

Wannabe

Or

Der Ersatz Erzähler

Friday 13th November, 1605 and Solomon Knivett, real name Simon, is worried sick in Amlapuram. A recusant Catholic, he has been smuggled out of Tilbury in a container ship, and has rendezvous'd in Calcutta with his old friend and bosun's mate from the London coffee houses, Thomas Coryate. Coryate, known as The Long Strider, has walked from his home village in Somerset, en route to to present himself at the court of the Mughal Emperor Jehangir in Agra. The queue at the general practitioner's is lengthy, Knivett the only European.

In four hours time, a carrier pigeon will deposit a sealed roll of parchment in the courtyard of the Vatican, informing that the plot is failed, foiled. It is hot on the little webbed feet of its predecessor, running late due to an unfavourable trade wind, who brought the news that the fuse was lit. The incumbent, Pope Leo XI, whose pontificate will last a mere month, is known for being ruthlessly, suffocatingly benign, exhibiting and bestowing an invidious love that resisted infidels and mothballs. (Let us not forget that, if Christ had been Roman, he would have had the bath house at hand, and would not have been hankering a foot spa.)

The sun at eleven o'clock when Knivett leaves the adobe surgery is woundingly brilliant. Despite reporting that he has been sneezing compulsively for some three weeks, and demonstrating thus, the doctor merely says:

‘Ah, I see you have the English common cold. You have not conquered the world: nor shall you conquer this. Chew betel nut and paan, spit often, have respect for other animals.’

Knivett nods and crosses himself, tossing a few paise into the brass bowl suspended from the small statue of Shiva on the doctor's desk. The genuflection goes unnoticed; the doctor bows, remaining seated.

As Knivett's tired footfalls slap the dried mud of the road, he detects from the corner of his eye at first he thinks a milestone, but which reveals as a withered livid stump, like that of the fresh amputee he had seen on the ship. He hawks, spits at it. The wad of paan had seemed intrusively bulky in his arid mouth at first, now he is gobbing like a native. Hermetic heresies unwrapped. He waves at an old lady plucking a chicken on her verandah; she waves back. Black feathers are flying;

she sneezes. On the ghats of the Ganges, no coins fall in the fountain. Wishes are silent and a sacred but dead Brahma cow swells with polluted aftosa. Here in Andhra Pradesh, she knows of this only from myopic faith and the pages of oral estuarine history, spoken from the river's three mouths six hundred miles North.

A tricky rekindling of events that only now surge like sewage from between the inbuilt cracks of faux earthenware pavements. The monsoon, however, repeats, endures, and circulates; less yet maybe more than any mirage or illusive record. (Fire, powder and espionage – the second eldest profession – hold a similar universality.)

Knivett's mood is softly sweet and slightly sour, like an Ume plum wine that is corked, oxidised. He wonders idly, too idly, how an ellipsis might last four centuries. A not so devout pilgrim, he has fathered the bastard of an idea. A gopher for an absentee diarist, his vocation is to misappropriate and reattribute ideas. All about his psyche, earthed gravestones are on the move, sailing in steerage to a world neither old nor new. Damp kindling resists sparking the pyres of Empire. (An unmanned paddle steamer pleasures itself along the shores of Lake Lacuna, seeking a mountain to tuck it in at night.)

By four-thirty in the afternoon, the sun is falling and it is already sixty years later. In London dry sack has been dampened, and in the theatres lungs fill with fluid. Another fuse awaits its match, a cathedral killer ready to cleanse. Knivett's nephew has been secretly sequestered all along in a priest's hole in Warwickshire, fed, watered, his chamber pot emptied. He has missed the middle five of the seven stages of man, and is now a stooped contributor to a ghostwritten convent history. The manuscript is incumbent in tubercular folio. Little Lambert has witnessed all and nothing.

Knivett spits at the roadside, sick though not homesick, naked but for two locally woven cloths, one about his waist, the other his head. He crouches to select and pluck a leaf to curl and construct a disposable chillum, then searches a small stone for it. Any past lust is tempered by existential anxiety and excommunicated, unvalidated indifference. The predictive is become retrospective, and the imperial railway that will be built in two hundred years is already late arriving at the stations of the cross. Prison riots traditionally occur in the summer months, the dry season, the evil that men do being greater under the sun. Knivett experiences an immoderate yearning for a regional accent in which to dismantle the foretold and divert the unremitting loneliness of this voyage round his forefathers.

By six o'clock he has smoked two chillums of ganga and bivouaced in a small cave, simian and sedate, reading the remnants of the Shakespeare that is his only possession. He keeps his own cavey, changing but never lowering his guard, alert for dacoits and approaching thuggery. How unseen is his valley beneath the unnavigable stars.

The longest walk is the one with no destination and that is why the history of the world self-aborts after part one. He closes his eyes before choking to death on his own vomit from the flux. In England the King has the pox, and in Chesapeake Bay toyless children comfort themselves with homemade cigars. It may, someone said, have been no more than a shortage of potash.