The Broken Word

Adam Foulds

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Extract

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1: WHAT WAS HAPPENING

Compact glare of a match flame in daylight

and the waiter's dark hand still
as an ornament, the flame an upright leaf
tending to Jenkins as he sucked his cigarette alight,
because the train had slowed.
He wished it wouldn't slow, not
among the lion-coloured slums
with their cattery stink.
He could see people posting themselves,
third class, into the train windows or dropping
carefully onto wide, unfeeling feet.

The waiter waved out the flame.
Can I get you a drink, sir?
Sun's over the yard arm.

The waiter stood in the cylinder
of his white shift, understanding
or not. The train bucked,
gathering speed. He levelled himself
naturally as a glass of water.

Jenkins blew smoke towards him.

Also there is an Englishman, English boy,
sir, on the train with … other people.
Really? Who?
I don't know name, sir.
Well, tell him to come and see me,
and the answer is yes, bring me a drink.

*

The carriage dark with bodies.
Bright smells of opened fruit.
He asked questions and got
one old man talking because
he loved the plush impacts
of their consonants, the glimmer
of teeth, and had missed the sound
of thoughts fetched and weighed
and slowly spoken, ideas
that had formed slowly in the sun,
a million miles from the bark
and whine and snivel
and brag of school.
It soothed him. The noble cheekbones soothed him.

The old man looked like Joseph
from his own farm
who always had something
small and alive to show.
He spoke of his son in the city,
the difficult life, and ambition.

Then a cough, a touch on his shoulder.

Excuse me, sir. Mr Jenkins invites you
to go to him, please.

*

Tables. Empty Seats. Napery.
The proper way to sit.

This Jenkins, half-remembered, had a tweed moustache:
threads of ginger brown and white