

POEM

Excerpts from *Daqsxejn ta' Requiem lil Leli / A Modest Requiem for Leli*¹

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Introductory Note by Immanuel Mifsud

A Modest Requiem for Leli is a work I was commissioned to write in 2016 for All Souls Night, recited during an event organised by Heritage Malta, which took place in the former Palace of the Inquisition, an eerie and chilling place that housed the Roman Inquisition in the 16th and 17th century (Heritage Malta 2016).² The event was meant as a counter to the recent enthusiasm with Halloween, a phenomenon that has swept through many European countries, including Malta. In response to what many refer to as “the Americanization of our calendar,” there has been a rise in the organization of initiatives and events that include old and long-time defunct traditions, which are more indigenous, even if less familiar (Ġużè Gatt, Email to author, June 13, 2020).

The idea for the poem about death came when I visited my late, last uncle, who was already in a coma shortly before his passing. Lying almost lifeless in a shining white bed, in the corner of a white hospital room, watched by his wife and daughters sitting motionless beside the bed, my uncle set my mind into pondering what might be going on in the head of a man in pre-death, irreversible coma. As it happens, there are various

¹ Published by Klabb Kotba Maltin, 2018.

² Heritage Malta. 2016. “L-Għid tal-Erwieħ – A Thematic Supper On All Souls’ Day at the Inquisitor’s Palace.” Accessed September 15, 2019. <https://heritagemalta.org/l-ghid-tal-erwieh-a-thematic-supper-on-all-souls-day-at-the-inquisitors-palace/>

common tenets about what happens when a person is nearing their end. One of these goes on to surmise that a person retraces the significant events of their life, resuscitating life's experiences just like a film clip, scores their autobiography starting from childhood to the recent past. This is the *Requiem's* central notion, as the dying man, who is the protagonist of the work, relives his distant past.

Throughout the *Requiem*, there are frequent references to childhood as the dying man becomes the child who visits the funfair and spends his pocket-money on a merry-go-round; the little boy who has a crush on his female teacher; the child who plays with teddy bears and toy trains, and the child whose face is smeared with chocolate. The references to childhood also include the traditional Maltese children's play *Onġi Onġi Onġella*, where children pretend a knight comes to pick a girl from their group. Another children's game, much more morbid, is *Ara Ġejja l-Mewt Ġħalik* (Hark, Death is Coming to Get You), in which Death (a feminine noun in Maltese and usually personified as an older woman) comes to get a blindfolded player to fry and roast them.



Photo 1. Arnold Böcklin, *Die Toteninsel* (1880). Oil on canvas. Kunstmuseum Basel [[Wikimedia Commons](#)].

The finale of the poem makes a distinct reference to Arnold Böcklin's 1880 painting, *Die Toteninsel* (The Isle of the Dead). On the "other side" (another euphemism for Death), there is the whole *dramatis personae* of the protagonist's last thoughts. The cast list in his drama, introduced to us through his delusion, wait to welcome him warmly in his new abode: the mother who gave him the penny for the funfair, the father, the sensuous teacher, and his first love Kristina are all there with arms wide open to welcome him now that the ordeal is over. Indeed, in many people's imagination Death is a re-encounter with lost ones.

A year after the event on All Souls Night, I contacted music composer Kris Spiteri, who accepted to compose a musical commentary to the poem. He composed an arrangement for strings (two violins, viola and violoncello), a bassoon, and percussionists. We then took on board a theatre troupe, *Theatre Anon*, to adapt the piece for the stage with six performers and a life-size puppet, and finally a visual artist who composed a series of visual images projected on the background. The performance's duration is just under one hour, and it purports to chronicle the very last thoughts of a dying man, lying in a coma in a hospital bed. The performance premiered on 4th July 2018 at Fort St Elmo, Valletta.

What have I actually done when I wrote this poem? Was it my foolish attempt to understand that which is impossible to comprehend simply because this something is beyond our experience? Did I voice my fears? Or my wishes, aspirations, hopes? What do I mean by this "all", whispered twice in the final line? The paradox in the last line is, in itself, evidence of the incapacity to treat Death itself, to put forth rational conclusions. It points towards an inconclusive conclusion. Probably the outcome of all this is the realization that we cannot talk, write, compose, sing, act about Death, and that, again paradoxically, we can only speak of life and life experiences when we think about Death.

V³

Dying man, what is it you dream of now?
This is my deathbed that they've laid me on.
This morning they administered last rites.
Out in reception I could hear their laughter.
They came in droves, they all came here together.
They laughed, they split their sides, they laughed so much!
They told me as they laughed, they said to me:
Death's coming to take you away, she's coming,
*she'll drag you with her to the flames, she's coming!*⁴ *
They kept laughing. I snivelled. They kept laughing.
To drag you to the flames. Look out, she's coming!

*Knock knock, knock knock, ongi ongi ongella.*⁵
Knock knock, knock knock? Who's at the door O Knight?
Who's there? Who's there? Who's there? Ongi ongella.
Who's there? Who's there? Who's there? Who's there O
Knight?
It's the woman in black, ongi ongella.
It's the woman in black, it's her O Knight.
Whatever could she want, the woman in black?
What does the woman in black want, O Knight?
She's come for you today, ongi ongella.
She's come to take you away today, O Knight.
Who's the woman in black? Ongi ongella.
Who is she, the woman in black, O Knight?
I have never seen her, ongi ongella.

V

Raġel qed tmut, x'int taħseb bħalissa?
Middewni fuq is-sodda biex immut.
Ġew dalgħodu jagħtuni s-sagramenti.
Hemm, fid-daħla tas-sala, bdew jiddieħqu.
Kienu kollha, ġew flimkien, kienu kollha.
U bdew jidħqu, mgħoxxiġin, kemm bdew jidħqu!
Bdew jgħiduli f'nofs id-daħq, bdew jgħiduli:
Ara ġejja l-mewt għalik, biex taqlik,
biex tixwik. Ara ġejja, ara ġejja!
Huma jidħqu. Jien nibki. Huma jidħqu:
Ara ġejja l-mewt għalik, biex taqlik,
Biex tixwik. Ara ġejja, ara ġejja!

Bumm bumm il-bieb, ongi, ongi, ongella;
bumm bumm il-bieb, ongi o Kavallier.
Min ġie? Min ġie? Min ġie? Ongi, ongella;
min ġie? Min ġie? Min ġie? O Kavallier.
Ġiet dik liebsa l-iswed, ongi, ongella;
ġiet dik liebsa l-iswed, o Kavallier.
Xi trid dik tal-iswed? Ongi, ongella;
xi trid dik tal-iswed? O Kavallier.
Ġiet ha tieħdok magħha, ongi, ongella;
ġiet ha tieħdok magħha, o Kavallier.
Min hi dik tal-iswed? Ongi, ongella;
min hi dik tal-iswed? O Kavallier.
Ma nafx – qatt ma rajtha, ongi, ongella;
Ma nafx – qatt ma rajtha, o Kavallier.

³ English translation by Albert Gatt (Klabb Kotba Maltin 2018).

⁴ This is a reference to a traditional rhyme in Maltese.

⁵ This is a reference to a traditional nursery rhyme in Maltese, with the refrain *ongi ongi ongella*.

*I don't know – I've never seen her, O Knight.
Lie down and sleep with her, ongi onġella.
Lie down and sleep with her, go on, O Knight.*

VII

*Dying man, what is it you dream of now?
Lately I can hear this train, a choo-choo
that dates all the way back to nineteen eighteen.
It's come to take me from a tiny station,
nestling among white beds arranged in rows,
transparent rubber tubes, bags filled with gore;
along the wards that reek of pus and urine,
a smell of grilling mackerel and bogue;
between the beds of nan Marì and Pawla,
my mother's scattered with garlic and onion,
my father's with the sheets all drenched in sweat;
my sister sat at her machine, bent over
sewing dresses and black armbands for mourners;
past a bed whose mattress has been folded,
where last I saw Kristina with no hair
and Ġulja scrawls my name on a marble slab.
A two-kilometre ride, then there are yards
where arum grows, and wooded fields with hundreds,
thousands of trees teeming with butterflies;
the most beautiful women smile at me –
they smile as they dangle from the branches,
they smile as they break the water's surface.
Walk faster, faster now. You're nearly there.*

*They're waiting for you on the high-ridged island:
they'll take you out there on a little boat.
Forget about the white beds and the needles,
transparent rubber tubes flowing with gore.*

*'mtedd ħa torqod magħha, ongi, onġella;
'mtedd ħa torqod magħha, o Kavallier.*

VII

*Raġel qed tmut, x'int tisthajjel bħalissa?
Ftit ilu bdejt nisma' dil-ferrovija
ċuċù mill-elf disa' mija u tmintax.
Ġiet biex tiġborni minn stazzjon daqs naqra,
qalb ringieli twal ta' sodod bojod,
tubi trasparenti, boroż bid-dmija;
qalb swali riħa t'awrina w materja,
riħa ta' vopi u sawrell jinxtewa;
bejn sodod in-nanniet Marì u Pawla
u s-sodda t'ommi kollha tewm u basal,
ta' missieri bil-lożor kollhom għaraq;
tghaddi minn hdejn oħti mgħawġa fuq il-magna
tħit l-ilbiesi u l-mustaxiji suwed;
magenb soda bis-saqqu mitwi tnejn
fejn rajt l-aħħar 'il Kristina bla xagħar
u Ġulja thazzeż ismi fuq irħama.
Żewġ kilometri kollox, imbagħad btiċhi
bil-buqari, għelieqi kollha siġar –
mijiet, eluf ta' siġar kollha friefet;
l-uċuħ tal-isbaħ nisa jitbissmuli,
imdendla minn mal-friegħi jitbissmuli,
ħirġin minn taħt wiċċ l-ilma jitbissmuli.*

*Ħaffef il-pass, isa. L-aħħar ftit baqa'.
Qed jistennewk fuq gżira bil-blat għoli:
jgħabbuk fuq dgħajsa żgħira u joħduk.
Insihom is-sodod bojod, il-labar,*

Forget the frosty glances at your side.
Forget your bones that suddenly protruded.
Forget the uniform of navy blue.
And the merry-go-round. There are no currents
and no waves in this blue sea that you'll sail on.

You'll see, they'll shout out when they see you coming!
Your mother will be smiling, father too;
and nan Mari, and Pawla. They'll approach,
Kristina with her dangling plait, Miss Grima –
they'll all be standing eager on the shore –
they'll wave to you, they'll call out when they spot
your little boat afloat on the horizon.

Now look, they've disconnected all your tubes.
They're dismantling it all. Aren't you glad?

VIII

It's fresh out. Wrap yourself in the white sheet.
Get swathed. Enwrapped. Get swaddled. Board the boat.
Just listen as the boatman dips the oars
into the water. Hear the hush. Hear nothing.
Nothingness. Hear nothing. Hear only nothing.
At nothing's end – one hopes – it all begins.
It all begins when all shall come to nothing.

it-tubi trasparenti jggorru d-dmija.
Insiha l-ħarsa kiesħa ta' maġenbek.
Insih dak l-għadam li spuntalek f'daqqa.
Insiha 'l dik tal-uniformi kaħla.
Anki l-ġostru. Dan baħar bla kurrenti
li se tbaħħar fuqu – bla ebda mewġa.

Issa tara kemm se jgħajtu la jarawk!
Ommok tidħaqlek, missierek ukoll;
in-nanna Mari, in-nanna Pawl. Tersaq
Kristina b'malju mdendel u Miss Grima –
se jkunu kollha fuq ix-xatt, bix-xwiek –
se jibdeu ixejrulek u jsejħulek
kif jilmħu d-dgħajsa žgħira fl-orizzont.

Ara, it-tubi kollha neħħewhomlok;
qed iżarmaw l-armar fti fti. Mhux tajjeb?

VIII

Ftit tal-frisk. Tleffef sew fil-lizar abjad.
Tgeddes. Tgeżwer. Tkeffen. Itla' fid dgħajsa.
Oqgħod isma' biss il-barklor ibill
l-imqadef fl-ilma. Isma' s-skiet. Ix-xejn.
Ix-xejn. Tisma' xejn. Isma' biss ix-xejn.
Għax wara x-xejn – għandu mnejn – jibda ko kollox.
Kollox jibda kif kollox isir xejn.⁶

⁶ Mifsud, Immanuel. 2018. *Daqsxejn ta' Requiem lil Leli/A Modest Requiem for Leli*, (Bilingual Maltese-English), translated by Albert Gatt, Malta: Klabb Kotba Maltin (pp. 26–29, 34–39).

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