

In Your Absence
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for Jack and Lily with love

Part One



Blunt Force Trauma

Today, this hour, this minute, there are things I need
to be true, and to not be true.

I need it to be true that on that night it really was help offered,
by that young lad, not the broken ribs from three to twelve,
shattered cheek bones, both eye sockets broken,
smashed nose and the fractured skull
resulting from a blunt force trauma.

I need it to be true that in the intimacy of a pocket,
hands were searching for your phone to call for help,
or at the very least feeling the quality of your suit,
which looked expensive, looked like privilege,
which was second hand.

That the lad was *only asking for the time*
and that I never knew the meaning of a contrecoup.

I need it to not be true, that there are people who have *nothing*,
have not got a lot, that rumour had it was some Asian lad.

True, that he was *looking for a job to get his life on track*.

Not true, the lifelong trauma, the blunt force of 'care'.

True a lad like him could save himself from life,
from dealing and enduring further blows. And most, I need it to be true,
that when you told the paramedics you were fine

that you were fine.

Things I See on the Hard Shoulder

*In the days before our wild and precious lives
began to choke us before the brain bleed and the ventilator tube
I spend 50 days and nights in search of you between Manchester and Leeds
Distraught and terrified owned by the road I am the pulse
of the windscreen wipers and the flare of lights on the westbound carriageway
dangerously distracted by the things I see on the hard shoulder*

1. Shreds of sheeting grey as your skin whip-torn, forlorn, a vast ghost flapping down the whole sad length of the M62
2. A never-ending diesel slipstream
3. A hard hat, white, rolling like a skull
4. An oily rainbow a parallel universe a dark holding place a reverse film on slippery celluloid we are the flickering ones streaming past each other frame after frame

and three animals

I saw them love lying between us

5. Grit coloured cat, sex unknown, moments before brutally kicked back by tyres still kicking back

3 seconds

6. Red dog fox, solid, heavy busted bag of bone and blood, his back to three lane brush blasted by wind rush

3 seconds

7. Roe deer. Female. Rigid with fear. Eyes in headlights blue. The blue and blinding howl of a siren

3 seconds 3 seconds 3 seconds

In Your Absence

Hospital

Woman

I smoke cigarettes, in the kitchen,
every night, waiting for the phone to ring.
Counting makes me feel that I am
in control when I am not.

Daughter

Example: Heartbeat of windscreen wipers as we hurtle between
London, Manchester and Leeds almost daily.

Example: Steps. Sixty. Leading up onto the ward. We never take the lift.

Example: Doors. Five. Lined up along the corridor before we reach the
door where your whispered name into the intercom admits us to the
semi darkness of the ICU like a spell.

Man

Example: Breath.

Woman

There is a suitcase where you were sitting yesterday
I experience extreme synaesthesia as you lie there in a nylon gown
I have to leave when you cannot.

Daughter

Sound of respirator smell of disinfectant barely concealing fear

House

Woman

I place clothes and books and coffee in the suitcase
where you were sitting only yesterday
Someone has put white blinds up in the house
where you were living up until last year
there will be an anniversary soon and in your absence
this year will have rolled on by despite my stumbling in its path.

Something haunts me
It is white, as in, the whites of your rolling eyes, as in your

Man

White Lies / Feather / Magic

Man and Daughter

Bone White / Water / Wedding

Daughter

Blood Cells / Hope / White Light

Woman and Daughter

Noise

Daughter

There are three new photographs around the house

Woman

I move them into different rooms and into drawers and out again
You are monochrome
You are drinking in New York wearing my vintage dress
You are absent

Daughter

Body fading

Dream I

Woman

The first white number according to the rules for colouring numbers is 66. I find this significant in ways I can't explain. Finding myself lost in colour, especially the number blue, I wrap my arms in your abandoned sheets and fall asleep before it gets dark.

Daughter

Dream poem

Woman

You kissed me in the blue lit public toilets
You were passionate as never so in life
You were eating peas out of the bird feeder
I said that was unhygienic.

Man

Irrelevant

Woman

It was always summer in the public toilet
There was a mirror made of tin

Man

It was winter outside in the garden
White out

Woman

I couldn't see you. You began to cry. A tear ran down your cheek onto the pillow.
You were my neighbour in the garden

Daughter

Then you weren't.

Woman

Why do you come kissing me?

It isn't like you

Are you making up for lost lost time?



*Dedicated to the memory of
Paul Bell 1960–2018 and Florence Penny 1925–2018*



Acknowledgements

'Thick Time' was written in response to an exhibition of the same name by South African multi-media artist William Kentridge. The exhibition was produced between 2003 and 2016 and 'weaves together global histories of revolution, exile and utopian aspirations, exploring how they are shaped by the creative forces of memory and the imagination' (The Whitworth Gallery, Manchester).

