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Panicked Spring

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Sample translation (pp. 7-23) by Alexander Booth

I

LOW WATER 0.68 m

On that April morning when at a single stroke an absolute silence reigned in the skies over London I walked to Trafalgar Square. The square was still covered in shadow, only high up on one of its columns, in untouchable isolation, Lord Nelson stood in the sunshine. His three-cornered hat was black against the sky, a sky of such a blue it seemed unbelievable that a cloud of ash from this Icelandic volcano had incapacitated the whole of European air traffic. All of the awakening city's sounds rushed unimpeded and virtually triumphant up into the void. The red buses glistened with dew. England was once again an island kingdom. In the middle of the throng I hurried down to the Thames and in the crowd in front of Embankment Station for a moment it seemed as if someone had waved to me, but I hurried on through the hall all the same. Out onto the embankment, down to the river! The pale spring sky even managed to throw an illusion of blue onto the normally brown and murky water. It was low tide, hardly a ripple, the gravel on the banks wrapped in the smell of the sea.

With my head tilted back I looked searchingly into the skies where by now those tiny ash particles had clearly begun to accumulate, some like dust, without form or structure, others needle-like and

pointed, then rounded down, frayed, or jagged like crystals. And all at once I saw us again, we were children, it was Ash Wednesday, we were out in the main square, after church, looking at one another as dimwittedly as I was now looking into the sky in which only the birds were flying. Most of the time still deep winter, a glittering ghost-like landscape the snow-covered mountains enveloping the valley, snowflakes frozen into clumps of ice upon our woollen gloves, now and again the gurgle of melted water through the church's gutters, but instead of making for the schoolhouse we would simply stay in the middle of the square and bewilderedly observe our sudden senescence. In long rows we appeared before the choir, the incessant murmuring of the pastor who would spread the sacred dust upon our hairlines becoming more distinct, remember, son of man, that you are only dust, the youngest among us in particular would shiver immediately, as if seized by an awful itch or attacked by fleas, we young girls however would stand under the blue winter sky out on the main square and watch ourselves grow old unimaginably quickly. And even if one among us might energetically bow her head and laughingly wipe away the ashes, the hair always remained grey. Evenings in front of the mirror the ashes would still be there, I'd sleep as straight as a post so that they wouldn't fall onto the white pillow, that's how terrifyingly fast the intoxicatingly unforeseeable future could pass, for days your hairline a row of ash.

I had sat down on the embankment wall by the two sphinxes. These mythical creatures in cast bronze shone dully and evenly as if made of ebony. A smile played about their full lips, paws gently stretched out toward each other though the one was gashed and gouged, caught in the first German air raids on London just a few minutes before midnight on 4 September 1917, as a commemorative plaque explained. Smaller duplicates of the two populated the other benches on the embankment nearby and split them into separate seats. To guarantee uninterrupted privacy or stop the homeless from sleeping? Almost imperceptibly the tide began to rise, it washed about the stones, chased off the pigeons which had been hopping about, erased the traces of people and animals. One lone flip-flop, baked into the sand, gave a good fight, but then it too was washed away. The smell of the sea

had escaped. The sphinxes dreamt with open eyes, their glances going up and down the Thames, but they could no longer see the sailors' chaotic sway nor the ships and their exotic cargo. Long before the two arrived the East and West India Docks in the east of the city had set up their businesses, and that Britain which had once been covered by massive oak woods had sunk deep into the past.

Never had a river mystified me more than the Thames. With the change of tides came a sudden standstill. Was the water rushing inland or out to sea? I stared fixedly into the forever clashing tides and before my eyes everything began to wheel and turn. There, just like a thousand years before, oaks began to swim in the river! Weakened by the tides, they had torn themselves away from the banks but still clung to their individual pieces of earth with their roots and so took them away too. Abandoned to the winds, the crowns of the oaks towered upwards and once afloat in the middle of the current terrified the Roman legions who, dazed or drunk, thought the massive rigging of the branches to be enemy ships and began to attack. But in reality the oaks had taken flight for the open sea as if they had sensed the coming destruction, the cutting and burning for settlement or ship, the fencing-in of entire hills and plains for the hunt, surveillance, and executions, while the woods only belong to the mad and the young.

The most puzzling room in my memory is a sylvan one. The wallpaper was a linden green. The trees painted upon it were surely meant to be lindens, but they had been gathered into a wood, and into the sea-of-leaves were mixed the leaves of beeches and oaks. This room, however, was not in a clearing, but in my uncle's parsonage where my father slept during the summer. Last night I was once again in the wide hallway of the old house, the light grew dim so quickly I couldn't differentiate between the various doors any longer. Suddenly I was embraced, so forcefully it cut through me like a fire, and on that face disappearing into the darkness I saw tears, tears! Now I was standing on the Thames and it was morning and I was following the shimmering of the waves, their unquiet, their climbing over one another and struggle. The oak islands no longer wheeled upon the

river but that linden green room in the woods, and with it the entire parsonage, the red hall, the small blue room, the arbour, July heat and clear nights. Alone in one of the most populated cities in the world, it was suddenly as if, just maybe, in that house we had invariably been lent for one summer only I had been sheltered from time's merciless passing more than any other.

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HIGH WATER 6.77 m

Within the din of traffic echoing under the bows of the bridge I turned back toward the Underground. Had that really been a wave? I looked about myself somewhat absentmindedly. How the tulip buds in the small gardens sprang forth with such shrill colours! Vibrant ribbons they wound their ways through the dark boxwoods, snow-white, blazing orange, violet, canary yellow. Behind the commemorative plaque to the victims of the July 2005 terror attacks someone was asleep, unrecognisably rolled up into a black plastic sack, the air smelling of spilled beer and hyacinths. The city will survive, she is the future of our world, the plaque stated, for all Londoners in our great city. A shudder of the softest green tinged the park's shrubs and trees, the still unoccupied deck chairs waiting like butterflies with windblown wings. Still now, however, a young woman is walking, not stumbling a single bit, like a living mummy, face covered by a white gasmask, arm in arm with a fireman through the Underground station of Edgware Road, she walks, unwavering, around her only smoke, blood, and screams. Half-round slits have been cut into the gasmask around the eye sockets, mouth and nose, she must go to work right away, the young woman repeats, the entire way, from the East End here, she'd been wedged in between the passengers of the Circle Line, she had tried to imagine the day's upcoming business, but, yes, there had been a tremendous bang, and to her left a fireball, which chased about her and then went out, but why have all the people flinched away from her in horror? The fireman continues to help the

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young woman with the white gasmask, please, she counters, I must get on to work immediately, I am so very late already.

Translucent veils of clouds rushed through the sky. I travelled back to the East End, from Whitechapel Market the calls of the Bengalis and Pakistanis pitching their wares rang out toward me, shrill and monotone, a hypnotising litany. The plastic sheeting about their stands crackled. The mounds of coriander, in the morning still fresh, lay about like limp pillows, green mattresses. The red post box around the corner, most likely due to the volcano's eruption, had not been emptied for days. A wild and thin rosebush was growing up out of the asphalt behind it, maybe in autumn it would have a few haws. The sirens of the ambulances from the nearby Royal London Hospital howled, and the singing ice cream van, at times abruptly interrupting its melody, made its last rounds in spite of the cold. In the flats across the street here and there the lights came on. My Bengali neighbours, who often gesticulated into their mobile phones right up until reaching their front doors, thereafter were no longer to be heard while from behind the kitchen windows of the only non-Asian family along with the growing steam came a bickering and bawling. This family consisted of two mothers, both sickly pale, an evidently unemployed man, and two children, the small dark boy a whirlwind of black curly hair, the little girl blonde, heavy, and every day with striped socks of mismatched colours.

Even under the night sky the wild cherry trees which bloomed luxuriantly in the narrow backyards shone. Almost incomprehensibly the strange fear I had felt my first night in the neighbourhood came back to me. I had come into a wide but poorly lit street. It was around midnight, the small shops locked up with their iron shutters, even the pubs were closing. An icy wind blew the rubbish from one side of the street to the other, and at a certain point I was overcome by the undeniable feeling that the darkness around me was congealing into a threat. I was standing where Commercial Road leads to Whitechapel High Street. Only later did I learn that it was precisely there that on 4

October 1936, one half hour before Sir Mosley's blackshirts marched into Cable Street, Irish dockworkers together with the East End's Jewish population, in spite of the deployment of the mounted police who had set upon the crowd with truncheons, had managed to barricade the street. Having only just arrived, porous and highly alert, an unknown force had shared something of the place's violence and resilience with me.

Beneath my window the black cab had disappeared. I'd never seen the driver, most likely he was only on duty nights and early mornings. During the day I'd often find the taxi parked just a hand's breadth away from my door and the signs of spring, viscous buds, in piles on its roof. Now it was gone, the driver no doubt chauffeuring the unquiet, the noisy, the drunk and the bleary-eyed through the sometimes glaringly illuminated, sometimes dark streets of the city, which at night began to resemble the Underground's subterranean tracts. I looked up into the night sky where the stars' blinking ways were never visible and tried to bring to mind that face which had appeared to me so quickly and closely in my dream and which nevertheless I hadn't been able to recognise. Had my father come out of the forest room or my uncle from out of his small blue room across the hall? Why that glowing feeling of happiness in the embrace, whence the tears? The painted linden and oaks grew out of the wallpaper and into the forest room, anchoring it within a monstrous root system, which the whole house tore away then out together onto the Thames, and there it swam and circled right in front of my eyes again! And it was up to me to save our summerhouse from the flood, to hold it tight and keep quiet watch, on the banks of that strange river once again envelop myself in that early horizon. Could this be a possible answer, the tribute to that face which had vanished in the dark?

In a Pakistani restaurant I was looking into from the street I saw the volcano continue its vehement spitting out of ash on a tiny television just recently placed on top of a microwave right under the low ceiling. Clear mountains of cumulus towered above a fuliginous commotion of black clouds, they frantically changed formation, and one got the impression that in the next few seconds they would cause the little telly to explode. The anchor woman stumbled on the name of the volcano, Eyjafjallajökull, ay, ay, that old lullaby suddenly came to mind, ay, ay, a little child have I chosen, I will be thine, and how my mother cried out, no, that she had never understood, that barbaric Massacre of the Innocents! How thanks to the newborn child of God all the innocent young children had to be slaughtered, and if you thought about all the wailing mothers it was enough to make you go crackers on Christmas Eve. Now and again the guests in the Pakistani restaurant looked up indifferently from their dinners at the restless volcano. The billowing clouds of ash looked more and more like mushroom clouds, and yet, outside, there was nothing but a cloudless spring sky, and I too felt something of that strange cheerfulness that grips people when they hear of a catastrophe just far enough away.

While continuing to follow the tireless volcano on the television, through the noise of the traffic and Whitechapel Market I slowly became aware of a sound drawing steadily closer, ever closer to my ear. A pitiless metronome. I finally turned my head and just a few metres away saw one of the completely veiled women dressed in a black Niqab striking a white cane against the pavement. She had a powerfully steady rhythm and the degree to which the small eye opening of her Niqab, held in place over the bridge of her nose by a thick, plaited thread, was of any use was doubtful. Without slowing down in the slightest she brushed right past me. Nothing about her said whether she was young or old. She only hit the pavement with her cane unceasingly, and for a long time I could hear it disappearing into the crowd, a terrible echo of time's second-hand. And then suddenly it was still in the restaurant. The eruption of ash on the television grew ever thicker, ever higher, a gigantic black-brown cauliflower. Day turned into night. An immeasurably dark curtain of ash settled over

the farmsteads at the foot of the volcano. Visibility doubtless reduced to only a few steps. The disaster crew unreal in their white dust masks, trying to keep a disoriented farmer from going to look for a runaway horse. An old Pakistani man, who had stopped eating when he saw the images of the cloud of ash darkening everything, left his half-eaten plate, got up, and walked out onto the street.

Later I crossed London Bridge. All morning long a crowd flowed over the bridge from the south and in the early evening back in the other direction. I had to work my way against the harsh wind, the doggedly determined forward hastening masses, I loved London Bridge, the most unspectacular of all the bridges over the Thames, unlike any other. Grey, plain, functional, as it was nothing at all suggested that it was here, only a few hundred feet to the east, that for over six hundred years old London Bridge had stood, thick with gates, towers, houses, and shops that would continuously go up in flames, fall into the Thames, that would be rattled by insurgencies and rebel attacks, would witness triumphant returns from battle and frost fairs. The past had dissolved into a blue air emptied of aeroplanes and of a rare clarity. Only the people continued to stream across the bridge. From the embankment they seemed terribly small and as if they were on a conveyor belt, their legs, briefcases, and bags full of Thermoses and lunchboxes covered by the railings while their heads merely glided over the edges like the spawn of an ineradicable amphibian species.

Shortly before reaching the southern end of the bridge I became aware of a young man's face stock still in the middle of the people barrelling towards me. He had to be near the stairs which led down to the Thames. He was tall, and thin, and wore a black leather jacket and just as in a Renaissance portrait the first thing I noticed was the elegant curve of his nose, for the half of his face which was turned toward me was covered by a thick mess of dark blonde hair and in the sunlight shone with an unmistakable shade of red. I moved halfway towards him, on the pavement at his feet was a stack of newspapers. He also held a rolled up newspaper under his arm without, however, giving any sign

that he intended to sell it. Once I was standing in front of him, I immediately looked down at his stack. It was the homeless newspaper. The young man must have leaned forward at the same time as I had, for when I raised my head, I saw into his face.

My dismay was even greater as I had been drawn to the young man's face, coming as it did from out of a distant time, in spite of myself. His one cheek, initially hidden behind his hair, was swollen and as if stricken by rot, as if it were being eaten away from the inside by some kind of animal. I frantically fixed my gaze again on the newspapers at the young man's feet, he seemed used to giving the public time to think. Determined to ignore the disfigurement, I looked back up. Two dove-coloured eyes examined me. I remember you, the young man said. And a smile crossed his face, or at least the undamaged part, over the other where the corner of his mouth was misshapen and twitched briefly he apparently had no control. I haven't ever met you here before, I said, by then collected, I am in different places, the young man replied with great politeness, but London Bridge, the southern side, that's my spot. The southern side! He laughed. I looked quizzically into his eyes, the grey suddenly darkening with a shine. I was still in front of him even though I hadn't bought a newspaper. Brakes screeched, buses passed, rushing pedestrians crossed against the light. Even the ends of the bridge vibrated from the traffic. One of the few container barges left was on the Thames, a clipper surged past, both of them overtook a tiny police boat. With unmistakable shyness, but at the same time a touch of brusque pride, the young man asked, Will you be here again tomorrow?

I had hardly made it down the steps to the Thames when it became so quiet I could hear the gurgling of the waves. The sharp wind stopped abruptly, blocked by the high old storage spaces, and where the steamers once unloaded their cargo of rum, sugar, tobacco, tea, and coffee there was now an elongated glass dome arching over a square which opened down to the river. I walked into the passage, amazed by the inescapable and bright birdsong coming down from above. With my

head leaned back I could only spot a few birds which, warned enough in advance against a dash against the glass by the filigree-like construction of steel-ribs, would sweep here and there but then at times wind themselves up into such a frenzy it was as if they would become intoxicated by their own songs. This unleashed such a manifold echo under the barrel-shaped glass dome that I suddenly felt as if I were no longer in the middle of the city, but had woken up in an early morning forest. I leaned my head even further back and closed my eyes. From out of those trees still dark with night arose a soft whistling and its urgent reply, cascades of tones and jubilant trills, and it was the first morning of the world.