

Domesticated to indifference
by an immemorial law; that from
Zinder to Benghazi, from Atar to Ouduman,
“master” and “mastered” have no meaning,
are capricious relations, eroded or reversed
by the Harmattan’s demanding fealty.

And so they bear this weight of abuse,
bedsteads, straw, their own manure,
this human show of dominance
among the streets and houses of a human town.
But will remember, and revenge.

Two-toed bag-’o-bones
folded against a Saharan storm
like sealed manilla envelopes
bearing the hundredth name of god;
they know their worth, compared
to those pathetic tents of blue and black

huddled like widows, worrying their beads.

5.
But the Tuareg boy crossing
the street to clasp my hand
is not worried, is mad
more like, from the warp
of his gaze above jet *litham*
and the space the townsmen
give him. They gawp
at us, scandalised; lean nomad
and portly Englishman
holding hands in the grouting
of Africa.

What did we say?

Perhaps he spoke of poetry,
the famous epics of Tamahak
or those pictures of god
in the Tassili;
whatever, I did not hear,
mumbling embarrassed in Hampshire
French, feeling my neck
beginning to sweat,
suddenly certain, and frantic
to rinse his dreadful
favour away.

6.
For the leper’s embrace is a nightmare borne
by multitudes, they hobble and scuff
to the market like traders; arranging their wounds
as others do fruit (the ripest up front,
raw, viscid) and calling like any vendor
summoning trade . . . songs old as affliction,
tuneless as grief. Grinning gargoyles

they beg just acknowledgment, the small
tarnished change that clogs up your purse.
“*Patron, Patron!*” “*Merci Patron!*”

A woman without nose creases her head,
the toothless Baba in Fulani sombrero,
straddling a donkey, has no hands and no feet
so waddles his stumps like a marionette
as the dull coins chime in his plate.

7.

In the Banque Internationale pour l’Afrique
a furtive literary clerk whispers
requests for books in English; “Achebe,
Soyinka, Armah . . .” Here where the bookstore
offers only Simenon, Feydeau, Dumas,
the very names are contraband.

Those evil
dealers in ideas, smuggling subversion
into quaint “folklore”, seem innocent/
irrelevant enough back where dissent,
if not embraced, at least hammers hard
at the rulers’ doors. Self-righteously
I make a package filched from everywhere,
stamped EDUCATIONAL, marked
UNSOLICITED GIFT, NO COMMERCIAL VALUE.
Which is all, more or less, the truth.

But the clerk never writes, and no longer
at ease, I fear the interpreters of
his literary wound were not the healers
but that brutalised strong breed
who *know* the road to revolution’s laid
by such harmless, passive, beautiful ones
whose fragments of uncowed curiosity
inevitably make things fall apart.

8.

Splendid Sun-birds, Long-claws, Rollers,
they preen and flutter their inordinate plumage
on the painted bulb and palm-starred patio
of a “. . . better days” hotel. More like Shrikes
overheard, their strident calls abrupt
and loveless as their clients’ beery passions.

They mob the strutting concierge, who
like a connoisseur selects the lucky ladies
for this evening’s contract work, the easiest
of pickings; light-skinned strangers
anxious for exotica to gild their travelogues
or regulars, those silent, sallow men
on week-end passes from uranium.

The remainders, outraged, raucous,
flaunt their disapproval of the clerk,
tease the chosen with tales of pale diseases,
the whiteman’s strange and infamous demands,
but reluctantly drift out to their work

grubbing for coins among the bars and alleyways,
transformed by this familiar omission
from spangled ornamentals to brazen scavengers.

9.

Alone in black Zinder Monsieur le Blanc
ensures his grocery's well stocked,
his books are neat, his taxes paid on time,
maintains a cultivated friendship
with the Captain of Police, and bears
the nubile, deft attentions of his
burnished "native wife" without complaint . . .

but keeps his petrol tank well charged,
his passport and his francs are close to hand,
has an "arrangement" with AIR FRANCE:
his seat is booked and vacant, any time.

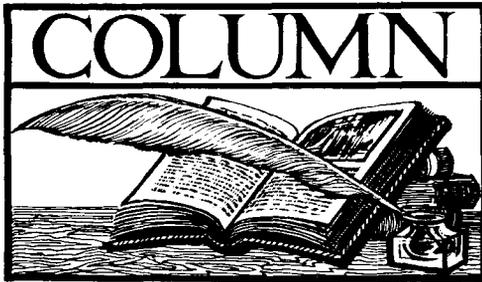
10.

For we're all
exiles, strangers, parasites
whose presence itches the scars
of empire. DEFENSE PHOTOGRAPHER.
The hilltop barracks' howitzers
trained over the mud-brick town
defend the army from its masters;
knowing how fickle history can be.

The soldiers
read irreverence in our faces;
"*Défense de Photographie!*" That
painted Hausa wall must be Top Secret,
that quaint square roundabout,
that silent circling kite above the
Restaurant Liberté. "*Défense de Photographie!*"
Is so their power's manifested,
its blustering tyro sum.

For the market
holds on Thursday as it has
for a thousand years, and the praises
of the tinsmiths are those
their forbears sang, the fakir
and the herbalist depend on ancient laws,
while the hunchback bijou salesman
hawks his images of gods
whose potency's enshrined in the
amnesia of the tribe.

And it's
just five miles out of town
to where the final gardeners
prise their green allotments
from the sand, crop mean, reluctant
peppers and a handful of dry beans;
but *they* attend them constantly,
knowing how swift the desert
is to foreclose on its loans.



“AND A FINAL TWIST will put Green on top and Orange underneath, with Red, White, and Blue at the sides facing left, right, and away from you. . . .” No: not another solution to Rubik’s Cube, but the “solution” that many now envisage for the “problem” of Northern Ireland.

The comparison may be more revealing than it seems. The twenty movable sections of Rubik’s Cube can be placed in more than 43 quintillion (43×10^{19}) possible arrangements. So, perhaps, can the elements in the Ulster imbroglio. A rapid computer, we’re told, would take centuries to explore all the Cube’s complexities. The conflicts in the six counties may prove equally prolonged. And what is the solution to Rubik’s puzzle but a form of partition, segregation, or apartheid, with each of the colours tidily banished to its homeland—neat, perfect, satisfying, and ultimately rather unreal?

That, of course, is what the comparison actually shows: that the situation in Northern Ireland, like most such political dilemmas, is not in this sense a “problem” at all. Rubik’s Cube is a puzzle with a single correct solution. Northern Ireland offers no such satisfying outcome. All the “solutions” currently touted are simply “problems” in their turn.

The nightly news—another bomb, another knee-capping, another soldier or policeman killed, another hunger-striker dying, more fires, more revenge, more rubber bullets—tends to numb us with despair and boredom. A visit to Belfast is like a trip into the wartime past: Army checkpoints, bricked-up windows, bomb-sites, and a strange sense of controlled normality amid the dangers, a patient Home-Front stoicism waiting for peace to break out. The hatred, the arrogance, the threats and intimidation, the mourning, the sentimental historicism, and the exhilaration of fighting—these seldom come across in BBC bulletins or newspaper stories. Now and then, there’s a burst of frankness, like John Archer’s Ulster Protestant plea in the September ENCOUNTER, or Edward Pearce’s *Algérie-Française* explosion against Mayor Koch in the previous issue. But most public discussion of Northern Ireland is bigoted or mealy-mouthed—or both. Republican partisans, far-Leftists, and even some Irish academics blame “British colonial rule.” Right-wingers, law-and-order men, *Algérie-*

Française polemicists, and most casual commentators simply condemn “the men of violence.” Politicians, meanwhile, talk guardedly of “a political solution”, but few of them specify what they mean.

PERHAPS it’s just as well. In Algeria, after all, General de Gaulle left others to interpret his gnomic “*Je vous ai compris*.” For if politicians or editorialists, from Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone to *The Sunday Times*, were really to come clean on Northern Ireland they’d have to admit that no one in the present conflict is going to get what he wants. The only exception—which Heaven forbid—is someone who wants the violence to continue for ever. Somewhere, maybe, there does exist a League for Promoting Merovingian Mayhem, but it’s not yet issued a manifesto. Instead, all parties propose “solutions.” None of them seems likely to work.

“*A united Ireland*” is the pledge upheld by the Irish Constitution, espoused by Irish politicians, and paraded by the IRA. If it means incorporating Northern Ireland in the Republic, this would merely turn the “problem” on its head. Dublin might shoulder the economic burden at present borne by London; but what would “Loyalists” do? Some would leave to look for jobs in Britain. Some would stay on, and hope for the best. Some—and they might be many—would try to overturn the settlement, if necessary by violence. How great their threat would be might depend on the Dublin statute-book, as well as on the forces of law and order. But the mere prospect is probably enough to rule out such a “solution” from the start.

“*Union with Britain*”—whether “direct rule” or the *Algérie-Française* version of incorporation into the British State—seems equally untenable as a long-term aim. Dublin could not formally accept it; the IRA would go on fighting it; and, whatever “Loyalists” might feel, many British people would like to wash their hands of Ulster altogether. Full union with Britain, moreover, would require a number of changes, not all of them welcome. The domestic law and electoral system in Northern Ireland would have to be adjusted; so, probably, would existing conventions on voting and citizenship between Britain and the Republic. Ulster’s land frontier would have to be far more solidly defended; and the IRA would have to be defeated once and for all.

“*Military victory over the IRA*”, in fact, is yet another pseudo-solution. Its economic, political, and human cost might include martial law, many more troops acting much more ruthlessly, a “Berlin Wall” along the border, the systematic arrest and imprisonment of suspects and accessories, far more impregnable high-security prisons, and perhaps a return to the death penalty. The protests such