

The Ferris Wheel

Two months at the Stout Centre

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I started working at the Stout Centre just after Christmas Day 1992. There was no one around; when the sun was out I took a chair on to the deck, and sat there staring at the view for hours, a book open on my lap. The beginning of the two-month Reader's Digest PEN-SRC fellowship coincided with four weeks' leave from my half-time work at *The Evening Post*, and to me four weeks without having to visit the newspaper seemed an almost infinite expanse of time. That must be why I arrived at the Stout Centre with such grand plans. I wanted to write a novel that I'd been thinking about for a couple of years – to get at least a decent first chapter written. But before I started writing I also wanted to read a large number of books as research for my own (about which I will say no more than that it involves amnesia and a lot of fibbing). I think I somehow anticipated fitting four months' worth of work into those four weeks (and the five half-weeks after them). In any case, I soon realised that I didn't know enough about the kind of novel I wanted to write and I didn't have the time or the patience to read all those books. My novel remained a cloud from which no rain fell. Other things happened instead.

In a drawer of the desk in Room 11 was a half-eaten bag of Curiously Strong Mints, left there by the previous Fellow. When the bag was finished I bought some more. Sitting in Room 11 sucking on a mint, thinking about nothing in particular, things would drop into my mind as they have a habit of doing, curiously, when you're in that kind of reverie. Correspondences, coincidences, chance comparison: whether they reveal something about the world or simply something about the frame of mind that brings them into play, these are often the means by which bits and pieces of poems (and sometimes whole poems) arise ...

The one thing that I knew I was meant to be doing at the Stout was finishing revision of my first book of poems. I'd given it to Victoria University Press at the end of September, and a couple of months later received their reader's report. It was extremely useful, and I wanted to take on many of its recommendations; somehow I was also going to revise my whole book of poems in January and February. So in between contemplating my novel (and after I'd given up this fruitless activity) I looked at the poems again. Some of the reader's suggestions I could use straight away; in other cases poems had

become so familiar and so fixed I couldn't get back into them – they resisted all attempts to take them apart and rearrange them. In any case I felt that I'd changed since I wrote them, thought I should leave them be, to float or sink on their merits (or perhaps borrow a little flotation from their neighbours in the book). It was when I pushed aside the poetry manuscript too – pushed it over on the desk next to the very slim folder containing the germ of my novel – and let my mind wander, that the things started happening for me that made my two months at the Stout such a valuable time.

Shortly after I discovered the Curiously Strong Mints, a new issue of UK poetry magazine *PN Review* arrived in the mail. The last thing in it was a review by American poet John Ashbery of *Landlocked*, a book by young British poet Mark Ford. I turned straight to it – Ashbery is one of the poets I'm most interested in, and I'd never read a review by him before. He rather liked Ford's book: 'Waves of refreshment coming at you, like those "curiously strong mints" you have in England. We know about "strong" poets; attention must now be paid to the "curiously strong" like James Tate and Charles Simic ...'¹ Not only was I astonished and pleased by the 'curiously strong' coincidence, but also at the mention of Simic, another of my favourite poets. Reading something like that is a bit like scanning radio frequencies and suddenly tuning into a wonderful conversation. Having an interest in reading and writing poetry is like being a shortwave radio buff in some ways (only shortwave fanatics probably communicate with each other more). When you get onto a certain wavelength, all sorts of things concur: the kinds of poets whose work you like, their tones of voice and preoccupations, your own preoccupations. It all happens at once, curiously enough, then you might lose the station for a while – there will be interference from all manner of sources, not least from the demands of having to earn a living. What I loved about being at the Stout was simply the space it provided for me to tune in, to be receptive, to pay attention. It enabled curiosity.

Part of this was being entitled to a university library card. One afternoon in January I gave up whatever I thought I was supposed to be doing in Room 11 and went up to the library's Audiovisual Suite to see what tapes they had of poets reading their own work. Charles Simic's name was on the list, so I handed over my card and sat listening to the laconic, wistful, bleak, mysterious, funny, wise tones of him reading his poems:

*All my dark thoughts
laid out
in a straight line.
An abstract street
on which an equally abstract intelligence
forever advances, doubting
the sound of its own footsteps ...*

(‘Euclid Avenue’)²

There was hardly anyone in the library – most just some students who had the holiday job of laboriously shifting whole sections of books from floor to floor, trolley by trolley, as if changing sets between scenes in some epic imperial drama (or perhaps a Peter Greenaway movie). To read Simic on the page is to glimpse a peculiarly baffling and bewitched universe of omens and curses and talking brooms; to sit listening to the poems in his voice, in an almost empty library in January, was to be compelled and surrounded by that universe. (In the background was the knowledge that the slaughter Simic witnessed as a child in Yugoslavia was happening all over again, that the figures of death and starvation and mute horror that stalk his poems were utterly real and at large again).

I went back to Room 11 and stared out of the window. The way my thoughts and feelings revolved (but made no ‘progress’) reminded me of the motion of a ferris wheel. I’d been thinking a couple of days before about how many conversations have something of that motion. (I suppose I was having some kind of conversation with myself- who was it that said ‘poetry is born of one’s conversation with oneself?’) In any case a poem came out of this, from the combination of the image of the ferris wheel and thinking about dialogue and how ‘we are what we are because of the people, real or imaginary, with whom we have talked’³ and from having listened to Simic. The poem attempts deliberately to imitate Simic’s tone:

*It was on the ferris wheel
I was introduced to
the art of conversation.
She was thirteen,
I was fourteen;
many times we passed the point where we’d climbed on.
How high it is, up here, she said
when we were near the top.
I could see my name
on the tip of her tongue.*

The poem took only a few versions to arrive at where I wanted it (most of mine take dozens). The title came quickly, too – I thought I’d call it, tongue in cheek, ‘How to Talk’. At the time I didn’t have a title for my book of poems, and after I’d written down the title of this poem I realised how appropriate it might be (in an equally tongue-in-cheek way) to the whole book, which has several poems about talking and listening and misunderstanding. I was pleased with the way, as a title, it might mock the demand that a young poet ‘find a voice’.

I’m not sure if I have found one yet, but I liked the idea of a book that not only pretended to have done so but also to be able to teach you how to use yours – and ended up giving you just a pair of tongue-tied teenagers on a ferris wheel.

I wrote other poems for a few weeks, some of them quite new and some grown from seeds in my notebook. Instead of revising several in my manuscript that I wasn’t satisfied with, I simply dropped them and put in these new ones. And in the receptive mood that the empty, silent January campus encouraged, I was unusually aware of the process by which poems were coming about: I think I learnt a few more small things about writing, about the importance of curiosity and trusting the imagination.

When I first started writing poems for my own pleasure, I was about the age of the kids on the ferris wheel, and all I thought I was doing was playing with words – trying to write things like Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (mostly rather innocent). Later on though – after several years of being taught books – I think the idea got into my head that writing poetry was some kind of transcendental experience. After all, poems most seemed to be about the transcendental (or its absence), so it followed that their authors had been in some kind of heightened mood when they wrote, and that all I had to do was get into the same kind of mood and poems would result. The culture encourages this kind of attitude with its talk of ‘creativity’ – as if the author or artist is a little god who ‘originates’ things inside himself or herself, instead of recombining pre-existing things to make new ones. (As Jacques Barzun points out in an essay called ‘The Paradoxes of Creativity’, the difference is a little like the conflict between creationists and evolutionists).⁴ The result is that when people sit down to write poems they often think that all they have to do is get a bit worked up about the meaning of life and put some words down on paper, words which because of the circumstances of their birth are automatically and magically invested with significance and wisdom. It’s even considered bad form to change things – ‘I thought I’d leave it like that because that’s the way it came out’.

It took me quite a long time to realise fully that poems (like poets) are made, not born. (‘Poem’ is from the Greek, ‘a thing made’). And they’re made out of already existing matter, by the imagination which like the processes of evolution needs material to work on: things seen, and heard, fragments of other poems, songs and dreams and stories. At any one time the information present to consciousness is potentially enormous – perceptions immediately available, and as recent experience, and as recollection: the readings of the million dials whose needles hover in the mind. Poems are composed of ‘takes’ on the world, by which I guess I mean one’s perception of the world, the world filtered through one’s thoughts and feelings about it, and through language – ‘takes’ and ‘mis-takes’. Perhaps

what we need to do is replace 'creativity' with 'curiosity', to be endlessly curious about the world and about consciousness and not to worry about how curious the results of our imaginative investigations might seem. 'Curious' is from the Latin *curiosus*, 'careful': perhaps (to go beyond poetry for a moment) our curiosity might teach us better to take care of ourselves and of the world, to be 'curiously strong' by paying attention, as in Jenny Bornholdt's recent poem, 'Please, pay attention'⁵ :

*Be wild and curious. The
day is in bloom. It needs
attention, admiration ...*

'The secret wish of poetry is to stop time', says Charles Simic.⁶ The illusion of a poem can be that everything is happening at once: the imagination holding close, or leaping invisibly between, all the things that it curiously regards. I don't think Richard Rorty (an 'anti-philosophy' philosopher) is exaggerating when he says 'the imagination, not reason'⁷ offers the best ways to investigate our lives: by paying attention to the new combinations of images and ideas that chance can bring together in an instant, by letting the mind wander and taking seriously the new paths it chances upon.

How does that happen? How does the imagination work? Mysteriously. One can only use analogies – which of course is what the imagination does, sliding from metaphor to metaphor. (Metaphor is not rhetoric, it is how the mind moves). Towards the end of my time at the Stout, I read a review of some books about Complexity Theory which seemed to offer an analogy for the way the imagination produces new things:

Complexity scientists speak of a 'space' of rules or patterns of interaction. In one large region, there is simple, repetitive, passive order. In another, there are the shattering cascades and unserviceable intricacies of chaos. In between, *the edge of chaos*, 'a special region unto itself', lies an area where rules become optimally powerful and 'creative' (in some dubious sense of the word). If you write a computer program consisting of rules designed to solve certain problems, allow them to modify themselves as they go along, and retain the modifications that make them more efficient, they migrate to the edge of chaos, in a handsome phrase. Here they achieve their optimal form, and *tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté*, as Baudelaire, himself often over the edge, remarked.⁸

That seemed to me to capture remarkably well what the process of writing poetry feels like – perhaps because my favourite poetry (the kind I like to read and the kind I hope to write) often teeters on the brink of chaos: it's the price you have to pay for taking account of the complexity that results from simultaneity. At this edge things make their own kind of sense, which takes a little patience to tune into – often it looks more like nonsense, and does its work by leaping the turnstiles of the rational mind. And there's always the danger that you have strayed, without

knowing it, into the region of pure chaos, where no reader will find you and where you will have only Language Poets for company.

(I already had, as many people do, my own less abstract analogy for the places the imagination can take you – a real place, a place I go sometimes when I'm meant to be doing something else. If you walk into the Botanical Gardens and take all sorts of unlikely turnings, you might end up on a little curving path beside which are planted six cork oaks, *Quercus suber*, SW Spain and Portugal, clothed in bubbling cork whose beautiful and slightly eerie texture could lead you to believe that running your hand over it might instantly transport you somewhere wonderful, a SW Portugal of the mind perhaps).

John Ashbery's poetry is all about letting the mind wander, and about simultaneity, and he finds these things in Mark Ford's book *Landlocked*, ending his review by referring to 'a wintry world, ours in fact, where the beautiful and silly simultaneity of whatever is happening in it at a given moment has never been more touchingly, more joyously expressed'.⁹ I wanted to read Ford's book after that – perhaps it would enable me to stay on the same wavelength for a little longer – but was pessimistic about getting hold of it. A few weeks later, however, I was browsing through the poetry shelf at Unity Books and spotted *Landlocked*. I read it that evening. I don't think I liked it quite as much as Ashbery did, but I was pleased to find there some familiar things, some images that must bounce around on that particular wavelength:

*And then the approach of evening
Is like stepping into space. The clanking machinery
Of the ferris wheel rumbles beneath each thought ...*¹⁰

Andrew Johnston held a Reader's Digest PEN-Stout Research Centre Fellowship in January and February 1993. His first collection of poems, *How to Talk*, was published by Victoria University Press in April.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ John Ashbery, 'By Indirection' *PN Review* 89, January/February 1993, p 63.
- ² Charles Simic, *Selected Poems 1963-1983, Revised and Expanded* (New York 1990), p 128.
- ³ Richard Rorty, 'In a Flattened World', *London Review of Books* 15, 7, April 8, 1993, p 3.
- ⁴ Jacques Barzun, 'The Paradoxes of Creativity' in *The Best American Essays 1990*, ed Justin Kaplan (New York, 1990) p 21.
- ⁵ *Sport* 9, Spring 1992, p 6.
- ⁶ Introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1992*, ed Charles Simic (New York 1992), p.xiv.
- ⁷ Rorty, op cit, p 3.
- ⁸ Galen Strawson, 'Let's have a bit of order', *The Independent on Sunday Review*, February 21, 1993, p 25.
- ⁹ Ashbery, op cit, p 64.
- ¹⁰ Mark Ford, *Landlocked* (London, 1992), p 14.