

GHOST METHODS

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Síofra McSherry

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ON SEAN BONNEY

Death is ours. Everybody knows this. But Sean Bonney knew it truly: His final book, *Our Death*, written in Berlin between 2016 and 2019, reads like a fractured prayer. That's easy to say, with that title, but how can you read these last poems and not think suicide note. One even contains a testament, Sean giving away the weird treasures of his life to friends and enemies. The poem, "From Deep Darkness," ends in heartbreak: "I love you all so fucking much."

He wrote about his friends a lot. Now all that his friends can do is write about him. Or to him. Address him as if he was still here. Sean. Are you okay?

Other poems, the ones he's probably best known for, are contemptuous, unforgiving, brutal. Terrorist poems slashing Tory throats. How can so sweet a man hold so much hatred? But then you saw him perform and understood. He spat at law enforcement, railed against the firmament. The FIRMAMENT. I want to say: Let that sink in. But this is not an expression he would have used. I've never seen someone so sickened by clichés and yet he understood them like Fassbinder understood *schlager* music. The painful hope that's confined in false words and false gestures. Rereading Sean's books and pamphlets now, from the forbidding experimentalism of *Blade Pitch Control Unit*, *The Commons* and *Happiness* to the bitterness of *Letters against the Firmament* to the dark sincerity of *Ghosts* and *Our Death*, I think he was searching for a language of true intimacy: a language that can never be taken away from us, not ever turned against us.

Us? Perhaps another cliché, but one that rises from deep sources of affection. You should have heard him talk about the people he loved. He was fiercely protective of his friends, their transitions made him tremble with fear and care. Always worried about people's bodies too. What goes in and out. Evil substances and kind words.

Sean was a political poet because he knew which strange powers can seize a body. As an epileptic, he was viscerally acquainted with unholy, fascist gods. One of his most frightful poems is about a dead man lying on the pavement at Kottbusser Tor, head smashed open, "maybe he'd jumped from his balcony." Sean always dismissed straightforwardly biographical readings but this had

happened to him. It was as if he saw himself lying there. As if he foresaw himself in his own poem.

How strange that Sean died before a pandemic that seems to have crept into his writing long before it registered anywhere else. When two of his friends meet now, I guess they sooner or later ask themselves how he would write about our present collapses.

I want to say violence and tenderness, because he haunted himself and he was loved for it. He possessed his body like a demon. That's violence. He inhabited his body like a friend. That's tenderness. I don't know what to say about the drugs. No two people are addicted in the same way. I know it made many of us sad. Being asked "Are you okay?" meant the world to him (is what he told me). It meant a life to him.

One night in his vertiginous Kreuzberg apartment, listening to Bowie, we talked about tattoos. He was contemplating a stick and poke "We Are The Dead". Nice, I said, but what if this becomes the title of a successful zombie sitcom? Ugh, he said, I need to spell it "R" then. Some of his best poems respell song lines and titles. Thrash Me, It Hurts to Be Murdered, Black Cocaine, Anywhere Out of the World, Where Have They Been, Under Duress, Let's Not Chat About Despair. Throw a rock against the road and it breaks into pieces. I remember the Xeroxed pictures of famous singers, poets, artists glued to the naked walls of his apartment. Bowie Dylan Fassbinder, suddenly looking like abandoned heroes in abandoned buildings. His Bowie was the angular madman, the tortured distortion artist, who cuts up sentences and sounds so they can be fabulous again. His Dylan was the Dylan of Idiot Wind, the vengeful con artist who wants to turn his back and scream at love because what can you do? It's a wonder we can even feed ourselves. His Fassbinder was the delicate comrade, the beat child, the raging tyrant of desire and devotion. Sean's office at Freie Universität had these pictures too. They made our instituted make-believe world look strangely transitional. He was the friendliest presence in the building, agendaless. So forgiving of our conceits, so generous about his other worlds, a guest, a ghost. We should have sealed his office after he died. Should have kept the bookshelves stacked with anarchist flyers, the walls adorned with Mustapha Khayati Sophie Scholl Amiri Baraka Pier Paolo Pasolini Anita Berber Katerina Gogou Diamanda Galas. These were his people.

In the first surreal months of the pandemic, I rewatched all Fassbinder films on old pirate DVDs from China with Mandarin subtitles you couldn't turn off. During lockdown, this was a special national nightmare. Like picking German scabs until they bled glamorous patterns. It also felt like Sean was there, in every melodramatic camera angle, every piece of cold or frantic dialogue. Now I'm thinking: Bonney in Berlin – that was the insomniac infiltrator who short-circuited the madness of two pathetic countries, England and Germany, rival business monsters from the same pale hell. His Berlin was not the cool capital of the expatriates, not the poor-but-sexy joke of a slogan. (It wasn't my Berlin of faculty meetings and cocktail bars either.) He didn't want to die in Britain, that's why he left London, didn't want to die in Berlin, I think, but who knows. Athens would have been next, failed Europe's beaten heart, where he found a gorgeous new scene, another underground metropolis. "I'll tell you all about it when I see you," his last text message said.

It didn't happen. No more messages, no more get-togethers. But his friends will keep talking to him. As good as we can. Siofra's *Ghost Methods* is no monologue. Her "Series of Posthumous Discourses with Sean Bonney" reaches out to an absence that is real. I want to say: touching. On the other side of these outraged and beautiful death poems, he is there.

Frank Kelleter
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