

*Three Excerpts From*

# Ultrameta

By Douglas Thompson

*(Extract from chapter 3a)*

...Alive again, the hunger returns. This broken body, no matter how many times I try to lose it, always finds me washed up, spat out by the city after another day's use. And here I am: spread out on my back on the mudflats under a wild blue autumn sky, brought ashore at the estuary, the delta of the wide river; where it weeps so blindly, endlessly, into the boundless ocean.

And the sky above me; suffused with softening yellow light, leans already towards nightfall and forgetfulness. Who am I? I have the tattered clothes I lie in, the wind-torn streams of cloud overhead: but what to connect it all with? The puzzle has neither author nor answer; just its own inexorable progress, the cycle of destruction and rebirth, the first drops of blood smearing the clouds, approaching sunset.

I stand up and look about. Behind me the ocean, in front of me the city in the distance, on my right the long rippling estuary, grey and polluted, on my left the brown mud flats leading to distant woods. And there in the distance I see a figure running away; my eyes adjust and I trace their footsteps in the beach right back to this point. They must have been here minutes beforehand. I shout after them, and stagger forward. But they half-turn, and run faster, as if afraid of me. Then at my feet I notice they have left a canvas bag. I kneel down and open it up: there is a change of clothing in it. A black suit identical to the one I am wearing, but without the stains and holes. I look about again. Without a soul under this sky to see me, I strip and re-dress drowsily, still a little unsteady on my feet.

Like homing pigeons my new shoes seem to wish to return me to the city of their origin. Across the impossibly long, bleak mudflats, my feet carry me towards those looming shapes in the distance, the tower blocks and cranes. Above me, the sky is like a woven pattern of cumulus, a little too regular to be believed, while the mud below is curiously striated by the retreating tides. And across this I move, exquisitely small like the shuttle of a loom, or a solitary soldier ant, returning home late to the nest.

As I walk, the sky changes and the sunset begins. The bleak open space is strangely comforting to move through, some part of me wishes it to go on forever. And I want to go on walking too, the rhythm greatly therapeutic, but the walking brings the city closer, will bring an end inevitably, to my wilderness.

Eventually, I see the docks looming, cranes and canals. The criss-cross formwork of girders, blackened against the deepening blue of evening, as I walk on, my feet encountering cobbles now, and quayside mossy stones underfoot, discarded packing crates, rusting capstans, rotting frayed ropes. And everywhere: puddles, fragments of reflected sky like glass shards, lying dappled on the uneven neglected pavements. Occasionally: a shipyard still working, noise of men shouting behind the gates, glimpses of sparks flying to the ground, the sound of riveting and bolting. Huge steel cliff-faces taking shape, reaching upwards to the sky. But mostly the empty spaces; vacant yards, rotting iron hulls of dead barges, stunted tufts of coarse grass growing on the piers, rails of disused tramways criss-crossing my path.

And derelict warehouses: their facades like heartbroken faces; broken windows, empty frames, bolted iron doors below, skirts of meagre weeds where walls emerge from the cobbled roads. Rusting derricks guard lonely pier-heads, their jibs swinging like the hangman's noose. The sky is blood now, punctuated at last by man's ladders of steel, fragmented rungs reaching up to scrape the emergent crescent moon.

But just who am I? The occasional strangers that I pass offer no information: shipyard fitters, finishing work, gypsies scouring the wastelands for salvage. I look for clues, further evidence of civilisation. Gloomy brick chimneys smoke like the Victorian pipes of Sunday fathers, rotten timber telegraph poles lean, their wires dishevelled but still gesturing in lines towards lost horizons, speaking in semaphore about distances and emptiness. At last, in the distance I see a new station perched above the canals and quays; I weave my way towards it, negotiating locks, towpaths and bascule bridges.

The sky is ablaze. I climb the gleaming new metal steps upwards, as if into it all. Above the docks I join an ordered world of timetables and bolted steel junctions, sandblasted green glass, sparkling white louvres. Like some technological animal, the station perches over the wasteland, the steps and lift door like some icy proboscis thrust down into its dying jugular, paralysing the victim in economic stasis. I look along the rails and wires stretching into the endless distance and I am enchanted: by the music of technology and schedules, the romance of futurism. I hear the wires rattle gently: the start of an approach, from the gleaming glass tombstones in the distance, emerges the nose of a train: some wicked antennae seeking me out. The twilight above and around emerges from

behind the fiery clouds; deepening blue ink, too much; I close my eyes and breathe in the white dust of new concrete platforms, absorb the growing sound of approaching carriages; the mundane crescendo of rattling wires and rails, the resonant hum of high voltage. I stand at the edge of the platform with my head and nose to the wind, a student of technology; I wait patiently to be made its servant.

The doors open. I step up and suddenly find myself among the commuter crowds. The warmth, the rush of flesh is almost overpowering. We are forced to press all our bodies together. From no identity, I suddenly find myself with a hundred, all pressing in, all vying for attention. And yet they are all strangers, to me and to each other. Some read papers, others look out windows, look at the floor, close their eyes, listen to secret music from hidden places. Their clothes are all so different. I see different emotions: tiredness, hope, expectation, despair. Recollections of their days wash over them: I see it in their eyes, like shores where waves of memories break silently. Some feel disgust for each other, some feel attraction, take furtive glances at areas of bared flesh, or where concealed flesh is expressed by the hang or cut of cloth.

Above all, these people that I touch are in motion: have precedence and sequel; an office or a shopping trip they have left, a husband or child they are returning to. They are underway, bound. They have meaning, which they express in their confidence and self-composure, and that they celebrate with ornamentation; patterned ties, sloganned t-shirts, eye shadow, lipstick, swept-back hair, tattoos, earrings, studs. They exhibit chains of personal decisions, they are mobile art galleries of themselves. They are enterprises, open for business, but just what business precisely? Individuation, if we had to put a name to it. And I, who can lay no claim to a name or a personality, envy these shining icons around me who drip with signification. I wish they would spare me a gesture, a quirk, a trademark or two. Something unique that somebody might remember about me, something I might measure myself against eternity with, something that might convince me that I am alive today, might fool me into thinking I mattered for a second.

But already I know who I am in that respect; somebody who must die every night, who cannot live the sleepwalkers life, who cannot believe that life goes on unchanging in blissful boredom, secure and content. I envy the commuters their lives, their clothes of unknowing, their blindfolds, their mutual forgetting. But I know the thing that they cannot bring themselves to face. I live their nightmare for them, I swim in it. I burn in the fire and yet, every night I return unscathed, without a single witness to the miracle. That is my fate. But their eyes are warm. They look at each other and imagine laughter, contentment, making love. I look and see exotic animals, doomed to die soon abandoned by their health, discarded by their own kin, deluded as to their own importance, robbed in the end of

everything, even their dreams. I see their futures and I weep for them, for myself, and for us all.

The doors open, and without making a decision I am swept outwards with the jostling sea of bodies, I am a fluid with them falling through underground pipes. I flow upstairs, down ramps. I am disgorged into a vast circular hall, I spin out into the middle, slowing down, escaping the centrifuge. There are perhaps six or seven different directions, archways leading away, with obscure symbols and names over them. Everyone seems to know where they are going, but it is all chaos to me. Some queues form in front of various portals, newspapers being sold and tickets dispensed. I stand at the empty centre of this space and turn slowly, my face blank, my head empty, waiting for a sign, for something to make sense...

*(Extract from chapter 5b)*

...I can't begin to sum it all up, or to go into the details. Suffice to say, it was all handwritten, presumably by him, but all in slightly different hands as if years apart or in various states of altered consciousness, under the influence of mind-bending drugs or something. The gist was, this guy was convinced that he could not die and that each time he tried to he would just be shuffled sideways into another life and wake up with no memory of what had happened. This had been going on for years it seems, until somehow one day he spotted a clue that let him in on this secret, and then his whole life changed. He began employing dozens of people to secretly follow him, to keep copies of his notes and then pass them on to the next version of himself. He was constructing a message of who he was, of what he was, that other people would carry into the future for him. He knew he could not do it himself. He knew that one day he might disappear completely, and then nobody would be able to find him, but that then the manuscript would be finished and here's the real point: he didn't just reckon this was happening to him, he reckoned it was happening to everyone. Therefore, he believed that this manuscript would be the key to everything one day, and anyone reading it would be changed forever...

*(extract from chapter 13)*

...At last we come to a solitary house, surreal because everything around it has been removed. A grand little townhouse with an overgrown garden and rusting Victorian gates; very elaborate, I run my hands around its fantastical twists and volutes. A tram rattles by behind us and shakes the ground like an earthquake as we walk across the moonlit garden; and I notice the surface of a bright pond rippling: silver against the black hues of the ivy twisting everywhere across the ground.

Inside she leads me in semi-darkness up a broad staircase into an upper room with a bare wooden floor; its planks creak under our feet. Its walls, and the ornate cornice and skirtings, appear to have all been painted black, but over this I can dimly make out various white lines; astronomical diagrams and geometry theorems, like some intellectual graffiti. *I would have liked you to meet my father*, she says shyly, her eyes on the floor, and gestures to where he stands alone at the window, looking out over the view: of the great bone-hard city on the hill, the derelict plain here beneath it, and the dark ocean off to the right. The window is large, full-height like patio doors, but very old and subdivided into many panes by peeling mullions and astragals. The rough sackcloth curtains are fawn and laden with dust. Stepping closer I see now that her father is actually a white plaster bust, a heroic Edwardian torso, with a chequered waistcoat buttoned around him, perched on the chipped plastic legs of a tailor's dummy. But his head turns somehow, and his deathly-white features flex a little and he speaks in a weary, hushed tone: *Ahh you've come again I see, I expected as much, will she remember anything this time?*

*But father*, I say, *I've never seen her before in my life, although conceivably in my dreams, if I'm not dreaming now. And anyway, how do you know me?*

*Fool*, he replies. *Nobody knows you. Except maybe the inanimate like me and innocent children like her, before you close her eyes forever. Why must you torment us by coming here? Isn't it enough that the city fathers see fit to demolish our district stone by stone year after year in preparation for the next*

*stage of their great plan: constructing new glass palaces for the heartless ones, those faultless maestros of youth and savagery?*

Then I feel a hand on my left arm, and I see that his daughter has come to rescue me. I look at her soft living face and smile, then return my eyes to her father who is now just a lifeless statue again, grey and inert, but with a single droplet of moisture on his cheek which I reach out and catch with my finger. I turn and hold it out to her, but just then a cloud of the turbulent night sky clears, the beams of moonlight intensify, falling across the large empty floor of the living room behind us. As we watch, the floor changes into a silvery ocean, criss-crossed by tiny waves. Enchanted, we link hands and walk slowly across it towards the black rectangle of the open door to the hall, the moonlit water lapping over our toes.

She takes me up a further staircase of creaking timber; narrower this time, into a large attic with several skylights propped open to the night air. The room has been a library it seems, and I see shelves around the room but notice that most of the books are now heaped in a large pile in the middle of the floor. She grows very quiet and walks in front of me, reverently, kneels at the base of the pile and begins picking up one book after the other to examine.

I walk slowly closer to her from behind. She picks up each ancient book, wipes its cover clear of dust, reads the title, opening the first few pages, skimming gradually through the rest then sighs bitterly and discards the book onto the pile. Then she picks up the next one, on and on, *ad infinitum*. The process becomes frantic, her hands darting in agitation. I kneel down next to her and see that her eyes are filled with tears. I put both my hands over hers and close them over the book she holds. Her body stills and calms at last; its unexplained disturbance fading away. I pick up a few of the books myself, fill my arms with a bundle and take them over to one of the open skylights. She stands up and follows me. Our eyes meet, agreeing a sort of plan. Standing either side of the window, we take each book one by one, then whole piles at a time, and hurl them up into the starry night sky above us. Most just open up into the air, white pages fluttering like feathers, then fall off to the left, caught by the wind and bounce away, thumping off the roof slates as they fall to the ground below. But our eyes light up and we laugh together exultantly at this: that every tenth book or so hovers longer, flutters its white pages, then lifts off and flaps away into the night, flying towards the ocean and freedom. We laugh and shout as we continue, freeing and condemning books at random for over an hour, until the attic is empty.

At last we are left without a single book, just staring at each other, the old sadness returning. The night wind blows across our faces in the silence, the same wind: with its smells of dust and ruination and of the city beyond with its taste of stale waste and fuel. And then time breathes in.



With the same reverent, yet destructive gestures we applied to the books, we gradually remove each item of the other's clothing until we both stand naked in the white moonlight from the skylight, our feet bare on the rough wood of the attic floor. She closes her eyes and I place my right hand on her left breast. She becomes whiter and whiter as I press my hand harder and harder against her skin. Slowly, surprisingly, my hand moves through and into her chest, without any blood flowing. She is quite still, her eyes closed, as I find and then slowly withdraw: a living, sleeping bird from her chest cavity. I hold the bird in both hands -a dove or a wood-pigeon, stained with a little blood. Her chest is open. The bird springs to life, and like the books before it, I set it free into the starlit sky over our heads, as the wind gasps like a hungry giant.

I dress and carry her naked in my arms down the staircase to the garden, and she opens her eyes again a little, her face still very pale, saying *won't you stay tonight? Why are you going to leave?*

I carry her out into the overgrown front garden, saying *Because I have to die again, to choose a death, it doesn't matter which, but chose it before it chooses me. Tomorrow nobody can recognise or remember me. There are always little changes, or I can take steps to make sure that there will be, put my face in the fire until I find a new face, and then everything will be different again...*

As I bend down next to the pond, she sits up a little and glances at her chest ... *the wound...* she says, ... *open again... will it ever heal?* I run my fingertips over the tiny red edges of the slit between her breasts, sealing it like an envelope, then lean to kiss her. Then I lower her body down into the cold still water. She floats there just below the surface. I place my hand over her eyelids and close them, gather up the autumn leaves strewn around among the ivy, wet them each in the pond and wrap them around her body until she is entirely encased in dead leaves, in shades of red, gold, brown, and green. A dusting of moonlit frost now partially covers every frond and stem of ivy in a kind of skin. Perhaps the pond will freeze before daybreak.

I leave her there to catch a bus back into the heart of the city. I think I see a dim light emanating from the upper window where her father had spoken to me, but it might just be a trick of the moonlight...