

The Broken Word **by Adam Foulds**



Already on Granta's 2013 list of 20 Best Young British Novelists, Adam Fould's ear is tuned to both prose and poetry. [*The Broken Word*](#), the poetry book which earned him his place on the Next Generation list, is a hybrid: a verse novella which served as many younger readers' first introduction to a dark episode of Britain's imperial history, the 1960s Kenyan Mau Mau uprising and its attendant horrors that preceded independence. The publication which followed – *The Quickening Maze* – combined history, prose and poetry in different ratios, to produce a novel exploring the institutionalisation of troubled 19th century nature poet John Clare.

from 5: Night Fires

Why had Tom thought they'd stop
after the first kill, as though they'd done enough?
Of course they didn't.
Over the long night they killed two more,
a modest tally by others' standards.
The second one Tom didn't shoot.
He held his gun up while the others shot
and watched him fall.
The third came after long hours,
with splintery light through the trees.
By now, trekking back,
they could smell the burning villages everywhere.
Tom's legs itched horribly.
His shirt sucked at his skin,
rubbed a slow burn into his collar.
There were bodies everywhere
in different attitudes:
stunned, reaching, sleeping, tumbled.
Then from behind something a man sprang up
and Tom shot him.
Just like in a Western: the attacking Indian:
Tom saw the man look straight at him,
clownish with terror
as he pulled the trigger,
saw the bullet make a splash

in the man's bare chest.
Only the fall backwards was different,
looser and ugly, spastic, almost embarrassing.
A Home Guard walked up sideways,
slowly, and shot again the wriggling man.

*

Back at the vehicles, the men murmured,
passing round a hip-flask.
The sky was oppressively bright,
acres of weightless gold above them.
Prior saw Tom's face
and walked over to him,
placed his hand on Tom's shoulder.
You'll be all right, old man.
Chipper after some sleep.
First time is always the worst.
Tom turned, unable... to thank,
and held on to his wrist.

8: Who Were These People?

Home. The door swings inward.
A servant, his face relaxing
with recognition, then his mother
drifting into the vestibule.

Tom. You didn't say you were coming.

But here I am.

Yes, you are, aren't you.
She rubbed his left upper arm,
chewing her smile.

*

The familiar food, the furniture –
the way the armchair by his window
spread behind his shoulder blades
and supported his thighs.
Tom could have cried.

*

Eventually:

I'm just a little concerned, Tom.
His mother, pouring tea
into three cups. His father
tightening in his chair.
About you just giving up like this.

Actually, that isn't quite what happened.

His father broke a biscuit,
shook crumbs from the two halves.
It's not really a habit you should acquire.

Tom, don't sigh like that.

I didn't sigh. His voice was loud.
They riled him so easily.
He sipped tea, felt it rush
around his teeth, and recommenced
with a lawyerly, factual, frangible calm.
I didn't just give up.

*Have you thought about this being just
a little holiday here and then going back?*

Back? He looked up,
then down, falling back in his seat,
mouth slowly closing.
They watched him closely,
thought he hated the idea
but his actual thought was:
It *is* still there. They're all still there,
save for the newly dead.
No. No. I want to start next term.

I mean to say, aren't you needed?

What he could tell them about there,
if he wanted, to shut them up.
If they believed him.
But it wasn't even possible,
so wildly unmentionable,
like bringing up wet dreams
or school things.
Impossible.
I told you, it was agreed.

His father tried to sting him
into it. *Well, you're a man now.*
You can make your own decisions.

But it was a weak lunge
and after it, they were all still there,
waiting, and it was Tom, in fact, deciding.
It made him think
Who are these people?
The frightened man with his telescope
and strapping, sunburnt wife?

Yes, I am. Yes, I am.
And I reckon I've done my bit.

He took a biscuit
almost not trembling.
But his mother was effective.
*Tom, I don't want you living
with the shame of crying off
of something difficult for the rest of your life.*

Tom put down his biscuit, finished his tea,
and threw the cup against the wall.
It smashed wonderfully, as though charged,
into a thousand tiny white knives and powder.
Tom looked over the whole service,
deaf with pleasure, considering them for bombs.

from 10: Falling Asleep

Lying beside one another on the grass,
inspecting faces, trying not to laugh.
Tom noticed the delicate fizz of light
along her jaw like a nettle stem.
In the inner corners of her eyes,
tiny submerged pink – what? – like
cushions or pleats, and beside them
in the whites' gathering convexity,
beneath bending tree reflections,
the finest threads of blood.
What? What have you found?
Everything jumping.
Sshh, I can't concentrate.
In her throat, a half-inch
of artery that pulsed.
Hmm. Little larva.
Touching it with a fingertip.
A half-pumped inner tube,
but alive. For a moment
he saw her whole head scarlet
and glistening, her teeth
folding back under a good thick stick.
God, he said out loud.
What?
Nothing. Lie still.
To put it out of his head,
he leaned over and kissed her
hard, pushing down to find
the moment of consent
and introduced his tongue.
He felt her eyes open
and close again as she responded
with a strong, blunt prod
of her own tongue back at his.
Wonderful. The time was right.
He took hold of her left breast
through her clothes, and squeezed,

still kissing, taking his time.
 Then he slid his hand down
 to the bottom of her skirt
 and stroked the bony hump of her knee.
 Then moving on again,
 onto the smoothness of thigh
 and up, short of breath,
 getting as far as her underwear,
 the disquieting, burnt grass
 dry crackle of hair
 through the cloth, flesh
 beneath it, before she'd had
 enough and grabbed his wrist.
 He kept his hand there,
 using his strength. She
 disengaged her mouth.
Tom. Please be nice.
I am being nice.
 Pushing against her lovely weakness,
 pressing the warm cloth up into her gap.
Tom. Don't. Please, now.
But why not?
 She kicked herself upright,
 retied her hair.
I have to go anyway.
No, you don't.
I think I know whether I do or not. Bye.

Discussion Ideas

- What do you make of the use of the word 'wriggling' in the first extract?
- Do pages 45-47 prepare you for the explosion of p48? Why is there no 'reaction shot' equivalent, why do we see the teacup smash and then nothing from the mother and father in response?
- Who has the power in the encounter in extract three? Tom, the girl? The writer, the reader?
- Christopher Reid said of *The Broken Word* that it shows 'what a verse narrative can do that a prose one can't. It's not just a matter of economy, telling a big story in a small space; it has more to do with the dynamics, the accents and the tensions' of the verse line.' What do you think?
- What does 'The Broken Word' refer to?

Adam Foulds was born in London and studied English at St. Catherine's College, Oxford and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. He is a poet and novelist and lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Roehampton. In 2008, his first collection *The Broken Word* (Jonathan Cape) won the Costa Poetry Prize and the Somerset Maugham Award. His novel *The Quickenings Maze* was shortlisted for the 2009 Man Booker Prize and won the European Union Prize for Literature. He was named as one of Granta's 'Best of Young British Novelists' in 2013.

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