

You

Edson Burton

I held you today between thumb and index finger. You waved in the breeze. Shots of light ricocheted off your plastic surface. I looked up to dramatise our moment of separation. You would float away into the blue yonder, I would wave farewell, pull up my collar and step into the day. We would begin new lives, new stories. In time you would be a memory, fixed and faded with gaps filled in by tales we wanted to tell of each other.

I open my finger and thumb. Release the string. Mouth farewell. Look up. You are still there hovering above my head. I fix on the distance and walk forward. You follow hovering cautiously. I break into a run, left, right, zigzag, criss-cross through the traffic. You are still there, hovering. Silent.

It was the words of a wise elder which had led to what should have been our momentous parting. Sat in the ark-like belly of a Babel library, he interrupted my studies: Why was I bothering to argue with You? Why was I so consumed by You? He sighed when I replied that I was learning to be free of You. Doing so, required tools, code-breaking skills and formulas. 'You will be free when you do not engage.' I look up, limed in the in-between of epiphany, rejection and confusion. His parting shot, 'You do not have to,' was delivered with kindness.

Until the elder spoke, I was resigned to Your presence. You had been in my life for as long as I could recall. As a child I had thought You kind, in my adolescence benign, later, capricious if not cruel. You swung like a torturer's pendulum: dipping low, almost touching then passing. Peripheral threat or cutting flesh. Always there. Foreboding.

The elder left me with the thought that I was co-architect of my own prison; that I was my own warden and prisoner; that I turned the lock to my own cell. I carried on as before but with ebbing conviction until, conviction empty, I became a mouth moving, feet walking, a limp grip upon a blank placard. The need to escape You became violent. But I could not find my exit.

Perhaps, I thought, I had known You too well for violent separation. I feared I had been too close to You especially in my formative years. We had read, jammed, cursed, worshipped, made love. Looking back, I realised You were never quite as in love as I was. Your love was light-touch. You were distracted, while for me, You were all-consuming. Nonetheless we were not strangers. Perhaps I cannot find an escape because I do not want to. The terror that I might perish if a surgeon was to operate, kept me, like a conjoined twin, tied to this halting life.

I ask myself, is this the same for others like me? Like me, in the sense of the same life journey. Has the wise elder appeared and counselled them? Do they grapple secretly? Have they made their escapes? If so, it is a deeply held secret. From the way we curse and perform You, I do not think so.

There are those who claim to have washed themselves clean of You. To them, You are contagion and their past life with You is to be erased. In its place, they plant gardens of ancient glories, ornate memories of regality,

and raise high the places free from your imprint. Awed, I watch them on parade: a rainbow of brown tones, swirling flags, symbols, robed in impossibly bright textiles, a sea of turbans, dread-locks and regal head-dresses. They call and respond as one in demanding restitution. Restitution for the crimes against our near and distant mothers and fathers. They are progeny of warriors that turned against You with militant surety. They have a plan, a programme, an unassailable faith. They will be free surely for You are fearful. I smell Your fear. It is such that you conspire against them either by denying their existence or breaking Your own rules in conspiring against them.

Fearful? But then if they need Your fear they are not free, not in the way the wise elder conceived freedom. They are addressing You. They need Your attention. They require You to be present. And their means of liberation, albeit hoarse and harshly delivered, is the very same petition that they decry when voiced by cautious others. They depend upon your vanity. We all do. For all we can do is wound your ego enough for you to pause, listen and change.

It will pain them to think that they are like our less-celebrated forebears who set up colonies upon the dream of proud repatriation only to petition You when provisions ran low and starvation threatened. So I say nothing.

I do not write for You, said my hero Morrison – or words to this effect. I was drawn to storytellers who don't. They put Us in the front, let us spread out and shine while putting You stiff and unsmiling in the rear. With You out the way, Sethe and Denver can make sense of their traumas; Ms Celia can write, uninterrupted, to God; Okonkwo falls by the rules of his world; even Bageye sometimes forgets you exist. The storytellers, the characters,

and worlds they create become my escape. I want to join them. I give myself over to the attempt. I step on stage with a clutch of tales.

My friend, a great orator poet, sticks it to you as tough as Baraka. I tell him he is a sublime thrill. He's a giant – raging locks, flailing, herculean arms outstretched, ham hands clenched. I tell him, you will get job offers and guilt-fucks every night with that gig but from people who will not remember a word you said. I am right.

Being ignored by You is my marker of success. I am writing for the souls in the back who swing in and out of sight. When the etiquette is loose, they call out. Their laughter, nods, exhalations and corrections are my map.

I was trying not to notice You sat in the front row smiling encouragingly. I have been betrayed by that smile before. It has been psychopathically opposite to your actions. But You seem unperturbed that I had for the most part ignored You since embarking on this new course. Have you changed? Have you come to an epiphany that parallels mine?

I accept your invitation for us to meet again formally. Perhaps we could raise this prison we built and from its ruins create a new sanctuary. Besides, ignoring You is draining. And dishonest: we are heart and lung intimate. Perhaps You might also be a means to platform those tales where You are absent. This could be Your restitution. I had to also confess I fear being forgotten. Forgotten and broke.

I come armed with pitch, lexicon, elasticity, elan and experience. You smile a great deal. You like my ideas but ask 'if I might' 'if I could', 'if I may' and 'what about?' You are a litany of expletives: 'diversity', 'inclusion', 'engagement.' I try to tune them out but they explode on echo. As you

speaking, I see Nat Turner whispering that I should push over the table, slit Your throat and burn down Your hall. Turner gallops off into the distance chased away by my fears and fragile ambitions. Back in the room, I nod and concede and tell myself that I have no choice but to dance. Reshaped and dishevelled, I leave our meeting.

I reach into my breast pocket for a cigar then remember I don't smoke. Never have. The exhaustion required it – somehow. Replaying our meeting, I am no wiser as to why You had agreed to meet. I had thought we were minds finally meeting but Your expletives said otherwise. If it were not me then another could have sat in that chair. Any other. Am I just seasonal fruit – if not picked now, then I would grow sour and rot at the bottom of the barrel?

The wise elder returns as I walk. He tells me to ignore You. I tell him to fashion a key to unlock my cell, build me a road that I can walk on, head held high. He tells me, 'That is your job.' I curse him and walk on. He is a tormenting demon.

I walk past a clown in blackface holding a cloud of balloons. Perhaps escape of a kind is possible. You have made the pathways, the home, the cell, but not my soul. I am still a mystery to You. Just as You smile and contrive, so can I.

Filled with joy, I walk back to the clown. I buy a balloon. I fill it with all the weight of You. Pump it full to bursting with bittersweet recollections. I can make You helium. I can make You super light. I hold You between thumb and index finger.

References

Morrison – Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison

Sethe and Denver – runaway slaves, later free, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Ms Celia – main character in Alice Walker's epistolary novel, *A Colour Purple*

Okonkwo – Main character in Chinua Achebe's seminal account of Igbo society at the dawn of colonialism, *Things Fall Apart*

Bageye – Irascible main character in Colin Grant's memoir *Bageye at the Wheel*

Nat Turner - Leader of a slave revolt in Virginia, 1831.

Dr Edson Burton is a poet, drama writer, curator and historian. His radio credits include the supernatural trilogy *Deacon*, starring Don Warrington, now available on Audible.

His theatre writing spans a range of theatre-based, promenade and site-specific work including *The Ithaca Axis* (2013) poetry/theatre show *Curry Goat & Fish Fingers* (2016), a Frederick Douglass dramatization, *An Abolitionist Returns* (2018), the game show-themed *The Edge* (2018) and the ribald *Anansi & the Grand Prize* (2019).

His on-screen history specialist appearances include Hairy Bikers series *Pubs that Made Britain* (2015) *Books that Made Britain* Bristol Sin City (2016), *Lost Civilizations Series 1: The Remains of Slavery* (2017). *The Antiques Road Show* (2018) *Britain's Most Historic Towns: Georgian Bristol*

(2019) in addition to regularly appearing on local news and radio in response to Black Lives Matter.

He is the author of the poetry collection *Seasoned* (City Chameleon, 2009), co-author of *What's Your Trinity Story, Vice and Virtue* (2018) and various online and print articles.

Edson is a member of Bristol's History Commission, the film programming collective Come the Revolution and Queer People of Colour Collective Kiki Bristol.

He is the father of two young adults, uncle to a cat and a lover to Easton Bristol where he resides.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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