

Boy from Bratislava

Requiescat Ted Hughes

Summer has died of boredom. Ensigns are
Lowered in undistinguished foliage.
Customary displays of blazonry
Fiery and mettlesome have been deferred
This year awaiting clinical reports.
Ribbons are handed out for loyalty.

I sit down on a bench and clutch my stick
Scowling at the dreary English Channel.
Excuse me! It's an unfamiliar voice
Which makes me circumspect, anticipate
Jehovahs or drunks, anxious for my alms.
I must maintain my pedagogic face.

A student wants to know if I can help
Interpret some idioms assigned him
To keep out of mischief unbusied minds.
It is a boy from Bratislava sent
Here to achieve proficiency. I curse
My ignorance of brave newfangled lands.

Together we attempt to extricate
Some meaning out of speech in easy words
Or gestures which we both can understand.
One phrase disturbs me and I pressure him
Not to use the *Get lost!* vernacular.
Piecemeal the cryptic catalogue grows clear.

Of course, I say, groping for dialogue,
Your country has no . . . wavelets vex the shore.
The boy from Bratislava reads my thoughts
And thwarts me with a simple, *We have lakes*.
Summer has died of boredom and it takes
A boy from Bratislava to pre-empt
My idiom and wrap up our cold war.

The small talk slithers on a shingly tide
Towards shallow sentiments of union.
Wings of seabirds caution like semaphore.
I forget his memory holds little
Or nothing of the *ancien régime*:
His Eurograsp as tenuous as mine.

It's unmistakable he's much more keen
To chat about his favourite football club.
And I'm relieved that I too know a bit
About the game, appreciate the skills
And dare I call it *art* of Manchester
United. I can drop the well-known names:

The enigmatic Eric Cantona,
That great Dane Peter Schmeichel, Ryan Giggs.
The boy from Bratislava worships Giggs.
He wonders if I know a place where he
Can have his hero's name emblazoned on
His Man United shirt. I think I do.

I sketch a crude plan, indicate the way
Between McDonald's and the printing shop.
My slapdash dots and arrows seem to carve
The town in two: create a barbed-wire fence,
An arbitrary, spectral borderline.
I hand him my fanatical design.

Summer has died of boredom. Yet my screed
Of sloppy sentence, my ambiguous map
Have cancelled armistice. Persuasions of
Man united are transfigured into creed.
The boy from Bratislava checks his watch.
He waves an arm and says *Have a nice day!*
There rings no dissonance in this cliché.

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