

I. THE FAN MUSEUM

This used to be a private house in Scandinavia. It once belonged to a fan collector, who was a great traveller, and was not known to have lived there. There were no signposts to it, although it featured in some listings and I had picked up a brochure for it in a café where there were the most beautiful biscuit tins for sale that I have ever seen, with designs of apples, and a Happy Blonde Lady wig in some coffee-drinker's shopping bag hung on the coat racks at the entrance, for this was summer. Place dissolved, as it tends to do: if the hedge had been less twiggy and the wrought iron more like weaponry, this approach to a stepped doorway via a modest paved path between wildly undimmed replaceable flowers could have been the way into a genteel dwelling in older Port of Spain. I shut up about this, as I tend to do.

(Becoming quieter and quieter so as not to appear to be living in the past: if your friend likes you his eyes will brighten and he will want to drag out fixed explanations of what for you felt like a fleeting reference to a permanent elsewhere that is continuously living and evolving within, in parallel to, and away from you. Call this the norm.)

There was a push-button doorbell but the door was on the latch so I pushed it and peeked in to a very blank hall that was not any tidier than a private house would be if one counted the ghosts of garden scissors and calling cards, stray reprimands and childish outbursts, that dropped dahlia-like into the faintly radiating silence. The ceilings were twice the height of my accustomed English rooms (ssh). A table of dieted elegance, offering more brochures, maintained its poise in an alcove to the right, unpersoned.

(I travel alone so as not to be quiet except by choice: an increase in wordlessness that is not pegged to explanation, like a national currency that has been floated in favour of independent devaluations.)

The doorway into the main space was without a door but blocked by a wrought iron trellis of the kind expected in a conservatory in a black and white film. I edged past it and straightened myself out. This manner of entrance positioned the visitor in such a way that the giant fan appeared side-on, though fully opened. Had I not known that this was the Fan Museum I could have thought that the fan in profile was a crack in a doorway to nowhere, for its side was ebony heavily covered in black lace, and the spread, the thickness of it did not appear. I walked round and looked first at one side, then at the other. It was

embroidered with scarlet poppies, corn stalks and vine leaves, on a black background.

The house was narrow: in front of me I could see double glass doors, locked, to a courtyard. To either side were smaller halls with staircases turning steeply to the upper floors of this house that was narrow but winged.

I had a strong, irrational aversion to making a left or right turn. I looked around for a guide to the display, but saw only two identical mirrors in ornate gilt frames on the slightly rounded corners to the left, and a tall, spindly, gilded clock in the right corner, ticking so quietly as to add weight to the silence. The other corner, to the right, had a light patch on the caramel paint, and some protruding metal remains that looked as if a small cabinet had been affixed to the wall just too high for my comfort, at average adult Scandinavian reach. 'Hello!' My voice reverted to a kind of Trinidadian that it had never used in Trinidad: a birdlike screech that would carry over a wrought metal gate (painted orange) across a yard with frizzle fowls and the odd goat.

I quickly went to the left. The room had no windows but two doors at the further corners. These were bolted and locked on the outside. In the middle was an item of furniture like two pine dressers back to back, with many drawers and one or two cupboard sections instead of shelves. I pulled open a hand-width drawer at waist height. Sealed fans were stacked in there like hairbrushes. I felt like an invader and shut it quickly. I reached up to the cabinet knob but decided against opening the door. I opened another drawer at waist height and took out the single fan that was in there. I could not tell if it was sealed or had simply dried shut. It was of light wood and dark lavender paper. Silver-white plum blossom flowered in my mind, but the fan would not open.

My hands started to hurt with the desire to touch or the recollection of touch. They developed a nervous disorder all their own. Something like cramp started to shoot up my arms. My throat and forehead felt hot. I walked around the cabinet and re-crossed the hall of the giant fan. The air seemed exceptionally still. Every one of those fans shut in the possibility of breeze. Every fan existed in the implication of stillness.

(A feeling like being cornered on a veranda in a house in Kingston in an area where the drug barons maintain their beautiful houses, cornered by nothing but the social impossibility of stepping into the street, for these areas boasted a winning safety.)

I went into the right-hand room. There was a bench with a green velvet seat and no fans, and nothing on those two walls. The bench was side

on to the door and side on to a portrait facing the door. If life-sized, this portrait was of a tall man who had the shape but not the years of youth and who was turned three-quarters away. His back was bent and shaded across the shoulders as if by the habit of paying painstaking attention. This could have been his main form of love. Instead of getting up, I turned my head to look at the picture. The bench was, unusually, exactly the right height for me.

When it grew dark I thought that it might be time to take the latch off the front door and lock it. I have been laughed at for sleeping like a statue. (It is more yogic and less static; with the spine at full stretch, the lungs can excavate the air. (Ssh.)) Now sleep emerged from the borders of the body like a well-trained force whose first, long-ago, unworded battle was with their own tentativeness and who therefore show little hesitation advancing into alien terrain. First my feet folded one on to the other, soles partly touching; the seams of my legs twisted and relaxed, clasped into position like an enchanted dress gone back into a nutshell. My arms did the same and even my ribs felt as if semi-detached like a purring cat's. I was shutting up. My eyelids shuttered. Under my tongue a word tucked itself like the head of a bird under its wing and my hair curtained the face like a blackout blind over the copper pagoda bird cage.

The sleep voice in my head was a clear murmur. What a coincidence, how productive of accidents it might have been if at that moment I had heard his name!

I was glad to visit the Museum of Fans.

II. THE GOD OF OBSTACLES

Expatriation: my having had a *patria*, a fatherland, to leave, did not occur to me until I was forced to invent one. This was the result of questions. The questions were linked to my status elsewhere. Transferring between elsewhere, I had to lay claim to a somewhere, sometimes a made-up-on-the-spot somewhere. Gradually this Trinidad began to loom. Then it acquired detail. I never have returned home to it, though, not to the place that I have had to hear my own voice describe when in conversation with the Priests of the God of Obstacles, they who wield the passport stamps. This luxury of inattention, invention, and final mismatch... a 'Trinidad' being created that did not take my Trinidad away (my Trinidad takes itself away, in reality, over time)... that is expatriation, no? An exile, a migrant, a refugee, would have been in more of a hurry, would have been more driven out or driven towards, would have been seeking and finding not.

If the Schengen Agreement had been a person, it would have been old enough to join the army, drive, vote, marry, have a proper job, be punished in serious ways for serious offences, all this and also have a gap year before going to a carefully selected non-Oxbridge university, in its own countries. It would not have been nearly as old as I was, when I applied for a visa according to its rules. It was a whippersnapper. I would not have dated it. It was ordering me around.

Trips home to Trinidad folded neatly into trips home to the UK. My aeroplane was a double-headed snake belting across the Atlantic. Now, as a graduate student, I started to think about travelling. I had been going back home to Trinidad at every possible opportunity. My father, in Trinidad, was very ill, as he had been ever since I had known him. In my early twenties, I realized that this illness was not going to change except gradually to get worse. In some ways this realization was freedom. I started looking to cross other waters.

I had almost enough proof to satisfy the Schengen authorities that I could apply for a tourist visa: being in full-time education, the co-owner of a family house, and in a permanent relationship with a native-born UK citizen so blond, athletic and well-spoken in more than one language that he frequently was mistaken for a German. Almost enough proof.

Hopping off from Oxford to spend a spontaneous few days in Munich, I only had to book and pay for my flights and get my other half to wheedle a formal letter of invitation from the Stiftung Maximilianeum (he was on an exchange scheme there; they didn't know me). Oh yes, and just rustle up a few other documents, all perfectly reasonable: evidence of accommodation for the duration of the stay, declaration of ports of arrival and departure and borders to be crossed: before ringing the automated visa line and getting an appointment six weeks or so in advance of travel. Lastminute.com travellers, eat your hearts out! Who can complain when everything is planned? Proof sufficient had I given: it was no dream of mine to quit my DPhil at Christ Church to sell oranges in the streets of Europe or, perhaps, travel with a donkey, like R. L. Stevenson, or with a circus, like Robert Lax, or with a notebook, like a young man with a ~~white shirt black poloneek~~ recycled half-zip fleece and a flair for poetry. Thus was I saved from turning into a travel writer. Unease is relative.

Obtaining the visa was no great shakes. My other half accompanied me to the German Embassy's hall-style waiting room. The Wielder of the Passport Stamps, plump with brown fondant hair, melted sweetly at our cross-cultural devotion. His many blushing nods embellished the ceremony of passport-stamping. He did not so much dismiss as bow

away our case. This happy send-off carried me into the aloneness (I was alone most of the time) of being appreciably foreign (but in a nice way) in Munich. In the early mornings I took the air in the Englischer Garten. Large men with baying hounds bounded out of the mist and hollered greetings largely. I camped out on a guest bed in the Stiftung Maximilianeum, in a room stacked with nineteenth-century copies of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Some mornings I limbered up with a swim in the basement pool of the Stiftung, which also housed the Bavarian Parliament. A single parliamentarian might be wallowing determinedly across it. Again there would be the greeting, this time something like 'Well swum!' Without functional German and determined not to speak English, I tactlessly negotiated my way in French throughout streets and markets, and was given a handful of free postcards for no discernible reason at an art exhibition where the gallerist took a non-predatory shine to me. Whereas the Alice in Wonderland porters at the Oxford college where I read for my BA, MSt and DPhil with few exceptions challenged me at the college gate several times a week in a sudden fit of misperceiving me as a tourist (my floaty hot pink shirt was the trigger), the Parliamentary guard at the entrance to the Stiftung only failed to recognize me on one occasion. The minute I gave the Stiftung guard a big smile and pointed up at the window of the room where I was staying, he looked genuinely remorseful for running at me with his gun and shouting; he acknowledged our shared embarrassment with a shy All's Clear.

In springtime I thought of travelling from Germany to Italy. My other half would be there on another exchange. With disbelief he witnessed my insistence on looking up the paperwork for such a land of sunlight. A fault line appeared in our communications. Why did he not understand? I was spontaneously attempting to cross a border! Being from a small island, I was historyless (perhaps three friends bothered to remember that I had a family background) yet I could not live up to anyone's hope of finding a malleable girl dropped from the sky. Paperwork stuck to me, like the paper slippers shredded on the feet of a fairytale person setting off on a highway of glass. I heaped myself for hours into the seats at the relevant building in Munich. Eventually, all was clear. This stamp was diamond-shaped.

Sick on the train with gin and disagreements till the air seemed yellow and accursed, I felt nightmarish unsurprise when the people with the printed list arrived in our carriage. They were checking passports. They were not sure that Trinidad was a country, though the visa itself looked all right. Some strange blindness seemed to strike them as they looked at the list. Trinidad was not on the first page; the second page had an apparent heaviness or stickiness, it would not more than half turn... What god of obstacles was moving in these officials? My then other

half addressed them Germanly. I was curiously sidelined; eye contact was not made, verbal contact seemed not possible. In that moment of sidelining, the god of obstacles visited the passport controllers differently, and the name Trinidad manifested itself on their printout.

I tried to trace what shocked me in the momentary non-existence of my smaller island. To my horror, it was that I felt they should have heard of it because... because... I reposed a trust in cricket and football (games which for me fulfil two conditions of storybook romance: I admire but do not understand them) to put us on the map. I secretly did not credit our Nobel laureate(s) with making us known usefully, for example to people who checked lists in trains. I interrogated myself further and uncovered an amoral willingness to locate Trinidad geographically with reference either to tourism in Barbados or the American invasion of Grenada, possibly both, according to nothing more than what I could guess of my interlocutor's likely interests. The important thing was to convince the list-holder that my country existed sufficiently to deserve to be looked up. How things have changed: nowadays a mention of Venezuela should be enough.

The god of obstacles stayed quiet during some years in which young Schengen and I politely ignored each other. Though having caused my British citizen too much perplexity for our attachment to endure, I was myself a British resident and had a real job at Girton College, Cambridge: I was spoken for, on letter-headed paper. I could queen it over your lists.

But the gods have a way of raising the game. This was in a year when, all my papers in order, I was about to leave Florence, independent and blithe. The young official who took my passport got a look of handsome stupidity. He scrutinized the flora and fauna that bedeck the Trinidad coat of arms. He burst out laughing, waving for a female colleague to come over. He pointed at my passport and muttered something to her. Now they both were laughing. (They looked so young.) It was half an hour before the plane was due to take off. No list of countries was in evidence.

In Italian that was vestigial, nervous, overcourteous, I asked what was the matter. Oh do not raise the question of *the role of the decorative arts in border control situations, or, never judge a passport by its cover!* That was, however, veritably the question. The stupid, handsome face stopped laughing. Hands gambled the passport open on random pages. The Wielders of the Stamps could not let me out of Italy. Why? Because I had a Schengen visa, yes, they could see that (it spreadeagled across a page), but I had no visa for the UK.

I gently moved the pages to show the permit that granted my right to residency in the UK. It did not cross my mind to try to explain the concept 'Commonwealth', though as a Commonwealth citizen I could anyway have entered the UK for a limited period without a visa. Two years' university tutoring had taught me how to recognize pretend-reading pretty fast. These Wielders of the Stamps were just pretending to read the British residency permit.

Alas, the words were all they had: the British permit consisted of a meanly inked text, with no translation into another European Union language. Confusingly, the wording referred to 'leave' rather than 'permission', and 'indefinite' rather than 'permanent'. Leave? Go? Was this something saying I should stay away from the UK for a while? Tradition, not marketing, certainly not machine translatability, must have been the force governing the choice of words.

Working in the airport of a major tourist destination not a million miles from Albion, the two young people appeared both unfamiliar with and utterly uncomprehending of this official sign. Worse yet, the stamp was lacking, was intrinsically unconvincing: it featured no coronet, no rolling waves, no rose, thistle, lion, unicorn, oak, beef, or albatross... I promptly affected dismay. What an ugly permit! How British, I cried disloyally; not a single picture! But do you mean you don't know Trinidad? It is a beautiful island! You must visit! The beaches are brilliant, the sea is so blue! We are very friendly! We love visitors! Why have you never visited? But Italy is so beautiful too! Oh, I see I don't know why there are no pictures for the permit but that is what the British have done!

I continued my Ministry of Tourism spiel in between rendering the meanly inked text word for word as best I could, till the Wielders of the Stamps stopped me. I sprinted on to the plane.

Did a deeper disloyalty reside in my touristification of Trinidad, which could make itself imaginable to my conversationalists only through me, or in my mock-criticism of my adoptive Britain, whose white-cliffed reputation could outface whatever I had to say?

(Expatriate, I had acquired the confidence to hurtle into having to start over. It was a way of going on.

ineluctable → unable to be resisted or avoided
variegated → exhibiting dif. colors, especially as patches or stripes

III. GOING NOWHERE, GETTING SOMEWHERE

How was it that till questioned, till displaced in the attempt to answer, I had scarcely thought of myself as having a country, or indeed as having left a country? The answer lies peripherally in looming, in hinterland; primarily in the tongueless, palpitating interiority. Trinidad was. Trinidad is. In the same way, some confident speakers do not think of themselves as having an accent. They will say so: 'I don't have an accent! You have an accent!' In those accentless voices compass points spin, ochre and ultramarine flagella fling themselves identifiably towards this that or the other region. It is a motile version of that luxury, solidity, non-reflectivity that is the assumption of *patria*. So different is the expat from the refugee, who has her country on her back, or the migrant, who has countries at his back.

What would I have called home, before I began creating home? Before I had to learn to ravel up longitude, latitude, population, oil rigs, mobile phone masts, prayer flags, legality of fireworks, likely use of firearms, density and disappearance of forests, scarlet ibis, other stripes of scarlet, into a by-listeners-unvisited, communicable, substantial image of 'Trinidad'?

Language is my home. It is alive other than in speech. It is beyond a thing to be carried with me. It is ineluctable, variegated and muscular. A flicker and drag emanates from the idea of it. Language seems capable of girding the oceanic earth, like the world-serpent of Norse legend. It is as if language places a shaping pressure upon our territories of habitation and voyage; thrashing, independent, threatening to rive our known world apart.

Yet thought is not bounded by language. At least, my experience of thinking does not appear so bound.

One day I lost the words *wall* and *floor*. There seemed no reason to conceive of a division. The skirting-board suddenly reduced itself to a nervous gentrification, a cover-up of some kind; nothing especially marked. The room was an inward-focused container. 'Wall', 'floor', even 'ceiling', 'doorway', 'shutters' started to flow smoothly, like a red ribbed tank top over a heaving ribcage. Room grew into quarter. Room became segment. Line yearned till it popped into curve. The imperfections of what had been built or installed: the ragged windowframe or peeling tile: had no power to reclaim human attention to 'floor' or 'wall' as such. Objects were tethered like astronauts and a timid fringe of disarrayed atmosphere was the immediate past that human activity kept restyling into present. The interiority of the room was in continuous flow. *Wall, floor* became usable words again in a sort of silence.

I had the sense to shut up about the languageless perception. Procedure for living.

Language is my home, I say; not one particular language.

IV. WORD BY WORD

Do you know that party or family game where each person says the first word that comes to mind, prompted by what the person before has just said? Outrages and banalities and brilliancy link up at high speed, a wedding dance of animated paperclips. I have not been able to play that game. It induces hesitation and something like a stammer. 'Don't think! You're thinking!' – a telling-off from the party dictator. Often the uttered word would summon up another word in a totally inappropriate register or language; more often, several words at once, in a kind of bee dance; most often, no word at all: sounds and images surged up, and I searched to find something to keep the game going. But this was not an expat phenomenon. This happened in Trinidad, too, before my move to the UK. Perhaps it was a hypersensitization to the fluidity and zigzagging of Trinidadian speech, where flowery translations of Sanskrit and the formality of the older Christian (mostly Catholic) liturgies naturally mix into the same track as the tricky shrug and bread-and-curses everydayness of Spanish-French-Portuguese-Syrian-Chinese-Scottish-Irish-(English)? Was everyone else pretending to have one-word events in their brain, while secretly choosing from a *retentissante* horde?

Expatriate.

Exile.

Migrant.

Refugee.

V. A RECORD OF ILLEGITIMATE REACTIONS

A record of illegitimate reactions... If these words: expatriate, exile, migrant, refugee: turned up in the children's game, what, on the instant, would be my wordless upsurge?

Refugee. Severity of the olive green cover of the J.S. Bach *Preludes & Fugues* book that was my master such long hours of my teens. Flight and the intricacy of flight and a scrambling to be heard and but a coming together in the end. *Refugio.* A cavern. Mary and Joseph, straw in a rough box? Promise of a place. Higher up than a stable and more difficult of access. A path to fall off, a lorry underside to grip to. The arrival

another unpacking. The station, built or unbuilt, ever inadequate, dark and cavernous. People with fine features and ripped feet fetching water with difficulty to a place of non-recognition. *Refugee* should have been, in Trinidad, the Guyanese maids; the Asian East African doctors; the Sindhi shop-owners, plumped under the new sun but with an unspoken... fear?... a *having-feared* behind eyes browner than mine, working the sharp-edged wordbatch WAR to WARES. A too-late identification. For they were not *refugee*, not to the mind of the child in the word-game. *Refugee had flight* in it and fleeing to a huddle of wrongness; a translation into a community of incommunicability. There is brown and mid-blue, blister-purple, love-scarlet and a great deal of black in this word. There is the insistence on losing and finding, finding and not having, a home.

No, not that.

Migrant. *Migrant geese* or some such was where first I heard the word so as to note it, the word migrant actually not alone at origin, part of a phrase with *white wings*, and it is driven it is thoughtless it is magnetically on course steered by stars and obsessed with diving for food and likely to have secreted in its braincoils a chart for the way home. A cyclical, undependable word – a trait prettifying itself when observed by the other species whose skies it occupies – *Migrant* is all the birds of the air and I lack the balance to set off on a flight with a due destination and a warm or frosted prompting back. *Migrant* is cerulean and khaki and it has a lot to say for itself once encamped temporarily by a river that will do. All movement, this word. Out at elbows or tense-thighed: verbal. Absolute: adjectival. In the singular, it implies plurals: migrant isolate in so far as rising from or surrounded by settlers. The hunted, hunter, unconcerned.

No, not that.

Exile. Exile is Joseph. Exile is Moses. Exile is a boy or a man and sand and serpents. Exile is Sri Rāma. Exile is a pair of sandals on the throne for your brother will not rule in your place while you have been kept from your kingdom and have gone into the forest. Exile is an ancient song. Exile is melismatic. Exile is flattened in English. *Exil* in French is yet more clipped: *exil* is a short step from death; it is St-Ex, St-Exupéry crashed into the desert, or the pilot's verrey corporeal assumption into his beloved night, wind, sand and stars. Sable encore. Exile has a grain to it. *Exilio, esilio* is one to call from mountain tops. It is a maker of songs who can make vowels from objects, a ram's horn, a conch shell; and I think he is male again, sinewy and unbathed for weeks on end without minding, expecting his songs to be transmitted, and when he arrives somewhere he will know how to make a fire and cook but someone else will bake the bread for him. Fire is in exile and the word burns me so I cannot use it; it is an hysterical word, I shall weep

and do wrong to others in order to avenge somebody if I think hard enough about exile, a bed of scorched earth and somebody I was in love with in a dream. Exile, a constant series of disruptive transactions between resignation and prophecy. Exile is a Book of Books. Exile is a find by someone else and the bones chitter the story, so every interpretation, being late, is haunted and warped into footnotes around the song. Exile, renewer of membranes. A sweated blanket of footnotes and departed feet. I picked it up and its black and white pattern began bleeding most deeply into my appalled, osmotic hands.
No, not that.

Expatriate. *Non dépaycée, sin saber por qué ni por qué sé yo, unhoused free condition.* I arrive at the theme, which surely is a citation. I am incited to pluck out the heart of the mystery. I am transported on the instant to another century. *Patria* sings an Italian tenor. No expiry, please.