To Bernard Fairclough:  
the War having begun

Ray Watkinson

Well Bernard, now we hear the engine  
thrown into gear, the grinding wheels revolve,  
much as we heard them in imagination  
when, eighteen months since, or two years, or longer,  
we would predict (how calm in speculation!)  
the ending of this world.  
Jehovah’s witness  
kicked at my door last Sunday, told me simply,  
‘Armageddon is here.’ I said politely,  
‘I am not interested. I have read your pamphlets,  
and so, good morning.’  
And so goodnight! The shutter  
clicks, and a different angle on our retina  
builds stereoscopic horrors out of idylls  
we painted flatly, as ‘pure decoration.’  
We were not unprepared: we saw this coming,  
and yet how little wisdom can console. Forewarned,  
we were still not fore-armed. Though no evasion  
or loophole offered, and we saw the distant  
peaks toppled down in glaciers to the valley,  
we have done nothing, made no get-away  
(that was not for us) nor prepared defences  
against the avalanche. What were we few  
to build a barrier strong enough to girdle  
and bind the crumbling of the entire range?  
So with the rest we wait the imminent yawn  
that swallows us: and hope that in the spring  
when the floods melt and the denuded rocks  
rub shoulders through the dingy swirl of water,  
we may with Noah’s raven find a foothold,  
and like the great diluvian himself  
commence our reconstruction with a fitting  
sin-offering, oblation, sacrifice. Seeing the bow in heaven,  
we’ll hope with Noah for continuance  
of divine mercy: but remembering  
how he got drunk, and fell, let us keep sober.
We? Yes, three years ago I could say so. Since then our ways have lain apart. It may well be the pronoun is no longer so inclusive as then it was: bracketting new acquaintance with older friends, I may be straining friendship over the gaps in time, in mind, in feeling. We, may no longer bind, but separate, and though together in the Cyclops cave we were imprisoned, maybe your way out differs from mine. I’m for destroying outright, this Polyphemus: letting wander out to destruction, all his bleating sheep. Then, if his brothers come, and ask who did it, ‘No man’ shall not suffice. We will acknowledge the bloodstain in our skin; then let them wonder which way to turn, seeing their terror ended, and the great race of Cyclops one by one tumbled down headlong.

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