

emagazine Close Reading Competition 2015

The Winning Entry: Harriet Fisk

The physicality of life in Nairobi is evoked in the passage through drawing on our senses. We feel the 'sore eyes' and 'heat ripping off the pavements'; we see 'brown grass' and 'red tin of insecticide'; we hear the 'piping' of the phone; we feel the touch of the flies when 'squidged or rubbed' on the skin and we smell the dryness in the air where even the 'jacarandas' are 'waiting for the long rains.' What a sense we get of a stiflingly hot and uncomfortable atmosphere as the central character, Woodrow, is introduced on 'just another bloody Monday'.

We learn more about Woodrow from the third person narrative than from his direct speech. The former give us access to his stream of consciousness: his seething resentments about his working life and the petty rumblings in this diplomatic outpost where 'reviewing guidance material from London' is a key task. The sarcasm and resentful tone of the language builds a picture of a man tightly wound by the structures and constraints of his role where even attendees at a regular meeting are viewed with cynicism by Woodrow as 'special-interest prima donnas', all out for themselves. His depiction of his colleague as 'shiny, overweight' and the derogatory nickname further draw a picture of small-minded office politics and an ordinary routine.

The simplicity of Woodrow's direct speech brings a contrast to the mass of images, ideas and anxiety whirling through his mind expressed in the third person. The deliberate change in voice in the extract marks a shift from Woodrow the regular bureaucrat with a wife and two children, into that of a man with secrets. It brings into sharp focus the direct connection, as yet unexplained to the reader, between Woodrow and the murdered woman - 'Oh Tessa. Oh Christ. What have you done now?'

Cornell's injection of aggressive, forceful vocabulary, (such as when he 'took it like a bullet, jaw rigid') into the narrative emphasises the impact on Woodrow that the announcement of Tessa Quayle's death has. We are left in no doubt that this is a turning point in his life. He goes over the sequence of events, for example when he remembers that 'he certainly barked his name' - so that the moment when he hears the news becomes frozen in time, so that he can replay and re-examine it.

The sense that Woodrow is somehow implicated is reflected in his forceful reaction where he is 'fighting now, rejecting the whole mad concept'. Our suspicions are raised about his 'secret memories of her' being furiously edited out and his swift reference to the 'unimpeachable' alibi of the military attache.

The mechanical language of the final paragraph, where he is 'moving by numbers' shows us how different a person Woodrow is by the end of the extract. From the ordinariness of 'straightening the photograph' at the beginning to 'hackles up, nerves extended' on hearing Mildren's news, Woodrow is acutely aware by the end that he is facing 'a long journey'.