

Meirion Jordan

Translationum Sancti Johanni Baptiste

I.

It would have been around five o'clock, just after we had all sat down for dinner, the bread flat on our plates like blind fish. I felt it under the curve of my palm but it was quite dead, it had no inclination to flop or to burst upwards in a flurry of muck and go shooting off down the table. I sat for weeks staring into the little eyes that the oven had burned into its back while my neighbours passed the oil and the fish sauce and overturned the wine-cups in their hastiness. I held the thing, turning it over, looking for its life, its soul, its willingness to amaze me with expressions of a divine presence.

I must admit I hardly noticed the head that sat yammering on its platter in the centre of the room, spitting olive pits and shaking its gory locks in a mockery of anger. It was all for show, I'm sure: some little homunculus had crawled up into its brain by the severed neck, tugging on wires of brass or sinew, whomping down on some grisly bellows to inject vital essence here, or here, filling the veins that made the dead thing laugh and splutter on the wine. But I thought it was in bad taste, not because it was in any way unpleasant company (it was not!) but because nobody else seemed to care about the droplets that leaked from it, overflowing the silverware that looked to hold it in, pattering on the carpet underneath. The blood - black and filthy and smelling of the last dregs of oil from the bottom of some desert huckster's globe of a pot - had ruined the pattern, had absolutely ruined it.

II.

It was a curious design, and indeed I'd searched for it in some of the older books in the college library on the day after term ended, mostly to take up the hour or two before I had to cross the quad and look the Dean in the eye over a glass of sherry. It was good sherry, but the man had such pudgy hands, you could hardly credit how he'd been able to make a career writing long, dull articles on the fall of Cyprus. They were like slabs of whale-meat, faintly ridged in the way that meat is when you slice right through it with a sharp knife, and with that same suggestion of mottling that you see on scraped fish-skin. And in fact he was in fine form, holding the glass like a piece of a dismantled chandelier with that sort of curious look you see in crabs just before you kill them – but as I say, I was surprised that the design was in none of these books.

It may have been a peculiarity of the Archbishop himself, that such a clearly Arabic thing would have been sought by him, but then the iconography was indisputably the work of a Muslim craftsman working in Tripoli or some other Levantine town and not the geometries of some strange Persian import. There was the Mediterranean, the Adriatic and the Aegean, there was Rome and Alexandria, but instead of the centre there was a ball-like figure whose meaning I could not even begin to describe. The wafers, I think, must have sat lightly on it, for it showed little sign of use, barring a Latin inscription on the back by some Genoese merchant. The party was rather dull in any case, with the usual stiffness barely compensated for by the quick turnaround of the glasses. The Dean's whitish fingernails seemed to beckon me over imperceptibly, but of course I stuck my thumbs in my jacket pockets and went over to where the Reader in Attic Greek was grinning through the billows from his pipe.

III.

If there had been sound, it would have been a roar - and if there had been light it would have dazzled with the reflections of tiny eyes and whitish bodies staring from the smokestacks. There was neither, and the black clouds scalding and choking the dead space above them spread slowly until the entire place-that-would-be-sky was black, fading to ash at the edges. The invisible things clambered and wafted, fell and climbed again until they latched onto the surface of the spires and swung there in their dreams of hunger and want. They had no colours, because there could be no colour unless some other life of lenses and searchlights came hoovering the world with their blind whiteness. And how could there be another life that did not mutter endlessly about the cold, about the un-world of not being near the warm rock? The algae and plankton wept the not-sky from top to bottom. Unseen walls of heat and water bent space around the volcanic flues, time's endless vertebrae curling into an ouroboros or full stop.

Once in a millennium some great portion of the sky would fall through the clouds, and a new universe would erupt from its sagging blimp of a body, splitting the skin and racing to colonise every temporary inch even as the weight of the world above slowly crushed it. Then, when there was nothing left but the great towers of ivory wheeling haphazardly from the murk, as the scuttlers and the pinchers and slurpers cleaned down to the white white white, the survivors would breathe their children back into heaven to wait in tiny shells of code for another world to come shrugging through grey rolling waters that nothing could comprehend.

IV.

The woods had no end and no beginning until a man came out of them. He said that he was Rhys, but the villagers were suspicious so he showed them the golden brooch hidden under his tunic and then they believed him. The best family of the village put him by the fireside and fed him some of the meal they had prepared with good salt and fish from the Conwy, and in the morning the son took him on to the Abbot. It was no small thing to cross the line of white wattles but the man did so easily, and so the boy blessed him, was blessed, and went on his way.

“Are they all dead then?”

“Not all of them. I counted twenty new graves, and perhaps a few more had gone on to the enclosure beyond the hill.”

“And the ship, and the women?”

“Gone.”

The man opened the bag at his waist very carefully with his long thin fingers, loosening the strings with nails cut sharp to triangular points. Then he handed the bag to the Abbot and stood back with the fear standing white in his eyes. The Abbot, with his hands callused at almost every corner of tendon and joint, simply took up the thing and smiled.

“It is a precious thing.”

“It is a precious thing.”

“I am glad they did not take it. The gold and the women they can have.”

Very slowly, the Abbot held it out at the very limit of his reach, rolling the little ball of bone to the end of his fingertips with his thumb, and let it drop onto the floor where it bounced, skittered, and settled under the table. It was the best of omens, and so

the man Rhys was blessed, offered his blessing, and went off silent under the trees.

V.

“I’m afraid that I am late. I am sorry, Doctor, I simply couldn’t avoid it.”

“Please, it is no matter. Do sit down. If you would like water there is a glass on the table. I can have hot coffee sent up, we have an urn on the stove downstairs.”

“You are very kind. The snow is very thick in the Potsdamer Straße, and I am afraid that these shoes are past their best.”

“Please do not trouble yourself over it, Madam. Can you proceed?”

“Of course. I wish to relate to you an incident that happened to me many years ago, when I was a little girl. I was wearing a fur cap and a red jacket that my father, who was a sailor, had bought for me. He had been drowned perhaps the week before, though the letter had not yet reached us.”

“That in itself is interesting. But please go on.”

“I was playing with my friends upon the pond near our house – do you know the place? It is surrounded by ash trees, and in winter the young boys will come out upon it to skate. I myself was an indifferent skater, having only a pair that I had borrowed from my cousin Pieter, which were too large for me.”

“I remember it well. The path that leads to the church passes nearby, does it not?”

“It does. It would have been a clear day, with the sun unusually strong for that time in winter, when I fell through the ice near to the centre of the pond. I recall that I did not have time to shout before the water came up to meet me. But, Doctor,

the world underneath the ice was full of a light that had somehow escaped the snow above. I saw the marvellous dark fish that swim only in frozen lakes, and the gold that the little men hide there away from jealous eyes. And above, very faintly, I could make out the shadows of the ash trees slowly lengthening over the lake as the sun went down, even as the light that shone in upon me was still bright and grew brighter.”

“It is a much-observed phenomenon. Why, you can see that even now, as the snow falls outside, the same is true in this room – for I extinguished the candles several weeks ago. This is not something that should alarm you, though I detect, madam, you are very much at ease.”

“Thank you, yes. The shadows of the trees were a great comfort to me, and in that marvellous light I was able to rest, very calmly, until my mother came to fetch me. But, Doctor, do I perceive that to you this is an unexpected conclusion?”

“Indeed. I am unable to comprehend why hearing such a story should cause my fingernails to grow to these unusual lengths, nor why it should pinch my eyes so far back into their sockets that I can perceive you only as if through a long tunnel. I fear also that I am breathless with some anticipation that I cannot place. It makes me weep! And yet I am glad of it.”

VI.

It is a great town, though a little out of the way for a man with such a weight of letters to his pockets. All those voices, petitioning and pleading for the remittance of this, or the allowance of that, or the confirmation of the other! I had a hard enough time sleeping with all their noise, while the horses chewed hay or cropped grass and the men huddled around their squib of a fire. The high passes were thick with cloud even in summer, and we travelled not on the road but on the sufferance of princes, lowest to highest. I let the clerks do the talking, or I let my money do it. Between Latin and silver, there weren't many places that wouldn't welcome us inside an hour or two.

I had heard of the market at Pavia, and I had asked there – but they did not have what I was looking to buy. 'No bigger than a marble', I said, but the merchants in their long habits refused to understand me. I described the thing that held it, the little castle in *aurum* and *argentum* on its stalk, and the platter full of strange geometrical swoops and falls. I even read a description to them that had been copied from the ancient books in my possession, correcting my scribe's errors as I went. They hadn't heard of it, the dolts! But one of the older brothers understood what I meant, and said that what I was looking for was indeed for sale, though not in that market. He told me of the place where it could be bought, the road that would lead there, the sorts of tongue they spoke. It is, it seems, a great town, for I see the gates ahead of me and I am anxious to be inside!

VII.

The ground was heavy with rain, but breathed, almost sighed, as we cut it open. We peeled the turf back to see the worms and segmented crawling things scatter light from their shiny bodies before we cut again, lifted and piled. It made a neat square stack about a foot high, perhaps twice as broad. The blackbirds sang through mist that still hung on the hedges.

This time, we didn't sift or sieve. The huge serviette we'd spread drooped with the soil we shovelled out, light and loamy and full of pot-fragments and god knows what. My eyes dragged me back to it, searching for the *sceattas*, the elf-shot, the bits of painted tile that I knew would start up and greet me like an old friend. The camera looked on, its back hanging open, its little red spark of life stowed back in the van.

It wasn't enough, but we kept to it, hungry, pulling and cutting with our spades. Someone made a joke about using a digger and my laugh turned to a growl in my throat. Bugger that, I said. We were hunched over the hole now, sucking and grunting with the work, scooping and tossing the soil over our shoulders, cursing and howling by turns.

And then it was done. The spade went crack through the skull, my foot braced on the pressed petals of his ribs. We've got him, I thought, as we lifted his crumpled pieces out, ready for the box. I had visions of the kingdoms of bric-a-brac and yellow newspapers we would inherit, and my heart warmed. We carried our prisoner home shoulder-high, strapped to the van roof, with the radio singing Gloria each mile of the way.

VIII.

It was curious to see that the house, as devoted to plainness and a kind of spiritual simplicity as it was, should be so extravagantly decorated. The inhabitants almost took on some of this quality themselves at times, as though they were paintings made to breathe and speak by some unidentified genius. Everything was painting, the food they ate, the clothes that draped in great oily swathes from their shoulders or waists, the beds they slowly reclined into at night in a series of secret candle-lit poses. It seemed that some great subject lurked around every corner, too: Judith with the sleeping Holofernes, Christ before Caiaphas or Pilate, close dark rooms where the light showed tentatively, crowded by a blackness that swallowed tables and chairs, fruit and letters and bread so that only hands and faces extending into that contested space could take on their own colour again.

Sometime early in the afternoon, like some sort of long-expected visitor, the flame came down and flickered above the heads of the house's inhabitants as they sat in the refectory. They continued eating, some of them artfully leaning through the wide blocks of shadow that fell from the columns for greater effect. The great napkin which hung behind the dais, and which was reputed to be ancient, chose that moment to catch fire in its very centre so that the city pictured there seemed for a moment to be itself ablaze. The little people running screaming from the walls or hurling themselves from towers into the waters below seemed almost alive, but again it was merely a final flourish of the nameless genius who had painted it. Oblivious to the disembodied heads that gnashed and rolled their eyes at her from the apex of the arch behind, the Abbess rang the bell, the religious got up, and in silence returned to their separate rooms.