

An Extract from *Sleep of the Gods*

By Erwin Mortier

I.

The act of beginning has always caused me qualms. The first word, the first touch. The unrest of shaping the first sentence, and after the first the second. Unrest, and trepidation, like pulling away the sheet covering a body in repose: asleep, or dead. There is also the desire, or fantasy, of beating the pen into a ploughshare, and ploughing into blankness the freshly written page, straight across the lines, furrow after furrow. Then I would look back at a stark-white field, at the relics turned up by the blade: rusty buckets, bits of barbed wire, bone splinters, bed slats, a dud shell, a wedding ring.

I would give a lot for the chance to descend into the underworld of our histories, to be lowered on ropes down the dark shafts, seeing stratum after stratum slide past in the lamplight. All which the ground has made its own: fundaments, gateposts, tree roots, soup plates, army helmets, animal and human skeletons in quietened chaos, the congealed earth-crust of the maelstrom that engulfed us.

I would call it the book of shards, of bones and crumbs, of trees in a row and the dead in the cellar-way, of the drinking feasts at the long, long table. The book of mud too, of placenta – formless mud, morass and matrix.

I am grateful to the world for still having windowsills, and door frames, skirting boards, lintels, and the solace of tobacco, and black coffee and mens' thighs, simple as that. The day comes when you are too old to conduct yourself to the grave for hours on end, to stand on doorsteps, street corners or squares mumbling the dies irae for the many selves that have long since flaked away, leaving a decaying mush into which you dig your toes. As you grow older you no longer see people around you, but mobile ruins. The dead keep sneaking inside through backdoors or kitchen windows to spook younger flesh with their throes. Man is a draughty hole. We have memories that allow us to tame the dead till they hang fixedly in our neurones, like fetuses strangled by the umbilical cord. I fold their fingers and close their eyes, and if they happen to raise themselves beneath their sheets I will know it is only the enzymes or acids tweaking their sinews. Their true resurrection lies elsewhere.



II.

I suppose I always knew, with the kind of awareness that takes hold quite unconsciously, that I would be the one left behind, that I would never know him as a seventy-year-old, say, not past fifty or sixty anyway, and that I would never look at his wrinkles and recognize the young man I had known was the one, my one and only, the moment I saw him. I always knew I would not be granted the experience of comparing the old man I had seen traced on his features when we were still young, so young, with the real thing.

We all carry our ages within ourselves, right from the start. They slumber deep inside us, and whether they become manifest or are doomed to decompose with our flesh like unborn children no one knows – but I always knew, always waited, thinking each time he left on a journey: this is the last I will see of him. Whispering each time the phone or the doorbell rang when he was away: that's it then, my joy is over.

It was because he was my greatest joy that I deceived him with more zeal than anyone else. It was a way of taking a generous advance on the time of mourning. I soaked up the unbearable otherness of other bodies while he was still there; I exposed myself to the deathly-quiet collisions, to the soft anguish of talking to strangers who looked like him, although I knew they were strangers and that there was no sense in my behaviour, and all this while he was alive – just to be ready and prepared to face up to the outstanding debt.

Even now, after all these years, and at the most unexpected, idiotic moments, the loss can come crashing down through all the storeys of my absurdly ancient body – when waking at the crack of dawn, or more often from my afternoon nap, to find the memory of his naked young shoulders on the palms of my hands, as though skin had a memory of its own; cupping the curve of them in my palms as I sink down, straddling his hips, and then, when he tries to sit up, pressing him back to the pillow with my hands on his arms.