

undress

onions are thickest on the outermost layer
fingernail puncture and tear
away brown hunks like
buttoned jackets

underneath reveal pearlescent layers
slipped off by juice-stained
rubbery fingers

each skin shed strengthens the scent
that stings in your eye
acid tongued

If we're told to think of intimacy, we might think of ideas of familiarity, of friendship or of love; certainly a sense of closeness, whether sexual or platonic. I'm interested in a different kind of intimacy, the accidental transient intimacy between strangers.

Think of what happens when heterosexual men meet in a gym, or in the changing room. They might exchange an awkward glance, perhaps a brief touch as one attempts to edge behind the other on their way to the showers, like a child leaving the dinner table behind a parent who refuses to budge their chair in. Maybe these men meet in the gym quite a bit, their daily routines matching, and so come, eventually, to talk to each other – what kind of regime they follow, what part of the body they are punishing this week in order to help it expand. Perhaps one will compliment the other on the growth of his delts, or the tone of his lats, or something else from the exercise idiolect. Those two men, big as they are, straight as they protest themselves to be, are engaged in something incredibly intimate. They are encountering each other body-first, they are meeting at their bodies and building a relationship based on their appreciation of the other.

I think we have several encounters like this each day. It's easy to run straight into the realms of cliché when one writes this, but think of the cashier giving you your change in the supermarket, the woman who accidentally sits on the unfurled length on your coat on the bus, the dog-walker you enter into an awkward dance with as you both try to second-guess which way the other is likely to go. Each of these things is an intimate act.

Now imagine we stayed in that moment longer – that we didn't hurriedly pull the coat from under the passenger, that we looked into the eyes of the cashier as they handed over the money, that we kept shifting from foot to foot in front of the pedestrian – rather than ignoring or running scared from these small moments of intimacy, we'd sink further into them, open ourselves up to the possibilities that they might contain.

That's really what any art needs to do, to linger in the moment, to resist the urge to get out when things get uncomfortable, to see where the moment can take us. This feels particularly true with poetry, which is such an intimate art form. When giving a reading you can be on stage in front of a hundred people (normally five or six to be honest) and by the time you've finished they can know things about you that

not even your closest friends know. It's a swift-won, if shallow, intimacy. Think also of the reader, at home on their own with a new slim volume – it is both a solo exploration and an intimate encounter with one other, the author, on the settee, or in bed, or in the bath, or on the toilet.

That defensive thing you see a lot of young lads have these days is a barrier against such fleeting intimate encounters. We've all had that one dramatic friend who says something like "I'm not going to let my guard down so then I won't get hurt". The friend usually means it in relation to dating, or relationships, but if intimacy is something which happens on an hourly basis, with people we hardly know, then a different type of protection is necessary. So the big, bruising dogs, or the hands down the front of the trousers or that general swagger they might adopt, is all part of resisting that intimacy. If you model yourself as someone nobody would want to sit near, or encounter, then you reduce the chances of having to deal with a moment of fleeting intimacy.

And why would an encounter such as that be so scary? Because it offers the potential for the realisation that the life we have is not the life we could have had, or not the life we really want, or not the only potential version of our life which exists. Because intimacy means, on one level, seeing people exactly for what they really are, and if that someone is ashamed, or scared, or can't match up to society's expectations then it's best to keep it hidden (so the thought-process goes).

This isn't that same article you've read a hundred times, telling you to put your phones down, stop texting and get yourself out in the world to have these encounters; texting can sometimes feel just as intimate as real contact (ask any of the politicians who get themselves entangled in sexting scandals); intimacy doesn't have to mean the physical presence of someone next to you, it can just as easily be a sense of being known.

Of course anonymous or fleeting intimacy is easier; it doesn't have to withstand the petty undulations and seismic shifts that lifelong relationships have to endure if they are to keep growing. Yet they captivate me; the potential in each person, the beauty of each person. The job of any artist, and particularly poets I think, is to look at people closely, to examine them, to show them something of their own lives, their own world, and to take that, distill it, and offer it back to them.

I like the word "intimacy" because it's somehow smaller than a word like "romance", and yet feels as though it has more power. And isn't that the job of poetry, to take the big, the sweeping, the all-encompassing idea, and contract it into something that loses none of its power for being smaller? Each day contains a hundred intimate acts, and each of those could alter the course of your life.

Good luck.

Last train

the threeseaters have become beds
for the last workers out of Sheffield
one young man reclines as if in
a sauna when the heat has loosened
the body and the balls are at their lowest
what would it be to lay with him
naked as a navvy to lick him dry
of the day he's had to be still with him
as the night outside hardens down to coal

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