



Carlos T. Blackburn

Portraits

First published in the United Kingdom in 2006 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
58 Velwell Road
Exeter EX4 4LD

at www.shearsman.com/pages/books/ebooks/ebooks_home.html

Copyright © Carlos T. Blackburn, 2006.
All rights reserved.

Cover: 'Abstract Grunge' by Karen Grotzinger,
copyright © Karen Grotzinger, 2004.

Portraits

A few words to answer why, where and how.

The idea for written portraits belongs to the Projects Director of the Scottish charity that commissioned them. As she pointed out in our initial discussion, people in care institutions generate a good deal of writing around them – care plans and the like. In the interests of a kind of practicality, a person needs to be assembled as a collection of reliable facts (female, 40, residing at, etc.) and set of concerns (mobility, physical health, communication, etc.) From this perspective however, the resonance of a person living among and through their nuances slips away, the efforts of equilibrium erased.

The mark I've aimed for is the open-endedness of a person in the midst of the proverbial stream. I wrote what came to me in time spent with Alex, Blossom and Sheldon, and took from their care-givers candid descriptions and observations. My hope is that the precise details of a given moment and the open-endedness particular to each person shape a narrative that by its nature is incomplete. This quality, besides leaving the door open for additions, dilutes the inherent inequality of writer and subject: there is no last word.

~ BLOSSOM ~.

Day One

We meet. She offers a hand and looks up, pointing to a spot half way up the high wall, as though we were bird watching. Blossom dressed in light green striped shirt, short black socks, shoes well-cared for. Arms crossed, people-watching. She's a watcher?

At a movement class, Ayisha pats Blossom's hands in time to the music. Blossom tilts her head and closes her eyes. Concentrating? She trusts human contact. The ease of it, not complicated. We are sitting together at the end of the class. Time to leave: she gets up and walks away, an unhurried, abrupt break. Or is it all contiguous?

I'm told that she has a powerful fear of dogs. My guess is that the world is quite full for her and doesn't end - things to contemplate, things to fear, a happiness to encounter.

Hearsay

July 20. Blossom not in

7 years old when she went to St. Joe Parents brought her

62 years old.

A party for her 60th birthday,
she was
over the moon.

Her concern for others
(returning shoes to Dennis' room)
concern for
light Some lavender
cuppa tea together

Loner ~ wandering the hospital.

By the window — hope.

She's changed.
he remembered
she'd only stay as long as
the sweets were there.

If she doesn't want to
she won't.

Healthy appetite
no porridge
try anything
treats.

Santa Santa Everywhere

“... her excitement around Christmas –

Santa-ing us for weeks before hand”

“First time I met her /.. / nowhere near Christmas /.. / but she sees a
Santa on t.v.

And she's going, 'Santa, Santa, Santa, Santa' /.. / unbelievable”

Salvage of Lost Notes from Blossom's House

At the end of my visit I'm shown a picture of Blossom some 30 years ago atop a horse. She has a helmet on and appears to be intent on puzzling out how she feels, clarifying her confusion. She had wanted to get on the horse and was indulged. Once on it, some inversion took place. In the picture she grips the mane and leans forward, looking into air.

Blossom knits; she was taught in the hospital. When she comes home, one of the first things she does is get the knitting and sit in a chair. Situated, a readiness, not to knit, but for what comes next. I never find out what she is knitting.

A wanderer. She would wander the halls of the hospital, look into all rooms. A meeting? That too. She would look in.

Photographs: rarely looking at the camera; in a large proportion of shots she smiles with eyes closed.

I had noticed she was well dressed the first time I met her. Yes she dresses well I'm told. We have to persuade her not to wear the same two or three things all the time though. Ah. A person with favourites.

Her brother in Ireland, a sister in Australia. They visit. Blossom knows they visit — a brightening.

The t.v. is irrelevant, though she sits with the others watching it. Other things are happening — her people, her knitting.

Snapshots

We're at the dining room table having tea. Blossom in the backyard, knocks on the window.

Pat startled — “I crossed myself!” —

laughter.

Blossom looks in.

The cup's empty. Blossom tips it
and looks in several times

to make sure.

A kind of thoroughness.

Thoroughness.

She steps from the house into the sun to look at us all in the garden. Takes a good look. Goes back in.

Blossom stands in the dark hall – crossroads of the house – where she observes the circulation of the house. A corner where she can relax, vanish. She seems surprised that I notice her there. She points, she speaks, she asks for a hug, taking my arms and putting them around her neck. She hugs me. The hug is sudden, unceremoniously tight.

Blossom's antipodal niece visiting today. A sense of unease with all the attention? The impression that two visitors introduce an awkward formality.

(I'm told that when it comes to card games she'll play as long as the cards are on the floor – informal – but not if they're on the table. Formality triggers indifference)

.. ((On the other hand,
if it's not in a frame
(photo) or a purse
(money) it's garbage
and goes right in the bin)) . .

To knit is to float above it all.
Knitting is a place. A place
like the hallway? Perhaps.

Picture this:
backlit by the sliding glass door,
with a knitting needle in her mouth,

Blossom tilts her head to one side
and looks directly at you as she
unravels her knitting. No hurry.

Begins to knit again
without looking down.

Gesture Syntax

She's happy to take my hands,
it is the way in. Once in,
she puts a finger to her lips
for quiet, gesture for quiet,
then points outwards.

Gesture I hadn't seen before today,
she greets me with two hands
on a hypothetical steering wheel
driving & steering driving & steering.
It's a question: will I be driving her
today? Regretfully, no;
I cannot take her glee
to the next level.

Nonetheless, when given a moment alone she takes me to the mini-van parked out back. Hands on her wheel, the question develops in the direction of a demand: you will drive, won't you?

Final Syntax

Coat please — gesture of coat over shoulders / arms waiting for a coat

Aerobics Class — arms over her head as though in mid-jumping jack

I'm ready

I hope

Let's go — thumbs up

faint smile

searching eye contact

Coat,
aerobics,
drive,
ok.

You.
You drive.
Hug.
Skips away.

\\// **Sheldon** //\\

First Glance

Sun pours through the windows of the dance hall. Early summer.

Sheldon sits on a stack of chairs that cannot hold him. Takes off his shirt. Prominent ears. Pointing at a photograph up on the wall, the face of a construction worker. Looking off at the far horizon, the things on it (what things?), no one else is here it seems. “Away!” – detached from the movement class that carries on around him. This is not analysis. This is first contact. He checks all the doors. Back to the photos of faces. Late thirties? Nice hands, short hair, blue eyes, all over the place.

Park

(Late July)

Hand clenched/coat clenched

You breathe out the way you do, Sheldon. The outdoors brings your attention to bear more on people, a contrast to indoors, where people are more peripheral. Peripheral to what? Curious.

Breathes out

You maneuver circuitously to Jenny's outstretched hand. Standing under a large spreading oak, you take a good look up at the canopy.

Seeking the hand, searching out Jenny's hand

You pull the bush, you blow on the tree, speak - a speech! Not interested in my offer of Blossoms. Interested in the small child with mother. You blow when the wind rises. The urge to participate.

Peering

Where is your attention, Sheldon? At the edge of the parking lot, making decisions; choosing particular trees, particular spots from the spread of

park. Children get you talking. We go to them at a jog. A dog. You use Joy's hand to pet the dog; petting it a collaboration.

(Early August)

You salute me with a crisp in one hand and words I haven't heard before.

Out walking. We're in the park. Have you got it? You check your grip on your jacket, then gravitate toward the people you know, listen to them talk. Closer, closer. Is it continuities or mysteries? Caroline gets a smile out of you with energetic parody.

Cloudy day. We make our way to the greenhouses. You're quiet, intent on the ground, but we're holding hands, and that's a first. So I'm here. You come across as remote sometimes; maybe it's me. Doesn't matter. You hold my hand tight readjusting your grip on the jacket you refuse to wear. Is it security? Is it a consciousness you clutch to your heart?

Kicking stones. Where are we going? You lead. The door set in the garden wall. I don't think it'll open Sheldon, I bet it won't.

Greenhouses; this one's got parakeets in it. Not interested. At the second, people are working the soil with pitchforks. Action, that's where to go. It's the most deliberate move you've made today: to the life here, people

turning the soil, listening to the radio, this is the place to be, this gets you talking.

Do some turning, go ahead. You get a pitchfork in your hand, you get real talkative. One hand stays with the jacket. Ok. Trying to turn the soil while keeping your grip. It's like you've got one arm sometimes. Push it. Good. God you're excited. Great.

What's that?

You want to give me a ride in that shopping trolley?

We walk back. You're all grip, concentrating on the ground. You looking for things to kick? Yeah.

(Mid August)

Heard you sampled a bug this morning, but spat it out.

Someone says, "... mind you, Sheldon tends to hold onto things"

'Dog!'

You pull Jenny over to look at the dog. Leaning over and pointing at it, you check with Jenny, head cocked peering up into her face. Pet the affable short-hair awkwardly. Take a kick at it, missing. 'Dog!' you announce to the group, proclaim it a dog, a discovery (to be kicked). What other urges amongst the rush to feel the dog, investigate it, declare it? Because a kick seems contrary to the attraction. A set of conflicting feelings and you not knowing what to do with them?
The feeling of not knowing.

(Late August)

The music's got you this week. You want to hold the tape player. You peer closely at the buttons. Great pleasure in the buttons. *In* them.

The music playing. You relinquish (I don't know what), watch the girls dance. You ask, 'Rain?'

You compare and connect the tape player and
Liz swinging in her chair.
Back to the tape player.

'Wind!
(blow
blow)

— always aware of the wind.

Back at the bus
you find your jacket quickly,
bunch it up, clutch it.
Default mode. You're a lucky
man, you've found your island.

Vocalize

'Away!'	the clouds, music
'A tea!'	the future, the past
'Hot!'	the present
'Oh. Oh!'	the present
'Wind!'	wind
'Dog!'	focus
'A tree!'	but won't touch

)__Alex__(

Basic Grapevine:

Alex not in this afternoon. Limited sight I hear. Likes to paint, loves music, has impeccable rhythm. Paints to music, paints the songs he likes;

Yellow Submarine: aqua green & yellow waves diminish left to right.
Yellow spray. (Forward thrust of the song's recollection)

Got to Get You into my Life: shouts of blue & green float up the page.

Eleanor Rigby: leaning blocks of paint – orange, mustard, red, pink.
(Colorful lonely dominoes)

Dancing Queen: thick red & peach clouds, centered.

Money Money Money: page is covered with overlapping red blocks.
Green & purple edges.

1st Contact ~ Late Summer, He's full of information:

Disco tonight, before bed
Eight o'clock Radio 4
Teeth washed 1/2 past eight
1/2 past nine, bed

"When's dinner?"

Dinner 1/2 past five.

A kind of precise presence.

Alex a precise presence. Sharp haircut, salt & pepper. The head in time with the music. He picks up phrases of tune and speech.

Dinner, teeth, bed - pretty standard sequence. The disco? A mystery.

- song on the tape deck ends -
"Ahhh. Fucken ends."

Out at Alex's Place ~ In the Quiet of Rosewell

– Seated with his back to the window, he twists his head around to the light pouring in. Thrum of wings. Budgie in a cage beats its wings intensely while remaining on its perch –

“The boids!” says Alex, sounding like he’s from Brooklyn, my home town. He went on a Blackpool holiday last year and worried about the birds.

Alex and George sing along together, George a droning monotone, Alex in tune, snatching up words. Phone rings. Chorus of “Phone! Phone!”

Ella Fitzgerald sings.

Sharp intake of breath, “this nice” he says.

She sings, “aw but it’s cold outside”

Alex echoes, “. . . it’s cold outside”

Alex echoes —

Susan says, “well that was a waste of time”

“Time!” he echoes.

“That’s the weekend coming up. Not going home this weekend.”

“Weekend!”

“She’s on day-off.”

“Day-off!”

“She’ll be in tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow!”

“Youse are Tom and Jerry singing together.”

“Together!”

Another Gorgeous Summer Day

Alex's dad phones

“Hello Dad”

starts singing into the receiver.

Call concludes

George exclaims, “ you spoke with your Da!”

Alex bright, speechless.

(Brown eyes, strong features)

So I'm told he's the happiest man in the house, excellent hearing and always on - morning, noon, night. Told that it takes a lot to get him riled, the ladies can do it once in a while. Told that what you see is what you get.

Tell you what I believe. I believe what you see isn't what you get – Alex is too moved by music, too osmotically involved with it (his voice, his rocking, applause, foot tapping), too quick and accurate in recognizing people's voices. Too discerning and present in the heart of what moves him. So he presents as a question, a slew of questions:

question of how much he sees,

question of acute hearing,

question of carrying a tune,

question of how quickly he picks it up,
 (astonishing how fast and sure he launches into yodeling duet
 with Jimmy Rogers)
question of rhythm,
question of retention – names, schedule, a person’s voice
question of the place in a song he smiles at,
 of what songs get the ‘yes’ out of him,
question of what gets sung,
question of (the song goes: “. . . will always lead me there”
 “there” he echoes)
 question of where,
question of attention,
 of who’s being spoken to & what’s said,
question of where the light is,
 of where the voices are,
question of his attraction to the gutsy songs – *The Boxer, Let it Be, Saint
 Behind Glass*,
question of what his Dad is to him that he sings to him straight away
 over the phone,
question of Saphia, the girl at the club, question of him being startled by
 the birds knocking their perches over,
question of what he thinks of me replaying songs we like, question of
 which songs get applause,
 of his enjoyment of crowd-sounds on the live tape.

*) ~

Question of his paint-flecked sneakers,
 (one leg shorter than the other, longer taps out the rhythm)
question of whether he likes singing with me,
 of his eating as quickly as possible,
 of how often he has to correct George (“get the phone!”
 “doorbell!”)

question of the concentration in recognizing a different version of *The Boxer*,

question of his expressions when yodeling – the eyes narrow, mouth in a grin ~ grimace

question of whether he likes singing with George
 (or just braves his drone),
 of the pitch that gets them both singing
 (Alex often sings, George often doesn’t),

question of how tight he’s gripping his right hand with his left,
 of how much fun he had fishing with Alvin
 (bliss? Or just delight?),

question of being riveted to the horn on *For All These Years*

question of what kind of event the Disco At Night is — mind? Matter?

question of pleasure – fishing, rhythms, horns, reedy-voiced yodeling
 country singers,

question of a man who seeks out light wherever he is,
 of a man to whom it appears in elemental form,

question of a man with music as his centre.

Now I get it. The birds
are called Tom & Jerry

- There they go George! (Birds flapping)
- Boids!
- Boids!