

Memoryspeak

John Turner

(i)

This time in a ditch, things in my eyelashes, a large rock digging into my back. I sit up and brush the dirt from my hands, take long sweeping strokes at my arms and begin to check my face. I feel the tie around my neck, the stains on my suit pants and the imprint of the rock in my back – only it's no rock, but rather a sloshing bottle of some plummy coloured thing that I fish out smell gulp burn shake *head hands stomach grass rush* rushes up to meet me. Again.

(ii)

It doesn't seem serious, but it probably could be. It's more like a problem to be solved, a puzzling anagram, a scrambled set of letters. The first time it happened was with a woman after a colleague's wedding. I'd driven there and later that night she drove my car back to my house; I sloshed me out of the car onto the driveway and she called out, saying she'd drop the car back tomorrow. Thanks. Sitting on the grass next to the cool cricket-laden camellia I waved her off.

My feet stretched onto the lawn and the stars shifted and whooped and yelped, diving crazily and whirling in vortexes that sucked me up; a dizzy boundless enthusiasm bubbled up and 3 a.m. laughter spilled out of me into the quiet suburban night.

A little later I heard the car as it grunted and negotiated the corner before mine where six lanes change into two and you must slow to an imperceptible crawl to turn into the nearest cross street. I sat up, drained the last of the whisky, and waited for her to return. She opened the car door and because the interior light globe had blown I couldn't see her face. I did hear her handbag knock dimly against a loose strip of metal on either the fence or the gate.

"Your keys, your keys. I realised that you wouldn't be able to get inside so I came back, but it doesn't look like you need inside."

"Siddown here. Look at the stars."

"I don't like stars. In London you get used to them not being there and so I decided that they were trying too hard."

"The stars?"

“Yeah, always so serious, so very far away. So very I could already be dead but you can still see my light, aren’t I clever? Astronomers? Get a life. Astrologers? Don’t get me started.”

“Do you have anything to drink?”

“No, do you?”

Inside in the cupboard was more whisky and that was alright. We sat watching bad television, bathing ourselves in beautiful blue light. The summer light of dawn interrupted and I was going to bed and she was having trouble with sentences.

“You can sleep with me, I promise not to molest you.”

“Well, I was kind of hoping that you would.”

That kind of comeback will always slow you up, no matter how drunk you are.

(iii)

The dressing table was positioned so that when you sat up in the bed, it was hard to avoid looking at yourself in the mirror; but when I woke up later that day, determining who I was wasn’t the problem. I got to the toilet, listening to the summer heat ticking outside, leaving the murky grey depths of the bedroom. The woman shifted sleepily, her dry mouth sticking and clicking with the sounds of waking up.

Returning to the doorway gloom from the toilet, her straight brown hair whispered that I had about two or three minutes to work out who it belonged to; her purple toenails tittered, suggesting I take it up with management. From the doorway I could see the dull white sheen of my car in the driveway, my keys on the table. I made my way back to the bed with a mind in clichéd overdrive.

Certainly you may have trouble remembering a stranger you picked up in a bar - or wherever - in some kind of alcoholic or chemical haze, this is a common enough occurrence. This wasn’t like that. I knew the slope of those shoulders, the smattering of freckles on the upper arms, even the way those fingers ran through hair to anchor it behind an ear; all those things yes, but especially the small giggle after she said:

“What time is it?”

“Dunno. Later than before.”

“I gotta go.”

“Yeah.” Ever the urbane sophisticate.

“Don’t ask me for breakfast, you know I can’t stand eating in the morning.”

And in the pause here she looked at me and it seemed that she knew I was lost, that she had laid beside me and watched me cut the strings and float off, looking from afar while she spoke on.

“You know I’m going back to London tomorrow?”

(iv)

After she left I sat casting back through the night with the unmended net of my memory, trawling for something that would catch there. The facts: I knew this woman. She drove me home in my car. We fucked. And now she had gone home to prepare for tomorrow’s London. A practiced but unknown hand skipped stones that barely touched the flat surface of my consciousness.

The disorientation I felt in the moment of standing in the doorway looking at Lisa’s inert body subsided in the painstaking archaeology of the following days. Filling in the white space wasn’t easy - it never is - always becoming harder to complete the further time took me along. The blankness of the hours between your tenth drink and the clarity of another’s warmth beside you always remains incomplete, at best haphazard and uncertain. This blankness is a place where everything collapses, where stepping outside time without that doubling effect of looking at a mirror in a mirror becomes an exhilaration, a line that’s crossed where time ceases to function.

(v)

That’s why I’m here, slopping on a bottle and looking at a distant glow of lights. Nothing seems to make sense. I check my pants: wallet, keys, phone. I never lose them. No matter what. Even when I’m way, way out and have no idea of time or direction or language or self. Somehow the idea of keeping these objects has been submerged so deeply in a part of my memory that no deep-sea diver could ever reach it.

I have no idea where I am so I walk towards the noise of the road which must be just over the rise. The plummy bottle comforts one hand while the other heads instinctively towards an eye that bothers me. I use my thumb to squeeze into the outer corner, while my other fingers land on the hair just above my forehead and discover the real cause of the problem – a dirt encrusted blood caked hub of anger.

Function. Function. Function. Light. Walk. Blink.

The taxi stops. “Where are we?” I ask.