

The Streets of La Roue

i

From the red house on the fish quays
where the old harbour was, the plane trees
and the cobbles, in Wednesday drizzle
when thought travels on diagonals, colour
is pure and unascivious, take the metro
from Sainte Catherine, via Jacques Brel
and Saint Guidon on the Erasmus Line
to Anderlecht – Anderlecht being, myth says,
a rough translation of ‘the love of Erasmus’ –
to find yourself between places, languages,
on the outer ring between city and countryside
where roads abruptly fade into fields, cows,
in a garden city whose streets commemorate
the aspirations of its founders and its people.

ii

La Roue is on the outer ring. La Roue
could have been a blacksmith’s wheel,
La Roue could have been a torturer’s wheel:
spin it – *roue, roue, roue*, in a backstreet,
a hoop and a stick and here come the twenties,
a little bruiser in his grey shorts, grey shirt.
Here come the pavements, double crocodile
of nuns with their charges, the tramlines, river,
the lake where the children bathed. Here
come the houses, big ones, little ones, four
small wooden ones in a block that in fire
would burn. Here come the Belgian, French,
the Spanish and Portuguese and here come
the old who were born and who live here.

iii

Like an old film star, the lone magnolia
is in flower but this is not Sunset Boulevard,
this is *Droits de l’Homme*, boasting mailboxes
in metal, wood, tin, most like birdhouses
or those two tiny dormer windows looking out,
perplexed. Where is the postman? Where
are the addressees? *Attention au Chien!*
C’est moi qui monte la garde ici! But
what does he guard? The cherub urns,
barbecues, slides and trikes, basketball posts,
looking up and barking, the number plaques?
What need for number when each doorway

is marked by its own carefully chosen tree-tile,
wall bracket, weathervane, carriage lamp?

iv

On *Rue de l'Emancipation*, parked in a white van,
Façade Express undertakes the cleaning of facades.
For nothing is what it seems. Under the asphalt
run the old tramlines, under the tramlines, damned
for all its sewage to run eternally underground,
what might have been a tourists' caféside river.
But for all the builders' rubble, plastic bags,
piping, wires, concrete blocks, tiling, planks
and paving stones, there are giant brussel sprouts
vying with camellias, geraniums and compost
sitting beside the pebbledash, japonica flowering,
rhododendron and broom and in a window,
behind the yellow primulas, a black and white cat,
black-nosed with a soot mark, looking anxious.

v

From No. 4, particularly pretty with an espaliered
tree and a climbing rose on a three-pole arch,
the sound of running water, a windchime
and an awning still bearing traces of artificial
Christmas snow, a lady opens her window to ask:
Vous cherchez quelqu'un? I am looking
for La Roue, I am looking for its guiding spirit,
where will I find it, *chez vous, chez vous,*
chez eux? Look, here is a bench for poets
and the elderly, a crescent where daisies grow
freely on the verge, *Place Ernest S'Jonghers*
overlooked by an orange crane and tremendous
sudden drumming from some den or loft
where a teenager drives them all berserk.

vi

But let us praise folly, for "He who loves
vehemently no longer lives in himself
but in what he loves...", Erasmus says,
and no more so than on *Rue du Symbole*,
where a young girl in a tracksuit is pulling
on a pink string a toddler on a trike, sucking
a dummy, surveying the world; a grandma
in a long brown robe and hejab accompanies
a gaggle of Moroccan schoolkids; an old spruce
wears a wild afro of ivy, a baby stone rabbit
nibbles at weeds and on net curtains, embroidered,

spreads an idyll of ponies, pastures, windmills
and turtledoves flying out of their cages to flirt.

vii

“... and his joy is in proportion to his withdrawal
from self and his preoccupation with what is
outside himself” our guiding spirit, for I believe
Erasmus himself has been invoked, continues:
“When the soul meditates on travelling without
this use of its limbs, this is certainly insanity.”
And suddenly Soul arrives at a basketball ground
and, not wishing to travel unfingered, unlimbed,
straddles a bench to carve a soulful message:
pour la vie mon bb, invoking the names
of Christel, Souliman, Ismael. Soul kicks
at broken sidelight glass, plastic fork tines
scattered in the dust of *Place Ministre Wauters*
and asks: “Who ate here under the beeches?”

viii

On the corner of *Rue de l’Energie*,
you will find the boulangerie/fromagerie
of Tonton Garby. In a French beret
and moustache, Monsieur Tonton
(whose less energetic brother serves
alternate days in a seven-day week)
holds forth in French, in English.
He has lived here for 43 years,
travelled all over – Oxford Street,
Piccadilly Circus, America (here
he bursts into an American accent)
and once, with his family, to Sri Lanka.
“Come on”, he cried, “let’s do the elephant tour!
Everything, everything!” And so they did.

ix

“The more perfect the love, the greater
the madness”, Erasmus concludes in his praise
of folly. And folly it is, surely, to come upon
an open space in the *Rue des Colombophiles*
where, beyond a fence of corrugated iron strips,
car panels, wire fencing, is a flat area of allotments,
well dug but empty of produce save for a few
yellow potato flowers and some far greenery.
Back gardens flaunt chickens and daffodils,
a fine cedar fronting a row of poplars, the chimneys
of the concrete factory, the railway bridge, trains

going to Ghent and, over the fence at the bottom end of the allotments, helmeted cyclists gliding past on the canalside like ducks in a shooting gallery.

x

Doves cooing on the *Rue des Huit Heures* bring you to the *Plaine des Loisirs*. Pleasure, more folly. Sun sets above the black plane trees and on a bench this time, *ALO MAMAN*, *Je t'aime Valentin*, are messages from Kelly. A young one in her mother's arms, stretching out a baby arm, is calling repeatedly like the dove, "da-ddy, da-ddy". Grass is littered with daisies and the long thin diagonal shadows of the trees underline the white lines the daisies seem to follow like shadow-writing. A blade of a boy in a black suit with a black dog yanks on the lead, making the dog snarl and twist and half-leap as if on circus training. The glittering of the grass swells like waves at sea.

xi

We've come full circle back to *Place de la Roue* but this time behind the church, once too small, now, rebuilt, too big. After all, it's only a moderate garden city, swelling with immigrants' kids: these two girls, one with bad eyesight and glasses, both with long brown ringlets, bright blue rollerblades, legs splayed like young deer finding their legs, this tubby boy, pushing his sister, *Vite, vite!* Two boys bending to their mothers' headscarved brows with kisses. And the young Moslem women, laughing, handling the baby in the pram as lightly, with as little concern as their mothers before them did. This little girl in plum, standing a foot away, swinging her arms violently from side to side like a windmill.

xii

"A glutton for letters", Erasmus said of himself, his humanism trying to unite, above the confusion of beliefs and races, all the clerics who desired not to betray the cause of the spirit. In his house lie a cast of his cranium, fragments of his coffin. In the Room of Rhetoric, a statue of him stands, the saint holding back his torn entrails, carrying carpenter's tools and hoe, square and compass. In profile, sharpened quill in hand, studied hands on an open book, fingers ringed, he sits writing.

He wears three coats, so cold were the winters,
and the black hat from which he was never parted.
Outside, leaf ponds float his adages – UBI BENE,
IBI PATRIA, brass letters half-submerged, rusting.

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