

The Estate of Hermione

So, the first thing to clear up is that we are breathing and beating inside what has, all along, only ever been a mistranslation.

Life does not only mean life.

‘Life’ in the ancient Greek is either *bios* (biological life) or *zoe* (divine, supernatural life) and the trouble is that one word can’t usefully mean both. There is the physical world, and there is our interior world. We can try valiantly to elide these distinct meanings but, as Hermione’s paintings remind us, there is something fundamentally irreconcilable about our internal truth and whatever real ground on which we find ourselves standing.

Switches flick on, and off.

Interiority can mean home, safety, sanctuary, or it can mean skating closer to the borders of unconscious knowledge than is strictly advisable. We’re all walking a line. In Susan Sontag’s framing, “everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick”; and Hermione’s citizenship can’t fail to inform her gaze. The prosaic and limited interiors of her sick bed (light-switches, chinoiserie motifs, husbands, doctors) become abstracted and mobilised to explain her place in the world.

Illness presents as an extreme, heightened femininity. Sickness is stalked not by death but by time, and the sick-bed’s chronology is a woozy and subjective one. Julia Kristeva characterises ‘women’s time’ as being possessed of “a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word “temporality” hardly fits: all-encompassing and infinite like imaginary space”. Time, yes, but not the kind of time that passes.

Hermione was twenty when they first dropped the H-bomb, and many years later its inventor J Robert Oppenheimer famously quoted the Bhagavad Gita, reflecting “I am become death, destroyer of worlds”. Now, Oppenheimer’s Sanskrit was reportedly pretty good, but the word representing death there is a complex one, *kālā*. It can mean, variously, time, duration, death and a deep blue-black darkness; or time as a personified death-bringing deity. So perhaps there is another mistranslation at play here, too: “I am become time, destroyer of worlds”.

It is time that devours us, anyway. Even happy memories are unwelcome when playing out on a loop, in perpetuity. Reconstructing old theatres, parties once

attended, memory acts as a ritual incantation, willing something into existence that is not real, or not real any longer.

And if we are to resist the destruction that time brings, we need to exist somewhere else too.

We need to take up residence in infinite and imaginary space.

We need to float without direction in the deep blue-black darkness, saying defiantly over and over: this is what is real. This is me. This is my red hat.

Tessa Norton, 2018.

Hermione Burton, known simply as Hermione, was born c.1925 in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire. She lived in Ramsgate, New Mexico, Michigan, and California before returning to Aylesbury and finally settling in Bedford. She was diagnosed with rheumatic heart disease early in her life, and was put into a coma following the birth of her only daughter Jacqueline. She was one of the first people to undergo pioneering open heart surgery, in 1967. Hermione studied art initially as part of her occupational therapy programme, and subsequently at the art guild led by Charles Quarles in Riverside, California. On her return to England, she was largely house-bound due to persistent ill-health and she remained under the care of specialist teams at Papworth Hospital and Bedford South Wing. Hermione resumed painting whenever her health would allow, although towards the end of her life she was also struggling with the loss of vision in one eye. She exhibited with the Bedford Art Society and, jointly with her daughter Jacqueline, at The Gallery in Wellingborough.