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Letter to Patience

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Extract

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I

The Cottage, 70 Padnell Road, Cowplain,
Hants, England, 5th May, 1993.
Patience – as I begin this yet again

now everyone's asleep, the BBC
World Service News is on its perfect line
along that line once ruled invisibly

across the globe to where that watch of mine
ticks on the inside of your wrist. Mosquito-
thin red second hand, you can refine

us to a single *now* jerk *now*, zero
meridian, across this black glass sky
with its own grid of panes and stars, and slow

pulse winking, like some tropical firefly
inching away. It could be taking this
tomorrow where time's real rules still apply:

sea, desert, savannah, airport, post office
with its dates and stamps, and then the bare
tyres bumping over dust with this homesickness

or something like it, turning *here* to *there,*
and *now* to *then,* except that now, before
even the words I'm even half aware

I want to mean form in my mouth, as sure
and speechless as the ink itself, I hear
you hearing them, as if I'm some folk-lore

style ghost that needs no corridor to steer
through space or time, as if the see-through head
reflected like a kite on this sky near

us both, might bring these words not yet quite said.
My ghost, the paper soul of me that slips
away, leaving its cell of bone for dead

awhile, here, two o'clock, the first few pips
before the news again on BBC,
and hands typing by touch. No, fingertips.

II

Go little spirit, then, and I can see
the candles wobbling on those stalls outside
the campus gate, the piles of *Ambi, Maggi*

Cubes, tea bags, the mosquito coils, the dried
crayfish in twists of polythene, the tray
with Saddam Hussein's face on it, the fried

yam clicking in its oil as Mamma Ture
bends village style down to her wide black pans,
her toes spread out, her bum hoisted, her grey

logs nothing now but beards, the Peak Milk cans
with tugging wicks of cotton wool, the flare
of charcoal from the suya sellers' fans,

house-fronts swaying in fumes, through pepper air
the coloured lightbulbs rattling on your bar
making the tree in front as vague as hair,

the drain wrinkly with rainbows, the car
sunk to its rusted wheel hubs in the dust,
door jamb, handbills for *Double Crown* and *Star,*

thin slits of light, reggae, voices, a gust
of laughter. As if I could make that bit
of threadbare cloth push back, as if I just

might feel the wall resist my palm, its grit
just shifting first, then underneath, the glow
of that sun right down in the mud of it....

III

As if it's all there still, a road, a row
of houses with the horns and plasticine-
like joins of walls, as if the radio

is wrong, or here has not been touched, there's been
no rioting, no churches have been torched,
no beer tipped in the gutters, no *shebeen*

(as they called it) left with its roofbeams scorched
and smoking among broken chairs and glass,
no *women from Hollywood Club* debauched

and stoned for harlots, as if men with scars
and home made bandages had not crammed Kano
junction struggling into buses, cars

taxies, mammy wagons. I don't know
where to address this to you in Benin
City, Patience. I'll send it care of Joe

at the department, if in fact Joe's in
the office still – yes, I know, for some clerk
to crumple up and lob towards the bin

with all the others which have this postmark
and nothing in them but the words? And yet,
it's just words, isn't it – the helpless stark

unlikelihood that they will ever get
to you – that makes me weigh the empty air
and shape of each. As if to hedge a bet.

IV

My daughter's new Bob Marley hair
beads click each time she moves her head, asleep
against the broad arm of the easy chair.

This was their Music Room and we still keep
the Francis Day & Hunter songs in place
along the shelves. My childhood tunes are deep

into the walls and floorboards here, their base
between pantos and summer shows. They look
from sterling silver frames into the space

from which applause should come. Outside, a hook
and chain suspends *The Cottage* in the ye
old letters of a children's story book.

Sometimes we act them out at bedtime, Ratty,
Badger, Mole, hallooing *Hey you fellows*
from the garden in their good chap RP,

those upright beasts dressed in Victorian clothes
that make you laugh. Lara's got a green
felt Mr Toad. His humbug eyes don't close

for all she hugs, just blink back as this screen
blinks, towards shelves of *Tarzan*, paper music,
Porter, Gershwin, Berlin, Kern – Dad's has-been

ancestors whose *Darkies* clinked an Afrik
banjo gut as if their fingering
might just retune the sun's own rays to pick

out human intervals along a string
and fret, just like the ancient profs, with skin
almost as dark, who made the numbers sing

for young Pythagoras when he sat in
their bars – like yours – drunk to the selfless essence
floating from his body like a djin

in timeless *now*. Exactly now, Patience,
I too want to make all Africa narrow
to a mud walled bar. There's arrogance.

V

As I think the thought of it a shadow
tumbler prints the creosoted top
of a plank table with those little hollow

ovals like a spider's web. A drop
of fat bursts into charcoal smoke that lifts
in rags across the voices, reggae, pop

of bottle tops, recalling, as it drifts
and thins away, some textbook entropy
stopped in the photograph's siftings and shifts

here, far off, at a screen, in memory
where there's no time, only a sense of sight
that's always there behind the eyes exactly

now, your stiff headtie, your nyash wrapped tight
in *george* as always, the wet bottles gleam-
ing in your elbows, now as every night

both there and here, both real and in the dream
in which your ghost is standing there again
unknown to you, as in a spotlight beam,

caught in the slime and wrinkles of a brain
that isn't yours, and synapse pulse and node
dissolve you Star Trek style into a rain

then in its other time and space reload
each cliché over cliché, till it's you,
again, half juju and half genome code,

now moving through the bar with *esewu*
in little wooden tubs. The gobbets shine
and steam and wobble in the soup, grey-blue

goat lip, goat nostril, goat eye, ear. "Fine-fine
na you go mek book, John, wid dis kain brain
for dey insai." And yet it isn't mine,

is it, nor yours, this picture from a chain
of nerves that spreads and spreads out of my head
like pins and needles, that I can't contain?

VI

"The bar is what you're going to miss," you said,
"not me," but that's wrong isn't it, to draw
lines around people (even if they're dead),

as if I'd miss the place you live in more
than you, when there's no line between at all
and that's something that *you* kept saying, *your*

philosophy, the sense of floor, mud wall,
dust road as who we are, the kites' long cry
at harmattan, the beggar's rhythmic call

outside Alhaji Kowa's store, this *I*
that floats and enters you from just as far
as ever, dear one, shapeless as the sigh

that lifts out of your mouth, out of the bar,
out of the rusted corrugated zinc
and mixes with some wailing armoured car

out on the road, and then the first tink-tink
of birds, the cockerel's call, none of it you,
except that when I think of it I think

it is and not the old *femme noire, femme nue*
'Afrique', no, something shared in spite of skin
colour, and Lugard's maxim gun, or *through*

just those, is it? I think so, what we're in,
as what we are. And so I'm writing this
Magana Jari Ce, am I, to spin

you into words? A spell, a selfishness
to try and keep you there, or rather here,
closing my eyes with lust to see, miss

you, sharper – no, the bar, music, the beer?
Or it's an elegy for someone dead
for all I know, for all I fear to fear.

VII

After my mother died I went to Red-
stone Hill, swooshing the leaves up through the same
woods I'd walked as a boy towards that bed

in that cold dormitory where she came
more real than in real life inside a cone
of spotlight, touched the steel tubing his name

was labelled to, and sang to him alone,
the blubby baby newbug with the damnfool
stick-out ears. Patience, I have to own

up to my empire making boarding school,
of course I do. It educated me....
So when she died, I went, stood by the pool,

looked at the brownish water in the vee
made by the concrete – cracked now, weeds in it –
remembering how clean it used to be

for swimming sports, and how we'd dive and split
its insubstantial glitter on the gun
then gag for lack of breath. There's still some grit

left from the drive. The trees still keep the sun
off where the forecourt circle was. Mayflies,
blackberries, nettles, stone steps overrun

with ground ivy. Vandals from the high rise
set fire to it. The walls are gone. There's ash
like porridge on my boots. Behind it lies

the green air of the jungle and this hash
of years of leaves, and old planks from the shed
where Tarzan used to come to see his cache

of human things: his father's knife, the bed
on which his own Mum's bones still lay, the cot
with that small skeleton put there instead

of him, the changeling of an ape. The plot
writ in his genes – part folktale, part Lamarck,
part racist pulp – returned him here. The blot

of his baby fingerprint. *Noah's Ark*
with his true name in it, from which impos-
sibly, he'd work out every bug-like mark

he found again and then again across
the page, not realising that he should,
dead as they were, speak them aloud. The loss

of everything except the skin he stood
inside was what he found. It brought him back
to his true Englishness, since there he could,

strange pale thing that he was, turn all his lack
of mother love to strength, and run and fight
and swim and jump and climb and track. And track.

VIII

Tracks, traces, tokens, trophies. Jungle light
becomes museum glass, their backs and arms
and necks able to twist like that in spite

of nature since they *are* just art. No qualms
of conscience, no shame, and no characters.
Only their shapes are human. Gods of farms?

Ancestors? Souls changed in the camera's
white prejudice again, this time to coffee
table ones some careful editor's

assigned a tribe and a geography.
And there they shag, mouths yawning out for it,
all poles and holes, no longer piously,

nor fertile, but as we say, *explicit.*
Merchandise, that should have been sent back
like all the reproductions we exhibit

in the theatre of the brain. I'll pack
and freight them back to *you,* shall I? The not-
returnable, not-mine, not-me, rucksack

which the sweating pilgrim bears, so hot
for far off love... Shall I? Your hand, your eye,
your mouth – item by item, lot by lot?

IX

Fertility, the primitive: how high
heels of space alloy, and tights smooth as sand
define the definition of a thigh.