

Dark Canadee

The First Voyage

Previously on DARK CANADEE...

'It's always night-time here...' 'a safe haven, full of rogues and chancers and dreamers...' 'Poets come, from the Plague-Times... I have to get them through the chaos of the market...' 'the hooded pilot passes her some papers...' 'I've seen ghosts in the upper windows...' 'the green lamp means we're clear...' 'J'essaye d'écrire, a woman murmurs from the shadows...' 'we're far from our lives but we're working together...' 'some hoodlums crouched over a strange game of tiles...' 'witness the white space like a spar of silence...' 'like I say, the cards are wise...' 'dead poets come here sometimes...' 'where the carts take the poor folks back to the Interior...' 'Everyone comes here, don't they...' 'they do...' 'I used to think everyone leaves in the end. But they all come here...'

Upon the Nineteenth day of February...

They call it Dark Canadee. Not because it's dark, it isn't. It's a flame-lit crimson port in a storm which you can see for miles from out on the Bay. I mean at night-time you can, and it's always night-time here.

They call it Dark because it's free, in that it's lawless and unclaimed, does not belong to any realm, neither ministers nor monarchs, no one quite knows why. It just – *escaped attention* and long may it do so. People come to buy or sell, to do or die, to stick or twist or disappear, to make their mark or scratch it out, they bring their hopes, their dreams, they wind up here, they wash up there, on the pebble shore where all is – I was going to say *forgiven*, I will settle for *overlooked*.

It's so Free it's *plague-free*, in a world that's full of plague. It's like the plague moved on for once, for its own private reasons. So yes it's a safe haven, but a haven full of fools and schemers and scoundrels. What gets done here stays done.

For all these reasons Poets come too, from the Plague-Times. *Plague-Timers* or *PTs* are what they call the Poets, without sellable goods to speak of, alone with who they are they sail the rolling waves of the Bay, they come in fragile plunging boats of four or five or more, sometimes many, or too many. They come piloted by hooded figures, silent ones with one hand on the tiller.

'I can see it,' cries McCloud the boatwoman from down on the pebble shore.

'Do you still know that Yeats poem you knew?' I ask her, 'that day we met him?' I'm leaning by the lamppost at the end of the wharf so I can form an impressive silhouette. I've been thinking about time, for a change. McCloud looks back at me briefly, states neutrally: '*I went out alone to sing a song or two.*'

'You were only a child then. You had a toy ballerina, seems like yesterday.'

'No it doesn't,' and now she's piling up her long white hair to keep it out of the sea.

'I mean it literally does. *Saw I an old man young or a young man old...*'

'There are six in the boat, Max, I think they're taking on water.'

*

I found myself one autumn in a village where it was always Thursday and the great poets I was meant to teach came by while I was teaching. It feels like only yesterday. I mean it *truly* feels like yesterday, for when I go to sleep on Thursdays in that village I always wake up on this wild Friday night in the dark blaze of Canadee.

*

Out of my pocket uncrinkles the charcoal sketches and names of the Poets on the boat that's coming in. *Boorman, Cockburn, Colombus, Curtis, Smith, Welch...* The sketch of Boorman is literally disintegrating as I look at it, and it's starting to distort the others one by one.

'This thing with the paper,' I call down to McCloud, 'it's happening again, it started in the corner.'

She mutters like it's actually time to concentrate on bringing the boat in now and the thing with the charcoal sketches can wait, then she calls up with a question: 'Is it a beautiful face?'

'Yeah exceptionally so, or he was,' but now the whole thing is satiny grey ash going through my fingers.

'It's very delicate paper,' says McCloud, 'it's from Signor Seguimi in Florence, it turns shy round exceptional beauty.'

'We need stronger stuff, we need a shipment.'

'I'll tell my mother.'

'Could you.'

Then she's wading out to meet them in her windcheater proofed for anything.

*

Boorman looks like his picture, or did when it existed, next there's a white-haired man in black: Welch, I presume. The four women seem to be friends already, they step out from their lifeboat huddle and bid the tillerman goodbye - his nod is all but immeasurable by either time or space - and they all like what one of them is wearing against the night air.

'It's a chenille snood,' the lady proclaims. I believe that's Cockburn from my memory of the sketches.

'You're in luck,' I tell them, finally uncoupling mysteriously from my lamppost, 'there's a brand new stall in the market.'

All six look up at me on the wharf, and I expect them to be impressed by my silhouette against the glow, or failing that my modest fame, but Welch says 'See that, it's a brass and gold finish Harrogate lantern, that's impressive.' One of the women says 'What, where that bloke is standing?' and I swear I hear McCloud creasing up as she secures their brave little boat.

*

So the introductions have to start with me – they probably all think I look older or younger than they thought, thanks Yeats – and then one by one they introduce themselves as they climb the stone steps to the wharf, ladies helping gentlemen and gentlemen ladies.

They stand around and behold the great blaze of the timeless port. Red firelight and lanternlight tremble on their faces, and the clamour makes them gasp with relief after their soundless voyage.

‘Is it far to where we look at the poems?’ Boorman asks me.

‘There is no fight club,’ I say, I’ve not given up trying to be cool, now McCloud can’t hear me, but no one seems to get my reference.

‘I’m hungry,’ says Curtis. I see Cockburn instantly produce a slice of what looks like potato bread from the lining of her coat and pass it to her neighbour.

‘By the way I’m always hungry,’ says Curtis, and Cockburn does it again. They start becoming friends.

Two of them are looking in the wrong directions, Smith up at the starlit sky, Columbus back at the sea.

Actually Smith at the crescent moon and Columbus at something not far away in the lamplit shallows.

Smith points out that a star has wandered in between the tips of the moon’s blade, and I say matter-of-factly ‘Means the Mariner’s out there somewhere,’ because as it happens it does.

They all look up, then turn to gaze at the far horizon for that legendary ship, or all except Columbus, who has gone to the very edge of the wharf and stooped down to have a closer look at something.

‘What’s that water hole,’ she asks of no one in particular.

‘You mean watering-hole,’ I go jovially, conscious of the delay as we all gather about her, ‘well there’s the Belly of Lead for later!’ and I gesture at the rainbow lanterns on the east edge of the market. The music’s pounding already.

‘No,’ says Columbus, ‘there is an actual – hole in the water.’

We look closer and there is, about twenty metres out. A tiny whirlpool, too tiny to be whirling even, just an odd little puncture in the surface of the bay.

No one knows why it’s there.

‘If the stars are doing *that*, all bets are off,’ Welch points out quite reasonably.

Columbus calls down to McCloud, who I know knows everything about the water here, so I wait for her to explain.

She pulls tight the final knot in the rope, locates and observes the strange phenomenon out there, frowns and sniffs. Then she looks back up at me. She hasn’t the faintest.

‘Someone’s pulled the plug,’ is her comment, as it probably would be at the end of the world, ‘I’ll see about that paper shipment.’

*

If I had my way we'd swing right through the market at top speed, for people glance at us, traders turn from their transactions and frown at us, someone whistles, you hear the words 'PTs, *more* PTs, it never ends...' and on we go, but these folks are hungry and they don't all want potato bread, so I say we'll get some fish and chops and eat them while we work.

'Work at what,' Boorman murmurs as he gets it now.

'Exactly,' I grin, and I should have seen this coming, but now they all want to stop, because we passed by **Fig-Roll Fantazia** along to the next stall – a brand new concern called, as luck would have it, **I'm In The Snood For Love** – and they're all digging out their doubloons to get a snood like Cockburn's. I encourage this, despite the dangers of bidding here too long; it helps when the group bonds, and if it's over snoods or potato bread, so be it. I remember a group who were super hot at board-games, now when on earth was that?

'I'd like a chenille one, like yours,' Curtis says to Cockburn, and the merchant, hearing this, points to a stall right opposite – **The Captain and Chenille** – where the Captain says he has the very thing, and to nobody's surprise, he does.

'Very nice,' I somehow say to all of them at once, it's one of my last remaining powers, 'let's get to the Fish and Chop Ship.'

As it's the second time they've heard me scramble the words, one of the women begins quietly confiding, 'I *presume* he means...' but before she gets any further we reach the place, a stall somehow re-timbered like a tiny boat propped up by warped blue planks and a canvas for the sea, where an old man on the little deck sells nothing from his dripping grill but breaded cod and lamb chops.

'The Fish and Chop Ship!'

'Yeah the old boy couldn't say *fish and chip shop*,' I explain, 'so it seemed simpler to redesign the stall and go the full surf'n'turf. What does that teach us poets? dunno... when the body won't do what the mind says, go with the body, it's older. Or fit the scene to what the mouth likes best – pardon? Vegetarian option? Um... over to you, Cockburn,' and out comes more potato bread from that infinite inside pocket, but while she passes it round I can hear she's very softly singing.

Smith asks her what the tune is, and Cockburn's pointing at the glum-looking fishes in a little tank the old man has on his deck.

'Farewell to my sisters,' she says, and goes on with the melody.

'Heigh-ho,' say I, 'in the midst of life, etcetera.'

I lead them out of the market, everybody soon chatting with their mouths full, and as they wolf through the food to the old newspaper that everything's sold in here, they see old headlines seeping in the grease.

**FLOODS IN THE NORTH AND SOUTH!!!
DUELLING DUCHESSSES AT LOGGERHEADS!!!
FLOODS IN THE EAST AND WEST!!!
MAYOR OF LOGGERHEADS ASKS DUCHESSSES TO LEAVE!!!
HIP HIP HURRAH, THE KING'S WEARING A FUNNY HAT!!!'
WHITE DEATH IN THE CHANNEL PORTS!!!**

‘Should we be worried?’ Welch enquires, catching me up while he scans the oily parchment.

‘No he often wears a funny hat. You were at Strasbourg, weren’t you.’

‘What goes around comes around,’ Welch sighs feelingly and I’m about to say *tell me about it* but I remember people sometimes do, so I just make the wise sound I’ve perfected and we’re good.

To the left we pass the dark tilting edifice of the Library. All the windows are dark tonight. We trudge along the narrow muddy pathway that winds away south-west.

A group of ten or so Deal Porters in their cloaks stop their murmuring conversation as we go by.

‘Seven this time,’ one of them resumes with his back turned.

‘Aren’t *you* good at numbers,’ I say, but not till we’re out of earshot.

On the right is the high-walled private garden where the local gentlefolk walk slow circles under flood-lights.

‘Sir Gilbert at your service,’ gleams a fellow lounging at the gate between the burly gatemen, ‘can I interest the *ladies* in...’ but we march right on by before he gets to his gist.

Up ahead we see the high thin tower of the Dockhouse, and the green lantern burning at the top.

The lantern means we’re clear. It means the red-coat officers of British Land are elsewhere, it means the oaken door swings open and closes by itself, and we’re where we’re meant to be.

*

It’s dark and smoky and lit by many dripping candles, I hold the door so the six can go stooping through. Sal Bonny looks up from her desk behind the door. She does with both her eyes, and not a patch in sight.

‘Got your eye fixed then, Sal,’ I say.

‘*Je suis ma soeur la corsaire, et je navigue les sept mers,*’ she says and goes on writing. As the six file through the room I notice the rest of the Dockhouse folks

are engaged in unwrapping framed pictures in the gloom, mounting them on the earthen walls. The Poets stop to take a look.

‘Forgot to say it’s also an art gallery,’ I say as I don’t know what to say, ‘where’d these all come from?’

Sal Bonny sits back, gives up on her work and settles for English.

‘Sharp Practice was here just now. He got this lot from Venice this morning, and he’s getting some more from Istanbul tomorrow, he just left.’

‘Um. How can Sharp Practice be in Venice today and Istanbul tomorrow and here just now?’ I reasonably ask.

‘He’s taken articles. He’s on the Grand Tour. He’s got a proper job, look I don’t know, Max, go and play bridge with the PTs.’

‘Is the Jazz Lady here?’

‘Went out to look at the water. There’s some weird *thing* in the water and she’s got this thing about whales. Thinks they’re coming to get her.’

I expect Colombus to join this conversation, having been the one to notice the whirlpool, but she’s more interested in the paintings.

‘What’s security like here?’ she wonders.

‘What do you think,’ say the Folks in the corners, and one of the men stands up: ‘we’re not a chorus, you know, we just happened to all say that. Why d’you want to know?’

‘No reason,’ says Colombus, moving on to the next one, ‘just curious.’

I call across the room to all the Dockhouse folks: ‘can you tell the Jazz Lady we need to talk about paper?’

‘Who’s that addressed to?’ say a voice from a corner.

‘Well, anyone who sees her.’

‘We’re not a chorus, you know.’

*

Down the spiral steps we go toward the blue light of our working chamber. The fire’s been made up in the hearth, the Great Book of Wicky is open on its stand, it tells us everything it knows, which isn’t everything, and they sit, three to each side, to my left first Boorman then Welch then Colombus, to my right first Smith then Cockburn then Curtis.

I start dealing out cards so it looks like we have a game going. We have a supply of doubloons to make it look like we’re gambling.

‘What’s wrong with what we’re really doing...’ Curtis discreetly wonders from her spot by the crackling fire.

‘They don’t know why we’re doing it,’ I say, ‘it won’t go on a spreadsheet. Now I let Fate decide the order and there used to be a dice here, which is perfect since there’s six of you, or would be if I could find it...’ and somewhere deep in

this sentence I see the piece of white paper laid out in front of Cockburn suddenly lift up its corners, carefully and diligently fold itself in several ways into a perfect paper cube and tumble lightly over to where I'm staring at it.

'Um. Cockburn. How did you do that?'

'Origami of the mind,' she beams.

'Mind you it's got no numbers.'

Boorman is already handing me a Sharpie, 'more black magic,' he says.

*

Colombus, Welch, Smith, Cockburn, Boorman, Curtis... I will set down what I spoke to them. These excellent Poets said their pieces too in these exchanges, but their words are protected here, and they all know what they were.

Meanwhile I say mine:

'You sailed here and I sailed here. You seek to write your best, I will seek to read my best. I shall try to speak to all as I speak to each. We're far from our lives but we're working together. There is no right or wrong here, no chosen school, no proper way. We seek the best form for the voices Time has stirred from the creatures present. We bring the dark ink of life but we respect the bright space and silence and infinity thronged about it. And when the work is over we will go down to the Belly of Lead and dance till the dancing's done!'

I turn my old red rain-stick upside down, it rains, it rains, the last drops trickle through, and we begin.

*

Chroma

Katie Colombus

Someone has removed all the black keys on the piano
it looks desolate white, light, space and smooth teeth

ivory ghosts of all the elephants slaughtered
for the sleek oblong sound of C Major. And

it feels like someone has removed all the black keys
on the piano, it is not grand - that was around

the time of my lace and lavender teacher, as I
patent feet swinging smashed at single keys.

I think someone has removed all the black keys on my
piano, and I'm not sure how it will be tuned now,

not sure how to read the music anymore, or if I'll ever
find them again, the white key they are so dazzling

because there don't seem to be any black keys on the piano
and all I know is my hands feel flat without their discord

as I play C up to C, but I can't only ever play C in major,
I want to play all my scales. I want to be chromatic.

*

'It's often misty here at Canadee, as moving through life is a step in the
mist, so mist the eyes for our first look at any poem... but especially one with a
striking formal stance like this...

'Justified on both sides, but full of toothless gaps, and some lines stumble
to get it all in before it's too late! A sense of the poet's voice constricted, buffeted
by form. For when a formal choice is foregrounded like that: where has the poet
placed herself? At one end of the spectrum the unusual form goes unmentioned,
the poet's choice is made and we hope we shall find out why, or at least discover
that the choice serves the material. (Quite often we don't, which means the poets
don't know why they're doing what they're doing.) But at the other end, the poet
is *performing* a sense of helplessness, the voice is actually *acknowledging the plight* of
being in the form it's in. Remind you of anything? Remind you of *everything*?

'But 'Chroma' plays that card cleanly and clearly, beginning with a voice of
bemusement, alarm -

'*Someone has removed all the black keys on the piano* and instantly we
are in a situation. The use of three couplets/two couplets/three couplets (though
these are broken couplets on a forced march) gives us a ghostly apparition of the
lost black keys which sit in threes and twos. Their absence is skilfully

underwritten by their mention, *all the black keys* three times – thrice makes the lament.

‘Many *untraditional* forms feel like shatterings, as if some norm or convention has been bombed at and is crumbling – and culturally that’s often, too often, the point – but this is far more interesting, because some force that is not the speaker’s – *Someone has removed* – looks like it held magnets to the ink, stretched, elongated, squeezed the voice, and won’t let it past those walls on either side...

‘So many free-looking forms have simply not been *costed*, there is nothing to explain or justify or make sense of the formal choice, or choice of formlessness. Of course poems don’t have to explain or justify themselves or even make sense – *BUT* – they ought to be aware of the price of what they choose. ‘Chroma’ doesn’t have that problem because it is instantly plunging us into what *it’s* been plunged into. Here the insistent geometry, the breathless staccato, the rules that don’t seem fair! these all works in concert to *infantilize* the voice – witness how suddenly the keyboard is being contemplated as a child would do at a very early point in her lessons – sad, the piano looks sad, look, the white keys look like teeth, oh, elephants died for this, and I can only play C Major forever...

‘More helpful strokes: the voice cries again *someone has removed*, same as before but this time helplessly islanded on the middle of a line, as if even the security of that initial accusation has been shifted underneath our feet, its capital S made small – and then that stifled, muffled *it is not grand* – this is only a small piano. A child’s limitless despairing love for the nearby, the thing we did *last time*. Note also the effects of babble, the anagrammatic suggestion of *elephants slaughtered* industrialised horribly into *sleek oblong sound*. It might not look anagrammatic, but feel it with your lips, tongue, teeth...

‘So of course the voice goes toppling out of the first section, falls like Alice through a long empty stanza break – *that was around* – around what? around when? failing to remember yet – then arrives at the next section remembering a first lesson, *the time of my* – remembering her what, her – *lace and lavender* – sight and scent returning quickest, as they do. The line-endings are excellent here, that *I* that leans out over the far far end of the line – I who, I what did I look like *then???* – the memory sprouts in the line-break – *patent feet swinging*, the *I* still grammatically in charge, and the long space to grow the force – *smashed at single keys*. Now here comes sound to join with sight and scent.

‘Up to this point, Columbus, there’s very little wrong! This is a finely calibrated piece that’s sensing One Unearthly Shift. There is a weird hole in the

water – and someone has removed all the black keys on the piano! Then some issues arise in the second half or so. I think they arise just when the gaps seem to begin to vanish – but on that 9th line *I think someone has removed all the black keys on my* it suddenly feels like the Voice has fought back, has tamed the unnatural spaces. It mustn't. It doesn't feel possible within the physics of the poem.

'I like how *Someone has removed* mutated to *it feels like someone has removed* and now to *I think someone has removed*, but the 9th line sort of cheats on that. Perhaps it's no surprise we now have the first bad line-break in the poem, *on my/piano*, and a long section-break that's okay, but lacks the transforming power of the first one, the Alice one.

'Because also, Columbus, get rid of the commas. I meant to say. Get rid of the dash on line 6, all the full-stops, all the commas. They feel too like the black notes you say are not there. They augment, they diminish, I think the formal derangement you've enacted demands you give up the punctuation too, like at a border kiosk. The self-imposed white spaces, with all their dogged habits, will punctuate it for you. And it's that upending of the Not Fair Rule – that there will be gaps whatever you say – that somewhat derails the rest. It makes the voice too adult – *my hands feel flat without their discord* and *I want to be chromatic* claw back too much power, given the giddy unsettlement of what's gone before.

'There are still sweet notes of that tone – *if I'll ever/find them again – I play C up to C – and all my scales* – but that last section needs to be *imposed-upon* like the first two. Don't let the 9th line cheat on the spaces, that's the culprit, that's where you weaken your own cool, firm, uncompromising form. There's the soul of a child alone at the end, so don't solve the dilemma with a move like *chromatic*. Let the form win this one. You made it strong enough to. Voice the loss you've grown here. Let the white keys play a sad chord to themselves because they miss the black ones. E minor? B minor diminished?'

*

'D minor,' she declares, her hand forming the triad on the table.

'I don't have the ear you have, Columbus, to call a chord out of the air, and I can't say why certain keys or colours or brushstrokes do what they do, but I *can* do that with vowels and consonants and that's what we do here. Slow it down to consciousness in the knowledge we can speed it up again into the wild sleep of *writing a poem*. Who can remember the moment it went perfectly? No one being honest. The brain has a room for it we can't see into. On we go.'

*

JLB

Chris Welch

dreams circle and
recreate themselves.
the light of the mind
of the man in the basement
is reflected from infinite mirrors
illuminating labyrinths,
impossible gardens,
and imaginary beings.
he writes unreal fictions,
cabbala and forgeries,
reviews of false works
and cowboy stories.
the light dulls and is gone.
like the man in the ruins,
dreams circle and
recreate themselves.

*

‘You told me when you saw the news headlines gloating in the fish oil, *what goes around comes around*, Welch, idiots on thrones, the floods, the Plague, then you said you’d been thinking in a circular way of late, and you’ve been at Strasbourg as an engineer of space, and you have a pantoum about the international station, now *there’s* a superb match-up of form and content: a pantoum spins its silk, travels without seeming to, helplessly repeats, coiled in its own atmosphere.

‘So I see where ‘JLB’ originates, in a sense of daily circularity, and it plays the game from the very start, or at least after the cryptic initials by which I’m fine to stay mystified: *dreams circle and...*

‘Dreams and poems, an uneasy relationship. Maybe like two social stars who’ve heard about each other, all their friends expect them to hit it off like fireworks when they meet, but there they stand quite awkwardly at life’s all-night party...

‘Dream (*sipping its drink*): So that’s what happened to me.
Poem: Okay. What does it mean.
Dream: It means I’m quite interesting.

Poem: I can say that *and* say it in a form you'll
remember beyond breakfast.

[Pause]

Dream: What's breakfast.

Poem: I think I might get some now.

Dream: Did I tell you what happened to me?

'And so on, do it yourself, take it where Dream wants or Poem wants, but it isn't the same journey. Look, Welch isn't making that mistake, I'm just riding the poem to lay a trail for thought. I like that it starts with lower-case, a short cut to instability, and I like that it says *circle*, for it's true dreams can seem to circle, making anagrams of themselves while you doze, and trying to say the thing again and again till you crack it or forget it and start your day. AND - I like *and* hanging over the first space.

'Space, Welch, you're an engineer of space and you engineer this well. I normally fear or loathe an *AND* hanging over the space, it can only work if the *straining* of thought is implicit, and it's implicit here, the straining of thought being *dreams circle and what is it they do exactly...? they recreate*. It's not easy to corral Dream into verbs that fit, but *recreate* will do for starters, they take existing mental impulses (please go at least *that* far with Freud and not the fairies) and for obscure reasons rearrange them. Maybe *rearrange* is closer, but in rearranging parts they do create a whole that is unique and we can call that a *re-creation* - it's Dream's *recreation* too, in the pastime playful sense why not, none can deny that Dream is playful.

'Ending this hesitant sigh of a thought with a full-stop is just right. The border between Dream and Life is baffling of course. I've always loved these lines in Auden's elegy for Freud, where he thinks of all the things there wasn't time for Freud to consider, imagines them as poor shy creatures drawn to a fire:

For about him till the very end were still
those he had studied, the fauna of the night,
and shades that still waited to enter
the bright circle of his recognition

turned elsewhere with their disappointment...

'I like also the resumption with small-case, and I like the humility of its offering, *the light of the mind/of the man in the basement...* This is a satisfying alliterative move, the two 'm's meeting and leading us somewhere else, a lovely

downward motion here. *the light of the mind* is dimly lit with its small-case, softly giving us the light we need to perceive *the man in the basement*. Remember, Poets, say something simply and every soul can see it. Their tickets are (a) having ever seen a *man* and (b) having ever seen a *basement*. Make it metaphor or simile and you're stopping us on the cellar stairs explaining *something else it kinda looks like*. Don't metaphor or simile in enclosed spaces unless you *want* to free us from them...

'And on the 5th line something happens that happens to us all. The Glance Away. I can't *prove* there was a Glance Away! Maybe they have cameras in Strasbourg to check you are busy space-engineering, I don't know. I believe Welch took the Glance Away. The Glance Away is born of satisfaction one has begun, there is a flow, there may be a poem soon, the Glance Away says *here I am, at work on a poem* – when you Glance Back you are confronted with an Artefact, four lines, however many lines, *the page is printed*, as Ted Hughes says of his Thought-Fox, who the devil put that there???

'Again, I ride the poem for the point, but it does derail here, in two ways. It gets metrically fussy after its meditative dimetrical pacing, and it stops seeing, trades the light in the basement for cheap jewels of mystery: *infinite, mirrors, labyrinths, imaginary*. (I'll make an exception for *impossible gardens* as it plays the sharp game of showing *garden* and whipping it away again like one of these cards.)

'Welch, you bring it back, you get back to the matter: *irreal fictions,/ cabbala and forgeries,/reviews of false works/and cowboy stories*, great, because this is the lost clutter of a desk of a man in a basement. I like *irreal*, the oddity of that option – in a basement I'll say *irreal* and no one will ever know! – the other things are in piles, and I adore *cowboy stories* at the tops of those piles. Look:

*He writes irreal fictions
of impossible gardens,
cabbala and forgeries,
reviews of false works
and cowboy stories...*

'The end is good too, *the light dulls* is good, it's basement light, then Dream reclaims the man down there and makes him a *man in the ruins* – does what Dream does, a *dissolve* – then we're at the refrain. But remember, there's a *light-year* of distance between repeating once and more than once. When you hit the repeated lines and the poem ends, well yes, you've made an end of the beginning and vice versa, and that's circular but it's only circular *once*, and I think

you're going more for circular *ad infinitum*. I would spin the wheel, the clock, the freaking *space station* and keep going! What's the man in the ruins up to now? Keep on hinging it with the refrain, but keep circling and circling till the man is gone. Or till he cracks it and wakes up in neither Dream nor Poem.'

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In the short break I go upstairs. I find the Jazz Lady at her desk, doing more charcoal sketches.

'There's an issue with the paper, Jazz Lady, it disintegrated in the face of beauty. So McCloud thinks.'

'Uh-oh,' she sets down her charcoal, 'the last ones didn't do that.'

'But the moonlight hit it, there were stars before the moon, I think the paper just lost it somehow.'

'Maybe it was the *thing* in the water...' Sal whispers from her table.

The Jazz Lady shudders but says 'it's not a whale, I'd know if it was.'

'I've ordered stronger paper,' I tell her, 'still sensitive and delicate, but it keeps its nerve by moonlight.'

*

When I go downstairs again, some of the Poets have been mentioning their fathers. Smith is describing the poem she's about to read, so I assume hers was an air-force navigator in the war. Boorman's was a Minister of Religion, and Columbus says hers used to claim he was a pirate, in that he had a big beard and a parrot on his shoulder. All the Poets agree that's close enough, and somehow the fleeting presence of these three elders bring all the Poets closer. I remember mine too.

'Let's hear about it, Smith,' I say, resuming my place, and she begins without introduction, with a lovely line stepping right out of life.

*

I am the Navigator's Daughter

Janet Smith

Sometimes the stars shone so bright and so many
that I longed to join you, navigating
the whales and bears
where the Dioscuri eternally clasp hands.
And now I think of you guiding your plane,
heavy with bomb, by telegraph wires and the fires of cities.

Sometimes the stars shine so bright that I cannot look at them
because they remind me
of the time I picked flowers in the garden and mother
swiped me hard across the ear. When the stars shine
so bright I feel clean and sharp, emptied
of everything. But the time when I sat in the mud
weeding so fast to keep up with the chickweed. Growing
in the sunshine I sat under a flap of pink sheet
that summer it was so hot you could fry an egg on the stone slab.

You landed safely then; the day Bert didn't come back - lost
somewhere over France. You drank a cup of tea - ever
the Yorkshireman - spilled it clean into its saucer; just the way
I did that camping trip in Harlech & brought tears
to your eyes.

And sometimes the stars illuminate
the holes in the fence where the fox comes through
and an argument starts about where they live now
although the den is plain to see underneath the apple tree.

*

'The title is proud, elemental, hoists its colours, we are as we were raised,
and the first line splendidly bears this light. *Sometimes* is a very friendly trickster of
a word, it can make a single night and many nights interchangeable, both focus
and blur, which is what it's doing here. All I'd do differently is lose the *that*, so
it's *and so many/I longed* - the line-break is already stretching out the longing, this
daughterly cry is not going to wait longer for the pedantic *that*.

'Could there be more constellations after *whales and bears* before the
Dioscuri? (That's Castor and Pollux, the bright stars of Gemini, I shall spare you
your three and half steps to the Book of Wicky, gentlemen.) What I mean is,
whales and bears and, say, two or three other generalised nouns? four, five points
of the compass, has the child turning circles in awe at what she's being told.
When she gets to *Dioscuri* she has stopped. Is standing still and the stars are
twinkling. The word is sharp-edged, alien, specific, and it's her father teaching
her the word. Though it never literally says so, the implication is strong in the
word *Navigator*, the word *longed*, here's how she learned the names. And *eternally*

clasp hands is a nice grown-up's addition, not true and also *dead* true, like most stuff about the stars.

'The starlit sky gives way to wartime, as it does for one whose father did this, and the imagination blooms with peril, of bombs and wires, and *the fires of cities*, which needs no more nor less. All it needs in fact is to drop a line, break after *wires*, and the eye dropping to a last short line gives you a little plunging thrill of descent – look down there, to *the fires of cities*... *Cities*, note, plural not a *city* or *the city*, which deftly gives you altitude. Think of Larkin in 'Days' with

...the priest and the doctor
In their long coats
Running over the fields...

Where the plural *fields* makes these two fellows tiny, and the singular *field* would have made them giants. The *fires of cities* it is.

'I like the second chord played, the repetition, and I admire the simplicity of the switch in tense – *stars shine* where *stars shone*, but still within this grand flourishing line. I'd break it sooner though, because *shine* is at least as dazzling as *shone*, I might break it at *cannot* – what is it I cannot do...? *look at them*. That break works, and so would *look at them because they remind me* plays that accelerating lurch of unhappy memory.

'This has opened really well, you know Smith, but a problem arises. This may not be the Glance Away problem, it's more like underestimating the power of what's been done so far. The title, the stars, the longing, the naming of constellations, wartime, danger, burning. It's hard to shift in only a stanza-break to those same smoky heavens reminding the daughter of something very different. Partly that the stars, having implicitly triggered joy and pride, now, the same stars, trigger a nasty memory, the garden, the mother, the swipe across the ear. But it's also partly that it seems a *daylit* memory, which calls time too soon on the starlight. And then the light gets more confused, in fact *diffused*. The third iteration of the first line returns – but reduced, broken over lines, *the stars shine/so bright* – but they're harder to see now daylight has intervened, and soon the night is gone again, for *when I sat in the mud/weeding*.

'This needs some attention, Smith, it needs a kind of storyboarding, do I mean a stanza for night, a stanza for day and so on? Maybe I do, if you want to convey the emotional power that's pulsing in this poem. Those lines that end the second stanza, the weeding, the pink sheet, the stone slab, these are a lovely

jumble of childhood sunlight, but I think they need more separation from the night you painted before...

‘What works in this poem are the memories – the stars with the father (implicitly), the chastisement by the mother (explicitly), the weeding, the father drinking tea, the daughter spilling tea. What doesn’t work yet is how they connect, their cause and effect, the way they bump up against each other. Of course memory is like that, fluid and scattered, but something in our minds is trying to gain control: assessing why they have returned, puzzling what they mean, relishing or shuddering at their details, holding them close or fending them off. We do try and tame them. You need to keep an eye on poetry’s equivalent *instruments of sorting*: the stanza, the line, the consistency of light and dark, and an awareness of impact...

‘This could end up very fine though, Smith! It closes sweetly, with the stars now drawing down to a tiny detail of this very night, *the holes in the fence where the fox comes through*, an argument starting and that odd final glimpse, *although the den is plain to see* – I would then go with *beneath* and I wouldn’t rhyme it (*see-tree*) as it’s too intrusive when you’ve not rhymed till now.

‘I greatly admire the impulse in that last line, but to close this kind of memoir with a still beauty that’s aslant from the memories – I love *although the den is plain to see* – requires a little more clarity about what those memories have done and are still doing. Is there a way to make more of Navigation in the disparate memories? How she/you/the daughter sailed through life precisely *by* these stars/memories? Can the lightening and burdening suns of recollection in this poem form a constellation known as The Navigator’s Daughter?

‘This sigh of an ending reminds me of Edward Thomas’s ‘Over The Hills’, a *Grand Meaulnes* type of poem about Thomas finding an amazing happy welcoming village he never finds again, and it ends:

...Recall
Was vain: no more could the restless brook
Ever turn back and climb the waterfall
To the lake that rests and stirs not in its nook,
As in the hollow of the collar-bone
Under the mountain’s head of rush and stone.’

*

We hear bells tinkling from down along the lane.

'That's the brown wagon on its way,' I explain, though no one asked me, I just wanted them to know. 'It's going to the Great Hay Meadow.'

*

Honeytrap

Diane Cockburn

Standing at the end of the narrow street, two boys behind a table, clothed in grey linen, against a dark doorway, smiling boys, looking like brothers.

"Come try our honey! Honey for sale.'
I move like smoke sucked towards a vacuum,
still lightheaded after the funeral.

They smile through slightly rotten teeth.
I could swear a feeble bee flew from that boy's ear
but the sun was slanting so low, an illusion.

But wait, no sun, just yellow mist rising here.
'How much?' No answer, just a grin
'Whatever you want to pay. For charity.

This is from hives in the country, where
we have a house.' I feel sorry for them,
thin in their pale privilege, their little project.

"Come, try. Come buy.'
The jar hums in my hand, sticky
with something. The honey does not move
behind the glass. I lick my fingers.
It tastes of you, not one month dead.

I smell your perfume. The cornflowers you liked
guzzled by bees and spun into this golden stuff,
the lid covered in the pretty chintz of your last dress
tied round with a strand of your yellow hair.

My heart stings once, twice.
I see dark hives with open mouths

your grave fresh dug and busy
with summer wreaths

buzzy with bees,
dark honey from decay
each cell six sickness

the boys are gone.
An empty narrow street
A jar of honey in my hand.

*

‘Another poem of memory, but centripetal, unlike Smith’s centrifugal visions. These memories cluster to a single event, then disperse, abandoning the speaker. It’s very well done, Cockburn, arresting, full of surprise – like the thing you did with the dice – but I want to spend a moment on the relationship of memory and regularity in a poem. This is not a general point, though: it relates to the way ‘Honeytrap’ begins in tercets, then the stanzas expand and contract again, leaving us with tercets again, but short-line tercets.

‘Now there is an argument for letting the action of the memory lap at the voice like this, vary lengths of breath etc, but once you’ve done five stanzas in tercets I feel a kind of contract is established, an accord with the memory: that these three-liners (which in the English tradition can feel less classic and *sealed* than couplets or quatrains, so are good at suggesting yearning or loss, as they do here) these are the vessels for this onset of a memory, which deepens and blooms impressively into elegy...

‘The point about switching line- or stanza-lengths in mid-poem, or establishing then dispensing with *form itself* – is that it can seem to give the speaker too much agency. My essential objection to what people still call ‘free verse’ – lifetimes since Eliot denied there was any such thing as *vers libre*, saying there was only ‘good verse, bad verse, and chaos’ – is that it takes for itself more freedom than the mortal mind or body possess, being as they are in thrall to heartbeat, oxygen, footfall, the earth turning, the earth tilting, so it is at a deep level *inauthentic*.

‘All arguable of course, if not right here right now, and in any case ‘Honeytrap’ is not free verse. I just think it should abide by the peaceable sound it has made thus far, those tercets conjuring the memory home. *Breathe in, breathe*

out, sweet remembrance... Breathe in, sad remembrance, breathe out... variations on these, that's the work of a tercet...

'And the speaker here is helpless. The speaker *must* be helpless, she is bereaved and remembering the loved one. The only help at hand is in the chosen words, the way she tells the memory, so these choices take the role of the heart's defences. The spaces take the role of the way things went, the irrefutable, the irreparable, the way things have gone. In an elegy the white space takes the role of the implacable.

'The first stanza needs a slight tweak for geometry. To my eye, *standing at the end of the narrow street* places the boys ahead of me, mid-road like in a western, and outdoors, whereas the continuation suggests they're on a doorstep, a threshold, selling honey from a table.

'The second stanza is terrific. The vulnerability of the boys, their ill-worn confidence, their fragile pitch. The fusion of the speaker as *smoke* with *lightheaded after the funeral* is superbly compressed, giving us what we need of the speaker's helplessness, listlessness, as *smoke* fumes into *funeral*. The description focuses, as if approaching – close enough to see slightly rotten teeth, and the oddly terrifying babble of *feeble bee*. But an illusion and *wait, no sun*, the correction or qualifying of memory – a good move in a poem like this, as memory needs to set its stall up *beside* poetry, not on top of it – but the boys go on pitching, they don't know they're in a memory, they're not keeping the same time: *This is from hives in the country, where/we have a house*. They don't feel they belong, and the speaker, caught in the moment as it passes again, feels the same onrush of pity for them – and this is very fine – *thin in their pale privilege, their little project*, where the alliteration whispers both education and isolation. Alliteration always makes the chosen consonants – the *p*'s here – lean together. Here they slightly bow their heads like flowers in the wind or rain. But the tercet spell is cast by now, there's no exit from here. I would do something like:

*'Come, try. Come buy.' The jar hums in my hand,
sticky with something. The honey does not move
behind the glass. I lick my fingers. It*

tastes of you...

'Maybe. How good is *hums*, by the way? Very. Honey-bees, Baloo, Winnie the Pooh, honey is born in humming, spreads humming everywhere! And Cockburn your line-break *sticky/with something* is okay, but mine's better because

the assumption is that the stickiness is honey, so you don't need to flag suspense in the line-break. My stanza-break above – *It//tastes* – might be a little dramatic for some tastes, but I'm just putting it up there. It's a hugely pivotal moment in the poem. Being reminded of love by taste goes on in a deep old realm.

'So, three-liners from now to the end, (line 1) scent, (2) memory of time and place, (3) memory of the beloved. The *lid* recalling *chintz* and *your last dress* is a marvel, as is *tied round with a strand of your yellow hair*. What a beautifully compressed way to conjure an apparition – *It had become a glimmering girl*, as Yeats has Wandering Aengus cry.

'A radical thought. Does it end at *yellow hair*? Could be a fine closing stanza. What follows sounds a little like reiteration, though *dark hives with open mouths* is good, *dark honey from decay* better, and there must be a sharper way to make *six* and *sickness* strike up a fire. Good shot though. And of course it's equally good to get as far as *the boys are gone* – a small departure standing in for the great loss. Perhaps I'm wondering if the best details of the last section, from *My heart stings once*, could all come earlier, on the way to the detail of the jar with the yellow strand. Yes, end with the boys gone and the jar of honey in the hand, but *then* those heart-rending details?

'You know what you want to say now in this poem, the story is settling in. Make it into tercets, confine it, it's not *confining* – it's allowing what can't be helped (bereavement, memories stirring) to toll its bell, while pressurising what *can* be helped, or can help (the words chosen to carry the moment) to cry its best within the confines. Look what the bees make of their unarguable hexagons!'

*

In Dark Canadee, as in life, if you mention a bell one will toll somewhere, and the bell tolled twice just now. I couldn't break my stride to tell them it was the signal that the second wagon, the violet one, was heading out for the Blackhouse Fields, but I tell them now.

'How many miles to there,' someone asks politely.

'Never been, there's never time.'

*

As I fix myself a drink I listen to them. The line of care has reversed: having covered fathers, upward care, they're on to pets, downward care.

I'm not surprised to hear that Cockburn has a tame phoenix in her stove at home, as well as a one-eyed cat that's prowling Canadee as we speak, or that Columbus was a cat before she was Columbus, or that Curtis has many cats but isn't sure she likes cats. She clarifies:

'At least I always have Fox, my signaller in case of danger,' though it's not at all clear whom or what she means by that. We all nod though, and Boorman asks 'Is it a *thought* fox?' which I thought was rather good.

'Boorman, bring your dragon!'

*

Common Dragon

Steve Boorman

Hatched in the sewers of south London,
I emerged as worm,
armoured with abandoned cans
of Coke and Heineken,
borrowing fire from barbecues
and roaring discreetly.
A grocer noticed when I made a nest
in Sainsbury's car park
and it's not the place to sleep,
so I've found my ideal island
on Tooting Common pond,
shared with swans, who show, like me,
the attributes of terror.
My ancestors consumed
princesses,
chained naked to stakes,
but now they're scarce
and, as a female of my species,
I have no taste for 'em.
My island on the common pond
is next door to the playground,
so sometimes I take one or two
small souls who welcome
the warmth of my jaws.
For now, I wait (how long is now?)
and every evening fly alone
unseen by joggers,
sometimes mobbed by crows.

The epistemology of dragons
is largely unrehearsed in Tooting
but when I come to you,
you'll know.

*

'This wry reptilian monologue is compact and has great charm. The compactness is aural, it's taut with assonance and alliteration. In fact from the very start it tells us something important about these strategies. You can *cast* them in a poem...

'What do I mean? See how the long *ur* vowel clings to the 'Common Dragon' as she *emerged as worm* and clatters into view with a lot of hard *k* sound, *cans/of Coke and Heineken*. Sure, assonance and alliteration group words or images together at one level below meaning, like an underground garage for this poetic supermarket where we sail down the aisles saying hi from our trolleys, and in fact it's often reliably *sub-conscious* in an alert poetic mind, but vowels and consonants do this *casting* thing too, this group behaviour. In this poem it means it comes as no surprise that our still klattering Dragon tries to nest in a *car park* or fondly recalls princesses chained *naked to stakes*, or that she comes out with the unexpected *unrehearsed* near the end – because Boorman has already given her these vowel and consonant colourings. Her *k-* and her *ur* are with her like her murky scales.

'All poems should have creaturely consistency – or they should in any room *I'm* using – should make the same animal sound anywhere you pinch them, but this is especially evident in a dramatic monologue. Falling short of that we're at a bad costume party. Boorman's 'Common Dragon' does not fall short, she flies in with confidence and an angle to the workaday world that keeps more or less steady throughout. She's at home in London's detritus, suborning residents to her will with those musters of sound – *grocer noticed – shared with swans, who show – consumed/princesses* – but very much alone, and, like most of us, trying to busk it with urban self-deception – *I've found my ideal island – For now, I wait (how long is now?) – when I come to you,/you'll know*. In passing, let me flag up the parenthesis there. You'll come to know I have an aesthetic shudder at any punctuation used *once* in a poem, whether it's brackets or an indent or italic or anything, my question always being *What does it mean to do this thing only once?* Here it suggests a route into introspection which Common Dragon doesn't seem big on, I mean she doesn't really hold back on detail elsewhere, so why that tiny soliloquy? If she asked herself *that* deep spiral of a question, why not others?

'The mundane proper nouns of her world, *Coke, Sainsbury's, Tooting* (no offence, I like Tooting) disarm her, making her vestigial instinct for grandeur or terror pretty forlorn – *roaring discreetly, sometimes mobbed by crows* – and the general impression is of exhaustion, pose, bravado. Here's where questions arise. This dragon does, after all, by her own admission, snatch kids from a playground, which is a no-no even for mythological creatures. It's a throwaway admission, *one or two/small souls who welcome/the warmth of my jaws* – I wonder if its implications need exploring a little, because everything else about our lizard friend sounds like a metaphor for the very real and helpless homeless – *it's not the place to sleep – I have no taste for 'em – every evening fly alone/unseen...*

'It asks a question of how seriously to take the *plot* of 'Common Dragon'. That's not a qualitative thing, it's not necessarily better if it's serious. But my instinct is the Dragon needs either to 'fess up to being genuinely dangerous, a mask for one of the real horrors in pockets of cities, or to, in the words of Pink Floyd, leave them kids alone – and be a portrait of a lost soul, shorn of its kindred, flying in low circles, never actually getting any of its wishes or ever acting on its shabby impulses. Without the casual consumption of *small souls* in the playground, this is a really engaging study of impotent longing and trading on old glories – *my ancestors consumed/princesses*, don't you know. So perhaps that's a decision to be made... If she does *take...small souls* she stands for something else, not impotent and obviously less funny, and the poem would need to edge in that direction...

'There's also a gender issue I find intriguing. I happen to know that Boorman's mother actually *was* the dragon from the island on Tooting Common Pond – his father was a Minister of Religion, Christmas must have been lively – so I was somewhat primed to hear 'Common Dragon' as a female presence, the dragon in *Shrek* not the one in *The Hobbit* – and yet everything I find interesting and resonant about the monologue makes me think of *males*. Males nowadays, in England – does anyone miss England? – I miss Angel, what do I mean... Something about the impotence I mentioned, the feeble posturing in an ancient form, like King Lear against his daughters:

I will have such revenges on you both.
That all the world shall – I will do such things – .
What they are yet I know not, but they shall be.
The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep?
No, I'll not weep.

‘Look where the full stops are, tears falling in his Heineken. Or raindrops on the window where the troll sits with his dingy laptop. There are Englishmen saying this *at* or *about* women at every hour of every day, and Tooting Common Dragon sounds quite like one of their number, with that final idle threat, *when I come to you, / you’ll know* – an exit line followed by a slammed door and a silence, and then that comedic resumption of us lot talking about something else.

‘Foreknowing that the Dragon is female didn’t stop me making my little *Oh?* when I came to *as a female of the species* – this is a female? and even the elision of *I have no taste for ‘em* sounds male to me, the breezy bluster of the insecure – there’s something, if I might say, Partridgean about it. Then again you’re looking at a pirate who feels virtually everything wrong in the Plague-Time – including the Plague – can be laid at the door of males, and who, now we’re on the subject, thinks only women can save the world, so... my ears are well attuned to those sounds and I thought I heard them here. In her defence, and Boorman’s, I don’t know the species well. But I am delighted to make her unsettling acquaintance, and shall avoid Tooting Common until such time as she’s apprehended.’

*

‘Witness the wisdom of Cockburn’s origami dice: we move from the Dragon of the Common to the Gannet of the North, *Morus Bossanus...* Curtis, the floor is yours, the page, the hour, the wide wide ocean...

*

Morus Bassanus – Shadow on the Sea

Helen Curtis

I shape-shift
 only for her
my white sail, wave-wandering lady
her no-fuss, no-time flight
how she stills the air, sea stalker.

It’s the murder of me, but I never lose sight
of her high cross, diamond-cut in sky,
and wild work keeping her pattern
on this restless clinker-scrim.

She needs me.
Me, her mark, her muddy footprint.

Calm days, I take it easy, a little drift, flip-
flop on my back watching her soft breast above;
or, when sea murmurs and breezes ribbon the water,
I dance my ballerina arms outstretched
embrace her lovely white sway.

Cross-currents

wind against tide
I fracture. I'm in pieces.
Ripped
triangles of my substance slap on sides
and peaks of wave I stumble over
edged ellipse, peel off
I'm shattered.

Languid laps of the sound, building, rounding
silver victim shoals; I watch my darling's
laser-eyes stall - a fraction -
it's now, the thrill - I hold for the kill -
she needs me -

I do my best to gather myself, assimilate
my shape, darken, sharpen
X marks my spot;

powering down, she comes
with great crewel beak
now my rush to keep up
parallelogram, rhombus, fold, fold
pantograph-mechanical
she angles down and
arrow-plunge
straight through the heart of me again and again and again.

*

‘This ecstatic love-poem, or sex-poem, or nature-poem, or life-poem – it might be all or any – wants everything its own way and frequently gets it... it is pulled taut by the articulation of longing, or addiction, or compulsion, it might be all or – you get the picture. Point is there’s a sensitivity to rhythm and sound that wins it many battles. My reservations may look minor, but I think Curtis will know they’re not. If only because this is a stirring performance, and I want to hear more, but I want to put my oar in first, into this cascade of passion and thirst and vivid light. My oar, more or less, is that the spacing is all wrong and it undermines the power. It isn’t hard to fix and I want to be clear about why I think this way.

‘First how fine is the outset! *I shape-shift* instantly slips down and across to *only for her*, as if conventional life, love, daytime is already disturbed, unsettled, floundering from the margin and beating back against a current. But let’s think about the left-hand margin a moment. Let’s feel the suddenly lost-and-found motion of what we have:

I shape-shift
only for her
my white sail, wave-wandering lady

‘Feel that stumble and reach and roll? And the alliteration is desperate praise, as in *look I can give you the same things over and over!* – the forming of that soft *w* a series of silent kisses – imagined, not *met*, kisses, like a lover asleep or a baby asleep – and something else too. Watch Auden in ‘O Love, the interest itself in thoughtless Heaven’, one of *his* poems of high praise:

...like patterns a murmuration of starlings
rising in joy over wolds unwittingly weave...

‘– where the *w*’s give you thousands of wings. Curtis gives you kisses or waves, either way the ups and downs of love-in-life or life-in-love. Anyway, the openness and hope of her *w*’s, carrying their three long yea-saying *a*-vowels, bring on, as vowels do, a negative shadow, *no-fuss, no-time flight*, and then the metrics of the 5th line really slow and still the moment, the fading hiss of alliterative *s* most certainly part of the song of praise.

‘But back to the left-hand margin. Of course it’s a default, it’s the trembling voyage of the quill, the wild slam back of the typewriter carriage, the voiceless code of software. But the *sense* of that margin is older than them all. Isn’t it also the ground a poem stands on? What gets returned to? What is landed

on again when the passion is spent? 'I am tied to th'stake and I must stand the course,' cries Gloucester. The poem is begun, stand the course, stand the course! All poems need the constant element that their other gestures *aren't*. In a poem like this it's nothing less than the retreat from passion, the respite, or in a child's game the home-base where you can't be *got* for a while.

'Which is so well described by *It's the murder of me* – it makes a fool of *She needs me* a little further down – as does the nicely revelatory *Me, her mark, her muddy footprint*. This is psychologically acute as well as pretty thrilling. Trying to keep up with the impossible high ideal – whether love or beauty or wonder – and the earthbound struggle it entails is well captured in

*her high cross, diamond-cut in sky,
and wild work keeping her pattern
on this restless clinker-scrim...*

'So all so far so good. Then one press of a switch and a whole stanza gets *centred!* Don't do it, Curtis! You are wielding so much power here, and you just let Microsoft or Apple or someone sling your lines into that familiar Rorschach *thing!* We all know centring is dead easy, so we all know those indents in the centred stanza are automatic, not yours, not *felt* like the rest, so don't do it, drag them back to the left and start feeling the spaces again! AI has done your spacing for you!

'I'm playing the fool to make the point. But the change in spacing also seems to me to make you *calm* the tone too much, seems to accord the speaker – up to now bewildered and babbling with devotion – too much agency, too much elbow, too much *say*. The lines of this stanza are, yes, about respite, *I take it easy, a little drift*, but they need to be in thrall even so to the same physics as the rest. It feels like a reach to find that tone again, in the *Cross-currents* stanza, and notice how there some whole new chess-moves of lineation start up, as if that centring stanza

tore
up the
rule-book and there's
too much
freedom!

'You know Curtis I think your *Journey To The Centre Of The Page* distracts you, slackens your concentration, for when you return I don't think you're hitting the line-breaks so well as before, what about these I've tried?

Ripped
triangles of my substance
slap on sides and peaks of wave
I stumble over edged ellipse
peel off
I'm shattered

‘Well there’s many ways to do it, I just think the alertness, the sensitivity, is slightly diminished in this part. The voice is using too much freedom! The fine tension is restored towards the end, towards that majestic *and/arrow-plunge* descent...

‘Is it a form of OCD, my resistance to these spatial moves? I sometimes joke that it is, and jokes I make about my habits aren’t jokes after a while. My favourite joke at poetry readings – when I lived in the Plague-Times – used to be *Nothing bad ever happened to me. All I hear is the clock ticking. So all I write about is Time.* Then one day it realised it was not so much a joke as, kind of, a thing.

‘Anyway I digress. The answer’s No – it isn’t just aesthetic OCD. You can’t express aloud those indents and centrings, or your suddenly sloping lines that start *I do my best to gather myself* – you can’t pass them to an audience, and they won’t get remembered even if the poem is. They don’t pass on. Not in the sense of Teacher Walcott’s formulation of poetry *as a phrase to be passed from hand to mouth.* There are strikingly memorable moments in this poem, phrases to pass on, all its beaks are sometimes frighteningly pointing the same way, but I think the whole needs to be governed by a single authority – *Morus Bassanus* and its action on your soul – and *that* should express itself in glorious and more *rigorous* form.’

*

O we’re done, we’re done. By this time in our subterranean space we are seven who’ve known each other years, and we traipse out sadly and happily – as we found we could about the time we started writing – through the deserted Dockhouse into the glow of the night.

‘Where are all the people who were here?’ someone asks and I don’t know, they keep peculiar hours, probably gone to the Belly or the British Water Café.

As we pass along the north side of the market we go by the Junction, where one last blue wooden wagon waits in the mud to depart. The Wagoneer stands there with his flag, and inside the dirty windows are vague huddled silhouettes.

‘On the chime of three, presumably,’ Welch asks and I nod.

‘You have to listen very carefully,’ and I tell them a little ghost thing I don’t know how I know: ‘They say you hear a woman crying when the third bell goes, then she casts a spell, then there’s a distant wailing...’

The Wagoneer hears me telling this and decides it needs more. He limps over, grinning: ‘She can fly, you see, she be in suddenly different places...’

‘I could fly when I was a child,’ says Smith.

The Wagoneer doubles down: ‘And she be gibbering in a foreign tongue!’ There’s a pause.

‘If it’s in a foreign tongue, how do you know it’s gibbering,’ Welch reasons and the Wagoneer goes blank.

The women all stand close together like old pals. I notice Columbus has under her arm several long scrolls of paper she didn’t have before, but I don’t feel it’s my business to ask why.

So when the Wagoneer rings his bell we’re very silent and we listen. And in Dark Canadee things tend to come to pass – the weeping, the incantation, the wailing far away, hear that? – as the blue wagon starts clanking along on its long journey to the Interior.

Not everybody heard them, to be honest they passed me by, but Cockburn, Columbus and Smith are pointing to the three different places the voices seemed to come from.

The Wagoneer grins with pleasure, I’m surprised he doesn’t charge us for the performance.

‘She do fly at incredible speed, you see...’

‘Or it’s three different women,’ says Columbus, ‘and none of them can do anything.’

He goes blank again. ‘Anything is as anything goes,’ he murmurs cryptically, and sets out back for his cabin.

The gang think I should make enquiries about these unnerving sounds. I assure them I will, and don’t feel like admitting my senses are dull with age and drink and I didn’t hear a thing.

‘*Or a young man old,*’ I quote cheerily, and forget what I just agreed to.

The moon is high and has put its stars away. Proudly I lead my Poets round the north edge of the market to the Belly of Lead, where music and dance are blazing through the doorway, but there’s quite a crowd on the wharf, looking out over the water.

‘It’s not a whale,’ the Jazz Lady assures me steadily, ‘it may well be a shark, but sharks don’t bother me, they don’t come up the steps.’

‘Whales don’t come up the steps, JL,’ says Sal Bonny.

‘Yeah right,’ says the Jazz Lady, ‘tell that to them.’

McCloud is suddenly by my side, hands deep in her windcheater.

‘About two hours ago,’ she fields the question we were all about to ask: ‘a fellow in his drink swam out to look at the little whirlpool. Look at it now.’

It’s a wild white thrashing turbulence where the hole was. It doesn’t move, nor grow, nor subside, nor come to an end. It only ends when we stop watching and disperse and make our way to the dancing.

‘Morus Bassanus has landed!’ Boorman yells to Curtis.

‘Or your Common Dragon’s coming up for air!’ Curtis cries to him.

It’s very loud inside, two dozen pirates in from some ship or other, plus a crew of dishevelled tommies from British Land. Private Field is there, and Private Ward, with flagons of froth and their collars all undone. They’re stumbling and grinning and pointing to their lapels, which they’ve scribbled on with thick black pen. *ENGLISH* Land, they say now, obscuring the old embroidered letters ‘cos we’re finally bloody free!’

‘Ask those soldiers about the weeping women!’ one of the Poets shouts above the noise, and because it’s late and I can’t hear I smile my widest smile and bellow:

‘I know! I know!’

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