

# Unintentional Hermits/ Animal Cities- Melancholy

*by* verity healey

The city was restless and it made him restless.

This wasn't what he'd planned.

Hours before and in the darkness, he'd felt that certain kind of serenity which comes with having made a decision and had turned over in bed and fallen promptly asleep.

When he woke at 8am he prepared himself- took the necessaries slowly, snapping them cleanly out of their plastic pockets- he took pleasure in doing that - and then decided to go for a walk. He was supposed to go into work but there was no point in turning up now and he wouldn't call and make an excuse, he would despise himself for it, no, he would just not turn up. They'd phone him perhaps, eventually, or possibly they might just not bother- employers didn't if they had a casual workforce, the shift could easily be covered. But it didn't worry him and there was no point in worrying about despising himself either, he reflected, in the light of everything- still he made up his mind to ignore all texts and phone calls, not that he was expecting any. He was that kind of chap. But if someone, a friend may be, did ring, he'd ignore it. He'd made up his mind.

He strode down the street. The sun was on his face and he felt happy, for the first time in many weeks he looked about him, at life, at the heavy sighing life going on about him on the streets of London.

The buildings were beautiful he decided. Even Heygate Estate, now emptied of people, had once known joy and love behind the Union Jacks that served as makeshift curtains, a proverbial two fingers held up to the outside world. He was in awe at the height of the Cheese Grater, and wondered for the first time who lived there- who

could live there?- he passed the man from Kashmir in the juice shop at Elephant who always gave him an unrequited nod and found himself moving his head up and down in return. He noticed his head felt peculiarly heavy, he felt like an elephant himself, and thought the weight of it might make him keel over towards the pavement. But he even stopped to help calm a thin young man standing in front of the 176, causing a traffic jam- he bought him a coffee to warm him up before the young man ran off screaming.

He marvelled at himself. How his decision and the consequential action, could free him up, make him almost jolly, almost well. He didn't give a fig for his lack of money and inability to pay his rent, he didn't care anymore that he was no longer inspired to write music and carry on with that futile task of trying to get somewhere, he didn't carry anything anymore for humanity- he was no longer involved with it, attached to it- .. no, he had a much larger and far more important matter to take up his thoughts now. He was definitely in a better mood- yesterday he would not even have seen the juice man, he might have shouted at the boy or swallowed the mirroring anger the boy sparked off in him but today he found a new gentleness and patience.

'Is it all because?' he wondered. And half thought, 'If only I could do this everyday.'

And then,

'Ha, ha!' a realisation dawned. 'How tricky life is!' he exclaimed out loud, 'For being in the process of breaking off, of not caring or being involved, I can now care even more! Detachment! Ha! The trick!'

How crazy he should discover this now, he thought and a smile broke out on his lips and he walked lightly and purposefully without the foggiest idea of where he was going, admiring the Cherry Blossom so much that he had to stop and examine, with a great pretence to detail, the white and pink petals, the yellow stamen and

in an instant was filled with a childish longing for summer and with it a sense of self one always gets when the sun shines.... Van Gogh's Cherry Blossoms, with the azure sky, came to mind and he thought of Proust and then he thought, Cherry Blossoms die quickly, they live only one day and then they fade and drop to the earth quite easily, their job done.

'And how funny,' he mused, 'one's thoughts and feelings were continuously being filtered through memory and given meaning through remembered artistic visions and experiences, like paintings, music, novels.'

It was as though he didn't live in reality. A tree was not just a tree but a symbol of George Eliot's ideas on structure. He couldn't look at a river without thinking of and hearing Smetana and Stravinsky or even Brahms. Sun on pavements reminded him of Henri Cartier Bresson, a certain shop sign would bring to mind a Wim Wenders film.

He suddenly felt terrified- perhaps for his whole life he had never experienced anything fully through his own senses, his perceptions were always influenced by other imaginations.

'It's a disease', he thought.

He carried on walking, his good humour seeping away, the familiar swirls of wind in street corners threw dust in his eyes which he picked out with gnarled chewed fingers and he felt again he was not really in life but in a film or a play. Even his room back in the old house made him feel like he was a character in Chekhov or a Thomas Mann novel. The sickness of a past Europe was in his heart and he had no idea what reality was. Could he distinguish between art and reality?

'Empty,' he thought despairingly. 'Empty.'

It was the monster of art pushing in on him, crowding out all else. It was the crow of a rook, reminding him of Messiaen tramping the woods, it was the shriek of lives lived by others and not himself. He had stopped on the street near Waterloo by a truck drivers' cafe whose patrons were paper thin OAPs trying to get warm before returning to cold apartments. His feet were numb and stuck to the pavement, and although the wind was icy, he was sweating. He'd been sweating a lot lately, he woke most nights swimming in a sea of it. Now it slid down his face and lips and dripped onto his shoes. He didn't have a hanker chief, damn. He rested against an Ash tree, one hand propping him up. He was being watched by sets of watery glinting eyes peering through the cafe windows and he hoped no one would come out- he would not be able to hide the hatred and disgust he was feeling for people again, their disapproving cold stares, judgements, or their contradictions, he was afraid they might pull him back into something, away from his impartiality.

When he'd recovered a bit he felt he might as well go in, it was a place he'd always liked the look of and at this particular hour the sun was dappling through the window onto empty vacant tables and red plastic chairs. It seemed like it offered sanctuary and comfort, a place where a man could be alone with his thoughts and if necessary, leave them there when he was done, like running from a jilted woman. It would be the place he thought, one could sit unobserved in the window for a long time and no one would notice. He couldn't quite be a French philosopher sitting in a cafe in the Latin Quarter but he could lose his thoughts and become vacant. Vacancy was what he craved.

Cradling the sugary tea the barista placed into his hands, he sat in the window. It was weird but he had lost his earlier thread of thought and was smitten with a terrible longing for a girl friend, for someone to love, someone to support and be supported by, someone to stand with him until that final calling. Now he was cross at himself for these thoughts and as if the universe was playing a

game, a young couple had stopped on the pavement right in front of him, locked together, 'gorging' themselves, or so he thought, on each other, oblivious to the world around them. Love was indeed, selfish. Watching them, he could not think he could accept it, despite the need in himself. And it made him afraid, who was it who said you were dead if you didn't have sex or weren't loved? In spite of the decision he had made and the ongoing process inside his body, this terrified him.

And what was happening inside him- it was as though he wasn't really thinking of it. He wasn't really that aware. It was done, what will be will be. Perhaps anyway, he thought, the end never really happened- it never did did it? This is what is meant by immortality he thought, because simply one was never present at the real end, one could never be and would never know, therefore for those going there was always immortality, for those left behind, there was only mortality.

Again he felt the coldness in him. This cold space in him he felt even on hot days. Even today the sun hurt his insides, far more than what he had taken. He spent days in bed trying to figure out what it was. Some days he just could not get up otherwise he would cry. Until he came to the realisation that there was nothing to figure out. That the space in him could not be filled by anything and that life- his anyway- was as directionless and as formless as space. He rejected God and was not obsessed over the question of His existence or not. If anything, Jesus was far more interesting to him. Jesus was real, a sinner and an everyman, struggling to be good. No, the struggle was with himself and his mind and there was nothing a therapist could do, he knew. Besides, it was not that kind of illness, it was also not about becoming more aware of himself. But his friends thought differently, they did not see that he needed love or they did see but would not give it. The mind can't accept the simplest of solutions. Or does not want to. But even he, he wanted to love and wanted love yet, how could he access it?

He sat alone in the window watching the blue steam of his tea and thought over his life. He had seen many things, he thought to himself, and experienced so many diverse roles so that he was quite proud although he thought now his life was nothing. In fact, had he been aware he was alive?

Where had he been when he held the hand of the deaf, dumb and blind old woman in her 80s, screaming with pain at the bed sores in her care home? Had he really, in the end, had to unclasp those thin fingers whose grasp was Herculean, such was the old lady's need for comfort, any comfort, in her senseless world? Had he really faced down a man 6 foot tall, bi polar and clutching a pick axe in their shared digs and then taken him to tea to try and soothe him and calm him down? (the man was sectioned now, his liberal landlords finding after all that they could not cope). Had he really been a teacher, had he really helped people with drug and alcohol problems, had he really been on all the marches, had he really once had such a humanitarian bent? Why had he lost faith suddenly?

Why had he bent his head and let himself fall under the hopelessness of it all? He realised, or so he thought, he was nothing. He couldn't see he only thought he was ordinary because he believed he had no purpose. Those with purpose had no time to think about whether they were ordinary or not. But he had given up on all of that now and instead was plummeting fast towards that black nothingness he himself was hastening his journey towards. There was a strange fuzziness coming about him and with an effort he looked out into the street. The couple had gone and the sun lit the pavings, bleaching out the grey. They stretched out like blank canvasses.

The buses roared, their hot bodies heaving together and coughing, like naughty school children standing in a line. In the park a Raster was making camp and cooking on a stove, about him half naked people clutching beer performed head stands and cart wheels. Life was happening. People passed by the window and did not look in, ignorant of the handsome man with the kind intelligent face looking

out at them. He was intelligent and kind and beautiful, but he didn't see it like that. If he did...

Life was happening, ignorant of his own state. The Ash tree in front of him quietly stretched its fingers through the dust to the celestial skies. The Laburnum across the road wept poisonous yellow tears and had about its trunk a kind of waiting. Its fate was not to blossom in Summer but in Spring, a weird kind of incongruity, he thought.

Through his dimming eyes an old lady near him suddenly shot out her hand and crushed a fruit fly. The needlessness of it made him retch. Even the old woman's spirit was kept strong through spite.

He could feel and see the white noise coming over him. It was in the tinny background music coming through the cafe's speakers, in the white roar of the street sweeper in the road and the glint of the sweeper's wing mirror as he checked his face.

Nothing was coming to him now, good! It was what he wanted- he could feel the casing forming around his head, like a rubber band. It was not on his head but around it, it was a pressure pressing against him but also pressing against the world out there. It formed a protective layer of nothingness between him and the world and he was blank. He struggled at first, like he always did. He couldn't let his spirit go and be swallowed up without a fight could he? Yet at the same time he welcomed it.

He looked at his watch. A few more hours.

He was sure wasn't he?

