

The Speed of Dark

Ian Duhig

Published by Picador

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Moshibboleth

In Beverley Minster's stalls a teacher pauses,
halting his gaggle of exchange-school students
at a carving of a hooded fox preaching to geese:
'Foxes are common trickster figures in folklore.

René, your twelfth-century "Le Roman de Renart"
was forerunner to "Le Roman de Fauvel": even now
you'll see foxes run for their lives before horses
in all the Ridings of Yorkshire, "God's Own County".

To Native Americans, Joe, *Fox*, is *Coyote*'s brother
and a favourite incarnation for their skinwalkers.
Aki, a Japanese phrase used on answering the phone,
is known to be unpronouncable by fox-spirits . . .'

'Moshi moshi!' demonstrates Aki, proving he's human.
The teacher tries these words but becomes tongue-tied,
fails twice more. The mask slips. Red-faced, he barks:
'And this next misericord shows a fox hanged by geese.'

Out of Context

An evil word is like an evil tree, torn from the earth,
shorn of all its roots. – Qur'an 14.26

A website glossed 'cleanskin'; his dictionary
of the Indo-European roots to English words
gives '*kers*' for 'black' (as fiery Krishna),
then '*kau*' for 'Caucasian' (those the sun burns).

'Ink' leads back to 'encaustic', so to 'holocaust'
but his page stays white; the light consumes
each verse he turns out like some failed Keats
when he pictures the red trees of human bombs.

At last he turns to that Tree of Hell *Zaqqum*,
its scalding fruit the shape of demons' skulls:
this the damned must harvest, gorge and abuse,
which tastes, the Qur'an warns, 'like dregs of oil'.

‘Use Complete Sentences’

French oral practice: Teacher’s nervous look
to where I stand in turn and raise my book:

‘My father has grey horses on his head . . .’
She snorts. Her face grows dark while mine glows red.

flogging dead brains for something true to say
when Dad’s grey horses took my breath away:

they took the air to run rings round the sun.
Now (with a crib) I work through Yang Tzu-yun,

where horses were his metaphors for breath.
These sentences are sentences of death.

Communion

Once, for our 'Preparing for Communion' class, a young nun on teaching placement screened 'The White Suit', a Vatican Film Unit rental. In the lingering cold of that Friday afternoon with a distant, circling angelus of ice-cream vans, the mote-thick beam of our chattering projector lit Giacomo and his subtitles' pale translation on the pock-marked wall of the school gym. Only ten, like me, he was already sporting the holy ghost of a handlebar moustachio which quivered with the passion of his pleas. But his hot Italian could not melt his mother, a widow just too poor to afford a white suit for Giacomo to wear at his First Communion. To save for one, he worked nights at a foundry only to lose his right arm down the fiery throat of some ancient malfunctioning ore converter. Then, to God's circuitous design, his workmates – communists themselves converted by his faith – stump up for cloth and the hire of a tailor.

The film ends with Giacomo in Milan Cathedral, empty white sleeve pinned to left silk breast, swanning to the altar-rail and smiling bishop, who waits for him with the chalice and wafer, through billowing incense which bleaches out all subtitling as if dumbstruck by the vision.

During break, I grew a moustache of free milk,
chalked hosts on tarmac and blackboards,
pictured my father's Guinness, Alec Guinness.
But most of the class had weeks of nightmares.
Parents complained. One day, without a word,
the nun was gone. To me, she'd never been
quite there, less real than Giacomo's moustache,
my phantom limb itching in its flesh impostor
or my grasp of sacramental transubstantiation.

Fauvel Love Song

(‘Douce dame débonaire’)

Follow your bright love, unlucky shadow
 whose comeliness is black
 from sun borne on your back –
yet follow your bright love, unlucky shadow.

The sun can quicken as she seems to stand
 a seedling Campion,
 that shadow’s champion;
the old hand followed with this second hand.

Shadow with your hand, unhappy lover
 then close round your own dove;
 be dovecote, nest and glove:
what light has veiled, let darkness now uncover.

Discover what man most loves is himself:
 be warmed by your own sun
 in loving number one,
a love that will not leave you on the shelf.

Turn your gnomon to your source of light:
 the fall awaits the proud,
 for all of us, the shroud;
so come like God, alone, and in the night.