Romulus 2012

Trauma, Challenge, Resolution
Editor’s Note

Stephanie Yorke

Trauma, Challenge, Resolution, the theme set for this year’s issue of Romulus, invited contributors to explore personal, professional, and collective trauma, and to narrate the process of ‘getting over’ the past. In this issue, academic dogma, economic hegemony, failed relationships, and illness are all considered as sources of traumatic disruption, and the process -- or the impossibility -- of emancipating oneself or others from their traumatic contexts is closely examined. I very much enjoyed receiving and reading the mixture of articles, lifewriting, book reviews, and creative writing, and hope that you also enjoy the work.

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Valley of Light

Zhiming Darren Tan
	hree spots of blood
wash into a triangle
and swirl of wheels
to the delivery suite

an emergent baby
with sounds and motion
and wrinkled skin
sent back to an
incubator

hatching again
under the watchful eye
of a lamp

sending a tiny footprint
to his brother

before coming home
after a week
and going back, back
to learn to breathe again
from a machine.

float, baby, float,
roll like a fog
across the green waters of the canal
and into the sun,
our living and dying
star
Cristina Parau

I recently finished ‘The Road to Harmony: An Appalachian Childhood’, an autobiographical work written by J. D. Ballam. Set in America in the Appalachian Mountains in the ‘60s and ‘70s, this wonderful book moved me deeply, partly because it brought back so vividly much of my own childhood in the ‘70s and ‘80s more than about 5,000 miles East of the Appalachians, but far nearer in spirit, in the hills of the Carpathian Mountains of Romania. It inspired me to write this article after casting a new light on my own past, whilst allaying my anxiety for having reached Oxford seemingly from the wrong social background. What struck me most of all, more than the many similarities between the two childhoods – (not so surprising, as they were shaped by similar natural and cultural environments), – was rather the few striking differences between an admittedly tough childhood but one spent in a free country whose people had some protection against arbitrary power and a little personal opportunity, and one that was stifled by the peak and collapse of perhaps the most totalitarian Communist regime in the Soviet Bloc. A rural childhood is almost always bound to be a struggle for basic material survival, but one lived out in an environment where getting on with ordinary life is profoundly obstructed by a government that can only be described as wicked entails a struggle for the survival of the very spirit.

A country childhood can only be described as bitter-sweet. The bitterness of destitution and relentless hard labour is nonetheless punctuated by a sweetness that one can only experience by actually living in the countryside. It is the very charms of the countryside which inevitably entail a huge amount of exhausting physical work. To this we were inured from birth. Just as in the Appalachians, one of the most wearisome months was September, when the main crops had to be brought in. We would start early in the morning, getting a lift from a neighbour who had a cart and horse (which few could afford), to work the patch of farmland allocated to us by the Party – often that confiscated from our grandparents during the Soviet-masterminded Collectivisation of the 1950s. As there was no agricultural machinery, we had to depend on the good will of the only two men in the village who owned a horse and plough to furrow our rows of potatoes. We – the parents, children, kinfolk...
and neighbours, for families took turns helping each other – would follow behind with hoes, buckets and sacks made of hessian. This was hard, back-breaking work, for buckets and sacks full of potatoes had to be lugged to the end of the row, where heaps of it would await the horse owner whenever he found time to pick us and our crop up in exchange for a promise to help gather in his own crop.

The most gruelling part, however, was when the yield was transported to the appointed weigh station where the State, like a rack-renting landlord, would take its disproportionate share – easily most of it; sometimes as much as two thirds. This comprehended all yields, including wheat and corn on which we relied not only to feed our few animals – for the number of these too per family had been capped by the zealous, exacting central planners – but also ourselves with bread and polenta. This unjust exaction was greatly resented and country folk did not shrink from ‘stealing’, whenever possible, from what essentially was the produce of their own labour. A few sacks of goodness were always being ‘lost’ here and there on the way to the Central Weigh Station – inuring to our own eventual detriment into a habit so ingrained it cannot be unlearned now that the nation is free of its Communist masters.

The 1980s were the worst of bad times, when Ceauşescu took the decision to export as much agricultural produce as possible to pay back enormous foreign loans borrowed the previous decade to build monster heavy industries that soon proved inefficient and uncompetitive in the world market, capable of cranking out goods of inferior quality exportable only to equally cursed neighbours within the Communist empire. In the meanwhile we natives starved.

Thus denuded of the fruits of our own labour and left with too little to see us through the long winters, there were times when we were forced to depend on the State-owned shops the shelves of which were often barren. In the 1980s even black bread became scarce. I would stand for hours sometimes amid a disorderly mob of jabbing elbows just to grab one precious loaf. In those moments all human dignity and respect for fellows vanished. It was a degrading experience that ‘branded’ nearly all Romanians with effects – like mutual distrust, resentment, disrespect for each other and the lawful State, to name a few – that may last for generations to come.

We did grow in my grandparents’ back garden some of the vegetables and fruit that provided vital nutrients throughout the year. I fondly recall the eagerness with which I awaited Spring. By then our bodies were craving greens and fresh fruit, and we relished like the nectar of gods the early varieties of spinach and green salad which we supplemented with tender nettles that grew abundantly along the riverbanks. Later, in autumn, I would help Mother and Grandmother prepare for the winter the vegetables we grew for ourselves: beans and cucumbers and green tomatoes and white cabbage. I can still feel the assault on my nostrils of the vinegary-sweet, scalding-hot pickling concoction that we poured over carefully stacked cucumbers arranged according to some strange algorithm in large, tall jars. Mother and everyone else would reek of pickling for days afterwards.

This memory in particular was brought vividly home to me by ‘The Road to Harmony’ where a similar process is described: ‘By evening the entire house was richly clothe[ted] with the succulent odours of cooked fruit and hot crushed spice’ (p. 96). We made jam from our home-grown sweet, purple plums and from the raspberries, blackberries and rose hips we gathered from the hills and the nearby forest. I would help stir the sugar-rich mixture in huge bowls, then seal them as hermetically as we could. The mouth-watering jam jars and bottles of compote and syrup, after being carefully counted, were laid in neat rows in the larder to stay alone in the dark and strictly forbidden until the deep winter days of January and February.

As in Appalachia, the countryfolk of Romania, however destitute, are sticklers for turning out in their best clothes for every rite of passage. The beginning of school was always preceded by a visit to the village barber for a square, boyish haircut. Or else the task was accom-
plished with equally awkward results (but no ice cream or lollipops like in *The Road to Harmony*) by a neighbour who was supposed to have learnt the trade somewhere. These are rites that seem to transcend geography and culture: ‘When Black Monday [the first day of school] finally came [to Harmony], I presented myself to the world clean, fresh, and trimmed, with a new shirt, new trousers, new socks and new shoes’ (p. 131). Even in grinding poverty the people of my village had the same obsession with respectability.

By contrast with Appalachia, the first few weeks of school were spent doing what was termed without irony ‘practical work’, as if we village kids needed instruction in that! We would be transported in decrepit lorries to collectivised fields that somehow had remained un-gleaned. We were then made to glean carrots, beetroot and turnips, a chore we disliked and did poorly and unearnestly. We treated such produce as not mattering, playing games with and throwing them at each other, for these fields belonged to the ‘State’, an abstraction that meant nothing to us. Or we were sent out onto the hills to pick rose hips for some medicinal concoction. The hills being vast we spent our time playing hide-and-seek or exploring a cave that hosted a huge colony of bats. No teacher would have been nimble enough to enforce discipline (even if they had cared to). Or we were tasked to gather up fat, slimy garden snails for export to France. We would chant spells supposed to charm them into showing their antennae (which never worked), and crack ignorant jokes about the poor, uncivilized French who had to eat something that we would never feed to anyone but chickens.

In December, two weeks before Christmas, butchering the pig was the main event for us as for our fellows in the Appalachians: ‘It was the same throughout the village. Slaughtering pigs, or just “butchering” as it was called, was an enormous operation and required a large team of workers and a wide stock of specialist tools and know-how ... Dick led the way into the barn. Two of the men were armed with meathooks, one carried an extremely sharp long thin-bladed knife, and Dick himself carried a .22 calibre rifle. No one else was allowed inside’ (pp. 169-170). Since the Communist Party forbade guns which we might have turned against them, we had to kill the pig with the thin-bladed knife alone, a spectacle that children were not forbidden to watch. Absent painless methods, the poor creature screamed unmercifully under the merciless knife. Its ears would then be cut off and singed. The rubbery ‘delicacies’ would be shared with the children gathered around to stare at the show. For me the process was too painful to witness; I had grown fond of the animal I had helped feed and look after throughout the year. I would run inside the house and cover my ears with pillows, waiting for the screaming to stop. Years later, I became vegetarian so as to redeem our acts of cruelty. No part of the pig was wasted; everything was transformed into various products providing crucial supplies through the winter.

Winters were cold and laden with snow. I wore jumpers, gloves and hats that Grandmother had knitted from rough, unbearably itchy wool. Winter boots were always a problem, made of poor quality in centrally planned factories and prone to becoming waterlogged, and I could only have one pair at a time. But the discomfort was soon forgotten in the frenetic sledging on the hills surrounding the village. The sledge came from my grandfather’s crumbling attic – a precious object, which, having been out of sight for a whole year, suddenly seemed very special, although it was rough-hewn and home-made and rarely kept a straight course.

Winter had its special challenges. Electricity would often be cut off, not so much because of the heavy snow but because higher-ups in the Communist Party, then at its apogee of abuse and cavalier autonomy, decided that ‘the idiots’ (all 23 millions of us) could jolly well endure the long winter evenings with just candles and kerosene lamps. This kind of cynical thinking pervaded all areas of life under Communism. Ion Pacepa, the highest ranking officer ever to defect to the USA from a Secret Service in the Soviet Bloc, recalls how Ceausescu ‘designed’ the Dacia – Romania’s national car that for poor quality matched only the Russian Lada. He had settled for ‘an antiquated and about-to-be-discontinued Renault-12’ which, however, he thought ‘too luxurious for the idiots’. He peremptorily ordered it stripped of ‘unnecessary luxuries’ like the radio, right-side mirror and backseat heating – such a dilapidated version was ‘good enough for the idiots’.

Electricity cuts were frequent enough to be ‘normal’. We became quite adept at filling our evenings with sundry necessary chores like shelling corn for the chickens and pig. No clever mechanical contraptions
being available, we did it by hand. Or I would prepare the shuttle for Mother, who used a generations-old loom to weave a red-and-black chequered cloth to be sewn into bed and table covers and warm clothes for winter.

Two other things impacted my childhood: alcohol and books. Unlike Harmony, which was in a ‘dry county’, home-distilled alcohol was as rampant in my village as White Lightning during Prohibition. As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, men in the countryside drank themselves to oblivion (and often death) by swilling down their unslakeable throats litre upon litre of a vodka-strength brandy typically made of a local variety of home-grown, small yellow plums (zarzâne). Distillation was done stealthily at night, for while drunkenness was not prohibited by the Party, making it at home was. But Romanian peasants were as crafty at hiding their ‘stills’ as Appalachian mountain folk at misdirecting Federal revenuers. Small quantities of this liqueur does lubricate social relations at weddings and funerals, and cements friendships when lightening up the games that grown men play for keeps (like cards and backgammon). But for most part liquor was a curse leading to many evils, not least of which was domestic violence, the stuff of endless social and familial anxiety and trouble.

Books, on the other hand, were much scarcer in my land than in the mountain hollows of America. I was impressed to learn that, even in a ramshackle farm in an isolated region of the Appalachians, one was still able to discover a ‘golden-spined edition of Edgar Allen [sic] Poe’s poetry’(p. 61). Nothing of the sort was ever seen in Winsberg/Orlát when I was growing up there. The village school had a tiny library operated by one of the teachers, but only during lunch break. It was forbidden to walk into it and browse freely; you had to ask the librarian for ‘a book’. She would then disappear behind a solid wooden door with a heavy lock and bring back ‘a book’ of her (not your) choice, selected according to a rationale yet to be discovered. I still wonder what gems might have lain hidden there, reserved for the lucky few. Certainly the Party had no use for emancipated peasants. A public library must have existed in the nearest city, about 30 kilometres away, but although the bus fare was trifling, we could rarely afford it. The village stationery shop was destitute: its only ‘books’ were insufferable Party screeds, which became the first symbols of the regime that Father appeased the angry mob with at the 1989 Revolution (or rather coup d’etat), piled up and burnt in the village square.

Father harbour a secret during the long years of Communist dictatorship: Locked up in the cellar was a dented, brown-leather, old and dusty suitcase which he had once used while on compulsory army service, where food and hygiene had been poor and new recruits beaten by more senior ones and assigned to do absurd chores like washing the floors with toothbrushes. The contents of that suitcase I was strictly forbidden to inquire into, but as I grew older, so did my curiosity. One day, covered by a schoolmate who stood watch by spying through the keyhole, I unlocked it. Inside were books, a motley collection by authors I did not recognise, mainly spy novels and stories of brave deeds during World War Two. Deprived of knowledge of classical literature, Father’s insatiable curiosity made him seize upon any books other than Communist propaganda. As the spiritual darkness descended, he feared any books would incriminate him, so he hid them. We were starved of the material goods that make life bearable, but starved morally no less.

The deprivation also extended to religion. Appalachian folk had their Brethren or their Lutherans, always there with critical moral and material support for their communities, but we peasants of the Carpathians had only the corrupted, infiltrated Romanian Orthodox Church.
It could give but cold comfort, as witness the many clergymen revealed in recent years to have been collaborators with and even officers of Securitate (probably the most feared secret police in Communist Eastern Europe). Church was a gloomy, ‘downlifting’ place; most parishioners attended only out of custom, occupying themselves with their neighbours’ dress or the latest gossip; where the priest mumbled words nobody understood to the dull, tuneless, mournful chanting of one or two male cantors. Last year when I returned home for my brother’s wedding, to my lack of surprise the same tone-deaf men now twenty something years older chanted the service, stretching the patience of one now thoroughly acculturated to the fast pace of life in the West.

The bittersweet end result of so many privations and deprivations, in any poverty-stricken rural community, however gloriously beautiful or steeped in the ageless wisdom of immemorial traditions, whether it be Apalachi or the Carpathians, is that just about everyone with any talent tries to find a way out. J. D. Ballam might almost have been writing the story of my life in saying of himself, ‘When I was twenty-five years old, I left Harmony. The combination of good grades when I was in school, a lot of hard saving and a small legacy, enabled me to become the first member of my family in its two-and-a-half centuries on Catoctin Mountain to leave home for university. Apart from some long holidays, I have never really returned’ (p. 191).

By much the same means (though without any legacy) I became only the second in my family, after my father, to attend high school and the first to go to university, and I too never looked back to my native village. My flight didn’t stop there, however. I left Romania itself when I was 24, driven by severe disappointment in my first degree. I had read Ecology in a spirit of youthful optimism and naivety right after the Revolution, expecting that environmental issues, of which plenty had been thrust upon Romania by Stalinist industrialisation, would become a priority. I should have known that basic material wants, until satisfied, would trump all else. Too late to change courses, I realised I had guaranteed myself to be unemployed or to be earning a wage so low as to force me to work on the farm. I did not hesitate to leave Romania at the first opportunity. I had now become also the first in the family ever to have gone abroad and, I would guess, one of only a handful of Romanians to have made it into Oxford University and one of the even fewer to come from a rural area.

I have since returned to Romania for research or short holidays, but at first I couldn’t bring myself to return at all. When I began my doctoral thesis on East European State-civil society relations, with Romania as a case to study, I buried myself in the library, lavishing ever more time on literature reviews that postponed fieldwork. Eventually it dawned on me that the bitterness of my childhood had cut deeper than I had realised. Going ‘home’ was too painful; instinctively I avoided pain. These wounds would have to be healed over first.

The social constraints of a rural village had felt ever more oppressive as I matured. The little village of 2,000 souls was too densely populated for comfort. People lived crammed next to each other and snooped too much into each others’ lives. Nothing could be done without first weighing up and second guessing ‘what will the neighbours think’. One ended up living their lives instead of one’s own. I came to resent the narrow-mindedness and pressures to conform. (England was a great relief in this respect; I soon came to love and respect the decent, rancour-free, minding-their-own-business English people.) Originality was laughed to scorn. Herself embarrassed in handling society’s expectations, Mother would reproach me for ‘not being like everyone else’. A girl was expected to be married by 16, ideally to the neighbour’s son, have a flock of kids by 25, and subsistence-farm for the rest of her life. For me the only way forward to a good life was through education, for no alternative to farming existed except the corrupt, pittance-paid, soul-numbing public sector. It has only been lately, since I have begun to go home again for family funerals and weddings, that I have understood the vital support the village community actually provides at crucial moments in life. For the first time I was able genuinely to value and respect its worth, despite all of its faults. Reconciling with the past meant reconciling with the people and the community amid which I had grown up.

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Arrakeen Kingdom

Andy Hogan

I.

In the midst of this our mortal lives,
I found that I had wandered from the Golden Path,
My Seker Nebyw.
My skin is not my own.

No lonely impulse of delight borne on Rumour’s wings,
No ecstatic phantasm or simulacrum of God’s boy,
Not even the suffering of a voice crying out in the desert
Could permit ataraxia to permeate my bones.

Through dangers untold and hardships unnumbered,
Past bridges of sighs and pints of peril,
I sought the answer to the question that plagued
A soul too far accustomed to asking grown,

Which, though tender, had grown fallow and brittle,
Warped under the toll of perditas amantes,
Not long forgetful of the triumphs of peers
Nor of their every page published to become renown.

Dulcet decorumst- NO! That untruth was not mine.
Undying and perpetually echoing in my lobes,
The siren song of achievements fulfilled
And futures guaranteed like a Coriolis storm were blown.

Just as vacuous as Saturday morning’s Valley girl,
Satisfied, though satisfying naught, our lie polluted
Motivation with the blood-shed tears of a foretold future:
Rich, Easy, Successful… Achievable, Tangible… Fun.

“Being a grown-up sucks,” they should have told us.
Amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis – STOP IT!
Adversity constructs character; confront death’s dream kingdom.
Retreat into over-education and find yourself dethroned.
II.

I am a son of Atreus, of Foresight and Damnation.
Warring calm stirs wrath and legion within me.
I take the prize of a man so that I many not be prizeless,
All the while no longer trusting, never faithful.

Cortez did not ask before spilling rivers of heathen blood
Upon dried rivers of gore. A metropolis made ruin, he turned
His back upon the dead, decaying shell for new conquests.
Why should the pleasurable sport be any different or less dull?

Shudders wrack the lithe frames; an ecstasy of fumbling
Feels like hours, like minutes. Screams pierce the night.
What are you doing? Whatever it is, it seems to be working.
Why do you do this? I shrug. You know you're going to hell.

I have lost my path. The sand and zephyrs hide all signs of passage.
Neither bombs, nor shaking, nor stirring can conceal this.
An old soul, pre-born, one could say that I began life Mesozoic
In the truest sense. Though this inculcation proved to be null

And void when it mattered. What idiot stays with someone
After they lose trust? Why become a pendulum, caring for one
And then treating another like a toy? Time marshals its troops.
I owe many a water debt and my cisterns are not full.

Morality and spirituality converge like a spice flow,
Like a pillar of fire or of wind, wind which would carry dreams
And prophecies to the burnt sky- there is danger in improper reading.
In the distance I hear a screaming whisper: 'Tis midnight and all's well.
III.

The perils of our age highlight The Lie
Of The A Our Lost Generation. Go to school
And you will succeed. If only it was the riddle of steel:
What is steel compared to the hand that wields it?

Fire and wind come from the sky, from the gods of the sky,
Ardor drives one to excel and intellect moves the humors.
Even Socrates had a job before putting gadfly on his resume.
What good are passion and change without an outlet?

A wasteland without experience in the real world has arisen,
And they still call themselves Intelligentsia. Ha! Sophomores, more likely.
Candide demonstrated the dangers of becoming set on
One plan. But nihilism can hardly be the right fit.

We could not find careers, so we worked, and reenrolled.
Those with means took control of their lives: exercise,
Diet, regimented days, and even a return to those books that
Were so quickly skimmed before a final, lickety split.

What should we do? Our prescience stops at this last vision.
What of my vineyard outside of Rome? Or my suits?
What about my car built to break the speed limit on the Autobahn?
Laudo, laudas, landat, ladamus, laudati…

At least that’s closer.
I… We… I feel. Well,
That’s a start.
I’m going to go… I should… Shit.
Asking What Is Needed: Challenge and Resolution as Problem-Solving Processes in Research

William Allen

...[I]t is precisely the Irish stew of different and competing approaches that simmer on the geographical disciplinary hob that in the end will get us the ideas we need.


The campfire is slowly dying in the clear, cool night. I am in Chihuahua—a Mexican state whose residents’ livelihoods are largely derived either from rural agriculture or manufacturing in border cities like Juárez. It is 2007, and I am part of a research team investigating how changes in economic trade and climate are impacting everyday life as well as migration decisions. Our host, Rene, is a farmer whose relatively successful farming operation was impacted by unrestricted mining of local aquifers and the rising cost of maintaining the land. Having lived in the region and raised his family here, he had been approached by development organisations touting various technical interventions aimed at mitigating these problems. Most of these, in his opinion, had done little to raise the standard of living for small-scale farmers like themselves because they did not account for locally-felt variations in climate, culture, and politics. He joins our team as we rest around the fire and its glowing embers. In the reflective silence, Rene speaks gently. “Everyone else tells us what we lack. You and your team are different: you are asking us what we need.”

At one level, his observation spoke volumes about the limitations of international development as it happens ‘on the ground’. Yet at a deeper level, and at the one I wish to briefly present in this essay, it has also shaped how I approach the possibilities and challenges associated with social scientific enquiries and their outputs. Specifically, it helped me think of research as the process of seeking better-formulated problems than those we already have. As I will go on to argue, this broaches the fact that findings are not just the basis of final recommendations like those I saw being deployed in northern Mexico. Rather, they should also be the starting points for further criticism and improvement, particularly drawing from different academic vantages offering new evidence and methods. I do not offer this as a call for more inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches for their own sake; neither am I suggesting that research outcomes should be devoid of practical value. Rather, I am advancing that both of these statements stem from a deeper truism: as Barnes implies, to recognise that actively dialoguing among competing views—among competing ‘answers’—is to welcome intellectual challenge as a way of improving our research praxes.
Karl Popper and problems: a method of social scientific enquiry

My choice of ‘problem’ and ‘answer’ language derives from the work of Karl Popper, particularly the ideas presented in Conjectures and Refutations: the Growth of Scientific Knowledge (1963) and Objective Knowledge (1981). Methodologically, he is concerned with understanding how knowledge develops over successive iterations of testing and reconsideration. In his accessible summary of Popper’s major contributions, aptly titled Popper (1982), the philosopher Bryan Magee expressed this process as:

\[ P_1 \rightarrow TS \rightarrow EE \rightarrow P_2 \]

where \( P_1 \) is an initial problem, \( TS \) is a trial solution selected to address the problem, \( EE \) is a process of error elimination through criticism, and \( P_2 \) is the resulting situation which carries its own new problems. Here, problems can refer to gaps, ambiguities, contradictions, or limitations in human knowledge on a subject. Note that \( P_2 \) is always different from \( P_1 \). Even if a trial solution ultimately fails criticism or challenge, the subsequent problem setting is not the same: we use new information to modify future proposed answers and avoid pitfalls. This cyclical approach, Magee observes, carries serious consequences for research practice:

A consequence of always proceeding from problems which really are problems—problems which one actually has and has grappled with—is, for oneself, that one will be existentially committed to one’s work...It will be not only an intellectual interest but an emotional involvement, the meeting of a felt human need. Another consequence will be an unconcern for conventional distinctions between subjects: all that matters is that one should have an interesting problem and be genuinely trying to solve it...It [Popper’s philosophy] puts the greatest premium of all on boldness of imagination; and it holds that we never actually know—that our approach to any and every situation or problem needs to be always such as to accommodate not merely unforeseeable contributions but to the permanent possibility of a radical transformation of the whole conceptual scheme with which, and even within which, we are operating. (Bryan Magee, Popper, 68)

In other words, the first half of Magee’s formulation (\( P_1 \rightarrow TS \)) strikes at deeply personal questions surrounding an assessment of what constitute interesting problems and the experiences which drive us to consider possible answers. Meanwhile, the second half of the formula (\( EE \rightarrow P_2 \)) expresses challenges and temporarily-held resolutions. As Popper argues in Conjectures and Refutations, intentionally subjecting our most cherished—perhaps even pet—ideas to rigorous cross-examination is vital for real intellectual progress. This is because it enables us to identify mistakes and build such insight into the development of future problems. More recently, physicist David Deutsch follows up this conclusion in his far-ranging book The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations that Transform the World (2011) when he remarks that:
...the desirable future is one where we progress from misconception to ever better (less mistaken) misconception. Perhaps a more practical way of stressing the same truth would be to frame the growth of knowledge (all knowledge, not only scientific) as a continual transition from problems to better problems, rather than from problems to solutions or from theories to better theories. (David Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity*, 446-7)

Rene’s comment in the introduction illustrates how the two halves of Magee’s formula must remain connected to avoid becoming too confident in presumably ‘final’ answers. In the case of development practice, error elimination could take multiple forms, from regularly engaging with project stakeholders to accounting for and including locally-held experience—although these ‘trial solutions’ are themselves subject to refinement. More generally, the process of error elimination and proposing new problems requires appreciating how even our best ‘solutions’ are always subject to change pending new insight.

A humbling search for better and better problems
At this point, I want to return to the observation I made in the beginning: casting research in terms of problem-solving has influenced how I approach the challenges and limitations of social scientific enquiry. This realisation stems from Magee’s conclusion that grappling with problems can ‘meet a felt human need’, and is as a result is deeply personal. Therefore, the question that confronts us is if we do adopt an open-ended outlook on research as Magee advocates, with what attitude should we personally handle the challenges levied upon our work? Popper and Deutsch, holding that bold conjecturing is the only way by which knowledge progresses, would suggest that tough-skinned enquirers should come to expect and welcome criticism. Indeed, intellectual courage does have some role in propelling interesting questions towards possible solutions. Yet while boldness of purpose might drive research, it must be accompanied by humility of method. As Anthony Bebbington remarks in his essay ‘Theorising Participation and Institutional Change: Ethnography and Political Economy’ (2004), “while we should still theorise, we ought to do so humbly”. Popper also poignantly captures this idea when he says that:

I believe it would be worth trying to learn something about the world even if in trying to do so we should merely learn that we do not know much…It might be well for all of us to remember that, while differing widely in the various little bits we know, in our infinite ignorance we are all equal. (Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 38)

It is apparent, then, that academic humility is manifested in at least two ways: first, as a realistic acknowledgment that our inevitably limited training and experience will not always fully solve our interesting problems; and second, as an energetic search for additional sources that augment these problem-solving quests.
To be sure, the natural sciences—particularly physics and evolutionary biology—as well as the history of science provided the intellectual topsoil in which Popper’s and Deutsch’s ideas have since germinated. Drawing strong parallels between natural phenomena and notoriously messy social problems is not always theoretically sound or empirically valid. However, this is beyond the scope of my argument. Rather, I have aimed to highlight the method of problem-solving as a fruitful way by which social scientists, but really all enquiring minds regardless of disciplinary field, can critically examine their own work.

Therefore, I see resolution as a deeply human product of having temporarily found an answer to a problem. It is human because, as Deutsch argues, people are natural problem-solvers who respond to imperatives of curiosity and creativity; it is temporary because findings throw up exciting new sets of problems that form the basis of new enquiry which may in turn challenge our entire way of thinking. The very word ‘resolution’, in fact, points to that iterative quality of ‘solving again’ which lies at the heart of this discussion. Viewing research as a processual enterprise reminds us that, instead of clinging to methodological dogmatism or settling on the status quo, we should be open to change and the unexpected. And then to humbly, courageously, sincerely ask what is really needed.

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In the Island of the Native Alone

Kepa Fernández de Larrinoa

I

Dear Stone,
I made you out of my name,
thinking of those before
who held it
and passed it down until present times,
thinking of those who will take it over in the future to come.
You came from nature, sacred nature, then christianized,
to be now back to pagan state,
just the way you were like when once upon the time
the first of us got colonized

II

I am from the North
I am here with the cold
I am there sans pardon
I am one
I am two
I am not myself at all
I am not with you anymore
I am alone
I am not in the North
I am not with the warmth
but I am again coming along

III

Bones
broken bones
who brought them to the beach?
Did the ocean tell the reef not to go underneath?
Did the wind tell the sand to dig them up from the sad?

Bones
broken bones
surrounded by cry
dreaming of just

Bones
broken bones
no flesh no Lord in the Island
of the Native Alone
Museum of the Defence of Leningrad

Kate McLoughlin

The tug of your arm tells me more than the pictures
You pull me to see.
Though, God knows, there are such pictures here:
Ribs-for-children, sockets sunk and darkened,
Bones on beds.

You press on me bits of broken English, Russian:
A smashed cup.
You are old enough to remember all this, babushka.
Do you?

Long after leaving this place, I will remember
Not the thick twists of shell, the lump of black bread,
But the tug of your arm on mine,
Your need for me to know.

Sita’s Question

Sulakshana de Mel

I stepped out of
Lakshmana’s circle
to offer
alms to a hermit
who
unclipped my wings
and taught me
how to fly
on my
own.
A courageous King
who dared
to fight
a lone battle
against the divine.
A beautiful stranger
who
listened to my poetry
at night.
I
need not step
into the flames
for polluted
I
am not!
Impure am
I
in finding
Myself?
When He Stopped Coming Home  
(Short Fiction)  

H. Kaji  

He has stopped coming home. He has given no reason. He has switched off his mobile phone and he does not reply to e-mails. I realize that I do not even know his company’s address or telephone number. His company is vast and heavily guarded; his name is common. How silly! I have never needed this information; he has always come home religiously, at eight-thirty.

Here I am now, alone in an old grim house, lying in my bed with eyes wide open and arms limp by my side. Hard ice cubes drift in my tummy, splashing away in gushing chilled water. It is filling me up. It will reach my brain before long. I need help.

Wait a minute. My friend is coming tomorrow. I must clean and cook. I have been looking forward to seeing her so much for such a long time. And she is coming from far away because of me. It was my idea to introduce her to one of my male friends, for her happiness; I must not let my misfortune taint her.

It is like eating sand. I munch and munch but it tastes of nothing. The texture is awful: my friend raves about what a good cook I am. Why does she always ask me if I am drunk? I am not drinking at all. She tells me that she would never have guessed that something is wrong. ‘I think he needs some time to think alone. It’s only been a week. He will come back, don’t worry.’ She leaves without a partner.

I cry and cry today. Nothing happens. There is only one thing I can do: see a GP and tell her I need sleeping pills because I have insomnia. It is affecting my work. I wish the doctor were not so nice, though. I have never met her before. She is too pleasant and well-dressed to be told lies. She says that she is a divorcée and is just about to move to Australia to be with her only son. She adores him. He lives with his father. A divorcée and a child…

Two psychologists are promptly sent to my house. Both look like former hippies. They smile and greet me normally. One looks quite annoyed when I ask her what to do with my cat. I love my cat but I cannot look after her any more. Can you not see how awful it is for me to part with her? I am diagnosed as critically depressed.
I am sent to see yet another doctor in a mental health hospital. It is barred and barricaded. I cannot find an entrance and there is no receptionist, only patients. I can see and hear them through the barred windows, all odd pauses and funny noises. I want to be somewhere clean and white and filled with sweet scents. This is not where I want to be.

The voice says:

‘When my wife left me, I went to see a GP too. But I quickly realized why ‘I’ had to be depressed. After all she left me for another man! I refused to take Prozac. Nowadays doctors think they only have to give Prozac for depression.’

‘I knew there was something wrong with my wife and I asked her what it was. She said that she had met someone. After a long discussion we decided to give our marriage another go. It never worked out.’

‘My husband started an affair with another woman. She was his colleague. We had two sons already and I begged him not to leave us. He did anyway. Funny thing is, he never married her.’

‘I’ve never told you before but we broke up once. I moved out of our flat. But we bumped into each other one day, and you know…we’ve been together for twenty years now.’

‘Did you hear about Paul? He is Paula now. He’s started wearing women’s clothes and make-up. He’ll have an operation in two years’ time. He left his wife and two children, of course. She is devastated. What will the children think of their daddy in the future? I dread to imagine! You see, your case is not as bad as hers.’

‘He is a coward! He just ran away. He couldn’t even talk to you about his problems.’

‘Don’t let him control your life. You should be the one who is in charge of your own life’

‘Why don’t you change your job? Would you like me to have a look at your CV?’

‘You can’t sit around and speculate on what is in his mind. You need to talk to him. Ring him from someone else’s mobile. He wouldn’t know it’s from you.’

‘You can’t force him to do anything. If he has left, then he has left. You need to accept it.’

‘He’s got Asperger syndrome. I’m sure of it. That would explain everything.’

‘We separated because of a five-minute mistake. Nothing more.’

‘I want to be separated from my wife, but I think it will be easier if I find someone else first.’

‘These things happen. It’s not unique.’

‘Don’t keep reading into what happened in the past. Don’t open old e-mails and try to reinterpret. The past lives in the past.’

‘He must have a lover like my husband did. He lied for months until my children started murmuring the name of an unknown female. I contacted a private detective and there they were, hand-in-hand in the photos. She’s not even very pretty; she has a long nose. But her dad is very rich. They’ve just bought a five-bedroom house. I thought you were a very happy couple. It’s your turn now, is it? Would you like to know the telephone number for my detective?’

‘When my wife left me I tried to be with someone else straight away. It didn’t work and I don’t recommend you to do that. This woman became obsessive with me and kept leaving a message on my answerphone shouting “Bxxxxxx”.

‘Go to see a counsellor. There is a good organization called T.R.U.S.T. They are all volunteers but professional counsellors.’

The room is simple. There are two chairs facing each other. There are several brochures: ‘Looking into the Future’, ‘How to Cope with Divorce’, ‘Missing Loved Ones’… One notice reads, ‘We are here to listen.’ I tell her everything and she listens as promised but I do not get a solution.
You are in a state of bereavement. You don’t know why he’s left you. And it reminds you of your own father leaving you. You can’t help blaming yourself. You think it’s all your fault. You have been very unhappy. The reason that you behaved in the way you described is because you have been unhappy… Remember, any relationship takes two people, not one. Nowadays people blame banks for lending too much money, but people forget that there are people who want to borrow knowing it’s too much… Would you like to come back to see us? Can you manage with the fee?

I wake up this morning and on impulse I go to see my husband at his company without warning. I am quite sure that I can remember where it is. One of my friends says that I should eat bananas: they will give me strength. I eat the whole bunch, five bananas, before leaving. I never paid attention to bananas before. Who would have thought that such wholesome sweetness hides under this hard leathery skin?

It takes me over three hours by bus because of roadworks. Is this the route he commutes – or commuted? The view through the windows changes with the shades of my emotions from spontaneity to curiosity to anxiety to warmth, and then a sudden halt. Our meeting takes place. It is all unexpectedly easy. He is thinner than he was, and has a rather queer smile on his face. We talk normally about anything but us. We promise to see each other again soon. I am happy right after seeing him, but the bitterness is back to haunt me the following day.

The voice continues:

‘You are not going anywhere if you keep on being like this. Go to see a solicitor specialized in divorce. Get divorced, buy a flat and find a rich man. In fact we often hear divorce lawyers marry their clients. By the way I hope you don’t mind. Our wedding will be on…’

A red-haired, bulky man is waiting for me. The fat gold ring on his left hand looks grotesque. I am just making an enquiry about what would happen if… but he is all for divorce. He talks like a psychologist and tells me to look forward, particularly ‘if I want a family’. Yes I am getting on a bit, aren’t I?

Soon after I go to see a lawyer and pay an astronomical sum, I begin to dream of a child. I can see myself being pregnant, this time next year perhaps. Who will the father be? Where will I be this time next year? What will I be doing this time next year? Haven’t I thought like this before and what happened then? Nothing happened for six years. It was a sheer waste of time. I must not waste my time any more.

The letter from the lawyer reads, ‘If you are happy with the draft, I will send it to your husband within a week…’ I find a flat and a new owner for my beloved cat. A new life lies ahead of me. I have lost weight because of my unhappy, stressful life. ‘Every cloud has a silver lining,’ I joke, and my colleagues wince. I send a short e-mail to my husband and ask him to see me because I want a divorce.

He is wearing very strange clothes. He has clearly gone back to his old habits. I begin to talk about how we could work out a divorce, but before I know what is happening I find myself asking him to come back. We take in three cafés. Eventually he nods his head and slaps his thigh. ‘Okay, I’m coming home.’ Just like that. After four months of agony. It is the same gesture he made when he agreed to the price of his new car in the showroom. I sip the third cup of filter coffee without saying a word. Through the windows sunshine fills this airy, impersonal space. It is already summer.

My diary ends here. I do not remember any of this. Who made which comments? People have gone back to their own selves – as if nothing ever happens to their lives – just like birds sing in the morning, buses go through the bustling streets, and dust flies in the wind – and there is this empty blue sky.

But I do remember one thing. It happened in a supermarket. I was trying to get something but I could not decide what to buy. My arms were too heavy to raise. It must have taken me at least two hours to buy five items: the sun was firmly set when I went out to my car – it reminded me of my husband. He was never good at deciding what to get and I always made fun of him for it.
Confession
Sarah Leyla Puello

Clothed in silky peach, cloistered behind another coffee,
I veiled us from acquaintances, chancing you and me.

I offered for once, the first and last –
banishing so much self-consciousness.

You looked straight into me, past that reluctant glimmer –
so hopeful, so sinful – a shell of my devoted eyes.

Our place of confession lodged itself behind my retina.
Silence and so much space stretched that second as it passed.

There, breaking fast, we knew the new order of things.
You broke the silence—that glimmer—now naked to your truth.

“Forgive me,” you said, unriddling the script:
Because of her, your heart is clothed in mourners’ habit,
while I sacrifice mine between your hands-in-prayer.

Sonnet
Sarah Leyla Puello

This city wears our story now, sewn into it
with threads of conversation hanging
over balconies, memories spread under our feet –
We span the pavements, stitching
hope to happiness, tailoring our map
to overhand expectations ironed into us –
My camera can’t even remember us –
but only you alone, scanning the press
over espresso I sipped from your cup.

So we stumble over stony words, patched
over buttonholes with fabrics of regret.
We were once bland to the bitterness.
This city wears our story now, sewn into it –
while I hold onto you only with this portrait.
Ineffable Effie


Will Stockland

This book recounts the life of Euphemia “Effie” Gray, wife of John Ruskin in her first marriage -- a fascinating account of the intriguing nuances of sexual politics in Victorian Britain and the complex character of the greatest art historian and art critic of the era: John Ruskin.

Ruskin knew Effie Gray from an early age because their families were intertwined through property arrangements. By the time she was nineteen years old – the time at which her involvement with Ruskin grew beyond a social nature – she was beautiful, popular and many men seemed to be smitten with her. Ruskin was prodigious, eccentric, and already at twenty-eight years old hailed as a genius as a result of his voluminous critical and historical work, Modern Painters. He found himself irresistibly drawn to Effie, and he wrote poems to her which have a distinctly child-like nature:

Thorn, and meadow grass – sweet sister,
Twine them as I may,
Deemest thou a darksome garland
For the natal day?
Thou thyself art fairer, sister,
Than all the flowers in May

This is a revealing poem, for in it is the seed of his failed marriage to Effie – he was far more interested in aesthetic beauty than in anything else, including marriage and all that it entailed. In fact, his marriage to Effie proved him worthy of his great hero, the British Romantic painter J. M. W. Turner, who famously despised marriage for its ability to remove men from aesthetic pursuits:

“I hate married men. They never make any sacrifices to the Arts, but are always thinking of their duties to their wives, families, or some rubbish of that sort.”

True to Turner’s ideals, Ruskin treated Effie as a useful ancillary to his work, even excusing his lack of sexual interest in her on the grounds that her pregnancy would interrupt her ability to accompany him usefully on his work abroad. Likewise, irascibility, demoralising criticism, and even accusations of insanity ensued when she made emotional and sexual demands of him – he found these to be intolerable interruptions to his work. Fortunately for Effie, nullification of the marriage was possible on the grounds of non-consummation and she was eventually free to marry her lover, John Everett Millais, having been reduced to a nervous and physical wreck by Ruskin’s continual inability to commit to marriage, emotionally or sexually, and his destructive transferral of blame onto her for the marital problems. Effie was finally examined by the Queen’s obstetrician and found to be virginal – the marriage was officially annulled six years after its inception.

Ruskin later made a reserved admission that he had not found her sexually attractive:

“It may be thought strange that I could abstain from a woman who to most people was so attractive. But though her face was beautiful, her person was not formed to excite passion. On the contrary, there were certain circumstances in her person which completely checked it.”

Effie herself took a more personal view of the matter:

“…he had imagined women were quite different to what he saw I was, and…the reason he did not make me his Wife was because he was disgusted with my person the first evening.”

Williams’s book makes it very clear that Ruskin had one overriding love: aesthetic beauty – a love before which all else was secondary, including human beings. We see evidence of this in Ruskin's reaction to the quelling of the riots in Paris in 1848, in which 1500 people were killed:

“The sound of mortars and howitzers in the streets of Paris is the sweetest music I have heard this many a day…it has shown to the mob that they are not omnipotent.”
This could be seen as some kind of political stance but, above all, Ruskin was terrified that the mob would destroy beautiful buildings. Likewise, he recollects unashamedly in his later years that when he was served with the papers for the annulment of his marriage he was more concerned with matters of greater, aesthetic urgency:

“My real sorrows were of another kind. Turner’s death – and the destruction of such & such buildings of the 13th century, were worse to me, a hundredfold, than any domesic calamity.”

Were we ever to doubt Ruskin’s purity in prioritising all things aesthetic, his critical reaction to the work of his successor in marriage – the Pre-Raphaelite painter, Sir John Everett Millais – speaks volumes in that he praised him consistently for many years as the greatest British painter of the time and the indisputable successor to Turner. This is hardly the average response of a jilted husband and, indeed, Ruskin’s greatest passions come out in his writing on art and architecture – Williams includes a wonderful passage from Modern Painters in which he relates his entry into Venice in magnificent, moving language:

“Do we dream, or does the white forked sail drift nearer, and nearer yet, diminishing the blue sea between us with the fullness of its wings? It pauses now, but the quivering of its bright reflection troubles the shadows of the sea, those azure, fathomless depths of crystal mystery, on which the swiftness of the poised gondola floats double, its black beak lifted like the crest of a dark ocean bird, its scarlet draperies flashed back from the kindling surface, and its bent oar breaking the radiant water into a dart of gold. Dream-like and dim, but glorious, the unnumbered palaces lift their shafts out of the hollow sea – pale ranks of motionless flame – their mighty towers sent up to heaven like tongues of more eager fire – their grey domes looming vast and dark, like eclipsed worlds – their sculptured arabesques and purple marbling fading farther and fainter, league beyond league lost in the distance…Yes, Mr. Turner, we are in Venice now!”

Ruskin’s judgement in aesthetic matters was to give him huge public influence, making Effie’s challenge to him in their marriage, and eventual annulment and re-marriage, all the more impressive. A ditty from Punch magazine of 1856 shows his total command over the British art market at the height of his influence:

I takes and paints,  
Hears no complaints,  
And sells before I’m dry;  
Till savage Ruskin,  
He sticks his tusk in,  
Then nobody will buy

In fact, it is in the certainty of judgement in his art criticism that we can see how rash and destructive Ruskin could be with his words – something that Effie suffered from terribly during their marriage. His dismissal of the painting Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket by the American painter James Abbot McNeill Whistler, for example – now regarded as a work of genius that fully anticipates Impressionism – shows his lack of sensitivity and excessive confidence in his own judgement:

“I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.”

Time proved Ruskin wrong in his judgement of Effie, as in his judgement of Whistler who, like Effie, sought legal defence and went on to achieve huge success. Williams cites a splendid passage from the court record, as Whistler is cross-examined by the Attorney-General in the libel case he brought against Ruskin:

“Q How long do you take to knock off one of your pictures?  
A Oh, I ‘knock one off’ possibly in a couple of days – (laughter) – one day to do the work and another to finish it.  
Q The labour of two days is that for which you ask two hundred guineas?  
A No, I ask it for the knowledge I have gained in the work of a lifetime (applause).”

In fairness to Ruskin, his mistreatment of Effie during their marriage, it seems, may have been partly due to the combination of the arrogance that can come with
elevation to huge public influence at an early age and the gender norms of a society in which women had little or no economic influence. He certainly bore no grudges against women and far from being a misogynist he became a very interested and active advocate of improving women’s education. If anything he suffered from an aesthetically idealised approach to women which disabled him from ever having any real kind of relationship with them and repeatedly led him towards women far younger than himself, as in Effie and others such as Rose de la Touche – the latter a mere eighteen years old when Ruskin proposed to her in his late forties. Some authors have accused Ruskin of paedophilia but Williams is quick to rule out any illegal conduct and it is very clear from her account that Ruskin was asexual in his conduct with all the women he appeared to court – he was far too wrapped up in admiring their beauty to get up to any mischief or, as with Effie, had better things to do.

The vicissitudes of Effie’s relationship with Ruskin, Williams also points out, should also be seen as paradigmatic of the convoluted nature of marital life in Victorian Britain, in which affairs, illegitimate children, and ‘multiple households’ (in which one man supports several families of his own progeny) were common currency among the wealthy middle classes – as in the lives of Dickens and Cruikshank, for example. Divorce was also very taboo in Victorian society, and it was well known that Queen Victoria would not receive any female divorcees into her company – a policy that thwarted Effie’s attempts to introduce her sixteen-year-old daughter into the royal social circle.

Ultimately, however, theirs was a marriage of three parts: Effie, Ruskin, and aesthetic beauty; and all the evidence suggests that aesthetic beauty had Ruskin’s heart from the outset. The son of the novelist George MacDonald, quotes an informative confession of Ruskin’s:

“I never loved Euphie before I married her; but I hoped I might and ought to, if only for her beauty.”

That seems to sum Ruskin up: beauty first and foremost. The book does well to show this as a crisis in Ruskin’s character: a man who was enchanted and preoccupied by aesthetic beauty entirely to the detriment of his sexual relationships, and even his social ones. Ruskin came closest to sexual interest only in beautiful young women in their late teenage years – in reality an aesthetic attraction that could never evolve into a sexual relationship. In fact, his eventual decline into madness and isolation may well have been partly the result of a lifetime of placing material beauty before human beings – a moral to this interesting tale, if ever there was one. But Effie’s life is also a tale of moral instruction in that she set a precedent to other Victorian women in successfully unfettering herself from an unhappy high-society marriage to find happiness and fulfilment with Millais in spite of all the social restrictions and taboos. As Williams concludes:

“[Effie] was one of the first women to…believe she had the right to a escape from a miserable childless marriage and form a happy one. She was one of the very few women of her time to do this and keep her place in society, showing that it might be possible for others. That is her contribution.”

The contrast of Ruskin’s great but flawed aesthetic mission with Effie’s troubled but triumphant search for personal fulfilment is a fine allegory of Victorian moral conflicts.
Three obscure young men who never met - Ivor Gurney, Isaac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen - were transformed into extraordinary poets by their experiences in the First World War. Rosenberg and Owen were killed; Gurney went mad and spent his last fifteen years in an asylum. Two of them were multi-talented; Rosenberg was a fine painter and Gurney a composer whose settings of folk songs are still performed. Owen, who died at twenty-five, was quite simply the greatest war poet in English.

This indispensable slim volume, fascinating for students and for the general reader, is edited by two Wolfsonians. All the important poems are here, in chronological order 'to the best of our inevitably incomplete knowledge', with detailed notes, a timeline and an illuminating introduction by Jon Stallworthy. Reading it straight through is overwhelming.

Gurney is the least well-known of the three and has the largest number of entries. He wrote a great many poems after he had been discharged and before he was certified, about his birthplace Gloucester, the river Severn and the Cotswold hills. He loved these places and dreamed of them when he was in the trenches, but they could not console him. The war had made what he called a 'strange hell' in his mind, and he never recovered.

None of these poets had a high reputation until the 1960s, when a new generation which had never been to war was growing up, and most of the people who had known them were dead. Editing their work was a truly awful job because their poems were often scribbled on dirty bits of paper and repeatedly revised. This book is dedicated to the late Vivien Noakes, editor and champion of Isaac Rosenberg.
Pebbles - Versions One and Three

Rae Hancock

Little round, hard shiny pebbles
in threes.
Now one after the other.
Weigh me down.
Weigh me down.

Brother Sister follow the trail
little birds lost.
Tiny skeleton swallowed.
Weigh me down.
Weigh me down.

White polished stones lodge in the throat
choke on.
More follow them down.
Sink me lower.
Sink me lower.

Polished stones/pebbles shine
little birds stuck; choke on me
weighed down, dragged under.
Fourteen Pairs of Glasses

Rae Hancock

The front door pumps great
bellows of sea
air/oxygen into musty/tired dank lungs
through black plastic alveoli I ferry out.

1938 PO! WORKER MECHANIC WORKING IN A FACTORY IN EAST GERMANY TOOK NOT OF PARTS
OF MACHINE BEING MADE.
HE MADE MOCK UP IN WOOD OF MACHINE.
THE GERMAN MANUFACTURERS NAMED THE MACHINE ENIGMA

The Pendeen beacon turns
a pair of glasses
fetid alveoli
another pair of glasses
unblinking peepers.

A kitchen knife wrapped in tissue
in an envelope
in a bag

BEG OF APRIL 1940
OBTAINED FROM A GERMAN AIRCRAFT
SHOT DOWN OVER NORWAY WITH
OPERATIONS RINGS

The Pendeen beacon turns
a pair of glasses
fetid alveoli
another pair of glasses
unblinking peepers.

Tightly wrapped newspaper
opened to reveal a carefully
folded supermarket
plastic bag.

Another kitchen knife wrapped in tissue
in an envelope
in a bag.

MAY 1941
THE NAVY’S CAPTURE OF UBOAT COMPLETE WITH ITS ENIGMA AND CHART OF OPERATING
RINGS INTACT
The Pendeen beacon turns
a pair of glasses
fetid alveoli
another pair of glasses
unblinking peepers.

Unclipped railway tickets
folded in crumpled deeds
placed discretely
behind the bleach.

Tightly wrapped newspaper
opened to reveal a carefully
folded supermarket
plastic bag.

Another kitchen knife wrapped in tissue
in an envelope
in a bag.

Tree ring damp creeps up the door
in the haphazard trunk
beacon
glasses
alveoli
beacon
glasses

All I am left with is a kitchen
sink full of glasses
A life-time of empty eyes
staring up.

Author’s Note: The second stanza, which begins with “1938 POI WORKER” and appears in all capital letters, was written in an otherwise empty address book. I have no idea whether they are ‘rememberings’ of her (the deceased’s) time at Bletchley Park or notes she took from a documentary. They are reproduced here in page order rather than chronological.