

Chapter 16. The Peterborough Child

An elephant skull

From Berlin, we moved to Peterborough in England. Our rented apartment on Manor House Street smelt of damp, although it had recently been given a fresh coat of paint. The low windows looked out onto a small garden where there were clothes hanging out to dry, a fallen plastic garden chair and a piece of low brick wall. Next door was a funeral parlour, part of a Victorian style terraced arrangement previously occupied by a homeless shelter. Apparently, the noise used to bother the neighbours. The sound of cocks crowing woke us, even though we were in the heart of the city. Next door were two families – Lithuanians and Poles. It was darker and colder than in London. We were further north.

Peterborough is as old as the world itself. The most ancient unearthened human remains date back to 5,000 BCE, from Neolithic times. The City Museum welcomes visitors with a display of a huge elephant skull, which became a road sign in my search of the city's identity. There is not much that can be learnt about the people of Peterborough today, nowhere near as much as you can learn about the remains of those who lived here thousands of years ago. One of the most powerful images recreated in the museum is of sacrifices in nearby peat bogs – near Fengate, where archaeologists are still unearthing tools, jewellery and bones. Peterborough is one of those towns that people are forever moving to and away from. This migration both enhances and erodes its cultural fabric.

I imagined time as a pyramid – on the very top were Russians, Lithuanians, Poles, Roma and other newcomers from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, followed by Asians, mostly Pakistanis, Indians and Afghans, followed by Italians and Vikings, Normans, Anglo-Saxons, Romans, Britons and our ancestors from the Iron, Bronze and Neolithic Ages. I had the impression that, walking the streets of Peterborough, one could hear things crunching underfoot. We were standing on top of hundreds of layers of past communities. The earth was constantly feeding on our cast-off remains – nail clippings, spit, bodies coming to rest in cemeteries, toys brought over from Eastern Europe, fabrics from Pakistan, Russian sunglasses, plastic Tesco carrier bags. Archaeologists are able to read layers of land like we read lines of text. Sometimes they find a particularly impressive object that becomes a prism of a historical moment and allows our imagination to reinvent life as it was.

A Bronze Age child and blood transfusion

An old quarry became one such key site following a discovery in 2007 in the vicinity of Peterborough. A small body had been unearthened and called “Bronze Age Baby”. I stared for a long time at the pixelated photograph of a childlike form lying on its side. Beside it were some clay pots and plates. Back in 1980, rows of graves, with skeletons, were found around Peterborough cathedral. The scene was captured by local photographer Chris Porsz during the initial digs. This confirmed my first intuitions.

Around the same time Rosa's health began to deteriorate. Successive chemotherapy sessions had completely destroyed her immune system. Along with my psychological defences. From my diary:

... It might seem that it was simply another week, and not six or seven days filled with constant trembling, fear that Rosa and her organism will surrender to fevers, waves of infection, that we will be back in hospital. Hurry, hands shaking, tension which tightens the lips, causing paralysis, sand beneath eyelids. I cannot describe the stress, which is causing me to lose touch with my own body, turning me into pure fear.

This is how it was this time. Waves of fever, each one greater than the last, caused us to pack her things, run to the car and race for an address we had found online. Our old GPS had problems, because the new hospital had been built in 2010. It was spacious and airy,

the chaos of admission only lasted a moment, then a series of highly professional procedures were performed. Quiet, discretion, calls to London, to the hospital where Rosa is registered.

The three days we spent there were hard. Not stuffy, rather the opposite, I remember them as breaths of cold air while cycling to hospital. One day I saw Andrew who, dozing, was sitting in a chair with his head leant against a wall. Rosa, with her head tilted back, as if echoing his position, was lying in his lap. She looked grey, slightly bruised. Chemo kills bone marrow, the production of blood platelets is dramatically reduced. Hence the bruises. She looked as if she was saying goodbye to life. Her mouth was half open.

The doctors decided to give her a blood transfusion. A red, plastic sack pumped its contents into Rosa through a drip. After only quarter of an hour her skin began to change colour. From a pale-white complexion, pink shades began to emerge, as if filling her with colour from within. It was one of the most powerful experiences I have ever known. I cried in the beautiful, black, wide arms of a nurse, while I hid in a kitchen somewhere.

I am constantly thinking about death, about the extinguishing of life, about dust. There is no pain like the pain a mother can experience. If a child dies, the mother dies with them. I will never forget a young woman, a mother, whom I saw in a Warsaw hospital before I knew Rosa was ill with cancer. She was collapsed, bent in half in a chair, and was nodding rhythmically, bowing low, in the most terrifying way...

CAN-Do District

The transfusion became a part of my description of Peterborough. From that moment on, whenever I thought about the city, somewhere in the back of my mind I could again see Rosa's skin shades, that mysterious, delicate, perfect pinkness, which began to slowly overwhelm the waxy greyness.

We were living in and researching the CAN-Do area (short for Central And North area). Arrivals from Eastern and Southern Europe were a very visible group that had tried to acclimatize there among the older migrants – those from Asia. CAN-Do was like a continent. About a hundred languages were spoken there. The layers of problems seemed to materialize in the form of piles of rubbish and debris which no one seemed to be bothering to remove.

Divisions worked in various ways, and there was much that divided people, especially religion, customs and openness to Otherness, not to mention language. Many people from small Eastern European villages had never seen people whose skin colour was different to theirs. Communism and poverty effectively isolated them. Not infrequently, their contempt for Asians was overwhelming.

One day, while walking along a path, I saw graffiti, reading: "For Afghans only." I read about a brave Lithuanian who had tackled a robber trying to get into a wholesalers, even though the robber was armed. Soon after, however, this hero murdered his own grandfather. Another Lithuanian rescued a woman who was being raped. Poles were being accused of eating local swans. The Czechs, of drinking too much. Everyone, of taking jobs from the locals. A documentary from 2004, *The Poles are Coming!*, summed up the mass migration of Eastern Europeans with a scene in a Job Centre, in which it transpired that the new arrivals were busy taking jobs no one else wanted in the first place.

In 2001, just after the attacks on the World Trade Centre, a group of teenage Pakistani boys resolved

to kill a white man. They armed themselves with knives and went out hunting on the streets at night. Ross Parker, a local teenager, was returning home with his girlfriend. He was easy prey. In 2004, Pakistani groups clashed with Afghan and Iraqi refugees, and one of the Indian street festivals ended in more bloodshed. That was close to Gladstone Park, which I would often pass on my way to hospital and where I originally decided to place the project.

As Rosa's condition began to improve, we would often wander along the streets of CAN-Do, which includes the historic Millfield, New England and Gladstone areas. I can still remember the saris draped over dangling mannequins swaying in the wind, Russian beauty parlours, Polish insurance brokers' offices, grand mosques and signs pointing in the direction of a Sikh temple which we would walk past. But the drama of Rosa and her condition meant that I was seeing it all through a mist. Divisions, differences and violence constituted another stage in the long, uninterrupted history of this place – another chapter, another layer which would be unearthed by hard-working archaeologists in a few thousand years. I was also thinking about how little I would have to explain to Muslim mothers whom I had met in the children's oncology ward about how I was feeling.

Inside the beast

At first, intuition told me to convert the city into a blood circulatory system. I could recall the life-giving moment of transfusion:

Peterborough has become an organism for me, its inhabitants will blend in with white and red cells, and the pavements, roads and paths will be the cardiovascular system. Vast blood cells, warm and pulsating with light, will become public objects, city devices, accessible to all.

In this way, we would find ourselves inside the city and, at the same time, inside Rosa. But also – inside a beast. It was the moment I realized what I bring with me from the other end of the continent. Apart from a sense of terror of the world, in my bag I also had gestures for casting and lifting spells, a belief in instinct, in the body, and the profound sense of absurdity of the situation:

The world is not a complicated mechanism, it is not architecture itself, the world is a monster. Unpredictable in its intentions and incomprehensible. Even if, as people, we think we are able to control its movements, we are under an illusion. In the east of Europe, where I come from, people know very well that the beast is ready to swallow them up at any moment, that instead of negotiating with it, it is better to curse it or simply to surrender to its violence.

The project of converting Peterborough into a giant bloodstream somewhat shocked my patron, the Royal Society of Arts (RSA). The very possibility of touching these evidently sore scars, such as the Ross Parker murder, any sort of allusion to bloodshed, was too dangerous. This carefulness was caused by a sort of fear, the nature of which was unclear to me. However, I trusted the RSA, because my curators had a huge amount of experience when it came to working in CAN-Do. I began working on an alternative project. I decided to use the force that was pushing my thinking into the future. I thought to visualize my fear for Rosa, locate it and try to turn it into a chakra – a place of focused, accumulated energy. A fear visualized is no longer a fear. The script I write will no longer be written by life. That which is represented does not happen again in reality. At least not in the same form. This was to be my guiding principle.

The Peterborough Child

It was to be Rosa's story, which, transposed in time, was meant to shift me from the moment in which I had found myself. And at the same time, paradoxically, it would cause me to find myself closer to other mothers, absorb their fears, their stories.

I imagined an archaeological site, in which an oval-shaped prehistoric burial place had been uncovered, containing the skeleton of a small child. The spacious pit, 1.5 metres deep, was meant to look as if the dig had only just been carried out. Next to the project I planned to install an information plaque, reading:

The Peterborough Child was a girl born 3500 years ago and found here during a 2012 excavation. Tests indicate that her mother came from the East, but that her father was a local man. It would appear she migrated for reasons unknown to us. Analysis of bone tissue shows that she suffered from a very rare DNA mutation. Her 13th gene was slightly damaged, which produced a genetic form of eye cancer, retinoblastoma.

It is thought that a child like this was valued by the community and was considered to have shamanic powers. The site of her burial was carefully chosen to ensure it brought blessings to the land. Evidence of her special status can be seen in the objects her grave contains, among them a beaker, a fawn skull and deer teeth. Some were presumably gifts for her to take into the afterlife, but others seem to be invocations. Apparently, the donations continued throughout the centuries, as the most recent objects date from our times. The distinctive container next to her was fashioned from deer nostrils and holds her two well-preserved eye tumours.

Remember to throw some Peterborough earth on it

We flew to Poland and the production began in a mannequin factory near Kraków. An anatomical model of a skeleton arrived from Germany. It was not a child's skeleton, but that of a 30 week old foetus. It reminded me of a fish, an ape or some other kind of animal. It looked surreal. With trembling hands, I sculpted two tumours. They turned out to be too big. One of the workers sculpted smaller ones. We took a huge deer skull and smashed it to bits. Once inside it, we found the delicate bone webbing of the nostrils split down the middle. Thus a twin chamber was created, ready to accept the tumours. A cup made from card and copper powder was there if the child got thirsty on her passage to the next world. The skull of a small deer, her companion for this journey, lay nearby. Finally, the discarded teeth, taken from the old deer, became remnants of magic jewellery.

The whole thing looked like a crater left by a fallen tree in some deep Eastern European woodland. In some mysterious way, everything ended up there: forgotten graves, undiscovered murders and that strange eastern state of nonentity, which allows the sated Western European nations to stop at the Elbe in their mental journeys. But it also reminded me of holidays in Bory Tucholskie, the burying of childhood treasures and the fear of getting lost in the woods, where no one would ever come to find us.

We buried chopped up bits of mannequin, destined for recycling, beneath layers of earth and sand glued together with polyester resin. My ecological conscience was more or less clean. Workers kept reminding me: "Remember, sprinkle some Peterborough earth on it, so that the project takes root."

The Peterborough Child was transported across Europe to where it was to be installed in the middle of a grass area in the park on Occupation Road, close to Gladstone Park. In the preceding weeks, I had made a series of presentations of the project, although we never organized a simple informational event which I had been determined to instigate – the sending of letters to all the homes in the CAN-Do area, giving information about *The Peterborough Child*. I also wanted to send letters to community centres, asking for individual, very personalized meetings and viewings of the installation. I had wanted to encourage parents to share stories of their children who had gone through difficult times of illness and crisis. And finally, I wanted to ask for objects and photographs which had become significant for their stories. In this way our pit would fill up with things charged with tenderness, fears and the never-ending care of children.

The plan was simple – install the pit, and stay with it. I wanted to familiarize the local residents with *The Peterborough Child*, to tell them the story of its creation. I decided I would remain with the project for 12 days, waiting for incidental passers-by to come along and ask about the strange hole in the ground. At night and at times when I was not there, it would be made inaccessible. This was the only condition – to allow the viewing of the project before imagination could grab hold and produce only fear and fear alone.

Events took their own course, in spite of my best intentions. The RSA, in some ways bound by procedural obligations, decided to first present the project to appropriate officials at various rungs of authority rather than to the people of CAN-Do. One of the presentations was in the city council offices. I was sitting opposite several councillors, men, most of whom were Muslim and who seemed to emanate a great deal of warmth. One of them said towards the end of the meeting: “I would not be surprised if someone decided to put something next to your installation.” I had the impression he meant some sort of seating area, where one could stop and, in complete peace, look at *The Peterborough Child*. The RSA, as well as I, were full of hope following this meeting, hope that something essential would happen among the communities of CAN-Do. That in this district, where child mortality rates are very high, people would start talking about the unspeakable. To avoid offending Muslims, Georgina Chatfield, (who was representing the RSA and working closely with me) even downloaded the Mecca Finder application on her iPhone, so our pit could face the right direction.

Chakra

The day before the installation, set for 26th July, we gathered at the Beehive Community Centre, for one last time, to explain the project to the leaders of the community, Arts Council East representatives and other local organizations. The licence to install the pit had already been sent through to the RSA. I was left with just 10 minutes to speak, due to previous proceedings overrunning, so I decided not to use the prepared presentation but simply tell them about *The Peterborough Child*. What stuck in my memory was the sudden, unexpected, emotional outbreak of negativity. It was an eruption of resentment, not so much directed at me, as I was being treated as if I were no more than thin air, as at Georgina. I remember two women in head scarves, young Muslims, CAN-Do community leaders, who opened by asking, with a certain degree of irony, who had decided about the commission. “If this project goes ahead, we will go to court and personally sue the RSA for undoing the progress made during the two-year Citizen Power initiative,” one of them shouted, pointing her finger at Georgina, who was sitting, motionless. She was pregnant at the time and I was a little worried about her. We were also told that, in line with Islamic doctrine: “We do not open up graves and do not dig up our dead.” “This is not a grave,” I answered, “this is only a representation of a grave, or, more precisely, of an archaeological dig. And these are not human remains, but a sculpture,” I added, embarrassed by having to explain it. My arguments about a unique opportunity to meet and share the experience of those whose children were seriously ill or whose lives were endangered counted for nothing. So did my references to times before the religions which are so divisive within the CAN-Do community, and my attempts to explain the chakra concept. It was useless talking about the legend that might come to life through the stories told at evening meals about things placed in the pit at Occupation Road. My conviction that this common space could become a chakra for the district by charging it with tales of these most beloved, lost children met with misunderstanding.

I had made a mistake in not showing photographs. It was too late. Resistance proved infectious. Someone said that it is not possible to feel an emotional relationship to something which is 3,500 years old. That he would be unmoved by Pakistani fabrics, which might find a home in my installation. Someone asked about the number of languages on the explanatory plaque and whether we would offer counselling to post-natally depressed mothers who see the project. I thought for a

moment that perhaps such help should be called for Georgina right away. The men hung their heads. At the very end, I asked as warmly and honestly as I could, whether the residents of CAN-Do would really be this negatively attuned to the work as was being presented. "I was born here," answered one of the women who had spoken earlier, coldly. I did not continue the dialogue. I lost the only chance I had to meet with parents who had been through the trauma of their children's illness or death. A few of the leaders and city officials cut off our access to the CAN-Do community for good. My idea of horizontal communication, sending letters to families and meeting them at the project, where they could see and experience it, was irrevocably lost.

All comments had been expressed in a situation when no one had actually seen the project. They had the destructive power of a domino effect. Fear seemed to be the driving force behind the decisions taken that afternoon. And not just fear. It is hard to explain what took place in the Beehive Community Centre. There are no tools to enable us to take truly democratic decisions to solve such situations.

Within an hour, a single person, the Head of Neighbourhoods, without consulting any of the stakeholders, withdrew permission for the installation. To this day I do not know how this was possible, considering the thoroughly democratic processes that had been involved. *The Peterborough Child* had to be hidden away, without the residents of CAN-Do being allowed a say or a viewing. The owner of the firm contracted to install the project kindly stored it in one of his sheds. Not knowing what else to do, we returned to London, having started to feel extremely ill at ease in Peterborough. Besides, there was no point in staying there. I was not invited to the next meeting concerning the project – I had been excluded by the same self-appointed censor who withdrew the licence – the Head of Neighbourhoods.

Out of curiosity, I checked Islam's rules governing exhumations, though *The Peterborough Child* was older than Islam itself, and its rules do not cover non-Islamic burials. There are numerous exclusions to the rules forbidding the opening of graves, e.g:

650. Digging up the grave is allowed in the following cases: ... When opening the grave does not amount to disrespect of the dead person, and it transpires that he was buried without Ghusl or Kafan, or the Ghusl was void, or he was not given Kafan according to religious rules, or was not laid in the grave facing the Qibla....¹

At some point it became clear to me that the fear raised by my project was a fear of replacing rituals. *The Peterborough Child* is a mourning site that can become a chakra only by the strength of human energy. It doesn't offer supernatural help. It doesn't offer a script of how to go through the loss of a child. It is naked and talks about complete helplessness. Again, instead of religious rites, a sculpture.

A few days later, the city council moved the project from the shed to a storage site belonging to the city. When councillors, leaders and Art Council representatives had finally come to see the installation and hear my story, the Head of Neighbourhoods did not participate in the presentation, but stood off to one side, whispering to the Arts Services Manager. This did not bode well for the future.

The aftermath of the last meeting led by the Head of Neighbourhoods was the nail in *The Peterborough Child's* coffin. We left England, hence all information reached us already filtered through the memory of those who were writing to us. There is no doubt, however, that certain statements were made: "Peterborough is not ready for this work, or any work of this kind" and: "This commission would damage future commissions, as well as art happening now in the city (driven by a fear of the media response)". There was also the argument that there was "no other

contemporary art like it out there in the public domain in the UK.”

At some point, the background of the situation became apparent – one of the most painful problems in the Can-Do area is the high infant mortality rate. This was one of the main reasons, other than the religious issues, why the area was “not ready” to host the project.

The RSA was presented with two options – the project would either be postponed into an indefinite future (more like an infinity), or would be decommissioned. The Head of Neighbourhoods summarized the meetings with a clear statement – the project would never find a home in the CAN-Do area. He suggested keeping away from the issue: “Leave it to the professionals”, he said. In addition: “The Communications people wish to have no press about this and are concerned about any visibility of the work.”

And yet I have faith in Peterborough. It is impossible to conceal people from themselves. Intuition tells me that things will be very different. But this 'different' needs more time. Our potential chakra is still resting in a publicly owned warehouse somewhere in Peterborough. I think she is sleeping. I hope she is comfortable there.