriend is also ‘there’. Thankfully, she never will see again the lover by whom she is already forgotten. But this fictive impossibility – her loving witnessing presence - is the poem’s one moment of saving emotional *reality*, restoring something human to this nightmare ground.

The poem might have ended there. But something in its patterning – in the contrast of ‘We see him almost with content,’ at the opening of the second stanza above, with ‘But she would weep to see today’ at the start of the third – seems to require it to go beyond the redeeming sentiment. ‘Content’ and ‘weep’ have to be in separate stanzas: the soldiers’ (‘almost’) satisfied feelings of vengeance and the girl’s imagined pain are as incompatible and antipathetic as hate and love. Yet here they are, together, side by side, at the same scene. So, too, the virile, intact young soldier is incongruously brought next to the man’s burst, fly-eaten body even by the equipment, ‘hard and good’, which mocks at his decay. These paradoxes take the poem into something tougher still - more impossible or irremediable - at its conclusion:

For here the lover and killer are mingled

who had one body and one heart.

And death who had the soldier singled

has done the lover mortal hurt.

The lover and killer are not just present by virtue of others’ perceptions: those opposing selves always were together in the ‘one’ heart of the single man. It is a fact so suddenly explosive as to seem itself almost ready to burst out of the poem - stayed and held together only by those ‘weak’ rhymes, ‘mingled’, ‘singled’, and the dissonant half-rhyming ‘heart’ and ‘hurt’. But the mingled elements do become momentarily a single have-able thought. ‘Normally you can only know one thing at once,’ my son said. ‘I’m thinking how you can never know the energy of a moving particle because as soon as you stop it to know its mass, you lose any sense of its speed.’ It helped me to see in a new way what else is special about poetry: how it can contain – only just, and only fleetingly - some raw contact with deep, difficult matter and vital processes that are closer to essential life than the relative categories which, as we often intuit, we do not truly or easily fit. ‘Here’, in that final stanza, is really the poem itself - the place where we find again a reality otherwise concealed or missed.

As expected, my son has now given up A level English for Physics.

When I next drove past the familiar grey railings, rosettes again lined the road. The ribbons, now fresh and bright, seemed at once newly moving and sadly inadequate - marking another year in hope’s loyal service and its hour’s brave renewal.