

Hubris

VIVIAN MILROY

In 1974, moved by no more than a combination of joie de vivre and a reaction against ageism and Yeats' 'the years like great black oxen tread me down ... and I am broken by their passing feet' I wrote the following:

*My years like golden
galleons bear me on,
A reckless joy-filled
journey,
Riding the wind and the
surging salt sea spray.
I know the depths of horror
are below me,
My scything keels resonate
with their distress:
The keening sighs, the
anguished groaning
Of the drowned and
drowning.
But I fly onward
Half sad in my whole joy,
Aware but untouched,
Concerned but distanced.*

I called the poem 'The Surface Man'. I have a picture of myself as not being deeply involved with life and skating instead on the surface - like a water boatman, secure in the sunshine and moving fast and quite impervious to the water depths underneath. After this, rather taken with this line, I did another one called The Surface Man, Part 2, which I subtitled 'Trick Psychist Department'.

*I juggle daily
With a dozen glistening balls
(My own included)
Balanced on a spangled
unicycle
Poised on the surf tip of a
breaking wave.
I know the depth and peril
underneath,
But breathe the salt spray
ecstasy
Of simple being.
I am a poise of charging
forces:
Unmelted I wing towards
the sun,
Breathe in the roaring
energy
And am not consumed.*

This was perhaps pushing salt sea spray a bit too much: and from time to time I felt a slight tremor of apprehension, that thickening in the throat when I was a small boy I had been a bit too cheeky, and the pleased glow of this was tinged by the apprehension. However, life went on happily for another two years, the salt spray flying and the balls sparkling. Then suddenly, whoosh, a black hand reached through the spray, grabbed me by the entrails and hurled me into Guy's hospital for a month. I had violent abdominal pains which gradually subsided leaving an overall weakness - all of it undiagnosed as any rational syndrome. Was this a cosmic come-uppance? That I was suffering from the effects of

Hubris was one of my theories: and there was still no more valid theory to take its place. So, in a vastly different frame of mind, I wrote the following:

*God is not mocked.
I am consumed:
The wax melts and I dive
downwards
Into this black paining
horror.
From the depths a net of
torture
Twits barb-like round my
loins.
Pulling me down, down,
down.*

*'Come down to us, Surface
Man, come down
We are calling you now, we
are calling you.
Come down to us.
It is lonely up there
In the wind and the spray
But you do not feel it
You do not know:
Come down to us
Here there is community
and people,
Joy as well as sorrow.*

*All joy will waste you,
Has wasted you.
Look at you now.
Where is your ecstasy now?
Where your pride?*

*In the depths we are all
equal
We are all together
In our pain, in our
humanity.
Come and join us won't
you?
We need you too'.
P.S. Bring spider with you.*

I had better explain 'spider'. When I was really writhing in agony I did a fantasy about what was happening inside my abdomen and came up with a great black spider with red eyes whose feet were prodding into every corner of my body and causing the pain. When I asked him why he was doing it, he said he was there to make me feel my own pain. That was spider. I think I grew to love him in the end.

And going with the thing now – even entering into the spirit of it – I wrote the following:

*Come pain, come,
With your black clutching
spider claws.
Reach into my writhing
entrails
And cast your augury.
Drag me down, down, down
To the horrors and the
degradation
And the total incarnation
That I have missed.
Fill in my blacks
That I may get to white
again.
Come back: come spider:
come pain:
Sink into my soft flesh
And twisting gut.
Come pain: black pain:
come with your spider
clutch,
Drag me down to the
ignominious depths,
And made me whole again.*

Time passed. The pain slowly grew less and then for whole periods disappeared completely. Six days later I had as long as twelve hours without pain and wrote the following:

*This is not pain;
Not even the beginning of
pain.
Only a soft pricking
awareness
Of the possibility of pain.*

*Just as the sky darkens
And the salt sedges stir
With the possibility of the
new tide;
And a cold wind
Stirs from nowhere and
disappears
Knowing it will come again.*

Finally the pain had gone. I felt subtly changed at the end of it. As if I'd grown up overnight and was looking back with suitable gravamen upon a trivial and misspent youth. The thought crept into my mind – 'I'm a big boy now!' and remembering back forty odd years to a painful but pathetic occasion when my father had upbraided me for telling someone on the telephone that he was in the bath (I thought he would have been pleased that people should know he did bath; not everybody had a bath in our village), I wrote the following:

Coda

*'The boy had no right ... !'
My father said:*

*Diminished and angry
I took my right
For fifty glorious greedy
years;
Crowed on my dungheaps
Beat my chest.*

*Now I am quiet.
I have come through the
fire of my own pride
And have no right again;
Only the joy in being,
And the gratitude for the
joy,
And for the being.*

Since writing the above, conventional medicine has in fact come up with what seems to be at last the final answer. A very astute – and also very human – consultant at Barts laid his finger and stethoscope over my abdomen for about three minutes and suggested that I had something wrong with my aorta which, as you no doubt know, is the largest artery which comes directly from the heart. In fact they photographed this about a week later and confirmed that I had split two layers and bulged the outer layer, thus creating a turbulent flow of blood which was clearly audible in the stethoscope. My most recent theory was that I had not been properly centred in my living operation: I'd been getting by by being very fast on my feet and rushing in circles, not by being firmly grounded in reality. As the site of the aneurysm was almost exactly on the Harar or centre of energy of the body, Eastern and Western theories can still coincide. My unchanneled energies had got off centre and damaged my main blood supply. Luckily by the time this was medically diagnosed I had managed to repair much of the damage. I will now have to go on doing this – and will obviously also have to get myself more firmly centred.

And I suppose in a way it all links back to the title of this article. Had I been firmly grounded I would not have flown so near the sun. There was a split in my personality between humble reality and my vaulting ambition. A split symbolized itself and expressed itself in my aorta.

*Self & Society Vol. 5, No. 4,
April 1977*