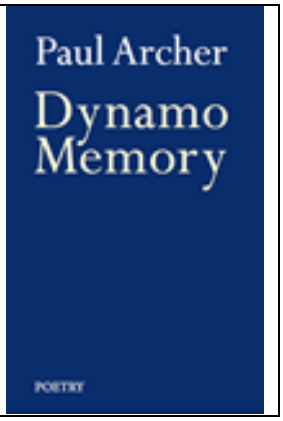
Paul Archer

introduces his book

Dynamo Memory



Memory takes us back to people and places in our past, but how well does it do this? How accurate can it be? This was the question occupying me while writing the title poem in the book 'Dynamo Memory', which came out of driving along the roads to my parents' house in East Grinstead in Sussex, where I was born and they still live, and remembering that these same roads had been my route home from school. There was little traffic then so few cars overtook me on my bicycle. The roads passed by woods and fields. On winter evenings it would be cold, most often wet, and dark, which heightened my sense of isolation. My bicycle had a dynamo on its front wheel to produce the electricity to power the headlamp. When I started off the lamp shone with a yellow glow, as I picked up speed this turned to a more brilliant white, when I slowed to a stop it glimmered down. I was around eleven and twelve years old at the time, and as I drove along the roads all those years later, I tried to think back to how I had been then. What had been going through my mind? As I thought harder, more and more memories came back as if they were tied together and I was pulling a rope. They emerged from the darkness of the distant past, but falteringly and at times they stopped altogether. I was surprised to find how much mental effort it took to reconnect with my younger self, and I realised when writing the poem that the bike's dynamo could be an apt metaphor: the harder I turned the wheels of memory, the more the past was illuminated, and when I stopped the light faded away.

My bike's lamp peers ahead
a few yards. Knees pump
under a plastic rain cape.

Tyres swish over tarmac.
Flicking the Sturmey-Archer
lever to the lowest gear,
standing to push the pedals,
zig-zagging the front wheel
up Imberhorne Lane.

I alone can have this memory
not some other boy, his sodden
school cap cutting into his brow,
coasting now as the star-constellation
of East Grinstead rises above the fields.
The recollection comes and goes
like the power from the bike's dynamo.
If I pause, the light glimmers down.
The harder I push, the more the lamp shines.

Dynamo memory

I now see, when re-reading the poem, that the idea of a dynamo can also serve as an analogy for something-else: for the very act of writing a poem, that one or any other. The origin of poetry may be 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' as Wordsworth said but he went on to say that the tranquillity disappears and an emotion is 'gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind'. The creative ambience may be calm, away from the hurly-burly of emotions in the present, but the poet is often far from being in a state of tranquillity. His or her mind is whirling furiously in the way that Shakespeare described when he wrote that 'the poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling, doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven'. The poet pushes hard on the pedals, pushes against the borders of thoughts, emotions and language itself. And this applies not only to writing about what happened in the past, whether a minute or a decade ago, but also when imagining what's to come, for example in this guide to a museum in the future:

Your tour begins in the gallery
with its paintings of long forgotten vistas:
Arabian deserts, English pastures,
Asian rice-fields, Alpine meadows,
American prairies stretching to the horizon.

Now continue through to our museum
and its exhibition of rare specimens
of richly grained oak, sandalwood and pine
from trees that once flourished here on Earth
preserved for your grandchildren's children!

Gaze in awe at our amazing floral show;
each flower has been carefully replicated
from archive drawings with complete accuracy.
Visit our shop to buy a flower to take home,
each has its own particular perfume!

Before you go, don't miss the pride of our collection:
a patch of real, yes real, green grass growing
in a glass cabinet in perfect atmospheric conditions
with miniature clouds producing rain at timed intervals.
Chairs are provided for contemplation.

Keep off the grass

It was while sitting in one of those chairs 'provided for contemplation' that the poem got started, and who knows what other poems may come from sitting there in the calm of contemplation when the emotion is 'recollected'? And using the term 'recollected' reminds me that 'Dynamo Memory' is a collection of poems and that perhaps I should say something about how they were collected or 'curated' to use a word that resonates with the idea of poems being like exhibits in an imaginary museum.

They were not chosen as a sort of 'best of' as I am doubtless not the best judge of the merits of these unruly children, and there were many other contenders for their places. Rather I wanted to bring together poems that would get on well with each other, and so a more fitting analogy might be that of guests at a dinner party. I wanted to bring together guests that would spark off each other, that would want to expand on what each other was saying, that would provoke different perspectives. But also would be united by common interests, like all good friends are, and that they would all rub along together so that if a stranger would enter the dinner party – by opening the book – they would sense the fellowship that underpinned the lively and diverse conversations that were underway.

Looking at the two poems I have just quoted from, we can see that the topics of conversation embarked upon include past memories and how humans interact with the natural world. The theme of memories introduced by the 'Dynamo Memory' poem might be taken up by other poems such as 'Archer River' which starts in the school I was cycling home from in 'Dynamo Memory' and where in a classroom atlas I found a river in Australia that bore my name and vowed to visit it one day, and then much later getting there by driving a Land Cruiser for days through the wilderness of Far North Queensland, with no other cars on the dirt track, and arriving with some sense of disappointment at the rather forgettable place that my dream had taken me to. And this might naturally be followed by a poem such 'The First Eleven' about that school's unsuccessful football team whose goalie let in many more goals than were ever scored:

at half-time we'd suck orange quarters and gather
round Mr Fox who sat on a shooting stick
and blew acrid smoke from his cigar to disguise
the disaster to come in the second half.
Schooled to take on the world and do our best,
and then greet failure with humour and grace,
we look proudly out of the First Eleven photograph.

From *The First Eleven*

I'm not sure where that photograph is now, but it's certainly imprinted on my memory and I can recall the day it was taken on the gravel drive in front of the school's austere façade. Or perhaps the conversation would be joined by a poem like 'Running shoes' which takes us back to the day I was born – not that I have any memory of that, however hard I might try! There was no telephone in the house so my father had to run to the midwife's house to call her. He ran for my life in his spiked running shoes and I think about that while pulling on my Nike trainers to go for a casual jog:

Now I set off and the blood pumps
through my veins, the air thumps
into my lungs, and like a newborn

my eyes awaken and sharpen
the world into focus, and then
I can't stop, I run over the horizon,
and the great ball of the Earth
with its whirling blues and greens
becomes a boy's marble that spins
away from under my shoes as I run on.

From *Running shoes*

I mentioned earlier that man's interaction with the natural world was one of the topics of conversation at this imaginary dinner party. There is a long tradition of well-observed nature poems, particularly perhaps in English poetry, but nature is placed in an unusual setting in this book, that of Spain and more particularly, as the tennis player Rafa Nadal loyally puts it, 'the beautiful island of Mallorca'. Here a blackbird is not in a hedgerow, but an orange tree:

Once - while pruning orange trees,
snipping white wood
out of lime-green leaves -
I saw a cluster of dead twigs
and stepped up the ladder,
secateurs raised,
and there: a sleek head,
yellow beak, rivet eye.

From *Encounter with a blackbird*

Or, to take another example, the typical English weather with its shifting moods and clouds, rain, cold and sleet has been replaced with constant blue sky and sunshine:

but summer heat's a smiling assassin
skilled in the snake's deceiving arts
as it moves to the kill, softening, stroking.

We return to the house's shaded rooms,
the custom-bound particulars of daily life
with the sun's silent scream at the windows,
carrying something to show that out of endurance
some good may come, owing its very being
to the suffering: a basket of ripe oranges

for slicing, for squeezing out the tangy syllables
of a language that will come to us in dreams
hanging from limp green-leafed boughs.

From *Summer in Mallorca*

Those 'tangy syllables' of an unknown language prompts me towards another of the settings in the book, that of Japan, a country whose culture and language had a profound impact on me. I wrote the next poem 'Rose Garden' when I first went to Japan and knew nothing of the language beyond 'sayonara' which turned out not to be the most useful of words, and is rarely used by the Japanese themselves because of its connotation of finality in the 'good-bye'. I was hired as an English teacher in a Junior High School, so my colleagues and students were Japanese, I lived with a Japanese family and the place was Fukuyama which is far from the metropolis of Tokyo. I had the sense that I was the only non-Japanese for hundreds of miles, which was probably true, and in fact most of the people I came across had never encountered a foreigner in real life and the main source for their impressions of them was the movies. So I was a curiosity in their eyes. As a result I haven't any need to wonder what it's like to be someone really famous like Mick Jagger because I experienced what the world is like for him when I was followed by kids clamouring for me to sign my name on whatever was to hand, even on the skin of their hands. But just as they were curious about me, I was intensely curious about them. How was I to break through the inscrutability and obscurity of another language and customs? Fukuyama has a famous rose garden – roses are exotic in Japan – and it was there that I paused in its tranquillity for reflection:

I strain to catch the words
of the roses, however
much I draw inwards
their scent and colour.

I've listened too long
to the frenetic fountain
bursting into airy song,
stippling the pool's skin.

I've lost my senses
in the carp's stealth,
circling upon itself
within its absences.

Rose Garden

It was only some time later that I realised, as if often the way, what I had actually written about. Perhaps I should have been tipped off by my use of the phrase 'the words of the roses' in the first verse, for it was words, those windows into intelligibility, that were most perplexing me in that foreign land. And perhaps it was those fountains whose flamboyance and noise – characteristics of a western way of pushing one's way into the world – that was the baggage that I brought with me there. And the confident calm of the carp in the final verse was what I found and treasured in the Japanese people who became lifelong friends. Japan may have changed in many ways, in the big cities at least, but it is still possible to find a quiet corner, perhaps under a cherry blossom tree or when contemplating a stone garden, where I defy anyone from another country not to lose their cultural trappings and find a new dimension growing within themselves.

So, to return to our imaginary dinner party, with its recollections and traveller's tales, to make it a little more complete, and in common with all good dinner parties, room should be made for the person who keeps things bubbling along with banter, who doesn't take himself seriously, who can have a laugh about what he's doing, someone in fact who can write a poem like this:

If this poem came from IKEA
it would be a flatpack poem
you'd have to assemble
from its various parts
connecting the metre and rhyme
aligning the alliteration
and offering up heartfelt emotion
and deep thought,
bolting them together
with an Allen key that isn't
yet lost, but will be.

You'd look at the diagrams
but won't figure them out
and you'll see how it goes
by yourself and that's
what we call free verse.
If this poem came from IKEA
it would have an obscure
and even unpronounceable title
like "Norråker" or "Lövbacken"
or "Svartåsen" perhaps,
and we'd all have a poem
somewhere around the house
that was exactly the same
as everybody else's
but pretend we hadn't.

Flatpack Poem

And that person is of course me. I hope this introduction has given you some sort of background to these poems and maybe has wetted your appetite to read more (and buy the book to do so, as a past member of my alma mater, Dr Johnson, said in an incorrigible mood 'no man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money'), and I'm aware that the poems, despite their bids for independence, offer glimpses into myself, someone who tries to get the best out of life like everyone-else, but also happens to write poems along the way. Those glimpses of me come and go, shining brightly, glimmering down, powered by the dynamo within 'Dynamo Memory'. But how much is truly me I leave to your imagination.

Sometimes I write naked
as a Neanderthal.
I write about bones and fire.

Or I'll put on the cumbersome
suit of an astronaut
and write about emptiness.

When the subject's sex
I find that a dinner jacket
and purple beret does the trick.

What am I wearing now, you ask.
It might be that black mask,
sailor's cap and bullet-proof vest

that I wear to formal occasions
like weddings, regattas
and the State Opening of Parliament.

Or it could simply be my favourite
t-shirt with the boldly printed slogan:
"I am your creation".

But I'd rather keep you guessing.
I have to leave something
to your imagination.

What I wear for writing

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