

Parthian Tears

by [Peter Dreyer](#) (June 2023)



The Captive Slave (Ira Aldridge), John Philip Simpson, 1827

For King Charles III on his accession, May 6, 2023

*... wound, like Parthians, while you fly,
And kill with a retreating eye.*

– Samuel Butler, *Hudibras* (1678)

On November 14, '48, the day before I turned
nine, while reading H. G. Wells' *The Time
Machine* in our De Aar Hotel retreat,
my brand-new puppy snoozing at my feet,
Rusty, I called him, who'd unscheduled been
a farmer's gift, a Rhodesian ridgeback's
half-breed progeny born of a dachshund mate,
outside, the sharp ochre of the Great
Karoo's distraised and whirling dust, hoo-hoo,
hit second-story windows, and *Lilibet*
whom my naughty aunts had promised me I'd get
as bride, gave birth, apparently, to you.

Oblivious of your coming (I forgot!)
to this our mortgaged bouncy castle and
estate ... though we are relatives,
your granddad was my liege, and us
all being kin to Genghis Khan—nothing to fear,
I think, or fuss, the old boy lived an age ago,
most family trace of him has faded, don't you know?—

una furtiva lagrima, a tear,
or two, leapt to my unaccustomed eye.
I confess I wept for you, Majesty,
and for your poo-bah coronation, a sigh
from this post-postcolonial slave station, see?

Envoi

I tell a lie. There was no dust storm
that day—it was the following year (a bummer,
as I recall), and it was for myself that, perhaps, that summer
I shed, in secret, those dumb-ass “Parthian” tears.
So, I was drunk, and it was late at night!
I’m terribly sorry! *Es tut mir sehr Leid!*
But how could these desiderata make much
difference to the likes of me and you?
Everything’s all, it seems, just tickety-boo,
for Saxe-Coburg-Gotha stuff is always such!



Delhi, India, folio from an
early seventeenth-century
Mughal Shahnama (Book of
Kings).

Note: The Parthians, a nomadic people who long ruled the Iranian empire, successfully resisted Roman imperial expansion in Asia, famously employing a tactic that became known as “the Parthian shot,” in which mounted archers swiveled their upper bodies at full gallop to shoot at a pursuing enemy (see [here](#)).

Squeak o' the mouse to James Elkins for Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings (2001).

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Peter Richard Dreyer is a South African American writer. He is the author of *A Beast in View* (London: André Deutsch), *The Future of Treason* (New York: Ballantine), *A Gardener Touched with Genius: The Life of Luther Burbank* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan; rev. ed., Berkeley: University of California Press; new, expanded ed., Santa Rosa, CA: Luther Burbank Home & Gardens), *Martyrs and Fanatics: South Africa and Human Destiny* (New York: Simon & Schuster; London: Secker & Warburg), and most recently the novel *Isacq* (Charlottesville, VA: Hardware River Press, 2017).

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