

# *DINNER GAMES.*

*Duncan Ley*

## I. Entrée

Attention. A tension.

Hornby: that jolly girth of jellied thunder,  
Capers and prances, he comes to plunder,  
His razored mind as sharp and crisp and fine  
As his asparagus-scented urine.  
Battered, bowler-hatted, waistcoat splattered,  
Plattered, finger-fatted, greased and matted,  
His merry dancing death, his screw-tape prick,  
Faust-fed, soul-starved, his wonderment thick.

Makepeace, this solemn mouse of quiet reserve,  
Whispers and worries, he comes to observe,  
His towered frame is gaunt and wisp and bland  
As the Babylon scars upon his hands.  
Sallowed, wrinkles farrowed, coat dust-wasted,  
Narrowed, eyebrows arrowed, tongue untasted,  
His tear-encrusted beard, his ice-cream skin,  
Christ-bled, soul-starved, his wonderment thin.

And upon the wintered common they fought -  
Or at least that's what our history taught.

Hornby takes a merry turn, skipping over rhyme  
*Makepeace my fellow, I haven't got time*  
*To skewer you with the obvious: it's*  
*Odious. So just grant me death and crime.*

Makepeace sighs, shows his hands to the sky.

Hornby gathers fire for the funeral pyre.  
*Come old chap! You won't give me what is mine?*  
*Very well, that's swell, let's see what we may find...*  
And from his mouth slips butter and lime.

And a lacquered smile  
To scare the dogs.

## II. The Lost Art of Chain Smoking

M. *If it please you, I shall sit a while.*  
H. *Oh no, come see what I've made of my time!*  
*Not a drop wasted. You'll find – oh, you'll find*

Breakfast Time! Eggs bubbling in the fry pan  
Laid on larded toast amongst the lip-sticked tea  
Pepper pots and plastic flowers  
Ashtrays sprouting butted towers  
Tears of yellow yolk dribble down the chins  
To be wiped away by busy napkins

*'tis hot in here turn the heat down please my dear*

fools  
the fools  
their football pools  
don't they know  
the salt of the earth  
destroys all that grows?  
their silent aunts  
gum-sucked sweet sisters  
their black-eyed boys  
A seething fester  
A poker hand  
Of fools.

Dinner Time! Now eat your fill.  
The chit and the chat the chewing of fat  
He carves the breast from the carcass  
Places it on the sideboard  
For later

(saucy jack)

Along the watchtower they squat  
To smack their lips and crack their teeth  
Sardines and soup and roasted spam  
And bread and melted cheese and jam

*Cost a lot that did! Think we're made of money?*  
*Think your Pa and me piss cream and honey?*

So come on lads, come on!  
Punch on boys, punch on!

And let the bones be licked and picked clean.

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He was always a polite pleasant chap,  
Liked a spot of quiet digging  
In his garden.

Quite close to that Rose down the road, I heard  
(bitch the whore the cunt)  
No, she went away last month – to Inverness, yes  
But not a postcard, mind! I find  
Those bosomed types can be a bit... uppity  
(rip rip rip you apart)  
Dirty blood in her veins that type, too ripe  
Who –

*M. Oh! Too easy too dry is that all you proffer?  
H. Just teasing, testing, don't want you resting.  
Here's a different offer.*

Mahdi sells news  
onions  
cologne aspirin milk frozen dinners  
dried coffee detergent  
fags and matches  
(tampons condoms on the back shelf  
hidden by cheap magazines)  
And a wife:

Brown eyes and cumin skin wait behind the counter  
Tremble with the tinkle when the door opens  
And even when change is required  
Will not look up.  
When the light fades she is allowed to lock the door  
And return the short walk upstairs.  
Her mother told her  
Happiness  
Can be judged by the smells of a kitchen  
So the wood-chip walls are stained cinnamon  
Saffron radish coriander marsala coconut.  
This morning's spiced porridge sulks in the sink.

From the bedroom Mahdi looks upon the street  
And with a smile imagines holy fire  
Descending  
To smite those who curse his happy existence.

M. *To hate yourself is to turn from the sun and submerge  
In the dark of Judas comfort.*

H. *Oh please.*

(and under the scarlet boughs they fought -  
at least that's what our history taught)

Tea on one knee, cake on the other,  
They sniff the air and one another,  
Purse raspberry lips and grip  
On each other's gossip

- Oh, those Gracchi boys!
- Dreadful. Absolutely dreadful
- I warned their mother, warned her for years
- Wouldn't listen, never listened
- Bright futures both. Not now, of course
- Dead in the gutter, I hear
- That'll teach them!
- Comes from helping those on the other side of the street
- They don't warrant it, I tell you
- We will always have the poor with us
- George always said:

Line another's pocket only after your own  
Then you eat meat when your neighbour wants bone.

*'Tis hot in here  
Turn the heat down  
Please my dear*

please

### *III. The Reading Man*

Look! They feast on sauced books  
and pickled saints!  
How quaint.

In the hallowed halls the masters saunter  
As goose-white boys are battered for slaughter:  
Necks quickly tied then steadily fed  
A blackboard diet: green eggs and hamlet.

(and a little touch of buggery in the night)

Brandy on a leather couch:  
Behind the bike shed – do you remember?  
Dear Douglas, always nicking fags  
From his blind old dad  
We'd chain-smoke them all – the lot!  
To think we were never caught.  
Hmmm. Yes, yes. Those were the days.

(all they that love not tobacco and boys were fools)

There were the days. Yes. But be not proud  
Though some have called you mighty,  
For you are not done yet.

And on his bed, the last queen of England.

He thinks of all the perfumed boys  
Who hastened him a lonely death,  
Defeated by their tired ploys  
They chase to play upon his last breath.

Beside him the wallpaper waits entrapped  
For the last bon mot to be unwrapped:

Either I go or –

go you may go now  
let the pen fall  
into the blue tent  
and champagne clouds

Just leave the stars above the gutter  
Shining.

Hornby stood  
Munched on egg  
Spat shell  
In a basket  
Of heads

*Raram facit misturam cum sapientia forma.*

and if your widowed ear finds  
more poetry in the stars than the earth  
why then not wish for death?

Alone we stumble into the arms of others.  
Mother Father Friend Lover.  
We say don't believe,  
Having done everything.

The Parson sighs: I would rather choose good  
than have it commanded of me.

and turns back to the altar.

## *IV. The Emperor*

Headlights tiptoe through the dawn  
The iron bells clang their morning call  
And the roads swim in the grey milk of fog.

A trolley his home a man shuffles past:  
How brief time makes a relic of the young.

From brown paper bags faint eulogies come  
How drink becomes art and vice befalls grace,  
Yet empty pockets flap idle and dumb  
Having fed the cobwebs that vein the face.

And all save the lost are lost in their dreams.

We married in spring; a sweet kiss over  
Bones that lay under the cool quilt of earth.  
Parted, we may meet beneath the clover  
Our skin-stripped skulls bearing death's grinning mirth.  
And if you were there my bones would not know  
That silent lovers we will always be:  
My flesh long given so the flowers may grow;  
Only the worms in my ribs to know of me.  
Yet before I die, to know you'll follow,  
Forced to discard your other paltry loves,  
Making all your promised passions hollow,  
Leaving in rest all your cherished above.  
So smile, in remembrance of our dismay:  
Soon we'll not care in the cold light of day.

Yes it were my favourite year  
Of you and I

the snow crunched under our footfall hand in hand across the common  
a happy dog running ahead sniffing the crisp white ground  
we held and breathed the pillowed air rubbing mittens on our red cheeks  
sharing that old jumble-sale scarf watching the sparrows fall  
past the warm cottage we wanted down paths flanked by fennel and rue  
we smile beneath the railway bridge then without time walk home

What did we say?  
That is the first to go.

What did we *say*  
something of – no,

but I turned to you  
and if it be  
*not now, yet it will come*  
you kissed to me

then we walk on,

but you you you you you

oh god you

*iseeyouiseeyouiseey*  
*ouiseeyouiseeyouis*  
*eeyouiseeyouiseeyo*  
*uiseeyouiseeyouisee*

and leave me behind.

\*

Ozymandias returned  
but for weeping did not stay long.  
The banks the streets the blood-stained marches  
The flesh the lights the golden arches.  
Our works our Might he looked upon  
and quietly despaired.

Glistening are the palaces we build.  
White is the tyrant now.  
Where is the comfort of the abyss?  
It is time we were looked upon.  
But not these white walls these many-squared asylums  
These flickering needled lights.  
How cruel to see the blue  
Through windows that won't open.  
So to escape we stare  
At the screen and dream.  
Yet if keyboards were pianos  
We would reduce a symphony of words  
To a policy of noise.

Hungry, he watches us fools.  
Slithers between the cubicles.  
Pops up with a joke a harmless crack

A wink a tale a pat on the back.  
He wipes his hair breaks into song  
*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate!*  
And by god we all sing along  
Fighting to be heard  
Yet none know the words.

Listen.

*If it gets too much: life's new ballad*  
*Just whip up a power-lunch salad!*  
To you, madam, this I say: Ham & Cheese.  
Now fuck off back to your orgasm, please.  
And why do you still paint your face  
And wrap your gifts in stockings  
When tears spot the beer heads  
And one tear is enough to slip on?

There are so many lights out there,  
so many lights. Each a lighthouse  
Drowning in the concrete waves.  
And we pass them by.

The sleeper turns to his lover and whispers:

One might have the fortune to live a millennia  
And still not know the soft touch of moss  
Upon a rock,  
Or the depth of an echo  
In a nameless place.  
And now the sea is night and night is the sea,  
Floating above us,  
And the stars are fish and we  
We all:  
    mere bones on the bed of night's dark ocean.

He lies  
In his padded cell  
And wishes we had but one neck  
And for the sword  
To fall.

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*You haven't said much, have you old boy?*  
*Give me something, or lost your touch?*

Nothing to say.

All is what it is.  
Gambol and caper and gloat all you like.  
I will not rhyme for you.

*Oh come! Can't you see!  
You need to defend reality!*

Nothing to say.

After all is said and done  
It is what remains.

Hornby scratched his eyeball  
*So where's the beauty the meaning the All?*

Makepeace  
he smiled.

Come! Take a seat!  
good god *let's eat*