

Poetry

The takes at Emmaus

It's basically a three-hander, and my plan is to film it in three episodes, or what I call phases.

One: all cloaks and dusty road, sadness and shadow. Hopes dashed.

I'll use the hand-held here, walking backward, and focus on Cleopas (they want Colin Firth for him – good at that hang-dog Weltschmerz, though that rules out Hugh Grant for Christ, bad undertones of Bridget Jones).

Anyway, long hand-helds for their walking grief, soft violins keening in the background.

The second I see as hardest.

Let's face it, Bible study is not the stuff of good cinema. But there could be possibilities – Sinai, Sea of Reeds, Calvary – almost like a lecture over a PowerPoint but the voice tasting of sheer sunlight.

And the scene at the inn – tremendous.

I won't show the face directly, only ever mirrored in the surface of the wine.

Here I can do better than the scriptwriter, fading to and fro between the Last Supper, that crowd of faces falling into fear, and the two in astonished transition out of grief.

Then closeup on the bread, last touched in the face of death – hard, just for a moment, to stretch out his hand for it.

I won't show the vanishing – no cheap tricks for me –

just the unquestioning surface of the wine,
the bread parted – laid out in blessing.

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Three versions of Judas

He had heard the talk and the plotting
 He idolised the Master
 He envied all those others
He had started to have a recurring dream
 He saw him as the true Son of God
 Those the Saviour rescued were trash
In the dream the swat team came for the Lord in the night
 The Christ, the One all Israel longed for
 He had waited patiently
In the dream jackboots were loud on the stair
 The kiss was rescue
 He had balanced the bloody books long enough
No escape from the Temple police
 It was time for the flaming-sword angels
 Enough of foot-anointing whores
The kiss would be the way, and a nice little earner
 This would be his God-given role, for which he would always be remembered
 Enough of flawed, dependent Peter. One last moment, one last kiss.

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Did Jesus hear birdsong

on the last morning of his life?
Were there sparrows disputing in the dirt
outside the High Priest's house?
Did Mrs Pilate's captive goldfinch

reach him across the courtyard
while the Empire washed its hands?

Did he who had seen beauty in every suffering face
glimpse loveliness anywhere on that climb
to the Place of the Skull?

Did the sun shine on a young girl's jet black hair?

Did he see pity, through the milky cataracts
of an old beggar's eyes?

Every dragged step of that last climb
was being alive. Did his gaze hunt for faces
that offered something beyond cruelty?
How long could he tune his heart
to the song of the trapped, the silenced
before the only music he knew

beyond the jeering crows
was the cry in his own throat
eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani?

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Woman behold thy son

We sat on the dust of the ground
Holding one another. He had given us
To each other, and we were both
Holding that, as we watched every breath
Rasp out, each one weaker
Than the last.

We willed every breath
To come, as you might will

A sick newborn to breathe, breathe.
Why did we want those breaths,
Torn from him when he had already
Gasped out that it was finished?

We could not bear
To begin that time without him, the time
Inevitable from the moment of a kiss
Under old olive trees. So we
Sat in the dust and held
Son his new mother, mother a son

While the light
Of our lives wracked out breaths
More blood than air now
Till the great wise head
That I had held so often in my arms
Finally fell.

No tears would come
Then, though we had tasted enough
Of each other's tears
Waiting for the end.
Guards broke the legs of the two thieves
With some sort of crowbar.

I wanted my child in my arms.
First I had to watch a savage spear
Enter his dear dead lung. Then a soldier
Knocked away the supports, and sent
His cross crashing down. Take
The carcass away, he shouted. Carcass...

My boy, my wise, foolish boy

In my arms at last, while the man
He had loved bathed ravaged
Hands and feet. We were so close
In that time, and I could have died
Gladly then, before they moved us on,

Others appearing as if from nowhere
To carry the body of the Lord
They had abandoned. The two of us
Looked at each other, agreed
Wordlessly to wait there, writing his name
Over and over again

In the dust of the ground.

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Etty Hillesum 1914–43

We must be simple and wordless as the falling rain,
Etty wrote from a space deep inside her.
She threw last postcards out of the Auschwitz train.

*The Lord is my high tower. He remains
Passionately mine, through all the misery and fear.
We must be simple and wordless as the falling rain.*

*We left the camp singing, Mischa too, not feigned
But firmly and calmly, with Father and Mother.
She threw last postcards out of the Auschwitz train.*

*I am sitting on my rucksack (her relentless brain
Always writing, writing, puzzling out adventures)
We must be simple and wordless as the falling rain.*

Sitting with the smell of cattle and urine.
Sitting with thoughts of Han, and her other lovers,
Throwing last postcards out of the Auschwitz train.

One more card was found. Mother, in different vein.
'Now nothing will help us any more.' The last we have of her.
We must be simple and wordless as the falling rain
And the high-tower postcard, thrown from the Auschwitz train.

In September 1943, Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish intellectual, was sent from the transit camp at Westerbork, Holland, to Auschwitz, where she died. Her remarkable diaries and letters from the last two years of her short life show a great appreciation of the 'glory' of life, and a remarkable refusal to hate her oppressors. The words in italics are quoted or paraphrased from her writing.

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