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– Introduction: The Great Work –

The alchemical operation consisted essentially in separating the prima materia, the so-called chaos, into the active principle, the soul, and the passive principle, the body, which were then reunited in personified form in the coniunnctio or 'chemical wedding'.
– C. G. Jung, *Alchemical Studies*

The risk in exposing our sources of inspiration, where the primal spark comes from and how it is transmuted, is of tearing the wings from a butterfly to explain flight. The impulse to write, to put a shape on chaos, is the neurosis that defines us, that allows us to find credit in failure: poetry as a sickness vocation. But then, as the various contributors to the collection published as *Alchemy* discover, there is relief in that provocative metaphor. Alchemy, existing on the hinge of the medieval and pre-modern worlds, offers a certain dignity of process to initiates of language; the branded ones who are prepared to work and rework, in darkness, by instinct, to achieve the faintest sliver of golden light. It slips through their fingers like a mercury spill. The story. The innocent confession. The lie that persuades. The comforting illusion of achievement in the accidental arrangement of words on a page.

The *Alchemy* writers identify with an intensely local force field known as the Self, while appreciating that its borders, through homeopathic doses of loss or hurt or love, can burst; so that, in the instant of composition, there is no division between individual consciousness and the world at large. Vision is the name we give to that absolute. The thing that can't be forced, prostituted or sold short. And herein lies the paradox and the challenge for the five chosen witnesses, who are privileged to write themselves out of the trap, the Faustian contract, by way of personal anecdote, strategic revelation or hopeful punt in the dark. The belief is declared several times in these essays that the natural world has its established mechanisms, suns will rise and rise again. We labour in that expectation, blackest night before dawn. Disillusion, anomie, betrayal are accepted as necessary tolls for access to the Great Work.

Gabriel Josipovici quotes Beckett, somebody had to: '*Bon qu'a ça*.' The condemned author – condemned to live – puts words on paper because it is all that he or she can do. Foolish to comment any further. But now comment is required. Comment has been solicited. 'The writing is painfully aware,' Josipovici says, 'of the fact that the rhetoric both reinforces and undermines the anguish.'

In playing the game, feinting at a posthumous explanation for what is, in effect, an electrochemical seizure, a sudden thickening of the tongue, a

suspension of conditioned reflexes, the essayist finds relief in identification with terrain, some elective topography capable of bearing the weight of the metaphor that must be imposed upon it. Vision is out there and we will walk, hobble, swim or crawl, to find it. The special place might, for Partou Zia, be a flint field at the end of the land. A soft-focus garden running down to the Thames for Joanna Kavenna. A busy urban road for Gabriel Josipovici. An aircraft coming down on a motorway embankment for Anakana Schofield. Geography is destiny, but 'reality' is a tight bone cage: the cell of the skull from which consoling sets are conjured. The writer's task is to recognise the place that is writing you; triggering the voices, giving you permission to continue.

I began my own long and frustrating engagement with London by quoting from *A Vision* by W. B. Yeats. And I've never, in more than forty years, found good reason to go beyond that. 'The living can assist the imagination of the dead.' We are ventriloquised, confirmed in our fantasies. This is what we must do and we are doing it. 'To drift into the poetic is in itself work,' Zia says. Kavenna shares my belief that writing is rewriting. We receive and record the stories that press in upon us, across the boundaries of sleep and mortality. 'I was troubled by bad dreams and these had an intensely tactile and auditory quality, and often seeped into the ensuing day, like a miasma. In my dreams the dead were alive.' It is not Kavenna talking to us, it is

her character, her creature, Anthony Yorke, who is one thing here and another in a different text. He is a blocked writer, a teacher – and an actor. He luxuriates in taxonomies of failure. He resents his role in this slippery production. 'This is nothing and everything, all at once.'

With intimations of a double displacement, separation from homeland and from physical well-being, Zia recognises her exile as a highway. 'Barren country roads crowned by a ribbon of mathematically-arranged wires that stitch earth-horizons with the wide sky. Hours spent in bed reading, my only solace. Outside is alien, and I am too vulnerable to venture forth.' The cold English sea is a cinema of memory in which the memories are not her own. The road is a prediction, running from past to future. 'There are those who will scowl at the pavement as they tread their isolated path, determined to keep their starved souls in the deprived element of spiritual poverty.' Along the stripped spine of a moorland track, the unresting dead are the only pilgrims.

What excites me, as a reader of the five texts, is how molecular reactions fizz between them to stitch a single hydra-headed, argumentative entity. It really does feel that none of these pieces could have been written in the form they have settled on without the existence of the others. Sometimes the forward momentum of the narrative is grudging, sometimes it flows with the reckless inevitability of a river in spate.

Zia's road of exile, out there in the far west, tapping sources common to earlier migrants, such as W. S. Graham, D. H. Lawrence, Mary Butts, dissolves into Josipovici's tramp from Brixton to New Cross: 'so endless, so rundown and desperate that it becomes purgatorial.' Moral exhaustion opens a grunge portal on the horrors of Francis Bacon's painting of a vomiting man in a sealed room. The description brought me back to my first experience of London in 1962, when I made a number of hikes from Electric Avenue, Brixton, to the great Bacon retrospective at the old Tate Gallery on Millbank. Prominence in the show was given to Bacon's reworking of Van Gogh's *Painter on the Road to Tarascon*; a molten rendering that became the marker for a lifetime of burdened trudging, of too many days walking out to write.

The condition of exile or tolerated otherness, defined by two of the *Alchemy* authors as a road, becomes an apprenticeship in migration for Benjamin Markovits. He leaves the USA for a season, trying out as a basketball player in Germany. Reading his finessed report, with its deceptively conversational style, we soon understand that the real apprenticeship, the bullet that can't be dodged, is to become a professional writer.

All the presentations have as their most immediate and defining quality the acceptance, reluctant or otherwise, of confrontation with the challenge of the commission: 'writing about the mysterious process of

transmuting experience into art, using a life-changing event to trigger the creative process.' In every case, we register the writer at the desk, gazing out of a window, moving around the house, firing up a start, then pausing to question the process; wriggling against the necessity of labouring to a pre-ordained conclusion, labouring for money. An imaginative flourish will stall into reverie, into reaching for a supporting quote from some respected predecessor in the game: Virginia Woolf, Kafka, Herman Melville, Borges, Wittgenstein. Otherwise, writers must become teachers. Kavenna: 'Yes, Anthony was also a tutor.' Josipovici: 'My frustration went on through my two years of graduate work and my first two years as an Assistant Lecturer in the newly formed University of Sussex.' Markovits: 'I've been teaching now for about ten years and there's a line I use on students to describe what seems to me difficult about writing . . . But novels are about things happening, and so when we start writing fiction there's this gap we have to bridge between the uneventfulness of our experience and the drama that we think is supposed to take place on the page.'

Where then is the truth, the true imprint of experience? Where is the author in all this? W. G. Sebald and Roberto Bolaño tease us with apparent versions of themselves in fictions that behave like reportage, or essays as playful as novels. We make those identifications at our peril. '*Real*,' Bolaño wrote, in *A Little Lumpen Novelita*, 'only stands for a different kind of unreality.'

In a book called *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire*, I used the devices of fiction to test a mythology of place made from hard evidence and the traces of writers who had worked the territory in previous generations. I studded the story, to ghost at a sort of authenticity, with a series of transcribed interviews that I edited into seamless monologues. One of the interviewees, reporting on her past as a weekend ecstasy raver, asked me to disguise her identity. I used her words but tweaked certain details to make the young woman into an architect whose thesis was to keep everything theoretical. 'No structure that can be commissioned, she asserted, was worth making. The aim of human existence was to do absolutely nothing, gracefully. Any intervention was doomed to make things worse.'

Soon after the book was published, I was approached by an architecture magazine asking for contact details, so that they could compose a feature about this exciting newcomer. I had to confess that I'd made her up. 'Impossible,' said the man on the end of the phone. 'I met her at a party in Shoreditch last Wednesday.'

The only fiction, as the *Alchemy* collective reveals, is that they are writing fiction. The element of self-interrogation is more fabulous than the more apparently contrived episodes. I believe in Joanna Kavenna's troubled author with the halting visions that he is trying to extract from his projection of a phantom female on the lawn. The absurdity carries absolute conviction.

I wonder about the downbeat adventures of Benjamin Markovits in Germany, even though they could come straight from a recovered letter home. I believe the elegantly measured opening of 'The Difficult Question' by Anakana Schofield: the rain, the red Clarks sandals, the dead father who refuses to save himself in the crashed plane. The authorial voice has the confidence of Bolaño or Sebald – which is to say that we invest our trust in the skill of the storyteller. And we grow uneasy when the magician tries to explain the trick.

So here is a true story. My wife told it to me on her return from a day's outing to Oxford. Why was she there? I was at home in Hackney, sitting at the desk where I am sitting now, niggling at another commission, another rapidly approaching deadline. There was no time to look out of the window, but I could hear pigeons massing on the tiles. Squirrels headbutting speckled glass. Recently arrived parakeets screeching from tree to tree.

Anna goes, early, into the hotel where she has her meeting, wondering if there is time for coffee or a drink. Someone she recognises is established at a table with her laptop. *Is it?* The woman with the busy screen, fingers flying across the keyboard, is a writer. She comes here to this commercial space, not to a library or a coffee shop, because the atmosphere feels right, it's not oppressive. Most of the passerines are tourists or business folk.

I am interrupted at my desk, to hear the stop-start, digressive movements of the episode. As it is recounted. As it is remade into a serviceable anecdote. The other writer in the Oxford hotel is also stalled, but she says that she's happy to join Anna for a drink. Two commissions are put on hold. *Can I guess who the woman was?* I don't have to try, Anna tells me: Joanna Kavenna. I wonder, now, if Kavenna was working on 'Realia', her piece for this book? Does Anna's intervention cast even the palest shadow on Kavenna's text? 'For some reason Anthony had put his invented woman in an invented house by his invented version of the Thames – and this was why he was in Oxford.'

Kavenna writes about Virginia Woolf 'refusing the "reality" of others'. A place, a set, let us propose the lobby or the bar of a hotel in Oxford, a former bank. There is a theme, in the stories written by women, about bereavement. The drama begins after their fathers die: as fiction, as fiction derived from an actual trauma. Dark forebodings, paradoxically, bring a sharper light to the landscape. To the road of exile, the airport runway, the dead path down which ghosts shuffle. To validate the story, I would have to cook up the tension. Who was my wife meeting? Was the writer composing a blackmail letter to a former tutor? Had she drifted into an episode of *Morse*? Were these modest coincidences a blip in the space-time continuum? Did any of it *really* happen?

Five writers deliver. Five writers invoke other

writers, a communality of purpose. Five writers make concrete the dream of place. Partou Zia begins by quoting Jung. Her essay, taken from a longer work, 'The Notebooks of Eurydice', has an overwhelming sensitivity to sound and smell, to the loss of her country of origin and her integration into the far west of England. Language becomes light. 'It is Light that varies our seeing senses, our emotions . . . TRUST, TRUST, TRUST.' But light is also the authorial voice, when it is detached from the page; it is the necessary element for which five very different writers are in quest. 'We can safely call the light the central mystery of philosophical alchemy,' said Jung.