

Claire LARRIERE

Jacquet se met à rire de plus belle et
il regarde Ducul comme lorsqu'ils
font leur randonnée: «Un sacré coup
nouissant, au moment précis où Mme
voit le mort.

I must have read it somewhere. In some small new magazine that probably
would not survive, no matter how much Big Cool Coke Thirst and Big Hard
Marlboro Space they advertised. I can see it still. Eroded. Eaten away by bright
yellow and purple patches (what was that again? which washing powder?).

*But I don't want to remember. I don't want to know. I do not know. I
have never met Bill. Or Sandra. Or the other one. They are not, don't you
see. They are figments, fiction. They only had a fleeting paper existence
and even the paper disintegrated.*

*But they are in me they won't go away they wait and wave they run and
grobe and*

I cannot I cannot I cannot
the key

cannot release them

A child, a boy, skinny, bony, tanned. How old? Any age between
eleven and fourteen, but smallish. Running down the steep sinuous
unpaved streets eyes lit a terrible hope burning in them a consuming
fire of expectation. Sun barely out on the harbour but sharp already
cutting angles of darkness into its new light where it meets a wall
drawing tentacles of neat shade behind trees weaving night on the
bright dirt of the wards on the wooden slats of the quay in the early
busy-ness of all those other people crowding in as the boat sails in. We
do not know what they want. His want is too big. It cancels out
everything else. His fire is too hot. The sun itself cannot touch him.
He moves (runs? flies?) in a light of his own, without a shadow on
any side of him. (Or is it because he goes too fast and the shadow
cannot follow?) And then stops dead. Stands. The dark purple water
flapping about a yard away from his now suddenly motionless feet.
And nothing moves in him any more. Only his eyes are still burning,
boring their holes of want into the morning light. Even now, when he
stands still—and no one around him on any side in all this throng of
people rushing to get their stalls ready, to pack their bundles high for
some distant journey or for the weekly market trip to the next island,
because after all we did want to know, we did want to look, if only to
escape for the briefest of spells the tight appeal of his gaze—even so
the sun shuns him, leaves him alone, forgets the gift of a shadow. He
stares out to the open sea. The boat is now growing bigger more

distinct by the minute. A heavy sloop, low on the water line. Rigged with sails, but they are furled in. There is no wind at all. Perhaps they wouldn't use them anyway. The bottleneck between the two wooden jetties may not be easy to negotiate. No stone wall anywhere. Only one stone building on the far side of the ramshackle harbour a low colonial building with a long porch and a clock over the arch in the middle. The clock has no hands. But the boy does not know about clocks, with or without hands, or about stone walls. He stares at the incoming boat. It must be using engines: it moves quite fast, with a widening white tail curving at the back. It seems that the boat's deck too is covered with wooden slats, not quite an inch apart, some thoughtful protection from the scorching rusting iron underneath? About twenty, twenty-five people, all standing, looking towards the shore. But the boy's eyes only see one.—Or two?—A tall man, broad-chested, a man to lean onto, a smile to curl inside and sleep into. Dark salted hair, tanned salted skin. He can almost taste the brine on Bill's face. (Why do I know the man's name and not the boy's?) Arms that will embrace him, toss him up, catch him as when he was three or four. Sheltering.

But the sun is black with water.

The man's right arm holds a woman's shoulders. A mere girl, her slender body waving like seaweed, hardly any clothes on, curls unfurling on her bare back, slim soaring of rich brown skin. (I know her name too.) Not the pillar of trust he can only just remember. Not the shaping hands that knew how to fashion food out of scraps how to scrub and rub and clean and cleanse.

And the sun is black and water-logged. The slats of the wooden quay are shaking.

Mildly. Wildly.

The key.

He has fished it out of a deep pocket, awkwardly, with his left hand. He is waving it in sleep-dumb fingers. The woman leans and waves and as their hands brush the key is not in Bill's fingers. His eyes are staring too, vacantly. To a morn on the right, behind the handless clock of the one stone building. He tightens his embrace and feels the emptiness in his left hand. Now both are kneeling, fingers groping, hands half thrust between the slats, groping into the dark underneath, hers following his, feeling his eagerness.

The boy has closed his eyes turned started to run feet blindly dodging the bundles and carts and expectant people.

The grip of anguish. The bite of remorse. Stalled.

The boy's legs knit the air away to nowhere climbing the hill legs only now in a deafening thunder of silence racing the tearing shadow of possible grief choking stifling even the possibility of feeling legs running beyond exhaustion.

The man's hand is caught between two slats.

How can they be helped? What could I provide?

What memories could unclench, unlighten, untie?

*the sudden sweep of light as the river unbends
to the next bridge and the one beyond
the spired expanse of sky?*

*the fluttering pulsating edge of the trees' shade
on a summer afternoon*

soaring falling into the sky

*through the late smell of lilac the first
heady smell of the mock orange bush?*

*the swirl of cold water as the thaw-flooded river
grips and rubs and quickens every part of a
dead tired body?*

legs caught in their running escaping possibilities
into the nothingness of undefinitions
hands caught in their groping
ground in their helplessness in their wish
to make good repair retrieve restore

Trapped in my head my heart trapped
under the computer keys
or released

into these white lines on the blue screen sky

*the legs can run and run or slow down and suddenly feel
again and feel tired in the dull ache of an awaking heart
and collapse near a gully the boy's head
inches away from the trickling water
the hand can probe or relax*

Christine PAGNOUILLE

*who knows it might even get loose of the slats
brush the sweat from the bushy forehead
rub his eyes awake
the key can lie in its cocoon of night
or slip overboard as the boat turns alongside the quay
and fall and sink and swirl and melt
into a blob of light forgetfulness*

The Sham

Andrew NORRIS

Moments before the washing-machine which he was unloading started up suddenly in resonant frequency with the terminal spin of its nearest neighbour, and took off most of his right hand, Sam had been riven by a hungover outrage at the pettiness and indignity of life's domestic necessities: this soaking trip to the laundrette, which would tap his reserves of patience and leave him irritable and unable to cope with the social demands of the rest of the day, was a case in point. After the accident and the well-bungled micro surgery Sam decided that the only thing for it was to become a half-wit and to be sure never to step forth without his leather motorcycle corps overcoat tied at the waist with a length of orange bailing twine, and his shabby black beret with the little felt tongue. He took to hunching his shoulders, walking with one hand clenched in a forbidding fist and the other spread like a climaxing starfish, or like a hand placed on a sheet of red paper, submissive to the white chalk which crayons around it caressing its outline. His especial tic, developed as a foolproof badge of office, was to behave prissily in delicatessens and to choose his cheese with a finical display of expertise. If ever he came across a smart samples girl in the supermarket he would buzz up to her like a fly at a dog's eye and pry and probe at her plate with his knuckles. Then he would walk off nibbling goggle-eyed at his sample before coming back five minutes later and starting again. He would repeat this until she denied him a morsel or called the floorwalker, then he would stare at her uncomprehending, turning his bottom lip inside out like a fat slug fastened on his face.

As the corners of Sam's mouth became slacker and slacker, and his head sank bit by bit through a sustained effort of will into the pit of his chest, so he alienated progressively his group of friends which, before the accident, had been not inconsiderable. There had been for example John the chemist and his charming wife Charlene; David the accountancy lecturer who had recently branched out and bought himself a little back-to-back where he...