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Seeing Stars

Written by Simon Armitage

Published by Faber and Faber

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Seeing Stars

SIMON ARMITAGE



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First published in 2010
by Faber and Faber Ltd
Bloomsbury House
74-77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA

Typeset by Faber and Faber Ltd
Printed in England by T. J. International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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A CIP record for this book
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ISBN 978-0-571-24990-9



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2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements and thanks are due to the editors and organisers of the following publications and projects: *Salt Magazine*, *Blackbox Manifold*, *The Literateur*, *The Rialto*, *Grist*, *PN Review*, *Poetry London*, *Yorkshire Sculpture Park* ('The Twilight Readings'), *Fiddlehead* (Canada), BBC Radio 4 'Writing the City', *Cent*, *Tatler*, *To Hell*, *Poetry Review*, *The Colour of Sound – Anthony Frost Exhibition* (Beaux Arts), *Love Poet*, *Carpenter – Michael Longley at Seventy* (Enitharmon), *Loops*, *TriQuarterly* (US), *The New Yorker* (US), *AGNI* (US).

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The Christening

I am a sperm whale. I carry up to 2.5 tonnes of an oil-like balm in my huge, coffin-shaped head. I have a brain the size of a basketball, and on that basis alone am entitled to my opinions. I am a sperm whale. When I breathe in, the fluid in my head cools to a dense wax and I nosedive into the depths. My song, available on audiocassette and compact disc is a comfort to divorcees, astrologists and those who have ‘pitched the quavering canvas tent of their thoughts on the rim of the dark crater’. The oil in my head is of huge commercial value and has been used by NASA, for even in the galactic emptiness of deep space it does not freeze. I am attracted to the policies of the Green Party *on paper* but once inside the voting booth my hand is guided by an unseen force. Sometimes I vomit large chunks of ambergris. My brother, Jeff, owns a camping and outdoor clothing shop in the Lake District and is a recreational user of cannabis. Customers who bought books about me also bought *Do Whales Have Belly Buttons?* by Melvin Berger and street maps of Cardiff. In many ways I have *seen it all*. I keep no pets. Lying motionless on the surface I am said to be ‘logging’, and ‘lobtailing’ when I turn and offer my great slow fluke to the horizon. Don’t be taken in by the dolphins and their winning smiles, they are the pickpockets of the ocean, the gypsy children of the open waters and they are laughing all the way to Atlantis. On the basis of ‘finders keepers’ I believe the Elgin Marbles should remain the property of the British Crown. I am my own God – why shouldn’t I be? The first people to open me up thought my head was full of sperm, but they were men, and had lived without women for many weeks, and were far from home. Stuff comes blurting out.

An Accommodation

— and I both agreed that something had to change, but I was still stunned and not a little hurt when I staggered home one evening to find she'd draped a net curtain slap bang down the middle of our home. She said, 'I'm over here and you're over there, and from now on that's how it's going to be.' It was a small house, not much more than a single room, which made for one or two practical problems. Like the fridge was on my side and the oven was on hers. And she had the bed while I slept fully clothed in the inflatable chair. Also there was a Hüsker Dü CD on her half of the border which I wouldn't have minded hearing again for old times' sake, and her winter coat stayed hanging on the door in my domain. But the net was the net, and we didn't so much as pass a single word through its sacred veil, let alone send a hand crawling beneath it, or, God forbid, yank it aside and go marching across the line. Some nights she'd bring men back, deadbeats, incompatible, not fit to kiss the heel of her shoe. But it couldn't have been easy for her either, watching me mooch about like a ghost, seeing me crashing around in the empty bottles and cans. And there were good times too, sitting side by side on the old settee, the curtain between us, the TV in her sector but angled towards me, taking me into account.

Over the years the moths moved in, got a taste for the net, so it came to resemble a giant web, like a thing made of actual holes strung together by fine,

nervous threads. But there it remained, and remains
to this day, this tattered shroud, this ravaged lace
suspended between our lives, keeping us
inseparable and betrothed.

The Cuckoo

When James Cameron was a young man, this happened to him. After his eighteenth birthday party had come to an end and the guests had disappeared wearing colourful hats and clutching cubes of Battenberg cake wrapped in paper napkins, James's mother sat him down at the breakfast bar. The smell of snuffed candles and discharged party poppers floated in the air. 'James, I'm not your mother,' she told him. 'What?' he managed to croak. 'I work for the government and my contract comes to an end today.' 'Does dad know?' asked the bewildered James. 'He's not your father. Don't be cross with us, we're only doing our job.' James felt like a gold tooth sent flying through the air in a fist fight. 'What about my brother, Peter, and all the family?' 'Actors,' she said, very matter-of-factly. 'I don't believe you. Not auntie Madge.' 'Especially her. She went to drama school. She was always a tad Shakespearian for my taste but some people like that approach.' The small tear in James's eye, like a baby snail, finally emerged from its shell. 'Will you leave me?' he asked. She said, 'There's a taxi coming in half an hour. I've left a chilli con carne in the fridge and there's a stack of pizzas in the freezer. Pepperoni – the ones you like. We're opening a bed and breakfast place on the east coast. Actually it's a safe-house for political prisoners – I can tell you that because I know you won't repeat it.' Suddenly she looked like the meanest woman who ever lived, though of course he loved her very being.

James went outside. His best friend, Snoobie, and Carla, his girlfriend, were leaning on the wall with suitcases in

their hands. Carla was wearing sunglasses and passing a piece of chewing gum from one side of her mouth to the other. 'Not you two as well?' said James, despairingly. 'Fraid so,' said Snoobie. 'Anyway, take care. I've been offered a small part in a play at the Palace Theatre in Watford and there's a read through tomorrow morning. She's off to Los Angeles, aren't you, Carla?' 'Hollywood,' she said, still chewing the gum. James said, 'Didn't it mean anything, Carla? Not even that time behind the taxi rank after the Microdisney concert?' 'Dunno,' she shrugged. 'I'd have to check the file.' James could have punched a hole in her chest and ripped out the poisonous blowfish of her heart. He walked heavily up to the paddock. If he'd been a smoker who'd quit, now would have been the time to start again. If he'd been carrying a loaded firearm in his pocket he might have put that to his lips as well. Then a bird fell out of the sky and landed just a yard or so from his feet. A cuckoo. It flapped a few times and died. However tormented or shabby you're feeling, however low your spirits, thought James, there's always someone worse off. His mother had taught him that. It was then he noticed the tiny electric motor inside the bird's belly, and the wires under its wings, and the broken spring sticking out of its mouth.

Back in the Early Days of the Twenty-First Century

Back in the early days of the twenty-first century I was working as a balloon seller on the baked and crumbling streets of downtown Mumbai. It was lowly work for a man like me with a sensitive nature and visionary dreams, but at least I wasn't moping around like a zombie, tapping the windows of taxis and limousines with a broken fingernail, begging for biscuits and change. Besides which, these were no ordinary inflatables, but gargantuan things, like gentle, alien beings. To drum up business I'd fill one with air and slap the flat of my hand on the quivering skin, the sound booming out among passing tourists, reverberating through body and soul.

It was a sticky and slow Thursday in March when he crossed the road towards me, that man in his seersucker suit, and chose a purple balloon from the bag, lifted it with his little finger like evidence found at the scene of some filthy crime, and said, 'How much for this?' We haggled and he bargained hard, drove me down to my lowest price, which was two rupees, then he said, 'OK, but I want it blowing up.' 'No, sir,' I said, 'that price is without air.' 'Blowing up, buddy, right to the top, or I'm walking away,' said the man in the seersucker suit. Trade had been slack that day. In fact in ten sun-strangled hours this was my only nibble, and to walk home with empty pockets is to follow the hearse, so they say. So I exhaled at great length, breathed the air of existence into that purple blimp, and to this day I wish I had not. For with that breath my soul was sold, and all for the price of a cup of betel nuts or a lighted candle placed in the lap of the elephant god.

And his lazy daughter danced with me once and left me
to slouch and gag in the stinking womb of my own stale
breath. Then his fat boy bundled me straight to his room,
and when I wouldn't yield to his two-fisted punches and
flying bicycle kicks, all the spite of puberty coursed
through the veins in his neck, and the light in his eye
shrank to a white-hot, pin-sharp, diamond-tipped point.

Michael

So George has this theory: the first thing we ever steal, when we're young, is a symbol of what we become later in life, when we grow up. Example: when he was nine George stole a Mont Blanc fountain pen from a fancy gift shop in a hotel lobby – now he's an award-winning novelist. We test the theory around the table and it seems to add up. Clint stole a bottle of cooking sherry, now he owns a tapas bar. Kirsty's an investment banker and she stole money from her mother's purse. Tod took a Curly Wurly and he's morbidly obese. Claude says he never stole anything in his whole life, and he's an actor i.e. unemployed. Derek says, 'But wait a second, I stole a blue Smurf on a polythene parachute.' And Kirsty says, 'So what more proof do we need, Derek?'

Every third Saturday in the month I collect my son from his mother's house and we take off, sometimes to the dog track, sometimes into the great outdoors. Last week we headed into the Eastern Fells to spend a night under the stars and to get some quality time together, father and son. With nothing more than a worm, a bent nail and a thread of cotton we caught a small, ugly-looking fish; I was all for tossing it back in the lake, but Luke surprised me by slapping it dead on a flat stone, slitting its belly and washing out its guts in the stream. Then he cooked it over a fire of brushwood and dead leaves, and for all the thinness of its flesh and the annoying pins and needles of its bones, it made an honest meal. Later on, as it dropped dark, we bedded down in an old deer shelter on the side of the hill. There was a hole in the roof. Lying there on our backs, it was as if we were looking into the inky blue

eyeball of the galaxy itself, and the darker it got, the more the eyeball appeared to be staring back. Remembering George's theory, I said to Luke, 'So what do you think you'll be, when you grow up?' He was barely awake, but from somewhere in his sinking thoughts and with a drowsy voice he said, 'I'm going to be an executioner.' Now the hole in the roof was an ear, the ear of the universe, exceptionally interested in my very next words. I sat up, rummaged about in the rucksack, struck a match and said, 'Hold on a minute, son, you're talking about taking a person's life. Why would you want to say a thing like that?' Without even opening his eyes he said, 'But I'm sure I could do it. Pull the hood over someone's head, squeeze the syringe, flick the switch, whatever. You know, if they'd done wrong. Now go to sleep, dad.'

I'll Be There to Love and Comfort You

The couple next door were testing the structural fabric of the house with their difference of opinion. 'I can't take much more of this,' I said to Mimi my wife. Right then there was another almighty crash, as if every pan in the kitchen had clattered to the tiled floor. Mimi said, 'Try to relax. Take one of your tablets.' She brewed a pot of camomile tea and we retired to bed. But the pounding and caterwauling carried on right into the small hours. I was dreaming that the mother of all asteroids was locked on a collision course with planet Earth, when unbelievably a fist came thumping through the bedroom wall just above the headboard. In the metallic light of the full moon I saw the bloody knuckles and a cobweb tattoo on the flap of skin between finger and thumb, before the fist withdrew. Mimi's face was powdered with dirt and dust, but she didn't wake. She looked like a corpse pulled from the rubble of an earthquake after five days in a faraway country famous only for its paper kites.

I peered through the hole in the wall. It was dark on the other side, with just occasional flashes of purple or green light, like those weird electrically-powered life forms zipping around in the ocean depths. There was a rustling noise, like something stirring in a nest of straw, then a voice, a voice no bigger than a sixpence, crying for help. Now Mimi was right next to me. 'It's her,' she said. I said, 'Don't be crazy, Mimi, she'd be twenty-four by now.' 'It's her I tell you. Get her back, do you hear me? GET HER BACK.' I rolled up my pyjama sleeve and pushed my arm into the hole, first to my elbow, then as

far as my shoulder and neck. The air beyond was clammy and damp, as if I'd reached into a nineteenth-century London street in late November, fog rolling in up the river, a cough in a doorway. Mimi was out of her mind by now. My right cheek and my ear were flat to the wall. Then slowly but slowly I opened my fist to the unknown. And out of the void, slowly but slowly it came: the pulsing starfish of a child's hand, swimming and swimming and coming to settle on my upturned palm.