

Of all the Faces in the World, Your Face

By James Hopkin

Speak to me. Ok, if you can't speak, then sing, whisper, moan or sigh! I know you can do it! You have been keeping me up at night with your curses and imprecations! With your ... your holy-sounding lullabies (yes, just like nuns at 5am, bad breath and church varnish caught in their coifs). Also, I should tell you, you make some pretty fearful smells in your sleep. Your breath blows hot and cold!

Call this a conversation? Why go quiet on me now when I'm ready to talk, to open up my heart, my soul, whichever you want, the one, the other, even both? So don't go giving me those painted-out ears. (I know you can hear me.) Or that grimace you wear so well as if I'm the one responsible for everything bad that has ever happened to you.

Listen, that first day you appeared – or rather, that night – each breath of yours landed a whole sentence against my skin. And in this sentence each word was like a drop of dew you'd carried home from the city gardens. I'll admit it to you now: I was a little scared. I pretended to be asleep. I couldn't keep my eyeballs still. My shivers betrayed me. You must have noticed! And when you started your heavenly chanting, I could take it no more; the tears poured down my face, my pillows turned to puddles of longing. I turned away from you. I didn't want you to see me reflected in my misery. Why? Because you had only just arrived in my life and I didn't even know where from. (Though I am aware that everything nocturnal comes from underneath.) I did not want you to witness – so soon, too soon! – the delicious torment you were already exerting upon me.

In another pathetic attempt to convince you I was asleep, I turned to my other side (yes, an insomniac develops an endless assortment of sides). This is a manoeuvre usually full of despairing promise, to find cool, soft bones, a fresh patch of slumber. But still I could feel the features of your face branding my back. Or else an eyeball on both shoulder blades, your

nose at my nape – like a dog that has the bone before the scent – while your words counted out my vertebrae like the beads of an abacus, or worse, a rosary.

I confess, I trembled. I repeat: I did not know who you were or where you had come from.

Earlier that day, another strange event had taken place. A large picture of my face had appeared on a board in the town square. At first, I did not know why, then I remembered a photographer had come round months earlier. He was working on a project about people from elsewhere living in this town. He was very friendly. He said it would be good for the people of the town to see that people from elsewhere were living happily here. I said I wasn't sure about the idea of 'people from elsewhere'. Or, indeed, about the idea of 'happily'. I asked him if the idea of 'people from elsewhere' still exists? He replied that yes, it most certainly does still exist, because if it didn't, then they wouldn't be having an exhibition in the main square about 'people from elsewhere' now, would they? Then he said he would send me the photograph for my consent.

He never did.

Some weeks later, when his visit had slipped from my memory altogether, my face appeared in the square: unsleeping, spotlighted, presiding over cobbles and drunkards and bins, my features unmoved by passing trams, shouts, dropped bottles, the chimes of the nearby church.

That night, with you at my back, I could not sleep. How could I sleep with my 'people from elsewhere' face in the square? I wondered if I was a scarecrow or a scapegoat. And with you – whoever you were, and from wherever you were from – vigilant over my wide-awake body?

On the second day, you started your smells. First I think it was the local sausages, each one as thick as a wrist. Then I think a hint of a Turkish kebab. (Well, there's no accounting for taste.) I have to tell you, you were firing from both ends. I wondered if my weary body and head were conspiring to flush my already distraught senses. I thought of my face in the square, now in daylight, trying to produce a smile for the hordes who pass by the minute, scurrying toward work or food or encounters, or whatever else drives people to put one foot in front of the other and scurry.

I wondered: if I ask for my picture to be removed (well, I was sure I had not given my permission) then would you disappear too? Hours later, you produced other smells: car fumes, rain on waxy green leaves, dog shit (how did you manage these?), and something baking or

frying, cutlets or fritters, so pungent I pictured the tenderised meat until it felt like my tongue was a rubbery chunk smacked flat by a hundred hammers. Is this how you pledged your affinity? By declaring all the body's functions, and as crudely as possible?

Yet you knew you had me. I was warmly encumbered by your presence. From your heavenly singing to your elemental smells, your voices and vapours filled my flat, my soul, my life, in the space of just three days, as if we had always been together and never again would part, for – didn't we agree? – if lovers don't promise each other forever they are unlikely to see beyond tomorrow.

On the third day, people began to look at me strangely in the street. My face bore a close enough resemblance to the picture in the square for them to recognise me, but they must have also noticed the differences: the sunken eyes, the dark circles, the anxious look of a man in torment. (Well, I no longer had the benefit of professional lighting.) Perhaps this is why they pointed and chuckled. Occasionally there was a shout, even a curse, but I tried to play oblivious.

I stopped going to see my picture or to investigate the crowd standing round my motionless mug. But we were united, my photograph and I: we were sleepless beneath the lids. Only, my picture did not show signs of stress. I had to carry them for the both of us. And for you, too, you who would not leave my flat. You who were taciturn for hours and then ridiculously garrulous, chanting, stamping, even growling towards the dark end of the day. I did not have enough ears to catch all your words, even with the additional (and larger) pair proffered by my picture.

Later that same day, I bought flowers, perhaps to celebrate my growing notoriety in the town, or in gratitude for your arrival (for after minutes of abuse in the square I fled back to your unquestioning love) and also, possibly, to banish your smells which were still dragging my senses through abattoirs and boudoirs and other places with French names that give off a sordid stink! So I bought tulips in pink and white. Daffodils, all soft ears and tongues! Little bouquets of purple violets wrapped in a thick green leaf. The flower-seller took my money, pointed to my face, then to the board across the square carrying my picture. Without speaking, she broke into gentle cluckings of mirth. I went as red as a busload of begonias.

When I got back to the flat, I laid these flowers on the floor all about you – a shrine to the living! To the loved! Other bunches I put in vases that I filled with my tears. Yes, tears were coming easily now, almost never stopping. My face in the square looked bold, never

slept, never cried (yes, my chops took a whole town on the chin), so I had to do all the weeping, too. Though, as I have said, I could not manage any of the sleeping. One night, I even thought I should take a marker pen and draw closed lids on my portrait. Then at least one of us would get some kip.

Throughout you murmured to me, in words that one moment came like a spring breeze, scented with mown grass and bird droppings, or, the next moment, with all the melancholy of autumn rain falling in an abandoned hubcap – but still you chanted, and kept chanting, a mantra, a slogan, a military march? Once, miraculously, yes, miraculously, you produced at my feet, from nowhere, a curled and crispy brown leaf, and, on another occasion, a breath as harsh as winter, a smell of concrete and ash, a puff of icy air, and – hey presto! – a snowflake! All the time words and more words, of love and leaving, of adoration and meeting, a perpetual pledge, a long and sensual incantation that had me sniffing my own chest such was my drowsy, head-nodding delight – the *relief!* – of these words that weren't so much words as tiny portions of tenderness, and these kept on coming until I could not see for the tears pumped out by this heart and up through the lachrymatory glands.

When I came in from the street covered in petals and stems and the accumulated embarrassments of a hundred pointing fingers (for the whole town crosses the square), I looked like I'd had a tumble in the cemetery or been to a wedding and run all the way back with confetti caught on the tip of my tongue to tell you, yes, yes, you're the one! Oh, how many murmurs from the breath of love? A long and tender recital for all unmarried mortals! (For I was convinced this chanting must be of love.) How I loved you then as you sang of my loneliness, of all loneliness! For you made even the emptiness of yearning feel like a warm, communal sensation, made of holy water and buttercups. And despite your night-time eructations when, it's true, you transformed all your humours into fetid fumes, and despite the voices from the street you suddenly threw out in one language or another, or a snarling hybrid of many, plus sirens, baby screams, brutal vowels and breaking glass – how did you catch a whole city in your throat? – yes, despite this, and your acrid smells (thus matching your love with monstrosity), that night I slept facing you, and quietly, delicately, we managed the mergings of love.

On the fourth day, things took a turn for the worse. In the street, people were openly jeering at me, laughing, shouting phrases that turned my ears blue and made my loose tooth wobble, until I knew for sure that I was most definitely that person from elsewhere pictured in

the square – though, bravely, my digital doppelganger didn't even flinch. Meanwhile, back in the flat, you started throwing up. But this was no ordinary puking, no, your vomit was of a celestial order, a stinking constellation, but terrestrial, too, for, either side of your holy sobbing and retching, you brought up pieces of paper, sometimes as big as a page from a prayer book, other times small, in tatters, but always covered in indecipherable scribbles, like a bastard hieroglyphic lacking the promise of revelation. Next came sweet wrappers, each one like a cellophane cat-tongue – and that might not have been an arbitrary simile, for what came after that? A feather! (By now, of course, I was alarmed by your diet. By your powers of indigestion.) Desperately I tried to read messages from your puked-up detritus, to find some order or sequence that might explain everything – your origins, for example, or mine! – because by now the singing had stopped, the lullabies, the whispers, too. I wasn't sure where you had gone, or if you were going to come back. Though you had lifted me towards the heavens in terms of hope, you now left me with a heart as flat as a footprint. Yes, you abandoned me somewhere between my grievances and God.

One piece of paper you spat out was covered in full stops. Never before had I sensed the might of so many endings! Now the tears that filled my vases were tears of incomparable suffering. A sense of abandonment flowed through my blood and felt like a panic in reverse. The flowers were carnations. They died before they had fully flowered. Tell me, was my devotion not enough, my heart of so little capacity? Did you come as a blessing that concealed a fatal wound? Had you left, as you had arrived, in the midst of 4am unfortunates, when I opened my eyes to a darkness that cracked like old paint, leaving me astonished that it is this life and not another that I am living, and that it is this country and not another that I am living in, and to see you there before me – yes, a visitation! – and surely not of my own making? Or maybe you had got wind – yes, that's the term! – of the word in the street, of the way people were treating me, shouting at me to go home, yes, maybe you wanted to join the herd and treat me the same way?

On the fifth day, your foul mouth found its range. I have never heard such furious curses, such mutant oaths! From what stinking orifice did you pluck your rancid tongue? There was nothing I could do to appease you, nothing to staunch the torrent of obscenities. I experienced all the pain of a loved one's scorn. Everything I said was wrong, and only angered you more. Everything you said was a condemnation or a painfully sarcastic retort.

You savaged me. When once you had raised me to the stars, you now dragged me down to the sewers.

On the sixth day, the first of a new month, the landlord came round for the rent. When I opened the door of my flat, he stuck a finger under my nose, laughed, and brushed straight past me, his finger now pointing to the ceiling. And then he saw you, the condition you were in – which I had assumed to be happiness. Elation! The ecstatic negligence of love! He asked had there been some trouble? A party? A fight? Some hooligan episode? ‘Everyone in town is talking about you’, he said. ‘What have you done here?’ Then, louder, ‘What are you doing here?’ And he gave that last question such emphasis that it was clear he meant, or it was clear that he wanted me to take it to mean: what are you doing in our town, in our lives, in our neck of the woods? ‘Really, this is your last warning,’ he said, his finger now pointing to you, my love. (Though, with equal veracity, he might just as well have said it was my first warning.)

Though you were mercifully silent, I could feel your contours cringe. He asked me, as he crouched beside you and stroked you, with a slight wince that could only hint at your frown, ‘Are you a madman or a drunk?’ With an angry arm, he flicked up a hundred petals that lay scattered across the floor. He asked: ‘How in God’s name did this happen? Is this how people behave where you come from?’ He put his hand inside the hole in the wall that I had taken for your face. I waited for you to scream. But, again, only silence. I tried to tell him, no, I am not drunk, no, I am not a madman, no, people do not behave like this where I come from, though I was not clear which behaviour he was referring to, and even less clear about where I was from, though I did begin to wonder if I’d been all there in the head (if not the heart) when you and I had come together that ludicrous or benevolent night.

Standing up, the landlord laughed from his adam’s apple to his ankles; he looked like he’d been suddenly covered in bubbles. He wears expensive sunglasses and goes boating at weekends. Last year he divided one flat into three. Only the external walls are real, the rest are partitions of plaster and wood. For months, I have been living inside one of these boxes within the original flat, like a rabbit in a segregated hutch, or a keen mind in quarantine, and then had come the sudden revelation, the blissful torment of the senses.

You.

‘It looks like a boot print,’ said the landlord, crouching again, and giving the hole, your face, my hope, one last stroke. ‘But from the other side. And a bloody big boot at that!’

He turned to me, and assumed the tone of someone addressing the village idiot. ‘Why did you let them put your picture in the square?’

I told him I had never agreed to let them put my picture in the square. He said maybe they put pictures of ‘people from elsewhere’ in the square to encourage people who don’t like ‘people from elsewhere’ to find the ‘people from elsewhere’ and give them a bloody good kicking. I said I didn’t know anything about that, but a lot of people who are not, or who appear not to be from elsewhere, have sworn at me or looked at me in a funny way, or pointed and laughed and jeered, or shouted at me to go home.

Two hours after the landlord had carried his shaking head out of the flat (as if the ensuing dizziness was a small price to pay for shaking out all that disbelief), a decorator arrived with a pot of wet plaster. He did not point at my face and laugh. Instead, with his index fingers, he drew a rectangle around his head, and then put his smiling face in the frame. I pretended not to notice, even though I could see his chin poking out of the parameters. Then he told me that my picture was that very minute being taken down from the square. Those unblinking eyes would at last be able to sleep, to turn away from the scrutiny of the people not from elsewhere, however long or short their hair, however big or small their boots.

It took only twenty minutes for the man to cover up your face. ‘A big boot!’ he said, ‘a big kick!’ And he stood up to demonstrate what a big boot and a big kick look like. Then you were all but gone, patched up, leaving a surface as rough as a shaved scalp, you who came or who was sent to take away my longing (or to deepen it), to cause my paranoia (or to cure it), to make me feel at home (or hated). As my sleepless face was ridiculed in the square, you sang to me of love and tolerance, while blowing your breath by turns sweet and stagnant upon me. (I can forgive you your terrible wind; not one of us is perfect! Though, of course, I cannot find fault with your form: an entry and an exit, what more does anyone need?) Yes, my permanently smiling-scowling love, your sweet harsh face was banished, leaving only two faint lines where a personal prejudice (for isn’t that what love is?) had made its point.

My flat is now full of dead flowers and the water in the vases has turned bad, for even tears lose their purity, and it was while sweeping up some disembodied daffodils – as if a whole season, a whole heart had died among them! – that I found a note, and before I had even read it I knew it was from you, because it was on a similar page to the ones you had puked up when you were bringing forth a city, or something else so bad that you couldn’t keep it down, so I skipped nervously around the flat, first finishing the tidying for I couldn’t

decide whether I should read this note or not. I had such mixed feelings about these last few days. I was thinking of packing up and leaving.

Glimpsing the paper I saw legible words and that was a first, even for you – though I was convinced already of your human aspirations (or should that be divine? Yes, whose side are you on?) – even if you could no longer sing, or lick the cleft of odious curses.

Finally, when the flat was washed and scrubbed and dusted (yes, a good clean can be just as effective as bugging off) I collapsed upon the bed, a few putrescent petals pressed to my sweaty forehead, my lips close to the spot where you, my vicious-beloved, had prospered, and I ran a finger down one of your lines (how time runs circles round our vanity!), the plaster still damp on your face, and I took your note from my pocket and, with trembling hands, and a heart I had to squeeze for hope, I smoothed the paper across my palm.

‘Later, you bastard,’ said the note. ‘We will be back.’

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