

On Parade by Will Self

No one wakes up in the morning and, at the moment of coming to consciousness, finds that their essence is to be British, or French, or Breton. No – rather, we have a few seconds or minutes during which our sense of ourselves is as purely inchoate as it's ever been; we are all potential, nothing actual – before we relapse back into the nagging claims of wanting flesh. Sometime after that we get up, go to the loo, and then, peering into the bathroom mirror, notice that we've put on our British mask, our French or Breton one.

Mark Neville's photographic essay is, I think, about this: about the myriad unreflective moments, when, stood before the lens, his subjects feel themselves – transposed by the act of being photographed at all – from our existential state – which is to be poised between action and inaction, solitude and comity, the unravelled past and the unwoven future – to our universal one, which is to be particular to this community or that. Although this is by no means to doubt the autonomy of the individual: thrust further west, along the granitic spine of Brittany, towards the open ocean and the end of the world.

Brittany hunches between the English Channel and the Bay of Biscay; the sunlight rebounding from sea to sky lances its fields and woods, and its gaunt towns repeatedly so they become espaliered by its beams. This is paradoxical land – at once heavy and luminescent; and in that alone, as Celtic as the filigree of ancient gold and bronze, or the thick consonants and aspirant trills of the old tongue. Yet there's hardly any sky in Neville's images – or green fields, of which Brittany, an overwhelmingly agricultural region, has many. Beginning in the month that the British electorate voted to leave the European Union, and ending three years later, by which time the sense of stasis throughout the realm, has reduced those same voters to a state of, frankly, lavish boredom (we stare at the lens forever and a day, yet the shutter never closes), Neville's essay proposes Guingamp (pronounced in Estuarine English 'gang-gong'), a small town midway along Brittany's northern coast, as at once a synecdoche of the region's bigger namesake, and a sort of *mise en abyme*: a British island shrunk then implanted in a foreign mane.

Guingamp's claims, if not to fame, then at least to the sort of notoriety that ties pork pies to Melton Mowbray, or mustard to Dijon, are an annual dance annual festival held at the end of August, and a giant-slaying football team, *En Avant de Guingamp* (Forward, Guingamp!), whose stadium has the capacity to hold twice as many people as live in the town. The dissolution of a proud Celtic heritage into a wider globalised culture is shared by Brittany and the western extremities of the British Isles – where non-commercialised redoubts are also formed by the communally corybantic and the traditional competitive sport of the working man. Brittany, where the British Celts fled to during the Dark Ages, can be conceived of as a Britain writ small – or a Gaul preserved in the odd aspic of its own quasi-introversion. This makes of Guingamp a yet smaller figuration: a mini-little Britain populated by our unknown and unknowable counterparts, some of whom, quite possibly, were dipped in the potion at childhood and so are tempered for life.

Each August, musicians and dancers from all over the Celtic world arrive in Guingamp for the Saint Loup festival: a celebration of their culture that always ends with the local dance known as *la Dérobée de Guingamp*. A literal translation of this might be 'sneaking away from Guingamp': the dancers parading through the town, setting to one another, forming arches of arms, snaking through them, reforming and parading once more – but there's nothing in the least bit sneaky about this, given it takes place in full daylight, and witnessed by many onlookers. There isn't anything sneaky about Mark Neville's Parade, either; here we see the dancers – of all ages, but mostly young – preparing for the annual event: trying on their costumes, the young women and girls pinning white lace caps with long trailing ribbons to their hair.

It's these ribbons, I think, that twine together the multiple images of Parade, tying one to another – because Neville's subjects, whether formally posed, or caught inadvertently, display the same range of sensibility as dancers: from brashly self-aware to sunk completely in the flowing movement of their own and others' lives. The hip-swing of a posse of precocious pubescent girls might be witnessed the world over – as could their raiment of sweat-shopped shmatte, destined for gull-haunted landfill. But Neville's essay places them firmly in Guingamp – just as his lens, like some epidiascope, both shines through the social fabric, and captures its opacities. For, in common with big and yet bigger versions, the town is no longer whitely homogeneous: black and brown faces appear among the secular celebrants – or standing in the streets, no shyer or brasher than the indigenes.

And in the Basilica de Notre Dame de Bon Secours the Black Madonna reposes with her black and godly infant – one of some 180 of these figures that are to be found throughout France,

either survivals from Byzantium and the east, or later copies figured by the Marian cults that spread throughout Europe, forming and reforming in the waves of Reformation and Counter-Reformation. The so-called 'pardon', or pilgrimage and procession of the Black Madonna is a sort of counterpoint to la Dérobée – some might say an ironic one, given the well known intolerance that can also be exhibited by white majority populations to black incomers who they regard as somewhat less than divine. Guingamp's Black Madonna – like many others – was dismembered during the 1789 revolution, and her several parts, and her baby, were only reunited in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Bare-chested, tribal, flag-waving – the En Avant fans do indeed plunge forwards out of pictorial space. Do they represent the long-forged conscience of their race? To paraphrase James Joyce's fictional doppelganger, wandering a different Celtic strand. The uncanny doubling of the stadium, which allows for more fanaticism than can reasonably be generated by the town itself, suggests deep reserves of nativism, ready to be drawn on. And here, in the details of Neville's images, we find the devils that plague us all nowadays: the animals whose relationship to women and men is no longer productive, or even symbiotic – but largely hieratic: the hounds that cluster behind the girl may be a working pack, but their work consists in a leisure activity which is itself a skeuomorph: namely, the reconfiguring of some thing or pursuit, formerly utile, as merely decorative. The dogs cluster behind the girl – walking on water, perhaps? Or, at any rate, some unseen bridge or pontoon – their role is perhaps to act as her spiritual advisors, reminding her of the skull beneath every skin.

And elsewhere, horses stand on cars, or are ridden by dogs – while fish are held in the manner of sceptres and orbs. A poultry worker becomes but the figure in a carpet of wings and beaks – a huntsman seems more concerned to keep his raiment immaculate than track down his quarry. The presence of animals in Neville's images reminds us of a different sort of dérobée: the slow and painful retreat of humanity from the ambit of the natural, which is circumscribed now by the screen – whereas once upon a time, the animals were everywhere – including in the Basilica, where, like the Black Madonna, they might well have been regarded through a hagnoscope.

The townsfolk of Guingamp, their livelihood yet dependent on what may be wrested from land and sea, appear before Neville in blue plastic aprons and white nylon snoods – for they too are hierophants, bound up in the alchemy of late capitalism, its ceaseless transmutation of base boredom into some other rich bastard's gold. Their faces are for the most part stolid – and sharply ruled by dark eyebrows and sharkish smiles. So it is that they celebrate their rootedness, for, while it may be said that no one wakes up in the morning deciding to be French, or a Breton, or a resident of Guingamp, once that unreflective moment is past, and we have become embodied, while we may assume a socially-mandated mask, we nonetheless continue to observe the world sceptically through its eyeholes.

And it's this, in the final analysis, that Neville captures so well in his work – yes, there is the sociological overview; yes, there is the careful composition of the tableau vivant that is our social existence; and yes – of course – there is an attention to the aesthetic found by the camera's lens as it encapsulates form, and registers tone and colour. However, far more important are those eyes, those looks, those several and various points of contact between the individual and the group, and between the split second — and eternity.