

JANET CHARMAN

in these hours

1

in these hours i met the translation students
and gave them a creative writing exercise
which was to record in detail everything they could remember seeing
through an important window in their lives
not fiction i tell them
write only the facts
this is an entirely factual task
but if there is anything out there about which you think we should know more
invent it
the whole to be completed in such a way as to make this external view
a self portrait
afterwards their professor told me he sees this task as a metaphor
for how a piece of work gets translated
from one language
into another

2

then a student at the Mainland recital
asked why i don't use much in the way of punctuation or capitals
was i affected by e.e. cummings? and what made me take up a career as a poet
when she put her questions it was well past the finish of my performance
i had left the stage and was sitting in the audience
hearing my name mentioned i twisted around in my seat to pay attention
but the things she wanted to know seemed to go on for such a long time
that when i got to my feet and faced the packed room
i felt so astonished to be questioned
i forgot what she'd asked and had to get her to repeat herself
which she did
word for word

3

yes e.e. cummings affected me
i remember in the fifth form reading 'Buffalo Bill's defunct'
and identifying wildly
with the lack of capitalism
and since the poem said Buffalo Bill was finished
that also suggested it could be the right moment for Annie Get Your Pen
and what i want to know is how do you like your hazel-eyed girl Mistress Birth?
but according to an article i read later in the New Yorker
using lower case marks me as a perennial teenager
and i see from her critics' notes that Fleur Adcock isn't fussed on it either
grounds for instant dismissal
that New Yorker writer said something like e.e. cummings' distinctive style
equates with the 'cool' kid in dark glasses determined to attract our stares

without letting us see his eyes
a 'look-at-me' display which i would add
has a particular jurisdiction
in the feminine
since however longingly we gaze at her
she is bound not to let us in there
sluts show up in the spotlight
to escape contempt a good woman needs protective gods or power suits
preferably both
without them
i've adopted
in
visibility
to carry my lower case into middle age
but i'm no teenager
and as i said this
i looked around and saw i was the oldest woman in the room
was it my imagination? or did those young Mainlanders seeing my body
experience a shudder of horror

4

so apart from looks
at my age
i require another reason
to carry on the lower case first person pronoun
which is that for me it represents
ideographically
the discontinuous narratives of women's lives
menstruation domestic celebration
pregnancy child birth and breast feeding
story telling

getting the shopping and doing the cleaning
keeping the fire and finding dinner
not forgetting any of those private and public domestics
which must be accommodated before anything else is
even when beside ourselves
and from our mothers we inherit this mantra: me~no~pause
but now my daughters
are interrupting: 'you never do any bloody cleaning'
please
excuse me for a moment
while we settle a family disagreement

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whereas
to my mind
the upper case first person
reads as the default generic
setting of the uninterrupted self as male
in patriarchy
in relation to which a woman writing
must perpetually distinguish herself

6

why choose a career as a poet?
career? that implies financial reward
i have been paid in many jobs
but practically speaking
despite spending a lot of my adult life writing
money only comes intermittently to me from poetry
and being invited to this writers' workshop
is like winning the lottery

even though here i am wearing a poet label
the moment your backs are turned
it washes off
at present it is my partner far away on the other side of the world
who supports me
then i lifted up my arms and said: 'thanks be to him'

7

why do i write poems?
because the novel is harder
takes years longer
and apart from the Jane Austens among us
who can fit writing one in around other things? i take my hat off
to these novelists
however if i get the gist of a poem noted
i can keep it to finish later
once i sit down and start typing
i'll look up after five minutes
and find several hours have passed in the space of a moment
which means my work goes on
outside time
i like that into a world of busynesse
my poems come between the dot and the stroke

8

then i decided this piece was finished
so before i went to prepare dinner
i got up from my screen and took a walk on the racecourse
where i remembered something else
how after i spoke
you stood and talked in another one of those languages i haven't learnt

beside me there came a murmur 'he's saying
good things about you'
but what were they? i'll never know
then we all went back onstage for the official photo
and when it was over five students mobbed me
for individual shots and autographs
standing on the podium with them i thought
this is too conspicuous
what about the men? i better get off
but until those girls were finished
i didn't