

## *Antananarivo...*

Today I intended on writing a sonnet during the thunder storm - regarding a gold mine in Ghana - but was distracted by pairing off my family's washed socks.

\*\*\*

According to the dictionary on my computer - set to the New Oxford American Dictionary - 'Baird, John Logie (1888-1946), was a Scottish inventor. He made the first transatlantic transmission and demonstration of colour television in 1928 using a mechanical system that was soon superseded by an electronic system.'

\*\*\*

My elder brother, sat at the dinner table with myself and the rest of our family, told us a story about one of his friends who was also a teacher of physical education in one of the local schools. This friend, named D, had for some time been a member of the Territorial Army, a division of the British Army that is not in full-time service. Those involved in this branch of national defence have always been mired with the tag of 'Part-time' or 'Boy Scout' soldiers, possibly due to the connotations arising from the morose looking buildings in which weekly drill meetings are carried out - community centres with the addition of barbed wire escarpments and Royal military coats of arms, appearing as grown-up and brutal versions of the neglected Scout huts and village halls that have been sagging with wood rot in Britain since the 1950s.

D was recently called up to serve on the front line in Afghanistan, a duty he supposedly accepted with relish. However, within a couple of weeks he had been airlifted out of action, on account of an allergy to a granola bar. The funniest part, my brother professed, is that D knows he's allergic to nuts. We'd once gone to an 'all-you-can-eat' chinese buffet with some other teachers, and he'd started coughing shallowly. When quizzed as to the reason for his discomfort, D said he couldn't think what the problem was. He'd eaten a number of things. 'You reckon it'd be the satay chicken I had?' This news fuddled me. What was sadder to think; the display of brazen stupidity of one of our country's many 'heroes' waging war in this dusty scuff version of Vietnam; or the fact that the only image springing to my mind at the dinner table was Tom Hanks enacting heroic idiocy as Forrest Gump, being wounded in the buttocks and subsequently moving into a blissful ignorance of recuperation, fueled by ice-cream and table tennis. I began to wonder what kind of casualties would be surrounding D at the military hospital he was lifted to. Amputees, road side bomb survivors, those with post-traumatic stress disorder; perhaps even other allergy sufferers.

\*\*\*

I was in the garden recently with my mother, as she was preparing to mow the lawn, when I spotted a monstrously endowed rhubarb plant in a shaded corner, next to our disheveled tool shed. Walking over to the plant - which I could recall from years past as a far more modest affair - I realized that it had flowered at the top parts, a long bobbed appendage of six inches or so, reaching directly skyward as a totem. Mum told me with mild surprise that in all her years of growing them she had never seen a rhubarb plant flower before. I asked whether she had treated this one differently to its predecessors, which produced a reply in the negative. 'Oh, well there is one thing it might be,' she said after a moment of thought. 'I pour the Holy water out on this patch. That must be it.' And she began cutting the grass.

My mother is one of a number of women who washes the altar linen for her parish church, which is part of the Roman Catholic faith. The ecclesiastical protocol desires that the linen - which may contain spilt traces of the Divine Host - be twice hand washed separate to the ordinary household wares, and that the water be returned to the bare earth rather than down the sullied depths of man's sewage pipes.

The following day, when talking to our two dogs in the garden, I noticed an unsightly gap next to the shed. I asked mother where the rhubarb plant had gone. It transpired she had chopped it down to the nub, as the usually delicious, tart pink flesh of the stems had become too green and developed to process for any culinary needs. The usual destination for this numinous fruit was the kitchen of my mother's friend in the parish, who would make jam and occasionally the odd pie, which would in turn be sold to fellow parishioners to raise funds for various charities and missions. This time however, the remnants had come to rest in the large green waste bin, the contents of which tend to sit and fester for weeks at the side of the house.

This bin crossed my mind two weeks later. A bin nearly identical in shape and hue appeared in the national news, as the receptacle for a murdered individual who was cunningly stuffed in and left in front of her house for three weeks, before being discovered by a visiting estate agent who had been entrusted with shifting the as yet undiscovered corpse's property. Presumably the killers had an unwavering faith in the local councils recycling capabilities.

\*\*\*

J told me that he was sitting on the toilet at B's house and was looking at the shower curtain. It was covered by a diagram of the earth. He was thinking what wonderful names Africa is filled with. He spotted Antananarivo. An-tan-an-arivo. I was sold immediately.

\*\*\*

William Blake mounted his first and only one-man exhibition of paintings and drawings in 1809, above the hosiery shop owned and operated by his brother. I went to see the re-hang of his 'Poetical and Historical Inventions' show in Tate Britain on my birthday this month. The room, unfortunately, was not an exact facsimile of the show presented 200 years ago. Indeed, there were six paintings missing, the largest of which measured four meters by three. Each misplaced vision was designated a blank white oblong on the blue wall, with dimensions true to the original. Next to these curious gaps hung an explanatory note written by the curators, detailing the invisible contents. Therefore, the most dominating feature of the exhibition was the largest void, titled 'The Ancient Britons', which depicted three archetypal models of man (courageous, beautiful, and ugly) from the last battle of the mythical King Arthur. This work was on a scale unheard of for Blake and marks an epic, ambitious swipe at addressing a nation; a visual crying out against the vapid thought of the day. It must have been exhausting working under the gaze of posterity, attempting to create representations of divinity for an indeterminate public, before finally withdrawing into his own visionary perambulations.

His form of self-assured mysticism was met with scorn from critics and public alike, and the show is stated as being a resounding failure over the year long period it was open; a 'farrago of nonsense, unintelligibility, and egregious vanity, the wild effusions of a distempered brain', according to the only known critical review of the time by Robert Hunt of The Examiner. The descriptive catalogue that Blake wrote and printed - which hastened to set the author on a par with the Great Masters of the past - surely didn't endear him to his audience. And it is from this publication that the second most perplexing revelation came to me in the gallery. On an open pair of pages, beneath a perspex box, amidst hand annotated notes by the troubled author, was:

*'The great and golden rule of art, as well as life is this: That the more distinct, sharp and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect work of art.'*

Perhaps a self-imposed nettled ring from which to battle free.

\*\*\*

That day when walking around the cavernous effigy to Sir Tate's sugar empire, I thought about a boy I went to school with, who shared the same date of birth as me. Master Baird had been the subject of much bullying, due to his rotund shape and the sharp unfamiliarity of his native Northern Irish dialect. He was particularly derided for once protesting the cause of his stature as being the consumption of too many aspirin tablets when he was younger, to fight the pains of regular headaches; a diagnosis that to this day I have not fathomed, though I have always admired it as a quick-witted and mysterious retort to school bus thugs.

Last year Baird and his partner had been expecting their first son. This little individual, Elliot Jack, was stillborn. In the following weeks I learnt of this via a notification on the social networking site 'facebook'. An obituary had been set up by the grieving parents, and posted round to hundreds of people. Some photographs of the small bundled child and the wreaths at the funeral, eulogized the single day of his appearance and disappearance. The shock of a still child does not transfer kindly to the anonymous skittishness of a worldwide web screen.

\*\*\*

Mother and I found a small injured bird in the garden, beneath a swing chair that no longer has its swing structure. One of the dogs drew our attention to it. The young bird couldn't fly or use its left side. It appeared to be toppling over to the right as if inebriated. Mother picked it up and stroked its head. Neither of us could kill it - there was no neck to wring, and a smash from a saucepan would be undignified we agreed. So we took it to the green bin. I pulled up a small tuft of grass from the fetid load, and mum placed the bird inside. I covered the grass back over and closed the lid. As I did so we heard a solitary 'cheep'. We ate garlic bread for dinner that night.

\*\*\*

*' "Yes, once we understand, really understand, that we are going to die, astronomy is the only consolation [constellation]." '*

- Emmett Walsh, June 2009.