

Fly – Yasmin Gunaratnam

I write to you at the beginning stages of a strike by university staff to protect pensions and the idea of the university itself; one not modelled on profiteering, where you pay £9k a year in tuition fees, our wages fall and Vice Chancellors are chauffeur driven, fly first class, and charge ‘porn star Martinis’ to expenses.

Taking liberties with what Roland Barthes called a punctum—the feral arrow that flies out from an image at the viewer, shattering the taken-for-granted—I’ve seen the occasional arrow fly in the classroom. Perhaps no more than in the corridors and canteen, far away from the narcissist pleasures of the text. If study is a time, it’s all of these moments flowing into a great edifice of sensual and critical thinking. And when we come together, you and I, in this strange life-of-the-mind ragbag community of ours, I try not to forget the distances between us, the potential for misrecognition, displacements, abuse. I hear your #MeToo. As they slowly dismantle the university, sacrificing it on the altar of markets, as they decry you as hypersensitive snowflakes while harvesting the produce of your sense organs to sell ‘student experience’ for league tables, I wonder if we should rejoin study elsewhere. I’ve never been at home here anyway. And I love my job. “After all, the subversive intellectual” Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have written, “came under false pretenses, with bad documents, out of love...The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings.” I haven’t lost hope that collective learning can be mightier than Daily Fail lies and hatreds, but I’m worried. My heart tightens when I write you another job reference for the precariat. How long, under unrelenting austerity, will it take you to see off the circling vulture of your student loan? One think-tank estimate reckons 83 per cent of graduates won’t be able to clear their debt within three decades.

With the collapse of rigorous journalism and bellicose, syntax traumatising orangey governance by Twitter, it’s worth remembering Friedrich Hölderlin—what abides the poets establish. And because poets say it best, I need Sarah Howe. The poem I have in mind for you is about those tiny flies that so often get squished between the pages of a book. It’s about being carried to other worlds and uncanny jolts of self-recognition: “More a midge really, flower-pressed: pent/in this hinged spread of my undergrad/Shakespeare. Down the page, a grey smudge/tinged with a rusty penumbra, like blood –/mine or its? Two sheer wings, stilled mid-word, trace out a glyph in a strange alphabet./At empathy’s darkening pane we see/our own reflected face...’.

So I wish you well in your adventures. Stay strong. Be brave and kind. Listen as if your life depended on it (it does). As W.E.B. Dubois wrote to his daughter Yolande, “Read some good, heavy, serious books just for discipline”. Use your learning for good. Dance. Live life as fully as you can without crushing more vulnerable souls. Your body is amazing. Look after it and thank it often. Discern how understanding hatred can be love’s labour. Take your time to think but be quick to speak up, wielding your Lordeian anger and truth like a light saber against wrongs. Most of all, I hope that there will always be a fly in your pages.