

Carillonneur

Also by Ágnes Lehóczy

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For our Sheffield times together...

Carillonneur

PART ONE

Parasite of Town

Greystones' Backyards

...through numerous lies this city unpeels its stratigraphy, by means of camouflage, by hiding, blending in long sequences of bus trips to and fro in late October rain between downtown and dark bricked alleyways. It's mostly iron rain, which streams down from the surrounding hills into the cracks of the concrete heart of this Northern settlement. When you do not know someone, like the way you don't know the intricacies of unfamiliar bodies, impenetrable ginnels, untouched geographies, you trust whatever they offer, allowing yourself to plunge into flooded impasses and cul-de-sacs, rivers of unknown neighbours' junk, cast-off children's toys, blown up rubber tyres, winter spades, ice axes thrown on the ground of hoar-frosty backyards' glossy ice rinks, wading through open doors of littered garages to lock your own bicycle in the shed. They offer you the post of the river diver to rummage through their junk. In this sense, there is no deception involved, since they too know riverbeds are thick, dense and grey. But sometimes they offer you more: liquefied maps with fuzzy street names to track down the old town which you can't quite touch yet with your mind. They often promise you a large number of rivers instead of the sea, hills instead of hazy dreams which they reckon are more tangible to climb. Or dive into. No gear needed to live here day by day apart from an oily anorak and a pair of old rubber thigh waders. But these rivers retreat into tiny arteries pulsing under the skin when you approach them. Then they offer you panorama. An afternoon through the kitchen window a solitary boy kicking a football

within a square metre muddy grass knot or bizarre angles of tiny back gardens with the irregular visit of the odd guest who hangs their laundry out in the rain. So that you feel that you too should become a parasite on the carpet of this soggy cityscape. In the riverbed of this pale town. And accumulate clutter in your own cobbled courtyard. Two hours from London. Up towards the nucleus. Its whole life organised by its Northern aorta, the Pennines. According to the sign someone left in the underpass one day near Bramall Lane the sea must have been here a long time ago. And that's just possibly another lie too.

The Sheffield Mágus

Once when you visited this phantasmagoria land in the early days you highlighted its hideousness with no mercy in your manners, snapping pointedly at its malformed maps, the rough tarmac of heaving streets, solid houses with anaemic colours, the pre-cast and poured-in shapes of composites and wondered at the antonym of the word 'ostentatious'. We spent two days in the city sightseeing around trying to find the soft core of the spherical settlement, its delicate focal point, where, as you said, everything happens. Yet there is some raw untruth in every verdict. And sometimes it's the rawness that can pay some aphoristic tribute. These yellow, pink and lilac light effects at night enveloping the carcass of the city, erecting the outline of another ghost town, you established, are nothing but simulacrum. Silky legerdemain. Although under the multihued flesh of this city apparition a concrete caricature, quietly clanks and clatters in the dark. In the daytime, from a bird's eye view if anything at all, the valley is industrious like an enormous workshop, a multitude of metal sawdust. But then it is the density of this iron debris, the valley filled with steel wool, copper wire, scrap aluminium items, which are magnetising. And we dived into comparisons with which we linked this geography to former and forgotten ones by mistake, from Bákó to Miskolc, Warsaw to Dunaújváros or Dresden... and then disappeared in the fluid afternoon through curvilinear glass pavilions of botanical gardens and fiery Guy Fawkes nights' crowded autumn fairgrounds, dizzying merry-go-rounds like

the ones we'd seen at the edges of derelict seaside towns. Forgotten playgrounds which have crawled further inland to be closer to the core. The next morning you woke on the carpet, rolled up like a pupa on a pillow and a sleeping bag turned inside out to make the place habitable for me, you said. Yet you left in haste with the coach to London which was two hours away. The glossy window of the bus was black, like East Anglian flint or quartz reflecting nothing but the pallid complexion of the early morning station always already weary, with empty cafés, vacant corridors coated with white floor tiles still echoing from late night footsteps from the previous day. The day, you might say, has not started just yet and warned me to wait. I waited a few moments and dissolved into what you may call the wake of a city in a November morning or around that time.

Panorama from the Top of the Wicker Arches

Unable to find the delicate core, the focal point where everything happens, the streets led towards the margin of the city in that Saturday afternoon, sometimes between daytime and night time, not quite twilight yet, a few minutes past the difference between dusk and dawn, uncertain. Such day-fragments in January often blend into one smoky whirlwind of the hours sweeping tiny groups of women dressed in black, stacks of small and weightless twigs, towards home. Through littered roads wading in the debris of the day, they roll in air like ash or crows sweeping by metal shutters of shops semi-shut. An hour, in-between, when stallholders have nearly packed up all their goods, with only a few boxes of oranges, local eggs on sale still waiting to be sold. Then the fish smell. And the smell of disinfectants. The smell of small second-hand things. The tiny cafés with aluminium chairs piled up on the tables. We were standing here, I think, between a black bin and a yellow mop bucket, what I mean is between what actually happened and what could have happened to us in a half-existent here-and-now on the threshold of the urban market a few seconds before it was closed. That moment occurs when you arrive at an empty corner, not so much too late, but not quite right on time. The momentum of forcing an arrival on a space which is ready to depart, is what I mean by all this. And so we left with five small and ragged avocados, a cardboard egg box of six local eggs and one shiny Braeburn apple from some Yorkshire orchard. All at once blown out into the streets towards the district, where, you said, the Wicker

began to stretch out into nowhere. To the edge of the heart. To the periphery where ghost kids kick phantom football and dark-clothed locals group at corners laconically nodding that they know how to inhabit this town without words. A spot which enables you to look at things from a distance but squinting from a distant enough distance sometimes allows you to fit every single miniature chip into a small but perfect pocket guide or map. And from the stone bridge over the watyr of Dune neghe the castell of Sheffield we saw the angle of the city as if we had always been pilgriming in reverse, crawling backwards towards the core. We arrived in the empty streets in the end and stared into second-hand furniture shops and bric-à-brac boutiques with miscellaneous objects unreal and underpriced. Exhibits of a dribbling vagabond in the window displayed between a metal kettle and a wooden nativity set with the thirteen characters still complete. Then following flocks of black skirts and scarves flapping in front of us in the wind we found the railway wall, the arch, the heraldic insignia carved out with a long peeled-off pride, a lion and a horse holding a shield *sola virtus invicta* but we thought this place was equally unconquerable and carried on walking wordlessly under the dysfunctional viaduct where, they said, in the odd hour one could spot blurred contours of cargo wagons of the Wicker crisscrossing the disused station and disappearing with the intermittent ‘chuff’ into the valley of no man’s land. And then from the top of the forty-one invisible arches we saw the city from this twisted Eastern angle subdued under a weighty petrol-blue skyline, the city walls, the fire walls, the derelict factory surfaces, then the blind-glassed office walls, the enormous rounded gas tanks, unstrippable folios grown eclectically together, like fractured bones imperfectly healed, clumsily designed prosthetic limbs, mismatching mosaics of the afternoon hour in-between, the pale palimpsest of now. We watched the tired posture of the landscape from this frame, paralysed in the hour where nothing really happens. And then we too got tired of staring at the littered streets, the deserted wide avenues dragging their way back to the plastered city hall wrapped in barbed wire (in its chronic battle with guano) and to

the pinnacles of the two cathedrals each engaged in their own solipsistic monologue and decided not to return to the centre until we have exchanged words with those who, although so cunningly camouflaged, have colonized this peripheral segment of the world.