

Bloomsday 2020 - Remembering Martin Johnston

In my final year at Sydney University I worked part-time as a ward assistant at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. My eldest sister, Philippa, who became a nurse after graduating with first class honours in anthropology, suggested I give it a try as a summer job. The experience left me with an abiding respect for nurses. One night I was paged by a nurse who asked me to keep one of her patients company. I saw myself, head to toe in my all-white dentist's uniform, reflected in the window opposite me when I entered the room, the lights of the city beyond floating in the darkness with my blurred figure. The room was partially lit. The man was not old. He was highly agitated and sweating profusely and his wrists were tethered to the bed frame with rope, which was unusual (disallowed now). He asked me to take the \$20 note on his tray to the bar 'just over there' and bring him back a drink. There was no \$20 note and no bar. What struck me about this man was his accent: his manner of speaking was not that of the usual clientele of this particular ward. He told me he attended a Montessori school and had spent his childhood on a Greek island. Maybe there was a name tag above his bed, or maybe the narrative started to feel familiar, I can't remember which, but I said 'you're George Johnston's son.' Martin Johnston, even in the discomfort of alcoholic delirium was annoyed, as if he'd heard this helpful observation before, just occasionally.

After being a war correspondent, George Johnston worked as a Fleet Street journalist. In 1954, George Johnston, his wife, the writer Charmian Clift, and their children Martin and Shane, moved from London, firstly to the Greek island of Kalymnos and then to the island of Hydra, where Johnston wrote 'My Brother Jack.' The island was something of an artists' colony in the 1950s and early 1960s. A young Leonard Cohen and his 'muse' Marianne Ihlen befriended the Johnstons. Years after Hydra, Cohen spoke of their influence on the development of his own writing. I studied 'My Brother Jack' at school. 'My Brother Jack' would feature in most lists of great Australian novels. George Johnston's (aka David Meredith) quest to become a writer resonated with me. I saw his brother Jack in my mother's uncles, quiet heroes of campaigns in North Africa and New Guinea who never marched on ANZAC Day.

After chatting for a while, Martin's mood brightened. He forgot the tethers on his wrists. I took his hand before leaving his room and promised to come back and see him on my next shift. Martin looked up and said, 'yes, I would like that.' I imagined meeting Martin in better circumstances, to continuing our discussion in a cafe in sunny Glebe.

When I returned Martin was not there. He had suffered an arrest and been moved to Intensive Care. I went down to ICU, where there was a woman wearing a woollen shawl, keeping a vigil by Martin's bed. She said she had come from the Blue Mountains. She cradled several books in her lap which she said were Martin's works. She asked me if I had read Martin's poetry. Martin lay unconscious, naked to the waist, his chest rising and falling with the meter of the breathing machine.

Martin Johnston did not regain consciousness. He was admitted to RPAH on 16 June 1990. When the doctors in Emergency asked "Martin, what day is it today?" he replied "Bloomsday," a response which baffled them. Bloomsday, 16 June 1904, is the day Leopold Bloom, protagonist of James Joyce's 'Ulysses' travels the world in a day around Dublin. Martin published one novel, 'Cicada Gambit,' a tale of the city with a chess puzzle embedded in the plot, in which one of the characters, an English professor, seeks to recreate Bloomsday around Sydney.

Later, having told my parents about this incident, they gave me a copy of 'Cicada Gambit.' Just recently, among the many books in my mother's study, I found 'George Johnston: A Biography,' written by Garry Kinnane, and in it an inscription from me to my parents marking Christmas 1986.

On Hydra a young Martin Johnston became fluent in modern and classical Greek, a skill he later used to translate Greek poetry into English and subtitle Greek films for SBS. He taught poetry at University of Technology Sydney and was said to be an excellent chess player.

Hospitals, especially big city hospitals, are the setting for the final act of countless tragedies. Working in a hospital teaches you to see without looking. There was a man, a baker, who brought in a large box of cakes and pastries on Saturday mornings for the nurses who had cared for his partner who died from AIDS. He did not linger at the nurses' station, he just said hi, dropped the box off and left. If you were with this guy in the lift, he would have looked a like a man delivering cakes and pastries from a Newtown bakery.

I read more about Martin recently. There is a website of his poems. Martin went back to Greece to live in the late 1970s, as if to be seeking to reclaim the innocence and apparent happiness of his childhood on Hydra. The Presocratic philosopher Heraclitus warned us that we never step into the same river twice, because both we and the river have changed. I can't help thinking Martin was dreaming of Hydra the night I met him.

Paul Bourke, 16 June 2020