

NOTES FROM A NEW BAGHDAD

Martin Burke

“Why use a gun when you can just change the law?”

1

No flowers. Not a flower left in the flower-field
Yet for reasons of her own she is smiling as if to suggest
She knows something I don't. Isn't that enough to make you believe
That somewhere a benign divinity also smiles at our hopes
Even if he doesn't always fulfil them? At which the State
Opens a file on our activities and mark us as 'subversives'
So that even the tram drivers are cautioned not to speak to us
But record everything we say.

Not that anything is happening. Overtly that is. But it is happening.
The lights in the barracks do not go out at night. Nor are the dead geraniums
Removed from plots in the park. This should tell us something –and it does
Because what is being said need not always be spoken and a dead flower
Is more than enough to let you know what a government's intentions are
Regarding the viability, and availability, of beauty.

Certain ones remember that this has happened before
Certain ones choose to forget. The postmen are late with their daily rounds
Because the censor is the only one working overtime.

Is it any wonder then that I have a suspicious heart?
It wasn't always like this. Once I had time and space for love.
Once I helped clear the gardens of their dead excess. Once I preferred
The Paradise to the Inferno.
Even then certain 'friends' called me credulous and naïve but could not convince me
That what I was doing was less than useless and was, in some twisted way,
A collaboration against everything I believed in; and if I listened to
The St Mathew Passion how could I have suspected that one day we would come to live it?

So successful has the changing of the guard been that nothing has happened.
Oh, the rituals continue: children eat ice-cream; a young man opens a girl's blouse
For the first time, old men in Cafes play cards and curse –but don't you see, don't you see-
Everything has changed?

Among the boats in the harbour you will notice an extra frigate
That there are slightly more army trucks on the road than there used to be
That certain buildings now have a 'security entrance' –and the list goes on
As if it were a parody of itself for a carnival parade but those six sullen men
Crossing the bridge are not wearing masks yet they walk perfectly in step
With each other and whatever their business is they will not say

But clearly they are going about it.

Nothing is hidden. Everything is happening so that we can see it
Which only means that few bother to look. It's as if we live in a prelude-time
To something that will happen. Only nothing will happen which isn't happening now
And because it's not hidden or covered or denied there is nothing to accuse anyone of

Like water against stone the slow erosion is underway and will not be stopped.
What is happening elsewhere will soon happen here –a new Baghdad,
The Irish route, Green zone and road-blocks –the roundabout way conspirators take
To achieve what they always intended.

2

When the first refugees arrived they were laughed at as yokels and armatures
And, because nobody saw them, nobody *saw* them.
The reaction confused them, the city itself confused them, as if it contained
Unwritten norms and habits they had no experience of. They were now doubly lost.
To the past, to the present; and if there was a future before them it was terrifying

Until those who were laughing began, reluctantly, to realise that this was also
The future they could not escape. Dislocation was everywhere.
By the time the new exiles realised that they were also exiles they were beyond
Any palpable form of redemption, or salvation, or whatever it is/was they had casually expected
Was always there to be given and would be given there.

Now you couldn't tell the spectators from the players. 'Caution' was the operative word
And there wasn't one who wasn't cautious. To the point of immobility if needs be
Where it was better not to act than to act and have yourself accused of your own actions.

You can't eat a flag but flags were everywhere while bread was scarce.
The yokels were accused of the rising crime-rate.
The first call went out to reinstate the ghetto.

3

My heart is suspicious but I have not stopped myself from loving what I love.

I kept dreaming a perfect architecture to live in with a woman whose body altered my language
Beyond what the sensible diction of the times called for. I was living in another country
But what was happening elsewhere was happening to me and I began to see more police
On the streets than was usual. You have to stay alert. A child takes a specific book from a shelf
And history alters. A woman opens her door to a lover and history alters. This is what

You have to look for: the ordinary gesture, the epiphany which becomes a narrative
The prophecy occurring in the most mundane way where nothing is mundane

The unattended bicycle can either be a pipe-bomb or Hermes's chariot adapted to
The new conditions; the shabby boat at the harbour contain something extraordinary;
Three words on a scrap of paper may pass from hand to hand and give birth
To a beautiful sedition. Yet whatever I cite some cold functionary is also aware of
And writes a memo and so the bike is taken away, the harbour closes its gates and pencils
Are hard to come by. You could laugh (and I have laughed)
Because for the moment that's the only weapon you possess. But if laughter is allowed
Then you know your will has been stolen; that what you are allowed is allowed
So that it serve what you are denied. When everything changes everything matters.

If you have four friends then multiply it by four and you have the number
Of your enemies. Somebody is watching what you do. Tram-drives make
Their daily reports. The file with you name is getting thick and thicker.

A parable or a poem. That's what you're hoping to find. Some epiphany
In sand or stone that will become a narrative. But that's for later. For now
The first duty is to survive. It's as basic and as primitive as that. To live in the ghetto
But to think of it as being your cathedral. Women are plentiful and as hungry as you are
For comforting flesh. Don't forget it. Don't put it aside or make love with sadness
In your heart. You're alive. She's alive. That matters. So when you open her blouse
Be aware that you are opening an uncontrollable future. Because if you don't know it
They certainly do. A hard-on is as dangerous to their future as any fifth column
So what they can't control priests will condemn. If you own the present you own the future
And if you own hell you say who goes in never to get out, and the geraniums left to rot
Are left as a visible warning.

Complexity can never achieve what simplicity can.
You have hard-on, they have dead flowers –which do you think will survive?

4

Yet sometimes you behave as if you have seen nor heard nothing.
You go to the mountains, you go to the sea. Children are eating ice-cream
And lovers are seeking excuses to find an unoccupied space they can fill
With their bodies without anybody knowing what they intend. Of course we know.
Didn't we do that also? Didn't we look for wholesome shadows where our bodies
Could glisten for our delight? Don't we remember how delicious it was to eat ice-cream?
Don't we remember how even the sand was innocent and whatever you wrote there
Was never intended to survive as some signal to the future but simple be a name across
A skewered heart which cause no pain but pride?

Yet the sand is no more innocent than we are. We behave as a bunch of people would
On a day's outing to the sea-side but that's where the similarities and resemblances stop.

We may not be subtle but we are purposeful; are focused on this conspiracy of joy;
Are casting our pride at the masters' teeth gritted against us because we are
Doing nothing dangerous and that's suspicious. No, the bastards are not stupid.
They know what we're up to, but if you have no plot, no plan, and no leader
Just what can we be accused of? So we roll up our trousers and paddle about
And not a word is exchanged, or suppressed, about exile or residency.
No one talked about the factory conditions, nor did any of the teachers
Make so much as a single reference to the 'adjusted curriculum';
The ice-cream vendor did a splendid business and the children were delighted
And by the time I was getting a hard-on for my wife she was already opening her blouse.

If you know that then you know a gesture can subvert the State-
Such as later, in the park, when she opened her blouse, took out a rose and gave it to the earth