

# Graham Mort

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'Aphasia' began as a single poem, a meditation upon the phenomenon of colony collapse amongst bee populations: a theme that became haunted by a history of lost species, lost languages. After the first poem, connections began to proliferate. I had previously adapted Maurice Maeterlink's extraordinary book *The Life of the Bee* for BBC radio, whilst the geographical and historical setting of my poem was also generating considerable personal resonance. The associations of memory and the dynamics of language in both the theme and writing process led me on. The single poem grew into a sequence; a first draft took shape. I thought it was ready for publication, but the first version of 'Aphasia' was rejected by this magazine. And that felt right. I'd been struggling to control the material, to find pace, texture, silence. I split some poems into smaller units, re-sequenced, revised, added a new opening poem to contextualise. When the sequence was finally accepted it was suggested that I drop this introductory poem. That felt right, too: it had served its purpose as scaffolding for the sequence. In recognizing that, I accepted something that the young poet who sets out in the poem might have found hard: that sometimes one flounders myopically in one's own work, that cutting invigorates a text by opening up imaginative space. Less is invariably more as the old – apposite, but hard to learn – cliché has it. Though not in the case of bees, where less may prove, sooner or later, to be apocalyptic.

## APHASIA

### Exodus

Schooled, freed, leaving the city  
     for that line of hills, for lime-white  
 scars, taking the road north. That  
     bright-edged air was light

and light was future time, its  
     flux, its superfluity. I felt I owned  
 those fells quartered in stone, or  
     they owned me before I came

through history: such *déjà vu*, that  
     mind-made familiarity. I woke to  
 shorn meadows, each with its  
     own hay barn; flour-nosed sheep,

hills' canticles of rain spewing  
     speech from flooded workings,  
 venting peat-rich vowels,  
     guttural, ancestral, already

deep in my way of saying  
     things.

### Toponymy

Muker is Norse: Keld, Gunnerside,  
     Thwaite, Swale, Grinton, Reeth –  
 all migrant-named, the tongue rolling  
     in foreign grit.

Noon heat climbs as stratus in sky's  
     china blue, spreading a mycelium  
 spawn. Turned headstones pave  
     graveyards, face-down

on their holy texts, pressing dates  
     that open and close centuries – wild  
 flowers in a stone book – recording  
     each life's shrunken

sentience. Field gates sprung  
     with steel where a nailed boot-sole  
 served once, slapping timber against  
     hewn uprights that

thud, shudder, loosen. Clog irons  
     struck out this way, wore grooves

in dirt paths before those synoptic  
gospels were laid:

lead miners trudging from unholy  
dreams to labour, pick and shovel  
heads hushing each pent gill.  
That lode's all spent:

galena smelted, wrought to  
musket balls, rifle rounds, pipe-  
work, pewter, solder, guttering,  
earthenware glaze and

church roofs. Now spoil-heaps  
that seized crusher left, wrecked  
washways, rusted gears, smashed  
timber, trolleys, roofless

shacks, sodden stone-lined shafts  
boring into hills to drain moss  
of rain that slants, smokes,  
fumes into a new century.

### Leadwork

Cheap imports bled out the trade, prices  
falling fast as shucked slag. They left in flocks,

in droves: America, Australia, Canada, the  
New World mineral-rich to miners skilled

as fairytale dwarfs, taking out their gnarled  
Yorkshire speech then losing it. Trade wars,

then the real thing – Spion Kop, Mons,  
Paschaendale – emptying these vallies like

a churn. Leaving for steady rations, England's  
soiled glory and shilling, for the liberties of a

slipshod imagining. Crushed into troopships,  
the dale's clay, dust and mud under their  
fingernails

and, still to come, their toil in Picardy: pick  
and shovel work, walling with sandbags, sagging

corpses, sleeping in a drowned sap or shelled  
church, remembering the Swale's chill against

their hands where they took a girl to ford  
shallows after Sunday chapel's gleeless drone

to see her shriek and hop from rock to rock,  
her skirts pulled high above neat ankle bones.

### Legacy

Fern and harts tongue rife,  
another season dead in the  
fire hole, grass burying the  
flue where flame ran, where

smoke fumed to arsenic  
crystals. This furnace burned  
lurid as a sacking against the  
dark of day and night, as if

the longboats were back.  
Whinberries, bracken, black-  
mouthed shooting butts, fell-  
sides patched pale with turf

cuttings, the burned heather  
bleached, the peat store's Inca  
ruin sunk. Here a bankrupt  
gentry disinherit labour's

legacy. Range Rovers bring  
them to pony treks, the shoot –  
grouse coveys break with  
choked cries, the guns'

hammers cracking wild air,  
wind carrying their calls  
away, the holy ghost of  
drizzle haunting daylight:

Surrender Moss, Healaugh Crag,  
Barras Top; North Rake, Hanging  
Stone, Wetslaw; Old Gang Beck,  
Flincher Gill, Reeth High Moor.

**Reliquary**

The railway station's iron  
     lines lead nowhere now:  
 a museum, its reliquary of

pails and butter churns,  
     its nostalgia nagging us  
 with caried teeth. Rust

pitting rails, cast wheels  
     fettled in rank grease,  
 grainy images of haytime

and village shows. Two farm  
     women rope a prize cow,  
 dragging it from that long

gone August day pixilating  
     from silver emulsion that  
 might have purified from

seams of lead. No memory  
     there of the Swale path, the  
 corpse road, melding tongues

with earth and bone – worn  
     by water, by boots: dumb  
 face-downward stone.

**Visitation**

When we came here I thought I'd  
     brought you home with me, back

to the source, back to the split stone  
     of our destiny: dark haired, dark-eyed

letting go your old faith to live in stark  
     uncertainties. We stayed in that cottage

by the church where an old man in  
     tooled boots and a Stetson knocked

one day, his vowels mined from England's  
     North, flown back from Texas to the green

Norse fields he couldn't forget. Nineteen-  
     thirteen: he'd stayed here then, snared rabbits

on the river flats for the farmer's wife  
     to skin into a pie, then sailed far west

to find another life leaving his friends  
     to fall to Europe's febrile maw. We

brought him inside and he cried the  
     way a child sobs for some unnamed

thing, inconsolably old, come home to  
     die at last. He thanked us with blue veined

hands and when he left we made love  
     in that bedroom with its croaking boards

and whitewashed walls, its crooked  
     sashes and thinning glass, knowing our

haptic touch was all there was to  
     say: our bodies tangled in cool sheets,

your cream-skin skin under my  
     tongue; wild rose aureoles, sun's

glittering wedge of dust, the cast  
     petticoats of thorn trees on the fell.

### Colony Collapse

This ether of honey is clover,  
bistort, cranesbill, creeping  
buttercup, the pale frocks  
of fool's parsley, thistle heads  
that goldfinches squabble at.

Not one butterfly  
alights or honey bee thrums  
in foxgloves, bumping from  
purple bells, pockets  
crammed with pollen.

Their colonies fail –  
even pheromones fade  
there – the language for  
each flower lost at the  
hive's finger-tight entry.

Those sentries have  
found the sleep of lost  
vigilance, its fading drone  
of wings: incalculable,  
everlasting dark.

### Funerary

The Swale is quick here.  
Once I scrambled out on  
wet stones to let my parents  
slip away: peat-brown

water, a long soft syllable  
of ash. Curlews liquefy  
damp air, the plaster-lath  
gable of the farm I

dreamed I slept under  
in some former life, burst  
to a buttress of spilled  
rubble, distempered

walls, a century's filth.  
At the old workings we  
watch a dipper feed one  
fat chick, its screams

teetering on the cusp  
of hunger and self-love;  
the chant of water going  
on, its untranslatable

plainsong slaking a day's  
sweet spaciousness.

## Quotidian

Riverside sward stinks of  
 death's rust: shot rabbits'  
 eye holes accusing light  
 of entry. Now a wagtail  
 sulphur-breasted,

lambs, panting in thorn  
 roots; a day so hot it  
 twists iron trunks, the chink  
 of oystercatchers telling  
 coin, a sandpiper shy

at its breeding ground.  
 Now a buzzard's Calvary  
 of blazing air, bullocks  
 at the water's edge  
 mooning, white-eyed,

a small boy bending  
 over tadpoles in a pool  
 hermeneutic to their  
 scrambled writ. A  
 warbler darts into

the sedge, cow dung  
 daubs a claggy memory,  
 its recollection reaching  
 before words, rich in every  
 thing felt, everything

unspoken. The day pours  
 heat at the valley head,  
 ascending as ribbed ice  
 above the track where  
 I've seen sparrowhawks

court at dusk, that  
 memory singing here  
 again, the path spurting  
 the gill, climbing its own  
 mirage: pale sand

sifting the hours, a  
 white swarm rising.

## Reprise

The city turns – daylight to nightglow –  
 horizons backlit by its prophecy. Vowels

purr through airwaves jammed with  
 ghosts, each jostling voice a new embodiment –

foreign blood mixed with local grit  
 to better the aggregate of its long telling.

Here, in this valley's parched  
 throat, struck stone smells of war;

those grave slabs face down make  
 pathways of lost bible lore; these flower

heads white as palsied washdays, the bees'  
 semiotic fugue quaint as lost madrigals.

All moment and memory lofted here:  
 summer hawks courting as self-shadows,

twin consequence, fledged passions  
 of air. Blossom laces blackthorn, its

lingering scent of loss, the Swale  
 quick as tanned muscle, bee foragers

wayward as words, gathering  
 quintessence only to fade, to fail us.

The freight of tongues scribed under  
 flat stone, unredeemed, the means of

remembrance forgetting itself: face-  
 down, text-down, everlastingly laid

down. And the city turning still, its epic  
 yarn spinning a shroud of silence: Earth's

dimming ember sucking at reservoirs  
 of coal, oil, shale, at the atom's spilled

seed, its bright, blind, brief occluded  
 eye looming in space, fading as stretching

waves of light – what was becoming  
 what is, will be.