

Hopeful and hopeless states of mind must be experienced as hopelessly entwined if we are to face our illusions.

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A woman tells me about how her cherry tree had grown too tall and blocked out the light to her greenhouse. She wonders if there is still hope that anything inside will ripen. Swiping through photographs of her allotment on her phone she shows me beans, peppers and potatoes; she tries to find me a picture of the cherry tree, but finds a formal portrait of her dead brother in between images of rows of vegetables. She apologises for the slip, her voice breaks and she pushes back tears and talks with indignation about the amount of blossom versus the quantity of the cucumbers. Her husband was supposed to pollard the tree, but he didn't have time because, although retired, he works many shifts a week as a driver for a property developer. She has tried to recreate her former Mediterranean home here in a London borough, has plans for her tomatoes next year, and even though perhaps there will always be a patch of her garden that the light does not reach, the dominance of the tree can be reduced before the autumn to ensure that next year there is more ripe fruit.

If hope is at root the belief in, and capacity for, reconnecting to the wonder of an earlier object that was transformational, then hopelessness is perhaps the endless search for the missing transformational object. Christopher Bollas writes:

Transformational-object seeking is an endless memorial search for something in the future that rests in the past. I believe that if we investigate many types of object relating we will discover that the subject is seeking the transformational object and aspiring to be matched in symbiotic harmony within an aesthetic frame that promises to metamorphose the self. On a transcendental plane, we believe in God, or we fall in love; on an empirical plane, we look for that ideal home, or job, or car because we hope to achieve reunion with an object that will transform our internal and external realities.ⁱ

Bollas's point is we are re-creating a union with mother when we look for an object.

Freud (1927) writes in *The Future of an Illusion*:

The less a man knows about the past and the present the more insecure must prove to be his judgement of the future. And there is the further difficulty that

precisely in a judgement of this kind the subjective expectations of the individual play a part which it is difficult to assess; and these turn out to be dependent on purely personal factors in his own experience, on the greater or lesser optimism of his attitude to life, as it has been dictated for him by his temperament or by his success or failure. Finally, the curious fact makes itself felt that in general people experience their present naïvely, as it were, without being able to form an estimate of its contents; they have first to put themselves at a distance from it—the present, that is to say, must have become the past—before it can yield points of vantage from which to judge the future.ⁱⁱ

It follows then that the more we know about the past and the present the more secure we can be about feeling hopeful about our future. Knowing about past and present environmental disasters, comparative measuring of sea levels, temperature rises and areas of polar ice could help governments plan for disasters in the future. Freud's caveat is that our judgement of the future depends on the personality – how optimistic one is, or how deep the sense of failure. Also, if we can only judge the present once it is in the past, the implication is that building a deep sense of success and optimism about the present is impossible. Feeling more secure about the future depends on comparison between past and present, and assessment of development. But if we are inherently naïve about our present – think we are right, good, secure – or positive about the present in a shallow sense, we might feel immune from feeling hopelessness, but we would also be underprepared for disaster. Freud continues:

But no one is under the illusion that nature has already been vanquished; and few dare hope that she will ever be entirely subjected to man. There are the elements, which seem to mock at all human control: the earth, which quakes and is torn apart and buries all human life and its works; water, which deluges and drowns everything in a turmoil; storms, which blow everything before them; there are diseases, which we have only recently recognized as attacks by other organisms; and finally there is the painful riddle of death, against which no medicine has yet been found, nor probably will be. With these forces nature rises up against us, majestic, cruel and inexorable; she brings to our mind once more our weakness and helplessness, which we thought to escape through the work of civilization. One of the few gratifying and exalting impressions which mankind can offer is when, in the face of an elemental catastrophe, it forgets the discordancies of its civilization and all its internal difficulties and

animosities, and recalls the great common task of preserving itself against the superior power of nature. ⁱⁱⁱ

Some forces – natural disasters and attacks by others are beyond our control, and this plagues us with hopelessness. The task of keeping hope alive, whilst knowing that some things cannot be fought or changed easily, requires mourning lost opportunities and security, assumptions about government, and entails living with hopelessness. The idea that children can save parents or parents can save children from everything is an illusion that also has to be given up, but one that gives rise to hopelessness about the inevitability of loss and death. Perhaps the only hope that we can hope for is resilience to cope, to get through.

‘Missing child’ from Charles Simic’s poetry collection *Hotel Insomnia*, published in 1992, conveys the full power and re-integrative quality of over-determined metaphor. By over-determined I mean many ideas condense to convey hope and hopelessness concerning loss. The ‘picture’ of a missing child is both a representation of individual loss and also a symbol of collective loss. Readers are allowed the possibility to re-incorporate their own sense of loss, hope and hopelessness in response. The photograph of the missing child from twenty years earlier conveys the idea of ‘the return of the repressed’^{iv}. The negated thought can be brought into consciousness in the service of re-integration. Waiting for the missing person to return provides a focus, but is also a hopeless and lonely task. The emphasis in this poem is on being stuck. Spontaneous feelings of loss arise within the structured environment provided by the rhymes and repetition within the poem. The two stanzas of the poem are structured to connect with each other. The dominance of second person ‘you’ – in bold and underlined - indicates the child that was lost. The change to ‘us’ is both in identification with the child, but also ‘us’ is in identification with the mother of the lost child. The reader gets an experience of being hopelessly lost like both the child and the waiting mother. The ‘us’ also enacts warmth and understanding, and the hope that the bereaved and abandoned are not alone.

Missing Child

You of the dusty, *sun-yellowed* **picture**

I saw twenty years **ago**

On the window of a dry-cleaning *store*.

I thought of you again tonight,
 In this chilly room where I sat by the window
 Watching the street,
 As your mother must've done every night,

And still does, for all I know.
 The sky dark and cloudy for us both.
 A bit of rain beginning to fall
 On the same old city, the same old street
 With a padlocked, *dimly-lit* store,
 And the growing horror of the truth
 With its poster of a firemen's ball.

The word 'picture' is the only word disconnected from all other lines. Other lines either rhyme or repeat lulling the reader into a collective understanding of loss that inhabits the same place: 'same old city, the same old street'. The isolation of the word 'picture' emphasises that the photograph is all that is left of the missing child, but the image returns to mind over the years in its 'sun-yellowed' state, not forgotten. Much has changed - 'padlocked' is emphasised and the store is 'dimly-lit'. This conveys the idea of a locked mind with a 'store' of 'dimly-lit' memories.

The phrases in the last two lines 'horror of the truth' and 'poster of a fireman's ball' are particularly condensed dream-like images. They are in stark contrast to 'same old' earlier in the stanza. These two phrases seem saturated in meaning, but offer the possibility of unsaturated interpretation by the reader. Canadian psychoanalyst Arthur Leonoff considers the difference between live and dead metaphor^v. In work with patients, severely traumatised as children, thinking can be impaired and the use of metaphorical language inhibited in favour of more concrete descriptions. Carveth^{vi} (1984) refers to 'live' metaphors which are conscious of making an analogy and 'dead' metaphors which are taken as true. There is a closed, 'dark and cloudy' setting, and 'A bit of rain beginning to fall' seems dead. This feels deliberate and enacts the hopelessly stuck and instantly recognisable metaphors for depression or the mundane. In contrast, the phrases: 'horror of the truth' and 'poster of a fireman's ball', are saturated with possibilities of analogy, but the reader has to complete the analogy by exploring what the horror is and what the truth is, or why the poster of 'a firemen's

ball' advertises the 'horror of the truth'. These two last lines are dream-like in that they are condensed images and the reader's response may vary according to their internal and external reality.

Apart from the idea that firemen celebrating at a ball neglect fires or family and may suggest the internal guilt of the mother who waits; the 'firemen's ball' may reference the Czech film 'The Firemen's ball' directed by Miloš Forman in 1967. The film, which satirised the corruption of governments and committees, was banned in 1968 when countries of the Warsaw pact invaded Czechoslovakia. Forman relocated to the United States. The film itself concerns a disastrous party where prizes are stolen. The lights are turned off in the hope that the prizes are returned, but more are stolen in the darkness. An old man's house is on fire and people are sold drinks whilst they watch it burn. Nothing in the film goes to plan and the instinct to take advantage of disaster triumphs over the instinct to restore what has been taken or minimise loss. The film concerns repressive regimes taking advantage of innocent victims, and destructiveness ensuing from chaos. There is an irony in the notion that disaster happens whilst no one is watching – something goes missing – a child, a protective parent or civilisation. However, the trauma experienced 'après coup' is felt to require watching forever, as the voice in the poem does and the mother who has lost a child does.

'Missing Child', in spite of being built around the fixed image of a missing person, is anything but static. The poem invites the reader to inhabit the way that the impact of loss builds. In the poem 'Missing child' the 'horror' is both individual – the mother lost a child - and collective – those who witness loss. The 'horror' is that the ones missing will not return. The loss of an individual child, a mother's loss of a child, the loss of the fantasy of return, the way repressed loss re-surfaces in the mind, the loss of peace of mind and the way catastrophe can only be grasped later – suggests that the full impact of loss continues and evolves along with identifications to the lost and to those who grieve. Loss can be re-integrated in new ways that convey the enormity and longevity of absence.

The poem requires the reader to inhabit 'the negative'^{vii}. In 'Missing Child' the 'picture' being 'sun-yellowed' suggests that the speaker in the poem is remembering a

photograph of a missing child that was already old when first seen. The image of the picture stands in for something long absent – a loss that happened earlier than previously imagined. It is representative of an absence, or blank, that figures more than the pain of the loss itself. This is reminiscent of the case of a girl who was evacuated during the Second World War, who Winnicott refers to in ‘The Transitional Object’ (1953). The girl refused to call her foster parents mother or father or to name them, as this would have been a lie or a betrayal. The absence of her parents became a blank, and the blank was more real and alive than longing in their absence. The dream-like condensed images in the last two lines of ‘Missing child’ bring new resonances to the place that the ‘picture’ has occupied in the mind. The condensed image allows further integration of the trauma of loss, and enacts the experience of how loss takes up space in the mind. It also enacts a sense of facing up to one’s illusions about safety and security, and the difficulty of keeping hope alive as it becomes ‘dusty’ and ‘sun-yellowed’ in the mind, but this marker of absence is preferable to a blank.

Freud goes on to write in ‘The Future of an Illusion’:

We may insist as often as we like that man's intellect is powerless in comparison with his instinctual life, and we may be right in this. Nevertheless, there is something peculiar about this weakness. The voice of the intellect is a soft one, but it does not rest till it has gained a hearing. Finally, after a countless succession of rebuffs, it succeeds. This is one of the few points on which one may be optimistic about the future of mankind, but it is in itself a point of no small importance. And from it one can derive yet other hopes. The primacy of the intellect lies, it is true, in a distant, distant future, but probably not in an *infinitely* distant one. It will presumably set itself the same aims as those whose realization you expect from your God (of course within human limits—so far as external reality, ‘Ανάγκη [necessity], allows it), namely the love of man and the decrease of suffering^{viii}.

If intellect is primary at some future point then Freud hopes love and the decrease of suffering can become the aim of humankind, rather than an instinctual clinging to suffering. Simic’s poetics reveals a mind working to triumph over the instinct to suffer by fusing hopelessness and hope in a condensed metaphor.

In conclusion, Charles Simic's hope is that the reader connects to their sensibilities and responses. Simic said in an interview^{ix} 'my wish is to remind people of their humanity, to preserve the freedom of imagination, of spirit, without which it would be difficult to live.' Poets, novelist, artists and film-makers help to give readers and viewers an experience of hope and hopelessness. If we can bear contact between horror and hope, destruction and renewal, our own love and hate, perhaps the dominance of hopelessness can be reduced. I think we have to assume that hopelessness always resides somewhere. We may feel variously: hopelessly outside and never accepted, or be hopelessly and claustrophobically inside of something that cannot be escaped from, or oscillating between these two positions.

ⁱ Bollas, C. (1978) 'The Aesthetic Moment and the Search for Transformation'. *Annual of Psychoanalysis* 6:385-394

ⁱⁱ Freud, S. (1927) 'The Future of an Illusion'. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 21:1-56

ⁱⁱⁱ Freud, S. (1927) 'The Future of an Illusion'. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 21:1-56

^{iv} Freud, S. (1915) 'Repression'. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 14:141-158

^v Arthur Leonoff, (2013). 'Metaphor-Work in the Treatment of Complex Psychic Trauma', *Can. J. Psychoanal.*, (21)(2):247-269

^{vi} Carveth, D. L. (1984) 'The Analyst's Metaphors: A Deconstructionist Perspective'. *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought* 7:491-560

^{vii} Winnicott, 'The Transitional Object' in *Playing and Reality*, 1953

^{viii} Freud, S. (1927) 'The Future of an Illusion'. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 21:1-56

^{ix} Charles Simic and Barry Lopez, on a Roadtrip, 1972, interview accessed on 26th April 2021, <https://lithub.com/charles-simic-and-barry-lopez-on-a-roadtrip-1972/>