

a fictional

Will my love be writ on a stone so that its words outlast it and me? I know that I'll come off worse. They say that once-upon-a-time adultery was much more common in this city than it now is. It was, they say, practically expected by all parties, of all parties. And there was once a couple who went against these prevailing practices, they stayed away from the orgies, from the wife-swapping parties and the gatherings of swingers. They kept themselves to themselves - one would think a perfect way of not rubbing anyone up the wrong way, but, this being a story, that was of course the whole problem.

My love has been a caustic against a different norm and I am separated from it by force, by a now insurmountable divide. They say also many other things - the wise gentlemen, the elderly widows and spinsters who clutter and mumble about these old cobbled ways of the ancient town - these ones who would have you believe they are as venerable as the cobbles and who certainly look as worn. They are full of tales of the bad-old-days, of the fickleness of their forefathers. They spout folk-drivel even as they devolve into the bedridden, sored and weeping. It's easy to think oneself at least as wise as these crones and geriatrics when one sits with another whiskey in the afternoon sun at a tiny table on a boulevard or about a square, easy to mumble curses and cautions into the breeze. I wonder where my love is now, tending wounds in the Caucasus the last i heard, mumbling herself, across linen and fractures.

There are so many methods of escape, so many routes of departure, exits. And as many ways of staying here, even if the doors are flung wide, the ushers spread their arms, the clamouring masses trundle out as one. I wish, often, that I were one of the aged, but age is a border closed to me. My robe of disgruntled, alcohol-sodden pontificator fits ill, and as it slips I see reflected in the table top, or in the window of a boutique, some guise of youth that lies closer to my skin.

It is an easy and a common thing to grumble about - love that has lost its interlocutors, bedfellows broken - an easy thing to mutter about. And, young as i am, no waif or tourist is going to submit to my heavy breathed eloquence, my interminable musings.

An old fellow addresses me as he inches painfully passed; his message boiled down - get a clue impostor. I think I have already become the punchline to stories; someday I too will be once-upon-a-time; my love - or some corruption of it - has been writ deep into the endless stone expanses of crones tongues.

Is it strange to love a city so? Not only despite its filth and excrement, its reprobates and curses which hang round street corners like particularly virulent diseases, but for those things. The darkness - that snaps at heels and nibbles at soul; that, when the shutters come down and the bars shudder to silence, becomes palpable, maturing in thin slicks, in pools in corners, obvious but still, unavoidable. Why should I flee? I am a coward and will let the coils of city night slip round me and squeeze. Eventually they'll be the end of me, but what-the-fuck. Probably every place has its constrictors, anywhere that people gather - so too a stench will collect. I wonder what stench threatens to envelop my once love, besides the antiseptic and the gangrene i mean, what curls at her toes unimagined, alert.

Love. It is a strange old beast. I saw it once, a long time ago, in what really was my youth, curled at a hearth, or wet-nursing a starving infant, and then saw it grow, statuesque and angled, but still it would pull the waif to its bosom; but one must watch for the angled ones - for time is the great warper - and each angle grew more acute and I saw its bosom flattening, its countenance becoming hard and canny, its joints swollen, and as gauntness creeps in, so the hunger grows. And I saw it ravenous, huddled close to the hearth and uncoiling to strike, to steal from the starving. My god, the metamorphosis! And in this time lapse perhaps you can see it but in before-and-afters you would not credit it, you would yell me a charlatan. But no, love may be different to everyone but also to each one it shows a myriad faces ever-changing.

Another empty glass is swiftened away by an efficient girl, local, I have seen her since she was the bulge and now she waits, and before long I will be a once-upon-a... on her lips.

They say many different things of course; it is probable that they utter every contradiction, every alternate opinion. They have their bases covered. Another glass appears and I think I can hear the chink as my tab clicks into overdrive. It's time I scraped some currency together and paid something off maybe.

I leave the glass where it settled and stroll off slow enough that I do not wobble. The sky is still bright but the lamps are being lit. An old acquaintance is reclining on a balcony and he hails me silently, a parasoled and multicoloured drink held aloft. I tip him my balding head and he beckons suggestively. I think he only suggests we share a glass or two but still a repellent thought momentarily floors me. I shake and shrug at his soundless protestations, perhaps another day, perhaps. The prematurely aged, I think, know nothing of real ancientness, of joints screaming, of needing to pee every five minutes, of the slow decommissioning of once robust and well oiled mechanisms. We know nothing too, i suppose, of a second youth, of a new found zest despite the creeks and grates. We don't really believe in such a thing but I look forward a little tentatively, for I cannot really be convinced by my own act; the devils will not dog me forever, they will grow cold. One day I'll emerge from my old age and get a firm grip again at the mane of this horse and maybe

start to trot.

I remember once in a hospital wing somewhere, as she resisted my advances amongst the hypodermics and dressings, thinking she is matchless, those words exact. All the places we have shared - I say we, she and I - there are an infinity of course, for place is continuous, not dots but a range of infinitesimal difference - I mean those few that bored a hole in me, small maybe but that, when I'm approaching, fill slowly with memories of sin and its guilt attendant. So many places, and each a membrane stretching as I cross it and staying clearly wrapped around me until the next one adds its weight. I remember a bedroom floor when we were frugal and the heating was off, and the event horizons of our imagination. A shared imagination because once, and you who doubt should know this is true, we were one, maybe only for a fraction of a moment, as our shivers synchronised, but it happened, and I recoil from it still.

In a city one is supposed to be nameless, faceless, dispossessed, but here in the old town I find I know every other face I see, and so few are enemies.

I follow the slope down to the gardens which are being planted by some elderly men in boiler suits. There are long low stone beds all along this side of the park full of new moist earth. And the holders of the little stalls propped against it are packing up or hurrying through a final transaction - coins for paper, prints and pictures, words repeating.

There is a strange conurbation in my heart, a place reserved for self humiliation, and as I perform a balletic little stumble over the raised edge of a grating I know that this moment, when wide frocked girls titter, will set up shop and lodge there for quite some time. I am an accommodating landlord, brutally forgiving, and my tenants know how best to take advantage, how to hang around for centuries.

It has seemed a wise precaution for most of my life to give as wide a berth as possible to those great ironclad moments given over to 'trying new things.' As a boy the only new things I would attempt were the next pages of the current comic in a long familiar series, cheating really. 'What have you done today?' is a question which all children are notoriously adept at failing to answer, and I was no exception, I expect that to this day my mother in her grave suspects that the seething waters of all kinds of torrid cataclysms resided behind my shrugged murmurs and rebuffs, but the honest truth was always, 'nufin'! That is in my boyhood anyway, for I lodged with her, dear soul, until her death, and even now remain there, in the little apartment in which i was born hastily - new things and so on. And in those years when my love and I tangled - still, 'nufin'!

A car slides into motionlessness beside me, a bundled together vehicle like a miniature scrap yard. As the semi-bearded occupant opens the door the smell of sex washes out and catches me off guard, I nearly stubble again. We tumbled so easily about, completely wrapped in our secrecies, impervious to glances, stares and whispers. In her pre-medicine days she was scratching sun baked

dust with a trowel, in pursuit of some sort of history or other, and I, a little too eager, leaning over a rail to peer at a half exposed ceramic, or at her equally semi exposed breasts, i forget which, fell literally into her pit. It seems, if memory serves, as so rarely it does, that that was here in this very park, as evening ushers out the vagrants. It's nice to drift purposeless.

Sometimes senses seem heightened, and it is not, as one would expect, at moments of great weight, but at the simplest time, when one is least expecting the need to requisition resources of reverence, or of humility. And it happened now - that my nasal passages thrummed, an olfactive orchestra commencing its tuning up. I'm sure, if one was off the scientific bent, that explanations could be teased out of the weather conditions prevailing, the state and fertility of foliage, the statistical likelihood of ladies doused in perfume at that hour, at that time of year, etcetera, and so on, combining in an unlikely, true, but understandable crescendo. But science is not my thing, not at all. Not that I'm not familiar with it. It seems eons ago that I sat myself down in a lecture theatre with every intention of soaking my bones in the physical properties of things, of the dances and gestures of mathematics, in particles and fields and matrices. And it wasn't pregnancy that called a halt to all that, though it coincided not coincidentally with my rejection, not of these things, but of the method, the practice.

Now the sky is almost starlit, one or two sparks hole the darkening canvas overhead and another little watering hole calls to me, one which I have frequented less often than perhaps I should. An old fashioned - in fact, not just fashioned, but genuinely old - cast iron chair allows me to rest my stumbling feet as I sip another whiskey, feeling ready for it.

The baby died of course, as the tongues would have it, predestined. From bar to bar, it could be a complete story, from a to b where a is equal to b or at least shares most of its more dominant properties, a whole saga in an evening stroll, containing all those great essentials, namely sex and death, and complete only in that it remains full of holes, inadequately drawn curtains inviting peeks at the jumble within. A stroll and a love. Of course I glamorise myself too much to think that any of this will find its way to stone, even to tongues, an old man's arrogance. And the ending seems unfit - because of course I have many years yet to run, am not so much a hopeless case as I portray myself, and my love has a will of her own, she had the gall to leave and could equally well return, ignoring tongues. Finalities beckon.