

Over There and In Between

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'This is not a real letter. The real ones are never committed to paper.'

Marina Tsvetaeva to Boris Pasternak, 1926.

I read these words on the train from Birmingham to Brighton.

Prologue

Walking to the exhibition I pass the walls of the Royal Pavilion, a place where state rooms lined with silk, filled with gilt and cradled with light become ghostly in their ostentation. The structure we see today was completed in the early 1800s for the Prince Regent. Its architect, John Nash, influenced by Thomas Daniell's volumes 'Oriental Scenery', (published 1795–1801) made an approximation of an Indian palace muddled with Moorish and far Eastern elements. Yet the Pavilion is as English as it is Chinese or Indian; its architecture and interiors are a tangled imagination of the exotic, the luxurious, the other. The palace's white onion domes signal to other places, drawing Brighton into an architectural conversation across centuries and continents. They ask me to think about locations and senses beyond the immediate present.

In the exhibition space at the art school this sense of absence continues. I am confronted with tangible things that do not constitute the entirety of the work. Each piece points out to a site, person, time or process beyond itself. The images and objects around me are beguiling in themselves but they are not the thing. The works around me are stand-ins: explanatory texts in an empty museum vitrine. In Greece's national museums the many artefacts and sections of ancient monuments that have been pilfered by others – mostly the British – are surprisingly present. Where carved stones should be photographic and textual representations mark the missing.

The sense of loss engendered is palpable and political. It evokes the ghostly bicycles left by thousands of members of the Argentinian resistance who 'disappeared' under the military dictatorship of the late 1970s and early 1980s. These bicycles became indexes of bodies, documenting final moments of resistant activity. They compressed movement and time into one potent, public image. Although these symbolic stand-ins evoke completely different eras, events and political environments both form resistant images that make the absent present. They have a similar effect to a photograph carried in the wallet of a mourner.

I'll put you at the bottom of a deep, bright white gorge. One hundred metres of marble tower above you, stepped in a ziggurat. Streaks of grey run down the white steps, like the stains of giant rivulets. The marble is cool but the sun is high and hot and the centre of this reflective pit is blinding. Giant mouths of CAT trucks attack various levels of the marble walls. Further up, behind the unblinking whiteness you can see the snowy peaks of the mountains. The creaks and scrapes of weighty slabs being shovelled about by heavy machinery ricochet around you. It is spring 2014. You are outside Carrara, a town on the North West coast of Italy.

It is cool in the church. You arrived just as the doors were opening, when the small square and church steps were still shaded from the day's glare. Soon the building will be flooded with the noise and movement of tourists. You breathe the church in with a long breath that brings the smell of dusty fabric and wood polish. Ahead is the altar, a garish shield at the back of a rounded recess under heavy frescoes. The transept of the church is slim: to your left sits one row of simple wooden pews; to your right another. You take measured steps towards the altar, looking to the chapels on either side of you and glancing back to a high crown of organ pipes. The walls ache and drip with putti and gold. You turn where the pews end. This is what you are here for. The Corinthian columns, like giant rollers mottled with ink, part to reveal an intimate scene bathed in spears of golden light. Here is the theatre of Bernini's Saint Theresa. Marble figures float on a cloud of more marble. The saint's face, somewhere between anguish and rapture, rests on volumes of sculpted fabric. Her mouth is slightly open and a hand and foot hang, post coital. So bodily. The sculpture is smaller than you anticipated and more human. A feminine angel stands benevolently over this woman, arrow poised. A yellow-paned window above gilt tubes pours theatrical rays down onto the figures. Buttery light spills onto Theresa's lap. Eight noblemen sit in two theatre boxes either side of the saint, discussing business, seemingly unaffected by years spent witnessing this sexualised awakening. Time passes but the marble figures remain. A hum of visitors now fills the church and your head aches with layers of overly elaborate stone, metal and paint. You turn away.

Montparnasse, Paris, in the 15th arrondissement on the left bank of the River Seine. It's 1949 and we are in the viewing space at the studio of Constantin Brancusi. We have been waiting here for some time. Four of us stand quietly, imbibing the detail of our surroundings. Smells of the studio behind us — wood shavings, grease and the sharp tang of metal — pervade the space. But the air has a cool, light quality. The ceiling is made entirely of glass and some of the panes are cracked or missing. The floor is coarse concrete. The building is dilapidated but the slight disarray inside is perfectly staged. Ahead stands a coppice of Brancusi's tall, slim sculptures. Around are low, plinth-like forms topped with bronzes, marble pieces and rough, unformed stone blocks. The atmosphere is thick with anticipation. Our attention is drawn to three veiled sculptures. We absorb their shrouded shapes. These works stand like clandestine figures poised theatrically for the perfect moment. We are waiting, not for Brancusi himself, but for the light.

You are inside a plastic box. A smooth, featureless wall slides into the chest-like seat on which you sit. No seatbelt or harness is available. On your way in you saw two further cells but today they are empty. A sense of sweaty doom nags your stomach and the twisty roads make sitting still, or sitting at all, difficult. Both hands stretched flat against the wall you try to steady yourself. Despite this, when the driver takes a bend in the track at speed you bang your head against the reinforced window. You can see out of this window to the fields around you. The sky is hazy and fields of rape buzz with colour. None of that pungent smell reaches you in here. Is it a two-way window? If you were to pass someone would they be able to see you? Or would there be only a series of three equally-sized square panes of black? Where are you? And where are you going? The van's engine is loud in the echoey chamber and you can hear the driver cough dryly. You lean forward and look through the slat to your left. Light flicks into the small shadowed corridor beyond the door but the space is empty.

Now to the summer of 1997. The lake behind you is float glass. The campus fields have been left to meadow and long grasses are cut by a criss-cross of mown paths. A few lone students dot the scene here at the University of East Anglia. To our right are concrete and glass stepped pyramids designed by Denys Lasdun in 1962 as egalitarian student accommodation. The buildings are a little decrepit now but still impressive. Beyond this, to the left, is Norman Foster's Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, opened in 1978. It is a large aluminium hangar on top of a grassy mound cut with a curved glazed fascia. Between the two buildings sits an agricultural building of galvanised steel notable for its incongruity that apes the mammoth construction to its left. This low-slung container with pitched roof recalls the nightmarish sheds of nearby factory farms. Somewhere inside this impenetrable box pulses the distinctive mechanical beat of a Garage track.

It is hot and humid. You have been driving through jungle for hours. The vegetation around you is lush, thick and full of noise. The Co-operative Republic of Guyana. This country has been blighted by slavery plantations and colonialism. Now heavy industrial production rules. You come to a break in the undergrowth. And you realise, with a jolt, that it is not a mere caesura but a complete cut. The jungle has stopped dead and so has your truck. Ahead lies an enormous expanse of flat red dust. It is 1940 and the words, that are to be spoken in a measured English accent, in the promotional documentary that you are here to make, ring in your mind: 'Without bauxite we have no aluminium, without aluminium we have no wings and without wings, we have no defense.'

Epilogue

Back in Brighton the chatter of pedestrians outside the gallery draws attention to my stasis. It has fallen dark and cars creep past the window. Smudges form on the glass like the shadows of figures not quite captured in long exposure photographs. My ghostly impression appears to either side: to the right a wall of windows superimposes my wobbly outline onto the world outside; to my left aluminium squares and rectangles of varying sizes feed back a shadowy, colourless form. These momentary images recall my first experience of a mirrored lift in which an image of my family and I shot endlessly in either direction. Here the reflections are harrowingly partial. They mock the stasis of the sculpture in the photographic folio encased in marble and glass ahead of me and speak to the degraded photocopy on the wall.

I take a final look around the room and then move towards the door. Outside it is dark and cool. I walk to the sea, to the luminous glow of the pier's amusement. Ecstatic shrieks of fear fill the air. The energetic sound, light and movement, so at odds with the stillness in the exhibition, is thrilling and repellent.