

Sunt lachrymae rerum

I used this phrase as the title of a picture I made maybe 30 years ago (when I still made pictures) As far as I knew it translated as “These are (or there are) the tears of things”. It is a line from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. The whole line reads “*sunt lachrymae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*”: again the translation as taught to me was “there are tears of things and mortal matters touch the mind” but the translations never seemed to live up to the promise of emotional intensity offered by the Latin. *The tears of things*. Sometimes *tears for things* – but I don’t think like that version so much.

Today I rode my spare bicycle to a pickup point in Clerkenwell to give it to a charity that renovates and redistributes bikes to refugees to help them get around (and just to survive I suppose, like another, older bike helped me to survive when I first came to London).

I bought the bike about 16 years ago. I got a newer, more expensive one in 2014 but kept the old one taking it up to Leeds, where I worked, to live in my office and take me between work and my local accommodation until I left in 2022. I took it down to London one summer to give it a makeover, respraying the frame and relacing some parts; it was always a nice ride though. I brought it back to London when I retired but there wasn’t the space to keep it. I like the idea of it going to someone who’s life might be changed by owning it (as mine was in many ways) - I imagine a tall, sad Somali engineer who saves the fares otherwise spent shuttling between ill-paid work, English classes and a support network of friends and relatives. The rack is strong enough to carry the week’s shopping or, for that matter, a young relative. Maybe the person who gets my bicycle will, like Aeneas, have seen their home destroyed by cruel and arbitrary invaders and had to carry family members to safety, leaving behind everything they own to be stolen or destroyed. I hope having my spare bicycle will make their lives just a bit better. I still felt sad, though - like I was taking the family pet to Battersea dogs home. I’m sure the new owners will be good and kind, but it felt like a cruel trick to play on a faithful, trusting friend.

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How sad things, objects make us feel. Maybe sad things make us feel sad – pass on their innate sadness. I think the saddest is the tears of little children, maybe 2 or 3 years old. They weep unrestrainedly and often; their saddest times seem to be sitting in buggies pushed by glum parents and clutching things - sometimes toys but often, making the sight doubly heart-rending, just arbitrary objects. On Sunday I passed a little girl weeping inconsolably clutching a pink plastic folder; why? Another time saw a child holding a mobile phone in her lap and wailing piteously. Maybe they have realised just how unhappy these things will make them as they grow up. Maybe they are channelling the tears of the things they are holding, objects that have in some way understood the essential sadness of being, part of a personified material universe that might suffer and sometimes weep with us, for us, instead of us.

The saddest thing any of us might contemplate is to lose a loved one (or ones) and be left with only their possessions to clutch and to weep over - a folder, a phone, a toy, a bicycle...

It’s been pointed out to me many times that I have a bad habit of imagining the worst. It’s true. Sometimes it seems I imagine vividly enough to experience an emotional response of great intensity - not imagined emotions but “real” ones. This is not a thing I want or which makes me somehow special. It pains and disturbs me and I wish I could just turn the dial down from 11 to a more comfortable level.

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