

“A soft muscle of prayer”

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Sudden Routes of Experience. Thirty Poems from Duncan Harper

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“Silence”, “sobriety” and “delicacy of touch”, these are the words that come to mind when speaking of the thirty poems from Duncan Harper published in *Sudden Routes of Experience* (2006). This may seem a paradox when one takes into account the careful craftsmanship that the poems display and the way the poet flaunts his *Ars Poetica* under the form of a (mock) invocation to the reader:

HEAR YE, HEAR YE

Poetry is the motion you interpret
see moving in a direction you like
causing you to focus
so you read it just right.

As is suggested in this poem, Duncan Harper’s poetry calls into the text a “you” (the word “you” is repeated four times in “HEAR YE, HEAR YE”) whose free or random interpretation will be checked by well chosen words in order to draw a path/route imposed by the poem “so you read it just right”. *Sudden Routes of Experience* thus presents itself as a series of poems of attention, verbal recordings of a poet who in each text maps out a direction (a sense) that leads to epiphanies, both for himself and for the reader. The movement the poems trace (“motion”, “moving”) conflate the literal and the metaphorical dimension of the word so that external and internal (com)motions converge in new, enhanced meaning, as may be confirmed in the poem:

OM ME, OM I

When I take my walk I take in
motion stretching distances
and messages this ageing body releases
revealing a soft muscle of prayer
propelling me forward.

The verbal echoes in the title - “OM ME, OM I” playfully recalls “O ME, O MY” - point to a favourite stratagem of Harper, who loves sound patterns and who uses word allusions in an almost obsessive way. The stratagem is distancing because it foregrounds the formal aspect of the

poems, the word engineering rather than a confessional tone or involving rhythms. The reader is made to “see” and to become “aware” of the multi-layered nature of language so that words “move” between primary and secondary meaning, between figure and ground (“FIGURE-GROUND” is the title of one of the poems). There is a shifting quality to the poetry which can unsettle and make the reader doubt about the exact nature of what stands on the page. Underlying the poetry is a paradox, a never ending movement that evokes a sustaining absence that remains to be resolved (“established”) by both poet and reader (“we”), as is evident here:

THE ESTABLISHING REFLEX

We are a mess
an unwilling mass exodus
under the influence
of our own random traffic
fencing with fate

Dazed or amazed, we create
meaning, messages
and faith.

The minimalistic quality of Duncan Harper’s art, visible in this poem, is present everywhere but first and foremost in the layout of the volume itself: the cover of the book, the quality of the paper, the letter type, the unnumbered pages and the sparse use of punctuation (most poems have no punctuation and the only full stops exist at the end of each poem). All elements converge to convey elegance and contention. The cover photo, especially, gives a visual instance of the “experience” that each separate poem points to and provides. It is a photo by the author of the interior of a dome - the Taj Mahal as one learns from the photo credits – and displays an intricate architectural rib network converging towards a centre. The photograph is taken from a slant angle that allows for a glimpse of the exterior of the building and of the sky. A workmen’s scaffold with a descending rope hangs high in the air (“wind”, “breeze”, “gust” are recurrent words in the poetry) near the ceiling and crosses the vertical rhythm of the picture with an obliquely horizontal line. But rather than hindering the view of the dome, the scaffold, a humble object made of loose planks bound together like a raft floating on the air, enhances the overarching interiority of the vast space. So also in Duncan Harper’s poetry we can observe where the horizontal line of commonplace human experience is obliquely translated into simple, translucent words so that they project the vertical dimension of what the words are silent about but make visible. The words create the presence of an absence, as it were, and that is clearly emphasized by the graphic layout of each double page: the thirty poems are all printed on the right page; the pages on the left side remain blank. Each poem is autonomous and has a quality of near absoluteness that echoes the silence of the blank space around. Even the infinity of the particular shade of blue on the cover hints at the spirit and reach of the poems contained therein.

Vision is central to Harper's poetry. “POEM INTERACTIVE: LIFE OF THE EYE” is composed of a list of twenty epithets with various proposals of ways of looking, followed by line marks inviting the reader to continue the list. Indeed, all senses are vital. In the poem “AROUND THE TABLE”, we are immediately invited to consider “that very common denominator/ our timeless senses”. This oxymoron synthesizes what Duncan Harper’s poems are about: vulnerability and

resilience, “timeless senses” and the limits of the body, formal elegance and ethical commitment, contingency and faith, the fire that fuels human experience and its dry and wry disguises in poetry:

SAVOUR ANY FRIENDLY BREEZE

We all come from a different path in the woods
descendants of killers and aspirants of peace
off to different starts, on to the same end

Whittlers of time or hewers of circumstance
expression lives, expression is
the log in the fire

You will find me
on a branch
somewhere in a treeless desert
disguised as an ordinary leaf
making faces at whatever moves me.

The elegance of the poetry has a strength to it, an impersonal quality that demands respect and leaves room for playfulness (as in my favourite “ODE TO NEW HORIZONS”, which is a poet’s plea to a pair of binoculars for them to “track down the perfect perfection”). Read “WISH”, for instance:

WISH

My wish for a woman
to waltz around the room
to be true to the math
of two playing one
and multiples of bliss
continues ad infinitum.

Some poems, however, also have a disturbing undertone that is all the more pressing because of the lightness of touch with which it is conveyed. The imagery of totality in “WISH”, for instance, the fulfilment of “two playing one”, is expressed as a painful lack in the first poem of the collection, “THE TWO OF YOU AS ONE TO ME”, which begins with the words “I cry out for you”. This is the first line of the first poem of the book *Sudden Routes of Experience*. It starts on a cry, a complaint. From the very beginning, the poet appears as a suppliant so that the word “prayer” which appears in “OM ME, OM MY” may be the right word to describe Duncan Harper’s art. That is perhaps the reason why the poetry convinces: the formality of the poetry does not eschew a vulnerability that, even in “disguise”, comes over as truthful, as worked through, as “experience”.

The philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas thought of all truthful words as a naked plea, and one is reminded of this when following the transformations of the poet’s initial cry into twenty nine variations, each “an ordinary leaf/ making faces at whatever moves me”. The association with prayer may also explain the mysterious word “sudden” in the title. There is nothing

spontaneous or impulsive about Duncan Harper's poems. On the contrary, what impresses is their elaborate manner. They are carefully contrived word objects rather than quick and unexpected outbursts. But the poems may be read as "sudden" routes if one thinks of them as "short prayers", the translation of an attitude almost, of a continuous attention to words and things that require discipline and "focus".

"THE TWO OF YOU AS ONE TO ME", the introductory poem, is preceded by a photograph with the dedicatory words "For my parents". The photo credits confirm that the picture of the man and the woman walking away are indeed the author's parents. It is a small photo in which the tiny figures are seen disappearing in a receding space. The contrast between the diminutive dimension of the photo and the large frame of the blank page reinforces a suggestion of lonesomeness. The two persons have their back turned towards the viewer and walk separately: the man with his hands in his pockets, the woman, elegant and contained, at a distance from the man. The body movement of the two disappearing figures, the distance they keep from one another and yet the way they are held together by the frame of the architectural structure they walk through, all convey distance, non-accessibility but also separateness: it is clear that these two persons are not "one". However, the complement in the title "THE TWO OF YOU AS ONE TO ME" poignantly conveys the point of view of the poet as child for whom the parents are seen as an indissoluble unit, as unquestionable as nature: "Like the sun, the moon and the stars/ you fed and guided me". The poem has Wordsworthian overtones of plenitude ("wondrous moments of glory"):

THE TWO OF YOU AS ONE TO ME

I cry out for you
because there was only one of you

Like the sun, the moon and the stars
you fed and guided me

A simple kaleidoscope
sheds myriad possibilities
letting the eye see
pure vastness be
wondrous moments of glory

I cry out for you
because there was only one of you
who fed and guided me.

The text suggests that the poems that follow will trace an evolution from innocence to experience, a twenty-first century version of Blake's famous songs perhaps. Yet, and although the shortness of many of the poems are reminiscent of songs, and some poems echo Blake's explicit moral concerns ("AROUND THE TABLE" "COLD FACT"), *Sudden Routes of Experience* does not shy away from the experience of loss; it takes loss in its stride and acknowledges it. Therefore the poetry does not settle for facile self-expression but remains alert to the loss of others, to loss everywhere:

URBAN OVERHEAD

It weighed heavy overhead
a helicopter slowly descending
lumbering in the still air
delivering a new patient to hospital
as a car minus its muffler laboured below
drowning out the gnawing vibration
of moonlit blades cutting the night sky

Then the thought ascended
that trouble is never ending here.

This kind of poem – and there are many more in which a landscape, a street, a building suddenly become visible under the poet's touch – seems to me to bear a stronger ethical dimension than the more openly ethical texts, like "COLD FACT", which ends with the lines "We care/ or perish", reminiscent of W. H. Auden's "we love one another or die" (the English poet changed this later in life to "we love one another and die).

Love is everywhere in Duncan Harper's poems: in the various acts of attention, in poems of loss like the one already referred to, in the more playful episode like "WISH", but also in more elaborate reflections on love like the beautiful "LONGER LOVE (UNDER THE SKARMA)", where the impersonal "awe" inspired by a "solitary white mountain peak" is rejected in favour of a love "upon the earth" that is enduring:

LONGER LOVE (UNDER THE SKARMA)

I am looking out for a longer love
and a deeper breath than in the awe that envelops me
when a solitary white mountain peak
heralds the sun at the close of a day
inside a vast range of sleepy giants
that pass the centuries with only an avalanche or two to wake them
I don't dream of an earthquake that caresses
or a love that appears or reappears like a dream
I wish upon the earth to recognize all the heights under the skies
and all the depths that plunge our mighty mortal minds

Just last night sleeping out on a rooftop in Ladakh
I thought of a longer love like a sky full of stars
and not a momentary shaft of light
shooting down a mountain pass.

And it is on love "upon the earth" that *Sudden Routes of Experience* ends, as if the many routes and disguises make way for the final revelation in the last poem "GARDEN OF HEARTS". The title calls to mind the tradition of love poetry and especially the 'topos' of "the closed garden of the soul", the image of mystical union and reunion.

The poem "GARDEN OF HEARTS" is accompanied by a photograph of a blurred figure lying supine, the body supported on the elbows, the turbaned head elevated towards the lens but the face hidden by the knee of a naked leg vertically bent in the foreground while the other

lies in a right angle on the ground in a gesture of ease. It is as if the figure is lifting his/her face to the photographer (Duncan Harper; the photo is called "At Ease in Santorini") who focuses on the gesture of the legs, an almost abstract triangular composition that nevertheless conveys trust and surrender. It is an image that speaks of both confidence and invitation and, as such, it seems to be the perfect counterpart of the picture of the disappearing figures at the beginning of the book. It is tempting to draw a simplifying line from photo to photo, gathering together the thirty poems in an overarching plot that goes from loss to fulfilment. But this is impossible: as already said, the formal care of the whole book "arrests curiosity" (the figure, the poem says, is "at ease on the patio of arrested curiosity"). At the same time, however, the poem itself is arrested in a convoluted syntax that is especially dominant in this last poem but which is a hallmark of the whole poetry,

Duncan Harper's most peculiar feature is his syntax, the way his poetry links words into discourse. If many of the poems seem totally transparent in their minimalistic formality, others are marked by a recurrent mannerism that forces the words out of their familiar word order (word order is paramount for meaning in the English language) and binds them together in a forceful contortion, a convolution that is both contrived and violent. There is a withholding in the poetry, a wilfulness that conveys a carefully controlled arrangement and is the opposite of transparency.

In its most innocent form, Duncan Harper loves sound to make words connect through alliteration and inner rhyme (although not end rhyme) as can be easily noticed in almost any poem taken at random: "longer love", "*heavy overhead*", "dazed and amazed", "fencing with fate", etc. Fricatives, liquids and nasals are preferred over plosives, that is, sounds that allow for fluidity and evade strong boundaries as in "bountiful binoculars". Consider, for instance, a poem in which sound patterns are taken to their limits and where the whole meaning is structured around the symmetry between the sounds "s" and "o". The poem is called "YOU DESERVE A MEADOW" and the sound play in the title is maintained throughout the poem ("meadow"/medal; "Lunge"/lunch, "harvest truth"/harvest fruit...):

YOU DESERVE A MEADOW

Lunge basket of harvest truth
umbrella open ordinarily aloof
a picnic moment airy relief
sumptuous centring spread soon out
soothing summer peaks of thought.

It is clear that in this instance, the poet plays with sound in an obvious way and is enjoying himself. Yet, in most poems, meaning directed through sound rather than through grammatical connectors is predominant. It is a way of evading common and dominant sense, to create new meaning and to flaunt the fragility of propositional discourse. It is also a way to play, to remain truthful to form, not to fall into the pitfall of cliché. In a certain sense, however, it is also a way to remain the master of words, like Humpty Dumpty (and is "GARDEN OF HEARTS" a way out of a Looking Glass world?). Be it as it may, Duncan Harper's poems can take the form of disturbing battles with language, a struggle with sounds, words and language rules that are distorted in order to say, perhaps, what cannot be said in any other way: the "sweet scenery" of the loved one, the grace and gratuity of a love that has been won over a

long “struggle with words and meanings”. Rather than the thirst and sterility often evoked by Gerald Manley Hopkins, a poet that comes to mind when reading Harper’s violations of syntax, *Sudden Routes of Experience* opens upon a space where there is room for life and revelation, where the outcry of the first poem encounters repose and anticipation (i.e. future, life) in the enigmatic words “near will be me”.

GARDEN OF HEARTS

If when you send finished renderings
or slow sketches of sweet scenery imagined or not
find they the route, direct and to
the gallery of loving thought
near will be me, close to the warmest ground
in the adjacent, ancient gardens of hearts
far from serial hunters searching
or casual tourists gawking
at ease on the patio of arrested curiosity
a place be it free from
waiting for a wish to come true or scene to unfold
if it not be that of a sudden blossoming of your sweet scenery
entering by way of its lasting spell.