

Encountering the Unwelcome

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Travelling back from Belgium last weekend,¹ I was inadvertently caught up in the masses of returning British holidaymakers, making for the Eurotunnel at Calais. I had not realised this was the busiest evening of the year, as everyone was pouring back before schools reopened on Monday. The signs on the motorway from Dunkerque were ominous. ‘Congestion,’ *Bouchon*’ at junction 27, the channel tunnel. I had raced needlessly from Tournai at illegal speeds to make my 21.27 slot, knowing that if I missed it I might be waiting hours for another place. But this valiant and foolhardy dash was all in vain, as on leaving the motorway for the tunnel approach, I became ensnared in a build up of vehicles which showed little sign of moving. I was in the outside lane of a three-lane queue, with vehicles to my left and to my right a free lane for freight traffic only. Beyond in the far distance I could make out the tolls, streams of cars backing up into a great estuary of flickering lights and machine urgency, the will of each anxious vehicle occupant bristling with only one ambition, to get through the next obstruction, to the train and freedom beyond on the home island. Few were looking right or left, all were focused on the target, the tolls, the passport control, England and beyond, in what would now be the early hours, the final prize of their

¹ This piece was written a week before a large group of African immigrants made the headlines by breaking en mass into the port of Calais and after running a mile into the passenger embarkation area, attempted to board a ferry by the vehicle ramp. They were eventually ‘dissuaded’ by sailors using fire hoses.

beds. I turned the engine off. I opened the window as it was stuffy and let the cool night air briskly shovel out the interior fug of my car.

To my right and rear, I saw in the wing mirror a number of huge trucks were attempting to push their way through the narrow gap the build up of cars had left and gain access to their freight lane, the only one which was unimpeded. As their air brakes panted, their engines revved, they finally sneaked a way through. Before their engines came closer and drowned out any background noise, I was suddenly aware to my right of a series of excited whispers, two people I sensed excitedly communicating without wanting to be heard, in a language I could not make out. Beyond the freight lane to my right was a dense area of bushes and stunted trees, a thicket or copse which pressed in on the metal barrier like a wall of shadow. From this dark thorny wasteland the animated whispers issued. I instinctively attempted to make out who was whispering, as it seemed they must be only a few metres away and must be staring straight at me, perhaps discussing me, but hard as I strained to distinguish some human form in the darkness, I could see nothing at all. I surveyed the attitudes of other drivers around me but they all seemed oblivious and stared straight ahead or turned to wearily reassure increasingly fractious children in the back. This strange scenario continued for a few minutes and I felt more and more as if I personally was being sized up by unseen figures, I felt a sudden compulsion to respond to this perceived gaze, say something, anything, even an absurd 'good evening,' just to break the tension. But then as the trucks eased their way closer, I realised these would be

stowaways had noted the unforeseen bottleneck and guessed the slow speed of the trucks might make it worth their while to attempt to cling to one and with luck be landed in England. As the first truck ground past I expected to see an attempt, I envisioned a man leaping like a dart from the thicket and swinging himself underneath the trailer, perhaps chaining himself to the undercarriage and I asked myself what would I do if that happened. But it did not happen and by then the truck had passed and no human form had appeared. As the engine died away the whispering began again, even more feverishly than before, another truck passed and then another and still I expected a final appearance of my whisperers. The trucks had gone, as had their moment. The whispers died back to a more relaxed tempo. I stared vainly at the black branches quivering in the night breeze, there was no outline of a body, no shadow, no silhouette, was I imagining this due to extreme fatigue and the late hour? But then as if in answer, something happened, but not from my area of bushes, further along the barrier I saw the figures of two slim men of African appearance approaching. They were calmly following the barrier as if going for a walk in their own locality, which in a sense they were. These two young men were silent and simply walked past their heads slightly lowered, they looked neither right nor left and seemed oblivious to the massed vehicles just metres away. They wore drab coats of a dirty cream colour and dark trousers and seemed to be hugging the thick shadow which seemed in its turn to hold them, as if seeking to draw them back from the barrier.

Then the cars moved forward a little and I was obliged

to leave my whisperers behind. But as the engines became quiet again, I was aware of new sounds to my right, and this time, there came the chattering and whispering of a large number of people, many of whom I could discern were women. Clearly there was a group gathered in the heart of the copse, but again I could make out nothing at all, no lights, no movement, again the darkness seemed unwilling to give them up. These people were hiding there, living there, somewhere in this labyrinth of miserable bushes. I felt the weight of their mournful presence pushing in and raised my window in a moment of self-protection, then I felt ashamed and lowered it again. The two men passed by the other way, again acting as if they were deep in thought and had a secret destination in mind. The flurry of voices continued and I tried to imagine the scene, the blankets on the ground, the pathetic attempts to make tents with scraps of plastic, the primitive cooking apparatus, the older men standing around smoking in taciturn resignation. But was this image my mind had readily provided just a shameful cliché, the ubiquitous shantytown occupant? Was not the unseen community something quite different, something far more universally human and closer to those who sat encased in their luxurious cars imaging themselves of a different race entirely from these nomadic ‘untouchables.’

This was a moment when a known fact ponderously taking up residence in your brain from news reports and well-thumbed media stories, suddenly becomes a vital lived experience, is transformed into a wholly new reality, becomes overwhelmingly human and urgent. I realised the situation I was experiencing was one of unmitigated shame

and absurdity, how these two groups of human beings, equal 'before God,' could mutually co-exist in such fantastic contrast but in such close proximity, drawn together only since both needed the same location for the same reason and yet in such vastly opposing circumstances. Once again I was reminded of the lie which is the flag firmly planted at the summit of our self applauding society, which through its newspapers television and media outlets harps on about the freedom of the individual, of compassion and tolerance in a democracy. But rhetoric aside, what we do not care to look at, what disgusts us, we tell ourselves is simply not there. This failure to look, to heed and most crucially, to learn from the past, is of course the Achilles heel of any self referencing society which perceives itself as entrenched in the moral high ground.

Of course I had witnessed in passing the wretched plight of these 'immigrant hordes' as they are often termed in the red tops, both on entering and leaving channel ports, where groups or individuals could be seen openly loitering at the approaches, or going to and from their miserable encampments. I even once saw men at the side of road outside of Dunkerque port who had rigged up some shaving mirror and a hose in a tree and were performing their ablutions openly by the highway. This makeshift campsite was both farcical and pathetic, but I somehow admired the resilience and the noble commitment to preserving their appearance even in this woeful and humiliating situation, as cars filled with gawping occupants streamed past. The presence of these tragic gypsies of circumstance is well known and ever more evident and yet people now just accept their curious

presence as being an integral part of the port scenery as they enter and leave the embarkation points, zooming off obliviously with a boot load of duty free in fleets of Audis, Jaguars, VWs and Mercedes sports utility vehicles.

These desperate people adrift on the perimeter of the homeland, testing the gates of what is familiar and safe, the national community, are at most a novelty for those inside, who on leaving look out at them in passing like the not so exotic animals in the zoo. They are merely something whose movement or skewed presence catches their eye, like a ruined house or a run over dog. For others they are an irritant, a blot on the well-ordered, 'controlled' landscape they seek to inhabit, a confirmation of prejudices ladled out each day by the bile soaked Daily Mail and The Express. They recognise these foreign strays are not part of the working society, but inter continental loose cannons, bands of terrified people on the run, fleeing oppression, thronging the drawbridge but unable to break into the keep. Who would want to hear their stories, to stop and listen to their suffering, to get involved? For what can one do for them anyway? They are human beings, yes, but our island is small, we cannot take everyone. Things are overcrowded as it is, the infrastructure is buckling, the services overwhelmed. All true. So morally then we can drive past and spy on them as they slip out of their copses and dune hiding places, perhaps judiciously tweak our compassion, before turning back to the route and our holiday. Then two weeks later we arrive back at the port and the unfortunates are there waiting for us, perhaps the same individuals, who the whole time we have been quaffing Beaujolais in Burgundy or exploring the grottoes

of the Dordogne, have been shaking their mouldy blankets and searching for 'firewood' amongst the broken glass and blown tyres of the dual carriageway, peeping out from dank shrubberies and assessing the likelihood of clinging to a tow bar or forcing their way into an airless freight container.

But though waiting for us, they will not look our way or attempt to catch our eye as they pass, those who know only too well they are the unwelcome, the untouchables. They do not dare acknowledge our presence as we do not dare acknowledge theirs. They squat on pallets behind their thick screens of bushes, clutching their mewling babes and meagre possessions they have dragged with them from some country torn apart by vicious sectarian hatred. The rain trickles off the plastic, they have some stale baguettes and a few sausages, if they can get the fire going. There are rogues among them, opportunists, but in the main these are proud people, who are destitute, bereft of options and have absolutely no power in our world or respect, for they have become the driftwood no one wants to pick up and arrange artfully on their hearth.

Though we may be unable to do nothing for them as individuals in a practical sense, let us at least give them the respect of thinking of them not as dangerous mannequins periodically swamping the ferry ramps, but as human beings of equal value, fatefully trapped in a hideous vortex of suffering and self abasement. When we hear their urgent whisperings travel on the night air and feel their forms milling around us in the darkness, so close yet so infinitely distant, can we not at least honour their presence with compassion, rather than by disgust and fear, and however ambitious a

proposition, acknowledge their future contribution to and reconciliation with the ‘civilised world.’ He who drives past them without empathy, with disdain, who sees these unfortunates only as a random monotonous element of the landscape to be registered then discarded, further corrupts whatever claims to humanistic torch bearing we ascribe to our western democracies in the early twenty first century.

WILL STONE is a poet, essayist and literary translator. His first poetry collection *Glaciation* (Salt 2007), won the international Glen Dimplex Award for poetry in 2008. A second collection *Drawing in Ash*, was published by Salt in May 2011 to critical acclaim. A third collection *The Sleepwalkers* will be published in 2015. His translated works include a recent series of books for Hesperus Press, with translations of works by Maurice Betz, Stefan Zweig and Joseph Roth. His recently published *Emile Verhaeren: Poems* will be followed by Georges Rodenbach *Selected Poems* in Autumn 2014, both published by Arc Publications. Pushkin Press will publish his first English translation of Stefan Zweig’s essay on Montaigne in 2015 and an expanded collection of the poetry of Georg Trakl will appear with Seagull Books in 2016.

GORSE is a twice-yearly print journal—and occasional website—edited and published in Dublin: gorse.ie