

SEMAPHORE FOR BEGINNERS

by Ben Francombe

Stand at either end, screw up your eyes against what we hope is bright sunshine, look out, and see what you can see.

In the distance is Pete or Jodie (depending on which way you're facing)... They're wearing red and, of course, they're waving those flags, but it's still rather difficult to see them, set against the colourful backdrop of the bustling streets.

They are small, insignificant, a long way away, indeed – a long way away from each other. And yet, they are talking while apart, not through the easy mechanisms of our manically connected daily lives: not through texts, voice mails, emails, tweets, blogs, skypes, but through something slower, heavier, more literal and analogue... Not easy.

Semaphore is not easy: it has taken quite a while to learn... but, like English speakers learning a strange foreign language it is too easy to give up, to limply apologise for modern impatience and think about (perhaps) making a performance piece about Skyping (assuming, as we do, that everyone who might be interested in their work will have internet access).

But they've stuck at it: they get things wrong and are duly embarrassed at their inadequacies (they hope that there aren't too many ex- scouts or seafarers passing by, laughing at their physical weakness, their slumped posture, or wonky Ws).

But, they're going to get better – time is a great healer – and they'll find a way of making this work, of opening up, of talking about important things, but also, at the same time, of having a laugh or a bit of a row: of connecting in new ways, adopting a short-hand perhaps, or a nuance that works over a distance – perhaps it will help them formulate their thoughts and make the things they say a little more precious.

Something difficult and distant can, over time, be made to feel natural and normal: and, of course, for many people whose lives are not easy-to-hand, who live apart from loved ones, who are forced in some way – perhaps here – to live at a distance from the place they might call home, the short conversation, the snatched text, the quick email before a long day or a short sleep, might be just as hard (or as poignant, or as beautiful) as a semaphored conversation.