

Winter 2019

Engine

Tom Stevens

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/emeraldcitylitmag>

Recommended Citation

Stevens, Tom (2019) "Engine," *Emerald City*. Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/emeraldcitylitmag/vol1/iss1/6>

This Story is brought to you for free and open access by Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Emerald City by an authorized editor of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@pittstate.edu.

ENGINE

by tom stevens

When they get what they want and go, I light a cigarette and have a little gin. Every time critics and journalists come, I tell myself that I'm not going to smoke or drink when they go, but every time they leave me shaking and practically throwing them out. It's the eternal tableaux, the duo—smiling, pasty journalist, coupled with a quiet but wide-eyed photographer. They ask the same questions about him, ask to take photos of his things, of me in the house. Over the decades they've changed slightly, I suppose; different smart/casual dress, different hairstyles. Always trying to look so damn pleasurable. Always clueless.

When I lie back with the gin (I've swapped the glass for the bottle) and a cigarette and close my eyes, I see my hands stretched out before me, stitching up a boy in Nepal, comforting someone with malaria on the border of Burma and Cambodia; I remember the smell of burning flesh as I cauterize a wound on someone with little medical tools or supplies in the high altitudes of the Andes. I see a tapestry of skins, stitches, blood, rubber gloves, defecation, deaths and blossoming resurgent lives. I also see, as if reflected in the glint of a glass of water, the conferences, the study, the PhD, parents, patients, hours and hours, and hours of hospital corridors. What the journalist and the photographer, decidedly typecast through history, see of me is the writer's wife, hopefully with a story, maybe with her own eccentricities.

There's no doubt my husband had eccentricities, and that people loved him for it. For a start, there was his immensely strong Cornish accent, and his peculiar fluency in Cornish, despite it's relative decline. If you were to attempt to find the root of this, to discover who taught him the language or even could converse with him in it so often, another quirk would be revealed; his confusion about his family life. He knew so little of his parents before they died that he can't remember them, and he would occasionally mumble about an Aunt. Even I never knew how he was made, what socio-cultural blanket nurtured such a creature into confidence and being.

In the early days after his death, the papers loved to hear about the travels—about laboring along the South coast of Crete, of a brief office job in Ceuta, where he would look hauntingly across the border to Morocco, his feet on Spanish soil, African soil really, and wondering what makes a place a place, a Europe a Europe, an Africa an Africa, what makes him standing there so significant and insignificant? Then there were the misty years in North Wales, and then South-East Ireland, where he would lope along the cold roads, almost starving, almost frozen, before decidedly turning up in Cornwall again, where he was almost instantly terrified by the sense of familiarity and the occasional recognition. We traveled, together, quite often for my own work with different medical organisations, governments, charities, and NGOs, but they're never really interested in that. Nor will they ever know about my own eccentricities, if they were to be called that, maybe my irregularities. His eccentricities made him amusing and interesting to the public eye; I don't think accounts of my nightmares about stitching heads onto heads onto heads onto shoulders onto hands, and waking up having stitched a good neat line into the fine flesh of my thigh would spark quite the same bemused intrigue. Even he was nervous of some of the thoughts I had, the actions I took.

They're interested in his novels mainly, the bulkier and pulpier momentum of his work. I loved his poetry most, especially the older poems. He only started writing poetry after he met me. His one play was awful yet well received. The scratchy illustrations he made that occasionally got pressured into full-scale prints always sold. These later works always hit the mark as a result of his famed early talents, and the love for his strangeness, rather than the beauty in themselves. I am invested in the arts in a way I suppose, but I am not studied in their ways; despite this, I feel only I am not blind to the truths of his career. I believe this, for only I have attempted to read the Engine.

The start of the Engine made sense. He hadn't written anything in a long time, but still was shipped here and there to little conferences, on literature in general, sometimes a show or exhibition centered around his work. I'd go with him, a proxy manager, and hold my champagne and be ignored. Afterward he would complain of all the attendee's attentions, of their prying questions, and gleeful, bullshit small talk. I loved this period, almost as much as I loved the beginning of our lives together. I would write occasionally for medical journals, give small talks about the importance of some charity or other, or some experimental new technique, but mainly be at home with him. We painted the house and dug vegetables and herbs and luscious smelling flowers into the garden, and put up shelves and organised our offices. In the evenings we'd cook dinner and eat it at the little kitchen table, later dozing in the scruffy armchairs in the living room, maybe to a little bit of music, maybe watch the news (I didn't like the television much, and he said he didn't, but it would draw him in occasionally) or even a film. At night we would entwine and unfurl in the bed. The house was filled with cats, all of them found in the fields and alleyways of the nearby town. They would drift in and out of the house, following the whims of their comfort.

In this period, the period I love almost as much as the beginning, his health began to decline. The medicine cabinet filled with medication, and his clothes in the laundry began to gain their own tainted, submitting-animal smell. As his health deteriorated I had more and more intense dreams of cutting him open and removing the stray cats with ragged ears and swollen eyes and gammy paws and matted fur out of his guts, filling him with the vegetable garden and new layers of paint on the house and evening meals and the scruffy armchairs, but halfway through the operation his heartbeat cut out.

He decided that before he finally died, perhaps he should try his hand once more at his old talents. For days he would sit in the living room, coughing and musing his lip, with a notebook open on his lap, the pages empty. One day, I guess, he grew tired of racking his fagged brain for inspiration, and copied out a line from a nearby book that he liked. I remember finding his armchair empty, the notebook open, as if in protest, as if a teacher had set him unsavory homework, and there was a line, neatly cited, from J.M Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*, page 197: "There is no such thing as a hole between the pages."

By this point I decided that I could take a well-earned berth from research and career-related appearances to settle into caring for him. We both talked about his illness in an aloof and detached way, and indeed that seems to be how I remember receiving the news, and dealing with his last days, a sort of sleepy eyed, pained lip, mumbling "Oh dear ..."

He must have decided to see where this vein of defeat would lead, and so he added another line from another text that he felt flowed. He fleshed out the 'hole' between the pages with a line from Aime Cesaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, p.65: "A beast that by the elementary exercise of it's vitality spills blood and sows death." To this he tailed on Conrad's "a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear," from page 94 of *The Heart of Darkness*.

The first fifteen pages continued, referencing more Coetzee, Fanon, a few lines from Borges: "He understood that he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another," from *The Circular Ruins*, and "a Samoyedic Lithuanian dialect of Guarani, with classical Arabic inflections." A few of his own lines made their way from his other poems into the list of quotes; there was "I will wait for you there blinking / among my own mirages of leaves in Spring" from his piece *Under Canopy*, and "there are those, idiots, who believe; that the toilet can take everything you want to give it" from *Appliance*. I notice that when he refers to his own work, it's never his novels. This makes some sense to me, I feel, as surely poetry is more of the soul than fictions. Fictions are the workings of the mind, poems the heart.

After those pages, adding to the piece became ritual. Between meals, he would traipse through his book and journal collection, finding lines that he felt had constructed him, had engineered himself into being. When he had exhausted his collection, he hauled tons of books to and from the library and charity shops. He stopped citing, and the lines blurred from their independent authors into their own being. No longer did he attempt to make them flow; an engine needed no beauty or poetic license, it needed efficiency and all of its parts working. Shaker Abdurraheem Aamer's "Peace of what kind?" is followed by Monbiot's line "the women and elder's wading along the estuary with their spears and prongs." The final line is Dylan Thomas's "Stars at hand and foot! Stars at hand and foot!" with his own repetition and exclamation point. After that, there is an indent, and written in pencil his own line; "I love you beneath the willows/ behind the blossoms / the river clear / and the woods / alight this winter" from *Chasing Your Shadow in the Woods*. The first poem he dedicated to me.

I only read the Engine after he died. It overran my dreams from a constant funeral, an eternal hospital bed, to me stitching writer onto writer onto writer onto philosopher onto theologian onto him, forcing them to work as a machine. What would my engine be? My engine? Reams of medical text and the gaunt faces of the dead. The engine reads more like a list a child would collate; list of colors I've seen, list of dogs I've met, list of things I've read. The reporter always asks tentatively how I felt around his death and how all of that was. Why would someone ask this? Why would someone regurge this story, the end of his story over and over again. Of course it was horrible, they all know that. They do not know what it was like to wake up without him or make two cups of tea without thinking, or to see his body, asleep but unwakeable, unconvertable, there but not.

I have to allow for my story now, as it is a story that continues. I have to make sure the characters go about their tasks in the walking phases of life. I have to keep living, for the sake of the narrative. The reporters want to spoil all the endings. They crave to know how he worked, and I have the physical code, the Engine. It meant something deeply to him, means something confusing to me, and would make no sense to these bloodsuckers. I keep the Engine, not to read it or get it published in memoriam, but because in keeping the Engine, I have kept a sliver of his soul, the soul that left that body that could not wake up or talk, that was and wasn't there, safe in the drawer of his old desk.

tom stevens

Tom Stevens is a 25-year-old writer currently living in Bristol, UK. Though working as a gardener, he writes poetry, short stories, and some (mainly environmental) non-fiction. Check out [miragesofleavesinspring.blogspot.com](#) for more of his writing.



A MOTHER'S LOVE

"Even before he had left, her body had been losing strength. Losing what made it a body. Even walking from one side of the house to the next left her breathless. Now her body just felt dead."



— william hayward



BACK TO TOP

