



Why is the measure of love loss?

It hasn't rained for three months. The trees are prospecting underground, sending reserves of roots into the dry ground, roots like razors to open any artery water-fat.

The grapes have withered on the vine. What should be plump and firm, resisting the touch to give itself in the mouth, is spongy and blistered. Not this year the pleasure of rolling blue grapes between finger and thumb juicing my palm with musk. Even the wasps avoid the thin brown dribble. Even the wasps this year. It was not always so.

I am thinking of a certain September: Wood pigeon Red Admiral Yellow Harvest Orange Night. You said, 'I love you.' Why is it that the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another is still the thing we long to hear? 'I love you' is always a quotation. You did not say it first and neither did I, yet when you say it and when I say it we speak like savages who have found three words and worship them. I did worship them but now I am alone on a rock hewn out of my own body.

CALIBAN    You taught me language and my profit on't is  
                  I know how to curse. The red plague rid you  
                  For learning me your language.

Love demands expression. It will not stay still, stay silent, be good, be modest, be seen and not heard, no. It will break out in tongues of praise, the high note that smashes the glass and spills the liquid. It is no

conservationist love. It is a big game hunter and you are the game. A curse on this game. How can you stick at a game when the rules keep changing? I shall call myself Alice and play croquet with the flamingoes. In Wonderland everyone cheats and love is Wonderland isn't it? Love makes the world go round. Love is blind. All you need is love. Nobody ever died of a broken heart. You'll get over it. It'll be different when we're married. Think of the children. Time's a great healer. Still waiting for Mr Right? Miss Right? and maybe all the little Rights?

It's the clichés that cause the trouble. A precise emotion seeks a precise expression. If what I feel is not precise then should I call it love? It is so terrifying, love, that all I can do is shove it under a dump bin of pink cuddly toys and send myself a greetings card saying 'Congratulations on your Engagement'. But I am not engaged I am deeply distracted. I am desperately looking the other way so that love won't see me. I want the diluted version, the sloppy language, the insignificant gestures. The saggy armchair of clichés. It's all right, millions of bottoms have sat here before me. The springs are well worn, the fabric smelly and familiar. I don't have to be frightened, look, my grandma and grandad did it, he in a stiff collar and club tie, she in white muslin straining a little at the life beneath. They did it, my parents did it, now I will do it won't I, arms outstretched, not to hold you, just to keep my balance, sleepwalking to that armchair. How happy we will be. How happy everyone will be. And they all lived happily ever after.

It was a hot August Sunday. I paddled through the shallows of the river where the little fishes dare their belly at the sun. On either side of the river the proper green of

the grass had given way to a psychedelic splash-painting of virulent Lycra cycling shorts and Hawaiian shirts made in Taiwan. They were grouped the way families like to group; dad with the paper propped on his overhang, mum sagging over the thermos. Kids thin as seaside rock sticks and seaside rock pink. Mum saw you go in and heaved herself off the stripey fold-out camping stool. 'You should be ashamed of yourself. There's families out here.'

You laughed and waved, your body bright beneath the clear green water, its shape fitting your shape, holding you, faithful to you. You turned on your back and your nipples grazed the surface of the river and the river decorated your hair with beads. You are creamy but for your hair your red hair that flanks you on either side.

'I'll get my husband to see to you. George come here. George come here.'

'Can't you see I'm watching television?' said George without turning round.

You stood up and the water fell from you in silver streams. I didn't think, I waded in and kissed you. You put your arms around my burning back. You said, 'There's nobody here but us.'

I looked up and the banks were empty.

You were careful not to say those words that soon became our private altar. I had said them many times before, dropping them like coins into a wishing well, hoping they would make me come true. I had said them many times before but not to you. I had given them as forget-me-nots to girls who should have known better. I had used them as bullets and barter. I don't like to think of myself as an insincere person but if I say I love you and I don't mean it then what else am I? Will I cherish

you, adore you, make way for you, make myself better for you, look at you and always see you, tell you the truth? And if love is not those things then what things?

August. We were arguing. You want love to be like this every day don't you? 92 degrees even in the shade. This intensity, this heat, sun like a disc-saw through your body. Is it because you come from Australia?

You didn't answer, just held my hot hand in your cool fingers and strode on easy in linen and silk. I felt ridiculous. I was wearing a pair of shorts with RECYCLE tattooed across one leg. I remembered vaguely that I had once had a girlfriend who thought it rude to wear shorts in front of public monuments. When we met I tethered my bike at Charing Cross and changed in the toilets before meeting her by Nelson's Column.

'Why bother?' I said. 'He only had one eye.'

'I've got two,' she said and kissed me. Wrong to seal illogic with a kiss but I do it myself all the time.

You didn't answer. Why do human beings need answers? Partly I suppose because without one, almost any one. the question itself soon sounds silly. Try standing in front of a class and asking what is the capital of Canada. The eyes stare back at you, indifferent, hostile, some of them look the other way. You say it again. 'What is the capital of Canada?' While you wait in the silence, absolutely the victim, your own mind doubts itself. What is the capital of Canada? Why Ottawa and not Montreal? Montreal is much nicer, they do a better espresso, you have a friend who lives there. Anyway, who cares what the capital is, they'll probably change it next year. Perhaps Gloria will be at the swimming pool tonight. And so on.

Bigger questions, questions with more than one answer, questions without an answer are harder to cope with in silence. Once asked they do not evaporate and leave the mind to its serener musings. Once asked they gain dimension and texture, trip you on the stairs, wake you at night-time. A black hole sucks up its surroundings and even light never escapes. Better then to ask no questions? Better then to be a contented pig than an unhappy Socrates? Since factory farming is tougher on pigs than it is on philosophers I'll take a chance.

We walked back to our rented room and lay on one of the single beds. In rented rooms from Brighton to Bangkok, the bedspread never matches the carpet and the towels are too thin. I put one underneath you to save the sheet. You were bleeding.

We had rented this room, your idea, to try to be together for more than dinner or a night or a cup of tea behind the library. You were still married and although I don't have many scruples I've learned to have some about that blessed state. I used to think of marriage as a plate-glass window just begging for a brick. The self-exhibition, the self-satisfaction, smarminess, tightness, tight-arsedness. The way married couples go out in fours like a pantomime horse, the men walking together at the front, the women trailing a little way behind. The men fetching the gin and tonics from the bar while the women take their handbags to the toilet. It doesn't have to be like that but mostly it is. I've been through a lot of marriages. Not down the aisle but always up the stairs. I began to realise I was hearing the same story every time. It went like this.

*Interior. Afternoon.*

*A bedroom. Curtains half drawn. Bedclothes thrown back. A naked woman of a certain age lies on the bed looking at the ceiling. She wants to say something. She's finding it difficult. A cassette recorder is playing Ella Fitzgerald, 'Lady Sings the Blues'.*

NAKED WOMAN I wanted to tell you that I don't usually do this. I suppose it's called committing adultery. (*She laughs.*) I've never done it before. I don't think I could do it again. With someone else that is. Oh I want to do it again with you. Over and over again. (*She rolls on to her stomach.*) I love my husband you know. I do love him. He's not like other men. I couldn't have married him if he was. He's different, we've got a lot in common. We talk.

*Her lover runs a finger over the bare lips of the naked woman. Lies over her, looks at her. The lover says nothing.*

NAKED WOMAN If I hadn't met you I suppose I *would* be looking for something. I might have done a degree at the Open University. I wasn't thinking of this. I never wanted to give him a moment's worry. That's why I can't tell him. Why we must be careful. I don't want to be cruel and selfish. You do see that don't you?

*Her lover gets up and goes to the toilet. The naked woman raises herself on her elbow and continues her monologue in the direction of the en suite bathroom.*

NAKED WOMAN    Don't be long darling. (*She pauses.*) I've tried to get you out of my head but I can't seem to get you out of my flesh. I think about your body day and night. When I try to read it's you I'm reading. When I sit down to eat it's you I'm eating. When he touches me I think about you. I'm a middle-aged happily married woman and all I can see is your face. What have you done to me?

*Cut to en suite bathroom. The lover is crying. End scene.*

It's flattering to believe that you and only you, the great lover, could have done this. That without you, the marriage, incomplete though it is, pathetic in many ways, would have thrived on its meagre diet and if not thrived at least not shrivelled. It has shrivelled, lies limp and unused, the shell of a marriage, its inhabitants both fled. People collect shells though don't they? They spend money on them and display them on their window ledges. Other people admire them. I've seen some very famous shells and blown into the hollows of many more. Where I've left cracking too severe to mend the owners have simply turned the bad part to the shade.

See? Even here in this private place my syntax has fallen prey to the deceit. It was not I who did those things; cut the knot, jemmied the lock, made off with goods not mine to take. The door was open. True, she didn't exactly open it herself. Her butler opened it for her. His name was Boredom. She said, 'Boredom, fetch me a plaything.' He said, 'Very good ma'am,' and putting on his white gloves so that the fingerprints would not show



he tapped at my heart and I thought he said his name was Love.

You think I'm trying to wriggle out of my responsibilities? No, I know what I did and what I was doing at the time. But I didn't walk down the aisle, queue up at the Registry Office and swear to be faithful unto death. I wouldn't dare. I didn't say, 'With this ring I thee wed.' I didn't say, 'With my body I thee worship.' How can you say that to one person and gladly fuck another? Shouldn't you take that vow and break it the way you made it, in the open air?

Odd that marriage, a public display and free to all, gives way to that most secret of liaisons, an adulterous affair.

I had a lover once, her name was Bathsheba. She was a happily married woman. I began to feel as though we were crewing a submarine. We couldn't tell our friends, at least she couldn't tell hers because they were his too. I couldn't tell mine because she asked me not to do so. We sank lower and lower in our love-lined lead-lined coffin. Telling the truth, she said, was a luxury we could not afford and so lying became a virtue, an economy we had to practise. Telling the truth was hurtful and so lying became a good deed. One day I said, 'I'm going to tell him myself.' This was after two years, two years where I thought that she must leave eventually eventually, eventually. The word she used was 'monstrous'. Monstrous to tell him. Monstrous. I thought of Caliban chained to his pitted rock. 'The red plague rid you for learning me your language.'

Later, when I was freed from her world of double meanings and masonic signs I did turn thief. I had never

stolen from her, she had spread her wares on a blanket and asked me to choose. (There was a price but in brackets.) When we were over, I wanted my letters back. My copyright she said but her property. She had said the same about my body. Perhaps it was wrong to climb into her lumber-room and take back the last of myself. They were easy to find, stuffed into a large padded bag, bearing the message on an Oxfam label that they were to be returned to me in the event of her death. A nice touch; he would no doubt have read them but then she would not have been there to take the consequences. And would I have read them? Probably. A nice touch.

I took them into the garden and burned them one by one and I thought how easy it is to destroy the past and how difficult to forget it.

Did I say this has happened to me again and again? You will think I have been constantly in and out of married women's lumber-rooms. I have a head for heights it's true, but no stomach for the depths. Strange then to have plumbed so many.

We lay on our bed in the rented room and I fed you plums the colour of bruises. Nature is fecund but fickle. One year she leaves you to starve, the next year she kills you with love. That year the branches were torn beneath the weight, this year they sing in the wind. There are no ripe plums in August. Have I got it wrong, this hesitant chronology? Perhaps I should call it Emma Bovary's eyes or Jane Eyre's dress. I don't know. I'm in another rented room now trying to find the place to go back to where things went wrong. Where I went wrong. You were driving but I was lost in my own navigation.

Nevertheless I will push on. There were plums and I broke them over you.

You said, 'Why do I frighten you?'

Frighten me? Yes you do frighten me. You act as though we will be together for ever. You act as though there is infinite pleasure and time without end. How can I know that? My experience has been that time always ends. In theory you are right, the quantum physicists are right, the romantics and the religious are right. Time without end. In practice we both wear a watch. If I rush at this relationship it's because I fear for it. I fear you have a door I cannot see and that any minute now the door will open and you'll be gone. Then what? Then what as I bang the walls like the Inquisition searching for a saint? Where will I find the secret passage? For me it'll just be the same four walls.

You said, 'I'm going to leave.'

I thought, Yes, of course you are, you're going back to the shell. I'm an idiot. I've done it again and I said I'd never do it again.

You said, 'I told him before we came away. I've told him I won't change my mind even if you change yours.'

This is the wrong script. This is the moment where I'm supposed to be self-righteous and angry. This is the moment where you're supposed to flood with tears and tell me how hard it is to say these things and what can you do and what can you do and will I hate you and yes you know I'll hate you and there are no question marks in this speech because it's a fait accompli.

But you are gazing at me the way God gazed at Adam and I am embarrassed by your look of love and possession and pride. I want to go now and cover myself with fig