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# 'Photographic disasters'

**Alec McHoul**

*The word neither diffident nor ostentatious ...  
The common word exact without vulgarity,  
The formal word precise but not pedantic. (Eliot 221)*

**1**

I want to know whether it's possible to photograph a disaster.

A personal disaster.

To photograph is to write or draw with light.

To produce a permanent visible image by the action of light *or any other* radiant energy.

Is it possible to write a personal disaster with light?

To write lightly?

With the light emitted from a computer screen?

Or from a slide projector?

Or with fire?

**2**

*Lancaster, 27th July 1974  
City of the red rose*

We were married on a rainy day  
The sky was yellow  
And the grass was gray  
We signed the papers  
And we drove away.... (Simon)

Standing in the queue at the Lancaster Co-op supermarket.

Holding bunches of red and white roses for the wedding guests.

He's going to be late for his own wedding.

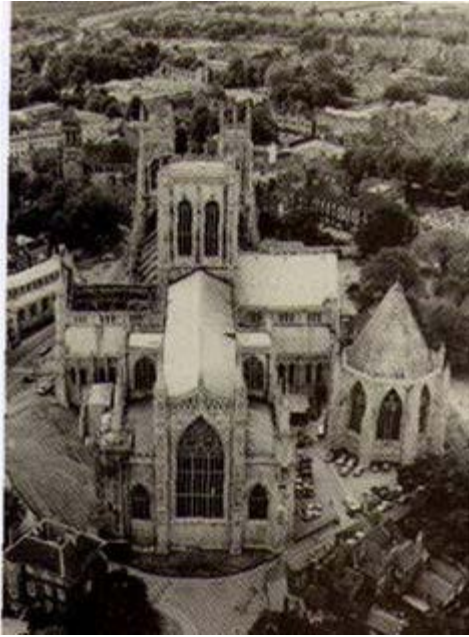
If not his own funeral.

Lancashire ladies in the queue let him go ahead when he explains.

3

*York, 11th July 1984*

*City of the white rose*



The Minster, looking as it always does.

A splendid, detailed, elaborate, architectural wedding cake.

Stone appearing so soft, it looks like icing.

Like you could cut it with a knife.

Slice it East to West along its length.

Making two symmetrical halves: a North and a South half.

Half each.

Two sides of a marriage.

Like two half crosses.

The kind of charm that lovers exchange, each wearing a half on a chain around the neck.



Equal halves.

But now it looks like something is missing.

The South Transept appears to be open to the sky.

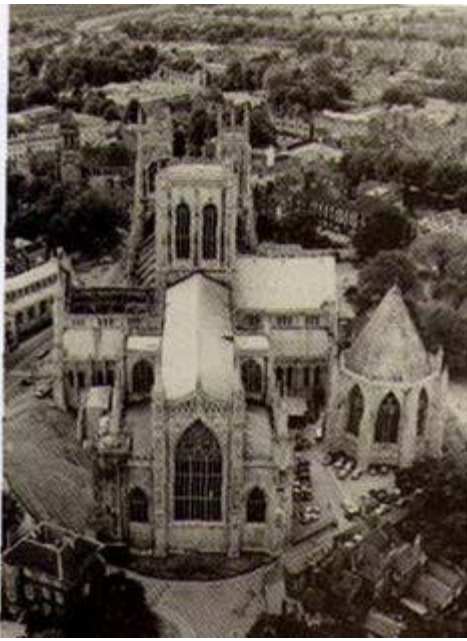
It looks roofless - rough and ready - perverse - ruthless, even.

Uneven, asymmetrical.

If one of them were to be allocated the Southern half, the arm-piece of his or her half-cross would be partly missing.

Some sort of prosthesis, repair, would be required.

The sting of reason  
The splash of tears  
The northern and the southern  
Hemispheres  
Love emerges  
And it disappears.... (Simon)



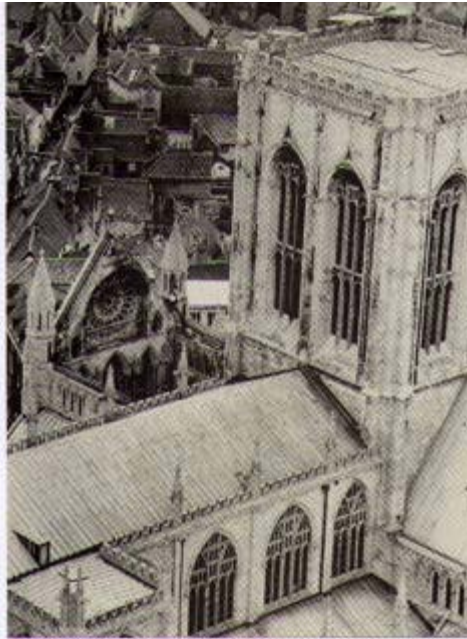
On returning to this frame, we can see now that the roof was missing all along.

The institution is incomplete, dismembered on this South side.

What looked before like an external wall is in fact an internal wall thrown open to the sky.

It has no right to be there in any photo of the Minster's exterior.

We have been fooled - sold a dud - a building with a leaky roof, open to the weather.



Looking from the North-East, straight into the hollow of the South transept.

The famous Rose Window now looks precariously balanced in its thin slice of wall.

It looks scarred, scared of falling, coming apart, crumbling like a piece of cut cake from the main body of the cross.

The rose trembles in the summer wind.

A red and white rose, made of smaller red and white roses.

Broken open to the sky, topped by a cross.

Some disaster has befallen this sacred, scarred, institution.

This is exactly the shot that the tourist postcards always show of the magnificent Rose Window.



Except that it's always, until now, been an interior shot that one takes from the opposite platform, high in the South Transept.

The Rose Window appears here in a context it has never been seen in before.

Normally the daylight is cut out by the roof, as it is by the shell of a camera.

So that all the light is concentrated, focussed on the lens of the Window itself, lighting up its red and white roses for the postcard photographer's camera.

Here it appears, the morning after, in the cold light of day, dull and blackened against a dull York summer sky.

The morning after

After his first foray into the unknown land of infidelity

He could get the stain out of the sheets

But not out of his conscience

Perhaps, now, I have begun to photograph my disaster.



Almost, but not quite.

What is it about photographing disasters that makes them so prominent in collections of photography, and in the estimation of critics?

Is it simply a carrion-like desire to be there at the kill?

Or is it the attraction and saleability of the elusively rare, the almost unattainable?

In 1908, the influential British newspaper art editor, Hannen Swaffer, wrote as follows, criticising photographers for failing to be immediately on the scene of disasters:

A railway disaster occurs in an important town; there are, say, four professional studios and forty or fifty amateurs in that town, but not one of the whole company can grasp the fact that there is a newspaper market for views of the disaster. The editor must race his men off in a special train for any remainders of good views. (Swaffer qtd. in Hiley 32)

The disaster was - and perhaps still is - precisely what tries to escape photography, to escape becoming a fixed image in predictable time and space.

Like a previously unknown star which flares up briefly in the night sky and is gone again before it can be captured on film.

Any photograph required a set up.

The equipment had to be brought into place.

It had to be brought to bear upon its object.

It required the intention, the motive, the will, to photograph.

It was almost impossible to set up the equipment precisely in a spot where a disaster was likely to happen: if only because a disaster is the sort of thing one can't predict with that degree of confidence.

Unless one is complicit in its occurrence.

In verbal language, one can write about almost anything.

The object does not have to be present.

One does not have to be in front of the object in order to represent it in language.



No experience necessary.

It's logical.

Photography is more *phenomenological*: the object has to be present.

That, above all, is why we trust photography.

We know that an object like the one we see in the photograph must have been in front of a camera.

To be there, it must have existed.

And to be in the photograph, there must have been a set-up - a contrivance to photograph.

We trust that particular contrivance as the mark of authenticity.

But the disaster runs against the logic of that rationality.

A dis-aster: against the stars.

A disaster runs against the clock-like predictability of the stars.

I can photograph the moment of the ceremonial event but not the game.

The wedding but not the marriage - or the divorce.

The nearest I could get would be a picture which went proxy for the whole game: a synecdochal picture which, perhaps, reminded me of it.

The moment of cataclysm tries to escape my photography.

I can only take pictures of the aftermath of the disaster - the Rose Window displayed against the sky.

This is the problem with disaster photography.

5



A disaster is unlucky, *unheimlich*.

But to be on the spot with a camera when disaster strikes is to be very lucky indeed.

So lucky in fact, that if one takes too many disaster photographs, one is in danger of being thought complicit in the



events.

It was a matter of luck that certain photographers, now famous - because of this fact - were on hand to catch the Hindenburg as it fell from the sky in flames.

This disaster made their careers.

The disaster photograph is a classically postmodern object: something which falls, falls into place as a matter of hazard, chance, the throw of a dice.

Snake eyes.

Ambs ace.

It is a case of accident, of the aleatory.

It involves a double accident: the event itself as accident and the accidental happening on the scene of a camera.

Two accidents must come into confluence.

The accident must be doubled: positive and negative at the same time: no excluded middle.

Hence, it is not susceptible to ancient and modern logics and rationalities.

One is simply accidentally lucky to be in the presence of the accidentally unlucky: to be around when events run against the ancient predictability of the stars.

Or on another reading of the etymology: to be in the presence of an evil star.

## 6

The prefix 'dis-' carries a number of possibilities.

(1) It connects with 'Dis', a name for Pluto and hence the infernal world: here it seems to derive from 'deus' and 'divus' and suggests an evil god or evil fate. *Chambers* gives this as its meaning in the word 'disaster' (366).

(2) It means splitting in two or splitting asunder, as in 'disassemble': here it connects to the prefix 'di-': twoness. It is the very name of a separation.

(3) It means 'not' or reversal, as in 'disestablish': here it connects with the prefix 'de-'. Combined with the second meaning, then, it suggests a reversion to an original state of twoness.

(4) It indicates a removal or deprivation, as in 'disaffect': this suggests that something which was in place has gone away or gone awry.

(5) It can be used intensively, to add force or emphasis, as in 'disgruntle', 'dissunder'.

An evil star.

A star split in two.

The opposite of a star.

A star which has been removed, gone away.

Something which is very much a star.

The Austrian-American photographer, Arthur H. Fellig, took the professional name 'Weegee', after the Ouija board. He had an uncanny knack of sensing when disasters would strike in and around New York in the 1930s and 40s. He always seemed to be on the scene at the right time, often seconds before some major calamity arose.

Arose.

Weegee even claimed to have photographed two disasters *before* they happened, including photographic "proofs" of his prescience.

The first case involved a street bum who is shown seconds before and seconds after he is hit by a car.

The second pair of photos shows a street corner just before and just after a gas main has blown up and destroyed it.

Later, of course, he maintained his reputation by tuning in to police radio frequencies.

Many people felt that he might have contrived some of the catastrophes he miraculously managed to photograph.

And the disaster photograph, by its own curious logic, by doubling fortune with misfortune, does seem to make a positive out of a positive and a negative: it can become a miracle, it can lead to fame.

Weegee writes:

The camera is the modern Aladdin's lamp. It has given me all the things I've wanted ... fame, fortune and friends. It is the easiest profession to get into because editors are always looking for something human, something different. The doors are always open to beginners and unknowns. Other photographers think the magic name of Weegee hypnotized the editors into buying my pictures. That's not so. To prove it, I tried a little experiment in London. Unannounced ... I went to *The Times*. They had never heard of me, much to my amazement.... I showed them some of my kaleidoscopic pictures. The editor stopped drinking his tea and said, 'By Jove, it's something new! Original. Refreshing'. And they bought my pictures and gave them a half-page spread. (Johnson 62)

The fame seems to have more to do with the pictures than with the photographer's reputation.

Or rather an instant reputation seems to derive miraculously from the good fortune of being on the right scene at the right time with a camera.

Who cannot still see the smoke trail from the shuttle exploding or the body hanging by its seatbelt from a tree in Lockerbie?

But just as postmodernism requires the accidental, it also seems curiously to require its opposite: the contrivance, the unnatural, the artificial.

It seems to want to play a game with the notion of authenticity.

And so the accident photograph may not be all it seems.

The photographer Robert Cumming is famous for his picture of a domestic accident, "It Was Around Dinner When the Ball Went Through the Screen" (1974).

It shows two frames in which a white ball is, firstly, just *about to* penetrate a flyscreen and is, secondly, just *in the act* of penetrating it.

A minor disaster, but a disaster nevertheless.

Cumming writes:

In this instance, the wood clapboard and window are a half-sized facade, a generic suburban front I'd built to function as a backdrop for a number of pieces. The person and interior are a slide projection of a photo I'd taken of artist and friend Bill Wegman in Chicago five years earlier. The ball is of styrofoam and stuck on a piece of wire anchored in the window frame and the window screen is a hand-drawn grid made by scratching the large eight by ten inch negative with a needle. It was one of a dozen similar "accident" photo tableaux woven into a broader fictional setting in 1975 in [a book called] "Discourse on Domestic Disorder". (Johnson 118)

This reminds me of the will to photograph in Peter Greenaway's film, *A Zed and Two Noughts*.

Oliver and Oswald, two twins, lose their wives in a road accident.

Somehow their work - which involves time-lapse photography of putrefaction in animals and fruit - becomes entangled with their grief.

They want to photograph the disaster: the accidental death as well as their grief over it.

In the final scenes, they try to become - themselves - subjects of a putrefaction time-lapse film.

After injecting themselves with a fatal dose of drugs, they lie down naked together on a board which is marked with the criss-crossings of a geometrical grid, used to measure the exact extent and parameters of gradual decay.

They have set their camera up at night in one of the fields of a private estate called 'Escargot'.

As they die, the camera comes to life, filming them as they begin slowly to rot.

But the disaster refuses to be photographed: a hoard of snails invades the mechanism, stopping the camera in its tracks.

The twins may rot in their remorse, but no record of that catastrophe remains.

We simply cannot tell what becomes of them or it.

What the twins forget is that they are duplicates, repetitions of one another and that the key to their problem of representation may lie in this.

Michel Tournier writes:

The twinless man in search of himself finds only shreds of his personality, rags of his self, shapeless fragments of that enigmatic being, the dark, impenetrable center of the world. For mirrors give him back only a fixed, reversed image; photographs are more deceptive still, and the comments he hears are distorted by love, hate or interest.

While as for me, I have a living image of myself of absolute veracity, a decoding machine to unravel all my riddles, a key to which my head, my heart and my genitals open unresistingly. That image, that decoder, that key is you, my twin brother. (Tournier 204-5)

8

By contrast with Cumming and Greenaway's contrived disasters, and against Tournier's warnings, less postmodern photographers seem to want to maintain the strong narrative capability of photographs.

They want to tell a story, a psychodrama.

And they sometimes want to represent such personal disasters as the withdrawal of (and from) love.

Perhaps these people could photograph my disaster for me.

Duane Michals, for example, writes in pencil around his photos, making them over into scenes from a personal narrative.

His "Letter From My Father" is a photo of a young and an old man taken in 1960.

Displaying the photo in 1975, Michals writes around the frame as follows:

As long as I can remember, my father always said that one day he would write me a very special letter. But he never mentioned what the letter would be about. I used to try to guess what family secret the two of us would at last share, what intimacy, what mystery could now be revealed. I know what I hoped would be in the letter. I wanted him to tell me where he had hidden his affection. But then he died, and the letter never did arrive. And I never found that place where he had hidden his love. (Johnson 117)

A letter which doesn't arrive from my father.

The father's diffidence about love: could this be part of my disaster?

Is my legacy a patriarchal training which includes an inability to think and write in the sphere of emotions?

It is something - some absence in fact - passed down from fathers to sons?

Is the disaster I want to name something like this: the fear of passing this inability on again, through the generations?

Ceaselessly repeating the legacy of the father; being another vehicle for the long march of patriarchy through history?

Being exactly like him?

In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Marquez says that 'a man knows when he is growing old because he begins to look like his father' (170).

In that book, the two main male characters both reflect on their relationships with their fathers.

Dr Juvenal Urbino's father, when he contracts cholera, locks himself away in a utility room in the local hospital, refusing to come out for fear of infecting others.

While he is there, he composes a long letter, telling of his own feelings: 'a letter of feverish love to his wife and children, a letter of gratitude for his existence in which he revealed how much and with how much fervor he had loved life' (112).

Miraculously, in this case, the letter *does* arrive.

It comes, however, too late for Dr Urbino to respond: his father is dead.

His father 'before that letter, had never revealed himself body and soul because of timidity, pure and simple' (113).

Thinking back on those events some twenty years later, Urbino 'knew that he was identical to him [his father], and to that awareness had now been added the awful consciousness that he was also mortal' (114).

The Australian folk-singer, Eric Bogle, has spoken of returning to Scotland upon the death of his father.

This father was a tough character too: one who never revealed himself to his son.

But while sifting through his possessions, Eric found a box containing some scraps of paper on which were written short poems which touched him deeply.

In his song about these events, "Scraps of Paper", the refrain goes 'Surely there must be something better; surely there must be something better'.

9

*Townsville, NQ, 18th July 1984*

Two days after leaving his wife, he called his father.

—How are you son?

—Fucking terrible Dad, I'm fucking dying.

—Don't wear your heart on your sleeve son, isn't that what I always taught you?

In another text, about *his* story-photo, Duane Michals writes:

I really don't care what my father looked like, and I'm sure you don't very much either. What is important, however, is what did transpire between us. That lack of communication, love, conflict is my legacy, my history. This is what matters to me, and this is what I want to share with you. I write with this photograph not to tell you what you can see, rather to express these feelings. We are our feelings. Photography deals exquisitely with appearances, but nothing is what it appears to be (Johnson 116).

Like I said: I don't seem to be able to photograph my personal disaster.

The disaster seems to involve not just events and objects but what Michals calls 'feelings'.

How can I bring my disaster into the realm of appearances?

Would it be a kind of writing on the frame that Michals does?

Would this be like a psychoanalytic encounter: bringing the inexpressible to the level of expression?

For example, could it be done by talking while we watch a rather arbitrary set of slides: say those of York Minster, the day after it set on fire on the 9th July 1984?

Would our talk be that kind of writing on the frame?

*On* the frame, notice: not inside the picture, nor yet in the space around it which is often called the "context".

Is there such a third, middle, space where the light-writing of my disaster could be written?

Can I ever make light of it?

Make it less heavy - carry less gravity.

Can I bring it to light?

That is: would it be possible to mix Cumming's with Michals' strategies?

To *contrive* the accidental photographing of my disaster?

To plug *artificially* into the double accident that turns any single accident into a miracle?

**10**

*Townsville, NQ, 16th July 1984*

She asks him to leave.

He packs his things in a suitcase late at night.

He drives over to a friend's house while the children are still asleep.

It would be easy, he thinks, simply to steer into the oncoming traffic.

But he doesn't.

He arrives and is fed intravenous coffee for a week.

He hadn't thought he'd cry when she left. But he cried. Snot by the cubic yard, eyes like red carnations. Presently, every time his left foot hit the ground walking he'd get a jolt of pain through half his skull. Ah, this must be what they mean by the "pain of separation!" (Pynchon 629-30).

The radio seems to play nothing but Phil Collins' "Against All Odds" for months on end.

He writes in his notebook the following lines from *The Four Quartets* and reads them over and over:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
Wait without thought, for you are not yet ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be light, and the stillness the dancing. (Eliot 200)

He will try anything, even the Tarot.

But the sixteenth card, The Tower, keeps cropping up in all the wrong places.

A sturdy tower, erected on a grassy rise, is struck by lightning. The castellated top of the tower is lifted by the blast and fire strikes deep within. Flames roar from the three windows and a shower of sparks rains down on all sides. Two human figures fall headlong from their stricken refuge. (Douglas 93)

This is the card of Apollo/Lucifer who brings light: 'the raw power of cosmic energy striking down unshielded'. (Douglas 93)

The lightning-flash was one of the attributes of Jupiter - the bolt of Jove ... a symbol of the overpowering light of truth in which all falsehood, and ultimately all duality, is destroyed. It is the flash of inner illumination which brings the freedom of enlightenment.

In French Tarot packs this card is generally entitled *La Maison Dieu*, or House of God....

The top of the tower is seen to have been struck off by a fiery bolt from Heaven. Symbolically the crown of an edifice frequently represents the peak of consciousness, revealing that in its flashing descent the lightning of pure selfhood, the primal energy of the psyche, strikes aside and rends all structures of the ego.

[The] shattering bolt negates all previous concepts....

The devastating impact of this fire can free the mind from its fetters and open the way that leads to the centre; but if the conscious mind is not prepared, not strongly built on firm foundations, it may end in catastrophe. In psychological terms the outcome will be dissociation, the division of the mind against itself.

## DIVINATORY MEANINGS

*Upright*: Suffering of an individual through the forces of destiny being worked out in the world. The apparent unfairness of natural disasters which strike all, just or unjust alike.

*Reversed*: The calling down of a disaster which might have been avoided. Unnecessary suffering. Self-undoing. (Douglas 93-5)

He also tries the game which Malcolm Lowry - that other fire expert - called *sortes shakespeareanae*.

You open the *Complete Works* at random, from the back, with the text upside down and point to a line: this is supposed to tell you your fate.

More than once he arrives at the following:

*YORK*: I shall not sleep quiet at the Tower. (Richard III, 3, i)

The tower is also the Tower of Babel, in Blake: Nimrod's tower of blasphemy 'which the jealous God stopped by confusing the tongues of the builders, therefore is the name of it called Babel, because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth' (*Gen xi:9*). (Foster Damon 33)

A tower of unspeakability, stricken by God into silence.

The crown, the head, cut off.

By a bolt of lightning.

The tongue cut out.

For every head you cut off, two more may grow.

[This] points to the mistake of trying to tackle dark Shadow problems in the outside world without coming to grips with them inside first. However hard you try to eliminate a problem from the outside world, if it is at root a psychological problem it will recur later in life in another form, possibly worse. Thus the one problem of relating to the father, for a boy, may recur in all relationships with authority later in life. (Chetwynd 266)

## 11

*Townsville, NQ, 27th July 1984*

It is (would have been) their tenth wedding anniversary.

Missed it by 11 days.

A postcard arrives from York, sent by a little girl who lives near there.

She is very young and barely able to write.





She has the same name as his wife - in fact she is named after her.

The back of the postcard reads:

Dear \*\*\*\*\*  
I hope you had a  
happy day I have I  
have been to the  
Jorvik Viking Centre  
it pongs in there  
from  
\*\*\*\*\*

[Caption: The cause of the fire which started in the roof of the South Transept in the early morning of the 9th July 1984 is a matter of conjecture, but probably was the result of a spectacular electric storm witnessed that night.

During the siege of York in 1644 the Minster was saved from certain damage by Lord Fairfax, an influential Cromwellian general and local nobleman.

Jonathan Martin, in 1829, deliberately set fire to and gutted the choir, allegedly to silence the organ which caused him great annoyance. He was discovered in Hexham and later found to be insane.

Again, in 1840 fire damaged the nave, this was caused accidentally by a workman's candle.]

The men that he talks to tell him:

- It's going to be OK mate.
- You'll find yourself another woman and everything will go back to normal eventually.
- But for Christsake, stop going on and on like this, telling us the same thing over and over.

He goes to Brisbane and stays with a group of women he knows.

He doesn't see a man for a fortnight.

They say to him:

- These are hard times.
- Say what you want to say to us.

—Say it over and over again.

—Eventually, you'll be able to see how this is going to change you.

—You have to use this time and this grief to become a totally different person.

—More like the person you always wanted to be.

—You can control this.

To see how disaster has struck, you have to look at the interior - not just at the outside of the building.

**12**

*York , 11th July 1984*



Underneath the missing roof of the South Transept.

The charred remains of the roof beams, riddled through with red and white safety cordons like crushed plastic roses.

The secular has come to invade the internal space of the sacred.

The roof has fallen in, blackened by the fire, smashed by the stone ground of the Transept.

Both a fire and a fall.

A fire of new love - a fall from grace.

'And the fire and the rose are one'.

Whatever was on the inside - whatever you could call it: the stifling air of sacred history, the musty and stale holiness, the sacred odour, dank spirit, the sanctity of the institution, its hallowedness, its official inviolability, its existence as a shelter, a place of sanctuary, a place to run to like a home - whatever you call that: it has passed out through the gaping roof, a day and a night ago.

It is a transgression, a violation of an historical institution.

It is also a liberation: freeing an imprisoned spirit, boxed in there so long, knowing no other home, but spoiling by the year.

Above the ashes is an artwork called "Calvary" - first erected in memory of the former choristers of the Minster who died in two World Wars.

### 13

*Townsville, NQ, 13th June 1984*

Midnight.

She tells him she has a new lover.

It is a close friend of his.

She will be going away for a while, in the time honoured fashion, 'to think about it'.

She says she feels 'damned to hell for eternity' because of her decision to end the marriage.

The next day is his birthday.

He doesn't sleep.

She buys him a red and white T-shirt with a guitar on it.

### 14

*York , 11th July 1984*



Made of fragile driftwood, this *pieta* is by the sculptor, Fenwick Lawson.

In July 1984, it was on loan for exhibition in York Minster.

Only a week before the fire, it was moved *into* the South Transept, just a little way along from the falling beams.

It was totally untouched by the fire.

This is its exact position of exhibition.

The woman is supposed to be standing erect.

The man is supposed to be lying, dead, on the ground before her.

The pieces are supposed to be cracked and withered.

It looks as if there's been a disaster here, but there hasn't.

Just a few sandbags, some charcoal on the floor and a few old bolts from the burned ceiling.

Everything else intact, as it should be.

The only disaster is the intended and traditional one: the *pieta*, the grief of the Mother at the death of the Son.

You can just about see the nail hole in his hand.

Perhaps even the accidental bolts are intentional?

The photographer, Derek Phillips, knew what he was doing when he framed this shot - he was creating his own picture of a miracle, a holy miracle, an act of God, sparing his own.

Just prior to the York fire, perhaps as the *pieta* itself was being moved into the South Transept, the Bishop of Durham, not far away, was arguing against the Virgin birth as a necessary article of faith in the Anglican Synod.

In fact Durham is in the episcopal province of York.

The tabloid press speculated on the fire being a form of retribution from God for the Bishop's heresy.

Is it possible that patriarchal institutions of training focus their effects of power most directly on men and boys - insisting that they become total, whole, unitary and autonomous subjects?

And in doing so, limit the scope of what sorts of subjects men can possibly be?

Is that why there are so few ways to be a man?

Is this why we grow up unable to cope with love or grief - sometimes unable even to use the language of interiority, of feelings and emotions?

Is it also possible that, at least comparatively, the same patriarchal institutions neglect the training of women and girls, making it possible for women to become many different kinds of subjects - a polysubjectivity by default, by omission - leaving the domain of interiority to them - while the wars are fought, the cathedrals built and the business empires established?

I don't know.

Is that why the men told him that, after the inexplicable crying, he would regain his masculine unity and go on as usual?

Is that why the women told him that the crying and the repetition of his grief would eventually lead him to see that he could be a different person, a person of a different order?

Is this the disaster I want to photograph?

The disaster of the compulsion to be a single type of thing - all exterior?

The disaster of confinement to (what E.M. Forster called) 'the world of telegrams and anger'?

Is the disaster my failure to begin to understand, let alone live, a life as a being with flexibly multiple subjectivities?

Is it that I can only read the disaster, the burning away of the roof of the institution, *as* a disaster and not as a miracle, a liberation, a splitting of the contained subjectivity into a million atoms as it soars through the gap in the roof, afire and free?

Can the lightning enlighten as well as destroy?

Is it that I can only see (and mourn) the wreckage to the physical building and not see (and celebrate) the immaterial substance which has escaped?

And for which I can never find a name?

**15**

*York, 24th December 1984: a special release*

He is running home, for all the good it will do him.

Like Burt Lancaster in *The Swimmer*.

Arriving in London, jetlagged to hell, his father meets him at the airport.

Once inside the car, the radio comes on with the ignition and begins to play "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover".

Making the only ever recorded gesture to his son's feelings, his father turns it off.

On a visit to York, a terrible sexual jealousy overcomes him.

He imagines his wife and his friend, her lover, in an erotic embrace.

On the floor of the Minster, are ancient grave stones.

Someone was buried there in 1669.

He looks at the 6 and the 9 - seeing both a pair of quotation marks and also a lovers' embrace.

He laughs a shuddering, profane laugh.

The relief, the spirit of his laughter, rises up and cannot be contained by the now-intact ceiling.

It dissipates into the winter air.

He buys a set of postcards in a cellophane wrapper, marked 'Special Release: York Minster Fire, July 9th 1984'.

He looks at the first three, taken by amateur photographers, of the disaster in progress.



16

*Disaster:*

- *noun:* calamity, cataclysm, catastrophe, debacle, misfortune, tragedy, upheaval;
- bomb, bust, dud, failure, fiasco, flop, turkey, non-achiever;
- chaos, damage, destruction, devastation, disorder, harm, havoc, hurt, injury, loss, mayhem, ruin, ruination, tort;
- affliction, anguish, care, catastrophe, despair, dole, grief, heartache, mishap, pain, regret, remorse, rue, sickness, sorrow, woe;

- debacle, defeat, downfall, overthrow, rout, ruination, thrashing, trouncing, undoing, vanquish;
- ill fortune, bad luck, evil star, malign influence, the worst.

*Miracle:*

- *noun:* blessing, bonanza, boon, fortune, gain, godsend, luck, serendipity, stroke of luck, windfall;
  - marvel, phenomenon, sensation, spectacle, wonder.
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