

EDWARD ST AUBYN

LOST FOR WORDS

PICADOR

1

When that Cold War relic Sir David Hampshire had approached him about becoming Chair of the Elysian Prize committee, Malcolm Craig asked for twenty-four hours to consider the offer. He had a visceral dislike of Hampshire, the epitome of a public-school mandarin, who had still been Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office when Malcolm was a new Member of Parliament. After he retired, Hampshire took on the usual bushel of non-executive directorships that were handed out to people of his kind, including a position on the board of the Elysian Group, where he had somehow fallen into the role of selecting the committees for their literary prize. His breadth of experience and range of contacts were always cited as the justification, but the truth was that David liked power of any sort; the power

of influence, the power of money and the power of patronage.

Malcolm's doubts were not confined to Hampshire. Elysian was a highly innovative but controversial agricultural company. It numbered among its products some of the world's most radical herbicides and pesticides, and was a leader in the field of genetically modified crops, crossing wheat with Arctic cod to make it frost resistant, or lemons with bullet ants to give them extra zest. Their Giraffe carrots had been a great help to the busy housewife, freeing her to peel a single carrot for Sunday lunch instead of a whole bunch or bag.

Nevertheless, environmentalists had attacked one Elysian product after another, claiming that it caused cancer, disrupted the food chain, destroyed bee populations, or turned cattle into cannibals. As the noose of British, European and American legislation closed around it, the company had to face the challenge of finding new markets in the less hysterically regulated countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. That was where the Foreign Office, liaising with Trade and Industry, had stepped in with their combined expertise in exports and diplomacy. The latter had come very much to the fore after some regrettable suicides

among Indian farmers, whose crops had failed when they were sold Cod wheat, designed to withstand the icy rigours of Canada and Norway rather than the glowing anvil of the Indian Plain. Although the company disclaimed any responsibility, an unusually generous consignment of Salamander wheat proved such a success that Elysian was able to use a shot of the gratefully waving villagers, their colourful clothing pressed to their elegantly thin bodies by the billows of a departing helicopter, in one of its advertising campaigns.

Elysian's weaponized agricultural agents had come to Malcolm's attention when he was asked to sit on the Government committee responsible for the 'Checkout List'. Aerially dispersed, *Checkout* caused any vegetation on the ground to burst immediately into flame, forcing enemy soldiers into open country where they could be destroyed by more conventional means. Debates about the *Checkout* List had of course remained secret, and from the general public's point of view, Elysian's name continued to be associated almost entirely with its literary prize.

In the end it was backbench boredom that persuaded Malcolm to accept the chairmanship of the prize committee. An obscure opposition MP needed

plenty of extra-curricular activities to secure a decent amount of public attention. Who knew what opportunities his new role might bring? His moment in the pallid Caledonian sun as Under-Secretary of State for Scotland had been the climax of his career so far, as well, he hoped, as the climax of his self-sabotage. He had lost the job by making a reckless speech about Scottish independence that ran directly contrary to his party's official policy and ensured that he would have to resign. He hoped he might one day return to his old job, but for the moment it was time to put away affairs of state and take up childish things, to look through a glass darkly – over a long lunch. When he rang Hampshire to tell him the happy news, he couldn't resist asking why the prize was confined to the Imperial ash heap of the Commonwealth.

'Those are the terms of the endowment,' said Hampshire drily. 'On the wider question of why an institution as vacuous and incoherent as the Commonwealth continues to exist, my answer is this: it gives the Queen some pleasure and that is reason enough to keep it.'

'Well, that's good enough for me,' said Malcolm, waiting tactfully until he had hung up the phone to add, 'you silly old twat.'

Broadly speaking, he did not regret his decision. His secretary was busier than she had been for a good while, collecting newspaper clippings and recordings of radio interviews. Malcolm noticed an increase in the ripple effect of his presence in the Commons bar, and an added liveliness to his conversations at dinner parties. The only aggravating aspect of the process was Hampshire's refusal to consult him about the other members of the committee.

As a well-known columnist and media personality, Jo Cross, the first to be appointed, made sense by raising the public profile of the prize. She turned out to be a veritable geyser of opinions, but once Malcolm managed to make her focus, it turned out that her ruling passion was 'relevance'.

'The question I'll be asking myself as I read a book,' she explained, 'is "just how relevant is this to my readers?"'

'Your readers?' said Malcolm.

'Yes, they're the people I understand, and feel fiercely loyal to. I suppose you would call them my constituents.'

'Thanks for putting that in terms I can easily grasp,' said Malcolm, without showing the patronizing bitch the slightest sign of irony.

The presence of an Oxbridge academic, in the form of Vanessa Shaw, the second recruit, was probably unavoidable. In the last analysis, Malcolm felt there was no harm in having one expert on the history of literature, if it reassured the public. When he invited her to the Commons for tea, she kept saying that she was interested in ‘good writing’.

‘I’m sure we’re all interested in good writing,’ said Malcolm, ‘but do you have any *special* interest?’

‘Especially good writing,’ said Vanessa stubbornly.

The committee member Malcolm most resented was one of Hampshire’s old girlfriends from the Foreign Office, Penny Feathers. She had neither celebrity nor a distinguished public career to recommend her, and a little Googling soon established the emptiness of Hampshire’s claim that she was a ‘first-class’ author in her own right. Malcolm couldn’t look at her without thinking, ‘What in God’s name are you doing on *my* committee?’ He had to remind himself that she had one of five votes and his mission was to make sure that her vote went his way.

The final appointee was an actor Malcolm had never heard of. Tobias Benedict was a godson of Hampshire’s who had been ‘a fanatical reader ever since he was a little boy’. He missed the first two

meetings, due to rehearsals, but sent an effusive apology on a handwritten card, saying that he was there 'in spirit if not in the flesh', that he was reading 'like a madman', and that he was 'in love with' *All The World's A Stage*, a novel Malcolm had not got round to yet. The truth was that he had no intention of reading more than a small proportion of the two hundred novels originally submitted to the committee. His role was to inspire, to guide, to collate and above all, to delegate. In this case, he asked Penny Feathers to look into Tobias's choice, feeling that one lame duck should investigate another.

He asked his secretary to skim through the early submissions looking for his own special interest, anything with a Scottish flavour. She had come up with three novels of which he had so far only had time to look at one. A harsh but ultimately uplifting account of life on a Glasgow housing estate, *wot u starin at* really hit the spot when it came to new voices, the real concerns of ordinary people, and the dark underbelly of the Welfare State. He intended to lend it his support and start a discreet campaign on its behalf. He was also pleased, for personal reasons, that she had unearthed *The Greasy Pole*, a novel by Alistair

Mackintosh, but he must be careful not to support it too overtly.

When it came to running a committee, Malcolm favoured a collegiate approach: there was nothing like proving you were a team player to get your own way. The point was to build a consensus and come up with a vision of the sort of Britain they all wanted to project with the help of this prize: diverse, multi-cultural, devolutionary, and of course, encouraging to young writers. After all, young writers were the future, or at any rate, would be the future – if they were still around and being published. You couldn't go wrong with the future. Even if it was infused with pessimism, until it was compromised by the inevitable cross-currents of unexpected good news and character-building opportunities, the pessimism remained perfect, unsullied by that much more insidious and dangerous quality, disappointment. The promise of young writers was perfect as well, until they burnt out, fucked up or died – but that would be under another government and under another committee.

2

Sam Black had written nothing that day. He was too preoccupied with the psychological contracts under which he had been allowed to write so far. What were they and could they be changed?

One contract was Faustian, in a secular and internalized version, but Faustian nevertheless. Haunted by the threat of madness and the consequent need to commit suicide, the modern Faustian was under an obligation to write in order to save his life. Damnation was the hell of his own depression, with a boutique Mephistopheles no longer offering infinite knowledge and worldly power, but the more modest sublimatory power of a practice that might one day release the artist from the destructive forces raging in his psyche.

Sam also recognized that his writing was an ingenious decoy, drawing attention away from his

own decaying body towards a potentially immaculate body of work. He named this deflection the 'Hephaestus complex', as if it had always been part of the annals of psychoanalysis. His angry father Zeus threw Hephaestus out of Olympus when he took his mother's side in a parental argument. Hephaestus's fall shattered his leg and made him lame, but the people of Lemnos, the island where he landed, took him in and taught him to be a master craftsman. Living under Mount Etna, using the volcano as his furnace, he became the disfigured fire god who made beautiful artefacts, and was given the most beautiful goddess, Aphrodite, as his wife. Even when she cuckolded him, he used art to avenge his pain and captured her with Aries in an unbreakable but invisibly fine net from which the adulterous couple could not escape.

Orpheus was an inevitable member of this gang of ancient enforcers. The man who sang his way out of hell only to let slip the woman he had gone there to retrieve was the world expert on haunting loss that every *artiste maudit* had to sign up with. His clinging melancholy was punished with decapitation, but even when his severed head was floating downriver, it continued to sing of Eurydice.

At first Sam had wanted to purge himself of these psychological contracts through a meticulous negativity. Like a man walking backwards along a path, erasing his footsteps with a broom, he had tried, through contradiction, negation, paradox, unreliable narration and every other method he could devise, to cancel the tracks left by his words and to release his writing from the wretched positivity of affirming anything at all. He hoped that by stripping all forms of belief from his sentences, he could evacuate his cluttered mind, leaving it empty and clear. Appearances were disappearances in the making – not that disappearances weren't appearances as well, otherwise the disappearance would have the retroactive effect of solidifying what disappeared, an obvious mistake. Nothing could hold him or trap him – except his belief that freedom could be achieved by simply refusing to be held or trapped.

When his sceptical texts could find no publisher, he was frustrated. He wanted to achieve enough to know, and not just to assume, that achievement was an alluring and arduous dead end. And so Sam put the typescript of *False Notes* in a box on top of the cupboard in his bedroom, and submitted to the grim rule of Faustus, Orpheus and Hephaestus, writing his

first published novel, a *bildungsroman* of impeccable anguish and undisguised autobiographical origin. He knew that his publishers had high hopes for *The Frozen Torrent*, and he joined them in hoping that it would make it to the Elysian Short List so that he could re-submit *False Notes* and finally win his freedom from the tyranny of pain-based art.

These grave considerations were not the only things distracting Sam from his work. He also found it impossible to let more than a few seconds elapse without thinking of Katherine Burns. She was famously easy to fall in love with. He had been waiting throughout February for her return from India. Today she had finally written to him from Delhi, saying that when she got back she would be working flat out to make the Elysian deadline, but inviting him for a drink the week after Easter.

If only she didn't live with her publisher. Sam disliked having his passion tainted by jealousy. He had nothing against Alan Oaks personally – he hardly knew him, and in any case Alan was relentlessly friendly – it was more of a geographical objection: how dare he lie next to her in bed?

There was something rather French about the way Katherine surrounded herself with artists, thinkers,

scientists and writers, like an old-fashioned *salonnière*, if not in an *enfilade* of double-doored white and gold rooms in the rue du Bac, at least in her Bayswater flat, with books in the window sill and books on the floor. She only seemed to have affairs with men who were twenty years older than her (although she liked women of her own age) and he worried that without a sex change, he might simply be too young. She commanded unwavering devotion from her lovers, in a way that reminded him of a certain species of wasp that paralysed its prey without killing it, so as to assure its offspring a supply of living flesh; but he knew that he was just defending himself from rejection with these dark fantasies. The truth was she was utterly wonderful and he adored her.

3

‘I enjoyed my time at the University in Delhi,’ said Sonny, over the rattle of the ineffective air conditioning. ‘We used to loll about in any sort of costume, ragging each other and making plans for pleasure trips.’

His eyelids, which had been drooping from the recollection of those languid days, suddenly shot open.

‘And then,’ he said, leaning towards Katherine with a troubled look, ‘the vimin arrived.’

‘The what?’ said Katherine.

‘The vimin,’ repeated Sonny. He sank back again, trying to dismiss the painful memory with a swipe of his wrist. ‘Everyone started rushing about – brushing their teeth.’

Sonny closed his eyes, shutting out that rush of

fools, and the rush of years that now separated him from those days. He was immediately consoled by the knowledge that he had redeemed all that seemingly wasted time with his magnum opus, *The Mulberry Elephant*. He was also enjoying the delicious irony that Katherine Burns, who was considered to be a tip-top novelist, had no idea that she was in the presence of a literary genius who outweighed her in every respect.

Mum was the word for the moment. When *Mulberry* appeared on the Elysian Long List, he would fly over to England. The interviews would begin when he was Short Listed, and after his inevitable triumph was announced at the Elysian Dinner, he would deliver the witty and magnanimous acceptance speech he had already sketched out a dozen times. 'I want to thank the judges for their enlightened decision. Enlightenment is something we Indians know a thing or two about, but tonight it's England's turn . . .' He imagined the shudder of laughter breaking out in the Banqueting Room of the illustrious Fishmongers' Hall. He would be encouraging to the lesser talents, and humble in the face of greatness.

Katherine watched Sonny murmuring to himself. He was reclining on silk cushions in the corner of a

frantically carved daybed, his legs tucked towards him, a slender hand clasping one of his ankles. She could see his eyes swivelling under their lids in a way that reminded her of the rapid eye movement of a dreamer, as well as the ceaseless vigilance of the blind. A pair of yellow slippers idled on the carpet. Two turbaned servants were placing dozens of silver pots onto the engraved silver table in the middle of the room. Her throne of castellated mahogany, too deep to sit back in and too jagged to lean against, made her long to leave.

She wished she hadn't asked Didier to call Sonny before she left England. Like all her ex-lovers, except for the occasional Spartacus who would lead a gallant but futile revolt, easily crushed by a friendly email or a chance encounter, Didier remained her slave. If only he had been a little more reluctant to get in touch with his grand Indian acquaintance. He hadn't seen Sonny for ten years and he warned Katherine that she would find him '*exotique*, but totally crazy'. Before leaving England '*totally crazy*' seemed a fair price for '*exotique*', but after three weeks of travelling in India she felt the opposite. Tonight, thank God, she was flying back to the welcome dullness of London in early March.

Sonny's head turned as if synchronized with the arrival of the elderly woman in a maroon and gold sari who now stood in the doorway.

'Auntie!' said Sonny, rising from the daybed. 'May I present Katherine Burns, she's a lady novelist from London.'

'Oh, how delightful,' said Auntie and then, noticing that Katherine hadn't moved, she added, 'Don't get up, my dear, nobody curtsies any more these days; or only the old stick in the muds,' her voice filled with mock-horror at the mention of this category. 'We're just having a cosy little lunch, nothing formal.'

She sat on the edge of the daybed and toyed with the folds of her sari.

'You're just the person I need,' she began, conscious of the favour she was doing Katherine. 'I've written the most marvellous cookery book – full of family portraits – and, of course, recipes that have been handed down from generation to generation by the cooks at the old palace.' She hurried over this detail as if it were hardly worth mentioning. 'You're in the publishing world, could you take one of the manuscripts back with you and place it with a London publisher for me? We used to know the great

English writers, Somerset Maugham and dear old Paddy Leigh Fermor, but they all seem to be dead now, or out of commission. So, you see, my dear, I'm relying on you.'

'Of course,' said Katherine, trying to assemble a smile.