

Graham Mort

'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 spurning
 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.