



A Haunting

by Graham Tugwell

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I wore rags.

And who was I in that moment? What words were mine?

What thoughts?

Wind in the hallway, bringing its coldness, bringing the voices, bringing the weight and the sound of the crowd.

My feet were bare; softpowder soiled, blackmade by the black stage floor and down I stared unseeing.

What words, what thoughts, what words were mine?

Steadily now unknowing myself, just breathing, softly breathing that cold: all the words written and all the words known. Nothing of me from that moment on— dumbly pressing the prop, that cold banded iron pressed dumb to my skull, forgetting...

Forgetting.

And staring, unseeing: no spectacles in this small town. Not then, not now.

Blurred squares of light from the glare of the stage, bred through the holes in the gaps of the world, making long shapes on the bareness of arms, shaping the shapeless rag of my shirt, blackening the red of the soldier's pole, glazing white bands with an amber glow

And carried on cold come unbodied voices; the girl on the stage and the soldier:

That leap cross the ditch nearly killed me.

I could barely keep up with you.

The soft thump of feet on the stagefloor, the sound of the crowd hungry watching them move in the warmth and the light and the life of that space, the beat of their feet is a heartbeat.

Wound springs, expending measured energy.

And their resonine words resound and resound— *I love the sound of your speech— the sound of your speech—* the sound of their feet—drifting to die in the lightless, airless space backstage, perish unseen in unbuilt places.

And cold in those dying spaces myself I worry the words I've been given; endeavouring there to make them my own, repeating them slow, saying them soft, repeating them slow...

Hollowness words, in darkness said, said for no-one, not even myself.

Breathing there to prepare to unbody; preparing the vehicle meat of myself, prepare for the stage and the hunger of crowd.

And how should it begin?

What strangeness will the lights work on me?

Will they rouse me from the cold and dark and death of backstage?

Will they warm me into life; make of me a vibrance, a vital thing?

Will they use me; use me up, so when the words have left me, they leave me brittle rawness in the thrall of eyes. The moment a melt of gone forever, and I made nothing but a thing in rags, of stripped ribs and aching arches, breathless to the dark dismissed and the weathered redemption of myself, my words...

But for now the metal on my forehead cold, and cool the breeze cross blackened feet and I numb myself with slow unmaking.

No words.

No thoughts.

No words of mine...

But—

The click of a latch lets softness to the hallway in.

Soft between the yawning slants of slatted black comes the whisper breath of cloth, drops the dab of supple sole, and from the depths of dark she comes.

Come to rouse me back from the freeze of uncreation.

Bare ankles fletched in feathers gold, that light that gilds a golden calf, that melts a length of feathered hem into a length of filigree.

And both of us are clad in rags.

And both of us are held in hollow ghosts of words.

And her hand on my chin, so light on my cheek, and my face, softly held, drawn slowly up, and my eyes drawn from the dust of floor and lead to look in darkness, I'm lead to look into her eyes.

What could I do?

What could I say?

Light she lays her lips on mine...

And oh, a wonder thing, such warmness for unworthiness, a thing unbegged for, a moment rings the chiming knife upon the rim of glass, that hangs, a bead of water fullness, perfect, all light enclosing, before the annihilation drop—

A moment revealing worlds and worlds, and words I never knew I needed—

How do I tell you?

How do I show...?

(long, so long ago, at length along the car backseat, and looking through the window glass, and watching looming streetlamps pass, and watching as those lights line up, striding lines along horizon lengths—in those symmetry moments the world made sense.

It all made clear, so crystal clear...

But the car drives on, and takes me too, and takes those faultless lines apart, breaks order down to senseless shards...)

And the moment moves on, and the meagre meanness, the hollowness of my reply
—

“Thank you.”

Words and worlds lost to me, burning shame failure of words... I couldn't say what I needed to, nor what it meant to me—

“Thank you,” whispered, slipped inadequate from lips unbidden, dying quickly death in air.

Stone numbness; still I'm left, an uncreated thing.

And she drifts, swallowed by a slow unfolding limb of light, swallowed in the mouth of stage, she leaves her mark of fading warm.

And I am left once more in dark, alone upon the margin stage and the sounds of crowd are softening now and light a slow and amber glaze and that instant hardens into memory and cool inscrutability.

What do I know?

Soft treads... the dying voice... again metal cold against my skull...

And the only kiss I count.

The kiss that caught the corner of my mouth: soft, a lasting soft, hidden from the lights and the warmth of the stage, a hidden thing, a softening soft unknowing...

But mine...

And time has moved on, has left me less, leaves me lost in memory, each leaves its sorrow stain on me...

(What thoughts, what words, what thoughts were mine?)

And time again abandons, and I find myself pinned by splintered light from stage, pinned by a kindness I could never hope to earn, can never hope to feel again, kindness holding me there again.

And again.

And again.

Holding me...

A kindness I make a cruelty.

A haunting.

Graham Tugwell is a writer and performer of Irish distraction. The recipient of the College Green Literary Prize 2010, his work has appeared in over forty journals, including *Anobium*, *The Quotable*, *Pyrta*, *THIS Literary Magazine*, *L'Allure Des Mots* and *Puddle*. He has lived his whole life in the village where his stories take place. He loves it with a very *special* kind of hate. His website is grahamtugwell.com.

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