

One-Sided Conversations

Rupert M Loydell

ONE-SIDED CONVERSATION

(John Berger, *From A to X*)

He never managed to watch the films he had borrowed, there simply wasn't a place in his routine, or the desire to do so. He lay in the bath reading a book of letters to a convicted terrorist in prison, messages of desire, of love, of everyday life when not confined to a cell.

A book about time passing and the possibilities of marriage, children, even a visit, fading away; the revolution failing and rebellion becoming history. There is quiet despair within the longing and mundane reportage, constructed happiness and frivolity notwithstanding.

It all shakes down to a one-sided conversation, missives mailed into absence, possibly arriving several months late, if at all, to slowly fill up improvised shelves in the small dark cell they are eventually delivered to.

OVER THERE

Bones of the dead, biscuit dough sculpted into shape then left to harden. Who shall we mourn or choose to let go with a shrug as acknowledgement that they've died? Sometimes the news does not hurt, other times we are reduced to tears and our world is changed, the future misty, our loss impossible to grasp.

I am used to making myself write, then shaping and editing later. Ideas and words bang into each other, but edges can be smoothed. It's good to make the reader jump about the page. I remember reading Dean Young's poems for the first time, wondering how on earth he'd got from over there to here.

If you let ideas come, it's easy to move on and ignore those no longer here. Crumble biscuits for the birds, honour the dead with life: the future is always there.

SERIOUSLY DEEP

I am trying to escape, see it as a new future, full of possibilities. She says I am running away, I know it is time to move on. We've overstayed our welcome, there is little left for us here.

I am worn out with it all, we can only measure the strata and think about the past. How strange history is, buried in the ground. How did we end up with these friends and lose so many others on the way?

Pass me the measuring rod, put your hammer away now; fossils are for the future, a faded photograph will have to do.

WHAT CONCERNS YOU?

How far away everything is.

How the seasons come and go.

How we cannot undo time.

All the poems waiting to be written.

All the poems wanting to be written.

Unused words on unwashed windows.

MY YOUNGER SELF

I listen to you stomp upstairs, fed up with homework and my nagging, on your way to bed. I'm already reading in mine, grateful for rest after a day spent being paid to not do what I want to do, to be somewhere else.

I try to make my dreams realistic, but it's impossible. I just want to sit in the garden on my own, eat lunch and dinner with you, write and paint, watch the sun go down and think about what I have done.

Life's been full but the future's taken away: friends dead, stupid politics and racism, bank accounts empty, however much we earn. Why do we let ourselves buy into bullshit, lies and discontent?

I stand beside my younger self, urging him to abandon common sense or ambition. Just be kind, be poor, do what you want to do.

ADRIFT

So why is reading in the morning with the curtains closed, so difficult compared to reading late at night? It's the same bedside lamp, same book unless you finished it yesterday, but now the bulb is dim and I can't find out how to hold the pages without my own hand's shadow on the text. It's a luxury, but not working.

The owls outside are silent and the thorn tree is no longer banging against the pipe. It sounded like we were at sea, ropes slapping on an aluminium mast, wind tearing past our cabin. The ship's cat is asleep on our bed again, my mate has gone back to sleep.

I am trying to finish books I have started rather than buy any more, but have lost interest. There was a time when webs of influence and reference made them seem urgent and topical but I did not make time to read them, they languish with bookmarks half-way through, piled on the floor.

Some things fade if you look away; I move on to the next, too inquisitive for my own good, playing in the shallows rather than diving in the deep end; swimming through mixed metaphors, uncertain where the ship is heading or how to sail the bloody thing.

MEMORY RESONATOR

for Luke

I'll stay awake all night listening to people talk with the creaking of the house, inventing ceremonies for the night air and the heroes of the space race, who were first to go somewhere else and then return.

I want my minutes back, the ones I lost emailing you about poetry and noise, the ones I buried under the house or painted over in my studio. I only wanted to dream, not make emotional connections.

Swimming in the rain reminds me of all the questions I want to ask the angels: whys and whens about how this conspiracy works. The damage is already done, says a wet figure under an ancient tree.

Look, I need to concentrate, to sustain and dissolve. I live in a poor part of town near to where you used to live but am a different breed. All that's left of me now is you.

LOOK THROUGH WATER AS WE LOOK THROUGH AIR (Cremona)

A small city full of emptiness, shadow absences in the sun. I follow my nose from church to church, damp frescoes to chipped saints: smoke and wax, electric candles and patterned reliquaries below heavy ceilings. Beyond brick walls, private gardens and tall trees, in the squares dust and benches for us to share. I am lost in sunlight and market debris, in soundscapes and sound worlds, home-made films, pigeon talk and cathedral bells, eurodisco and late night chat.

Clear dark sky sends cool air into my hotel room. Space and time and the visual, Bill Viola's slow-moving figures and the sounds of distance, of silence, the close-miked today; the sounds of steps and voices, cat purrs and paintbrushes, the echoes of a tunnel in time, characters who cannot see each other. Everyone knows someone else we almost know: zoom to rain on the windscreen, pan out to watch the clouds go by.

The market scaffolds itself into being, disappears by afternoon, so what remains can be swept up. Everyday perception is disrupted: five faces in a dark room, digital glitches and delay disrupt our point-of-view. I am above it all, immersed in it all, a visitor frozen in a hotel window, four floors up with no-one in the dark to pray for me.

Is it art or a documentary, a provocation or the avant-garde? What do we gain from drilling down in isolation? I like the shelves of found objects – glass and china, stone debris – in the museum of archaeology. Kingsley climbed the tower past the pendulum, swinging straight as the world turns. Traffic noise fades, frescos change colour, there are no questions from the audience. We are all immersed in sound and sunshine, concentrating on the view outside and the audio-visual equipment's hum.

AGAINST THE COSMIC COMPUTER/WEIRD FALLOUT

Light in the right location can either mean the object has been used to predict political evolution or that the mental feats of bees are forcing us to rethink what we know about intelligence. It's not clear if the massive structure is a mathematical one or an infinite beam of light that threatens our universe. Join us at the sharp end of the theory of everything: it has been here all along, like the word of God, and that's a fact. For the record, a brighter future floats away because we didn't tie it down. Hey you, astronaut, what if we changed our minds, can't wait? Can you make it back? Does mending memories help repair the past? Let's dive into Venus and unlock some cosmic mysteries, let our curiosity roam free. My brain is a ventriloquist, I am loved

but still not liked, cannot activate the circuits that generate the illusion I am smiling.

It is the day of the trilobites and they are late for the party. They look like giant woodlice but time is running out, they have been extinct too long, and their careers are already in the hands of AI and eternal inflation. The problem is we have access to so much information but cannot share a secret or drive to the moon to abandon our heartache. Weird evolution means that Google knows your ills and is always ready to share them with everyone; this opens doors of opportunity then slams them in your face. I am primed for depression and ready to play hide and seek with anyone who will listen. When did money start spending people? How can information bounce back out? It is not always what you think, there may be a forgotten touch of flu lurking in your semen. Your phone is betraying you, will not help bring heaven down to earth.

Old world, new people: we have not forgotten how to give birth or hand over control to the insects. Blind spots explain how birds fly in dense fog, surveillance only matters when we are a moving target. How on earth did our ideas ever get so popular? Why does space have three dimensions? And what came before the big bang or Burger King? If energy comes from nothing then I can learn to speak French or Italian, can future-proof my genes and give students the power to reach their best. Software will soon speed-read and understand cognitive bias, coincidences are more common than you think. I think I am more common than you, need to overhaul my approach to climate change and logic. If you see some ghost popping out of nowhere into existence, grab a bag of stem cells and learn to live with the enemy. Bat's really aren't to blame.

Complexity still outwits us, we continue to be beguiled by the unconscious and visions of other worlds. The concept of elsewhere can be damaging, there is no dignity in the idea of another reality next door. Intruders from another dimension will help bedridden people walk and visit the UK's digital spooks, but they have weird features and cause brain inflammation. They also don't exist. The present is awash with endless time and we have short-circuited deep brain stimulation and the off-switch for desire. Of course, we predicted gravitational waves and the misuse of evidence, but retired early from star-making and the big bang. Life may have begun in icy seas, but I prefer to talk brain to brain. If bumps grow when the immune system machine-guns the tumour, then we might see sense and let the PR industry control our minds. What price reason?

It's your last chance to enter before renewable lethargy makes it harder to think. Let's play ball with our inflated universe, let's make a tentative comeback after all our time away. Millions of people suffer so why can't we? Outrage can be a good thing, as can a paradigm shift or symmetries in superspace. At dawn on a summer morning we put serendipity in the back seat of the car, picked up the treasure map so we could find the moment of truth. We searched at thirty-one separate places and built a robot snake. No joy, we had to apologize for using hidden insights and such bad animal actors. Before all learning began the story of our cosmic origin went wrong. Just how clear is your mind's eye? Who should be admitted to paradise or be

offered a mental reset, get to use Tony Blair's eyes or brain? Thanks but I think I'll pass.

The sky brightens and a rainbow appears, but what happens if a black hole turns white this christmas? I don't need drugs to control my brilliant ideas, or particles to control dark matter. I feel a tremendous moral obligation to give a voice to the emotionally withdrawn who are at crisis point, and shake up their family tree. Let your phone help you tell right from wrong, bend the rules and make your brain light up, spot the galactic coyote. Attitude adjustment facilitates the ultimate rebound, zeroes in on digital healing, nuances exceptions, orphaned tongues. Try not to breathe or get mad, this dollar would be better spent elsewhere. Twin asteroids pose twice the risk. If you have caught something nasty, find out quick. Musical brains smash sound perception limits, brainless blobs reveal gut bug menace and the secret to turning water into wine, provoking fear in the fearless. Meet the ultimate bottom feeder, show me you are there.

Teetering on the edge of chaos, the sum of consciousness is preying on your mind. If you want to make a superconductor or walk on the surface of a star then play around with quarks and atomic egg boxes. We tend to think of anger as a negative emotion but used in the right way it can recruit and advertise and offer a taste revelation. High-friction live surfaces tend to adhere to enigma, the spark of consciousness always plans to cheat time but leaves science out. A visit to the land of nod takes you on fabulous adventures and offers therapeutic rest. Subscribe now and save forty per cent as the head of quality management. It is actually very difficult to make yourself look at or see the light. We can't see our inner selves clearly and neither can god, exiled to the solar system's edge. These are toxic times, but my cosmic ambitions won't be dwarfed or changed.

Driven by inertia, the choice is yours. The absolute limits of human endurance are imposed by the brain. Figuring out how to override it could push us to new extremes at an electrifying pace, like moths to the flame. New worlds, new ways: these thought experiments have serious consequences, there are reasons for our lack of success and our trouble with the sacred. Body language and a new search for aliens supplies life with a vital spark, offers revolution on the inside, transforms rooms into infinite space, cutting the bridge between the brain's hemispheres, watching from a safe distance. Now think about particle B. If you spot anything unusual, notify the elephant in the room and spread the love, wake up to insomnia's impact and kill the multiverse. Squeeze the arm, protect the heart and treat violence like a plague. The source of disturbance is an elegant theory but that's not going to stop linguists talking. Where on earth did our brains go?

JUST THE SAME

The 21st Century turned out to be like the last one, in this book anyway. It's not as hot as earlier and the lawn was still wet when mowed. It's nice to smell cut grass but I still hate gardening. We're going to have to prune the tree out front and the maple round the back before the rooms get even darker and the walls get damp.

Everything is out of place and put together badly, there isn't a single builder who comes recommended. The only bush that doesn't grow is the only one I paid for. The 'hardwood' table and folding chairs barely lasted six years. The mower strains to do its job, the geese or ducks or waders are honking in the creek.

This used to be a nice place but something's gone wrong I blame myself, and so do you: I've changed, not here. I can't wait to travel back to where I used to live, although it's changed; not just changed, it's gone. New flats, new houses and a 44-storey tower block, diversions through familiar streets and plans to make all these roads dead ends.

How to belong? Focus on the local and see what happens here. Nothing happens here, it's just where we live. It's the same as the past, it's the future, where everything's the same.

FOR THE DURATION

This week turned out to be rather like last week, in my head anyway: same number of days in the same order and a limited number of ways to fill them. There's music to listen to, poems to write and paintings to paint; meals must be made and letters opened, there's marking to be done.

Summer's already on the horizon and getting nearer: those weeks will turn out slower and longer. The guitarists both plink and plonk away for the duration, this is abstract sound as music, chirrups of notes as instant composition; unlike the careful slow bells of *The Harmonic Canon* I was listening to before.

Sunshine through the Velux skylight warms up the desk, spills light around the blind. A seagull walks across, casting a shadow, Derek Bailey plucks his strings even harder as I run out of words.

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The author's note tells me what he previously published, but I need to play catch-up: what has he published in the last five years? There's some kind of timeslip at play; it

was true then but is not true now. Or maybe there should have a been a statement of intent?

The author hopes to write more books in the next few years.

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