

Comes out March 7th 2017!

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1) Plaza Hotel, Brussels (Belgium)



I'm sitting in the lobby of the Plaza Hotel in Brussels, waiting for the Nobel prize-winner Derek Walcott and his wife. Walcott, who lives on the island of St. Lucia in the Caribbean, is in Europe to read from his epic poem *Omeros* and to hold the Cola Debrot reading in Amsterdam.

It's not the first time I've waited for Walcott. Some years ago, just after we'd wired him his travel costs, his fee and sent the agreement to use his poems and the entire festival programme, he called to say he'd been mugged in Paris. His passport, wallet, the notes for his latest book, all gone.

Totally dejected, he decided to return to his island. No stop-off in Rotterdam.

A year later, I was having breakfast at a festival in Dublin with Irish poet Seamus Heaney and the Irish festival director John McAuliffe. Heaney was standing in for his friend and fellow Nobel laureate Walcott, who'd cancelled the previous evening. After each sip of coffee John and I took, Heaney reached for a flask of Black Label in his inside pocket and poured another shot into our cups. 'The level must stay the same,' he said.

'I'm happy you could take Derek's place, Seamus,' the Irish festival director said. 'He sounded completely at his wit's end on the telephone, the poor man. Mugged in Paris. Everything gone. Passport, wallet, even the notes for his latest collection. Terrible.'

'Ah, Derek,' Heaney laughed, pouring another shot of Black Label into John's coffee. 'Did he do his mugging story again?'

Walcott and his wife come in. He's carrying an old book with a linen slipcase and places it carefully on the edge of the table. 'Freud,' he says. 'First edition.' His wife asks him what he wants to drink.

Him: Lemonade.

Her: Lemonade?

Him: Lemonade?

Her: Wine?

Him: No, lemonade.

Her: We've already drunk a lot of wine today. This afternoon, with lunch. Do you want something else?

Him: Yes, lemonade.

Her: Waiter, one lemonade.

Waiter: We don't have any lemonade.

Her: They don't have lemonade.

Him: I want lemonade.

Her, to the waiter: He wants lemonade.

Waiter: We don't have any lemonade.

Her, with a smile: Shall I throw this chair at you?

Waiter: No.

Her: We were sitting outside on the terrace this afternoon. When I turned my chair around so I could sit facing Derek, this angry waiter told me to put the chair back. All of the chairs need to stay facing the street. We were forced to look at other people's backs. Do you want ice tea?

Him: Yeah, ice tea.

He looks at the menu.

'They've written it wrong. It's iced tea. Give me a pen, I'll correct it.'

She gets her bag, and gets out a Taschen book on Surrealism when she lays on top of Freud as she looks for a pen.

'And cake?'

Him: 'Yes, cake.'

Her: 'With ice-cream.'

Him: 'Yes, with ice-cream.'

Her: 'What kind of cakes do they have? Ooh, I can see cheesecake. Cheesecake? Do you want cheesecake. Do you have cheesecake too?'

Waiter: 'We've got strawberry, apple and apricot.'

Her: 'I can see cheesecake, there, top right.'

Waiter: 'That's rice cake.'

Her: 'Rice cake?'

Waiter: 'Rice cake.'

Her: 'They've got rice cake.'

Walcott looks pissed off.

Her: 'What do you want? Strawberry, apple or apricot?'

Him: 'Apricot. I want apricot with ice-cream.'

Her: 'He wants apricot with ice-cream.'

Him: 'Who's put that bloody shit on top of my book. Whose book is that?'

Her: 'Mine.'

Him: 'Move that shit! Now!'

She looks at me, startled. She moves her book. Then she looks at Derek and sticks out her tongue at him.

Derek moves his chair closer to mine.

'Did you know that the people on my island are better at reading Dickens and Shakespeare than readers in London? When they look outside, they can't connect anything to that literature, you see. I hate everything and everyone who stands in the way of universal literature. Particularly groups. Virtuosity is timeless. You're talented, your talent matures and bam, you're Rimbaud. Picasso.'

That prize? Tss. They didn't even dare to give it to Joyce. Those cowardly Swedes don't even dare honour their own Tranströmer*. Did you know you have to pay tax on the prize? No kidding. The Nobel is fucking taxed. I have to leave. I can't see the sea. I want to be in a place that's three paces from the sea. Won't be in any good in Amsterdam. Did you know that the Caribbean sea is as old and contains the same water as the Aegean Sea? Waves. Only waves. Waves that roll onto the beach like Dante's and Homer's hexameters.'

The waiter sets down the ice tea.

Him: 'What is this?'

Her: 'It's ice tea.'

Him: 'It's not ice tea'

Her: 'It is ice tea.'

Him: 'Is it sweetened?'

Her: 'Taste it to see whether it's sweetened.'

Him: 'I don't want sweetened ice tea.'

Her: 'Taste it first.'

Him: 'It's fizzy.'

Her: 'Yes, it's fizzy ice tea.'

He takes a sip.

'Yuck, it's sweet. You drink it.'

Her: 'I don't want any ice tea.'

Him: 'You have to drink it.'

She drinks. The waiter sets down an apricot tart.

Him: 'What's that?'

Her: 'It's your apricot tart.'

Him: 'I want more spoons.'

Her: 'What do you want?'

Him: 'More spoons.'

Her: 'Waiter, he wants more spoons.'

Walcott gives me one of the spoons. 'Here. Eat! I don't like apricot tart! Eat.'

I take a bite.

Him: 'How many books do you have? And what do you do again?'

Me: 'Director of Poetry International in Rotterdam.'

Him: 'You? You can't be the director of Poetry International. You can't deal with schedules. You could never organize such a big festival.'

*Tranströmer was awarded the prize in 2011.

2) *Lux Hotel, Sainshand (Mongolia)*



Stevie is a young working class Brit from Newcastle. Both of his parents were factory workers, strongly opposed to the monarchy and fond of martial arts. Every evening the family would sit down to watch K1 matches. Stevie began his career with Muay Thai and later switched to kickboxing. He started fighting in MMA cages at an early age and competed on an almost daily basis for seven years. Despite his small, rather slender stature, he never lost a single fight. During holidays, he'd allow himself to swept along in the stream of young drunken Englishmen heading to Torremolinos, Chersonissos or Albufeira, where he earned the cost of his flights by working as a bouncer. When his shift was over, he and his friends would throw beer on the lit-up dancefloor before sliding across it on their backs (the Snail); they'd take out their pocket linings and bare their penises (the Elephant), or drop their trousers, tug their genitals up high and run screaming through the streets of the holiday resort, *'Look, the last chicken in the shop!'*

As a doorman in Newcastle, he was the man to beat. Each weekend, his drunk or otherwise intoxicated fellow townsfolk would decide to test their strength against the little man at the disco door. 'You get used to smacking people in the face every night,' Stevie said.

No one ever managed to hit him. Stevie was unbeatable. They renamed him the Highlander. The immortal.

After an MMA match in Moscow against a Russian, whom he'd knocked out in the third round, Stevie popped into the station kiosk to grab something to read on the way home. He grabbed the thinnest book he could find from the rack and jumped into the train. It was the poetry collection *Twarz trzecia* (The Third Face) by the Polish poet Tadeusz Różewicz. Stevie opened it and read:

'Occupied / with much more urgent business / I forgot / that you also / need to die'

The poem ended: *'I shall promptly begin to die / wise and in good spirits / without wasting any time.'*

Stevie read and re-read the collection and then slammed it resolutely shut. It's what every work of art sets out to do: overturn somebody's life. *Du sollst dein leben ändern*. 'I'm going to be a poet,' Stevie said aloud to the empty carriage. 'Poet.' He swapped the MMA cages and the disco doors of Newcastle for a job as a guide in the British Museum and started to read. He read everything he could get his hands on. The books from the museum library, the collections from the antiquarian booksellers around Russell Square. He read history, art history, philosophy, theology, anthropology and lots and lots of international poetry.

Stevie's unorthodox entry into literature and his love of Różewicz made him an independent reader. As an independent reader, he soon discovered that there was something odd about modern English-language poetry. A powerful tradition and frantic experimentation had given the Brits TS Eliot, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. Language that flowed. But the stream had dried up into a muddy greyish pool of cowardly puffs of language due to a weak tea of anecdotes, youthful musings and insipid reflections on the lark in the tree and wind over the fields. Template poetry. Stevie decided to use his own language, personal imagination and unprejudiced curiosity about art and culture from outside the Commonwealth to enter the cages of British poetry and break them open from the inside.

It is late and I'm stuck in a suburb of Sainshand in Mongolia. Drab blocks of flats are interspersed with round, grey tents set up on the mud and sand. It is already dark and I need to get back to my hotel in the centre. A dangerous undertaking for a foreigner at this time of night. The poet I have been visiting asks his son of fifteen, who after an exchange programme with a British school, speaks reasonable English, to accompany me. We walk together to the edge of the neighborhood, a sandy path across which a long string of cars slowly drags itself to the centre. The boy holds his hand up and we see the lights of a car in the queue flash. 'We're lucky,' the boy says. 'So quick. It usually takes a couple of hours.'

There are three lanky teenagers in the car. Battered leather jackets, dirty jeans, hair messy on top and shaved in the neck. They don't speak but when we drive off, I hear the door locks click on. After a short ride, the car stops turns abruptly into a side street and a little while later we find ourselves parked up in a dark alley between a brothel and a scrapyard. I clutch my bag containing my notebooks and sketchbook tightly to my chest. The boys consult with each other, my young guide listens attentively and with growing concern.

'Who are your favourite MMA fighters,' he suddenly asks, loudly. I think for a moment.

'I'm friends with the Highlander,' I say.

'The Highlander? Little Stevie from Newcastle? He's my hero!' the boy says, and he slams his fist down three times next to the driver's seat.

'Badr Hari from Holland is OK of course,' I say as nonchalantly as possible, 'but the Highlander, the Highlander's the best. Elbow up, hand down, aim for the triangle, eyes-nose, that's what he taught me.'

The two boys in the front look at each other for a moment. Then the driver starts the car and worms the car back into the queue. Half an hour later, they drop us off in front of the hotel.