

*Ahoy there Poets, Pirates, Dreamers,
Come with me
To Dark Canadee...*

DARK CANADEE

is a wholly original and peculiar new writing course.

It's a reinvention of the Poetry Workshop in a time of gloom.

It involves your real poems and real feedback on these from T.S. Eliot Prize-nominated and MA Tutor Glyn Maxwell, but everything else about it is fictional, fantastical, hallucinatory...

The workshopping of your poems is enclosed in an exotic fiction, set in a *dream* version of Canada Water, written by Glyn Maxwell, into which you sail in a leaky boat across the seven seas...

It's always night-time here, it's a free port in a world of pirates. Workshopping poems is illicit, we use a secret chamber in the subterranean gloom of the Dockhouse. The port is full of shadows, memories, rumours. Dead Poets rub shoulders with the living at a dangerous dive called the Belly of Lead, as ghost-ships come and go in the harbour, and *anything can happen...*

Would You Like To Pay A Visit?

All we need from you are these **MATERIALS**:

- (a) A poem (one side) that you would like feedback on
- (b) Seven Things About Yourself, true or false, that can be used in the fiction (100 words max)
- (c) £150 doubloons as fee

There are three boats sailing to **DARK CANADEE** in the next few weeks, with more to follow in the coming months. There are SIX places on each Voyage.

These are the **DEAD**-Lines for submission of the Materials...

First Voyage: 12th February
Second Voyage: 26th February
Third Voyage: 12th March

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Dark Canadee is intended to be both enlightening and entertaining. You submit a poem you want workshopped, and Glyn will read it to the best of his ability: real poem, real feedback. The rest of the piece is a comic, gothic, and light-hearted fiction based on whatever you want to tell me, true or false, about the version of your self you are sending to Dark Canadee. No offence is intended! A good time is meant to be had by all! This is the spirit of the course.

DARK CANADEE – PT.0

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 loan or call time, to pass on rumours, chance their arms, they bring their wares, their stuff, their stock, and they come here on their missions with targets and secrets.

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 rogues and chancers and dreamers. And 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.

Charcoal sketches of their faces precede them, I have four in my pocket, I think I'll know them when I see them. *Lampert, Levy, Bloor, Prince...* they all sound like they'll fit right in somehow. I have to get them through the chaos of the market to the safe house before the red-coat officers of British Land come, bellowing for papers. They don't like folks who sail for reasons no one can write down.

But I am standing where I always stand when their little boat is spotted out there. I am a silhouette on the lamplit wharf, I've paced it out, I've figured where to stand, I've got my black hat, I've got my white-haired little friend McCloud to row out there in her bobbing coracle to look, I told her, 'Tell me where to stand for *maximum* effect...' 'Is that why they call you Max,' she asked me when she came up the steps, but she didn't wait for an answer.

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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 *literally* feels like yesterday, for when I go to sleep on Thursdays in that village I always wake up leaning by a lamppost on this wild Friday night, a silhouette on the dock, against the scarlet blaze of Dark Canadee.

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They look a rum group, for sure, our latest outcasts from the Plague-Times.

I glance along the wharf towards the rainbow lanterns of the Belly of Lead and I hear the stomping as the fiddler starts up inside. What already? It's a dangerous dive that'll claim us all before the end of the night, why not take them straight there now, but that way lies oblivion. Down on the brief pebble shoreline, McCloud is splashing as she pulls in their boat, it's just a thing she always does. And the hooded pilot passes her some papers,

means everyone's as swabbed as the deck of a naval ship. Means everyone is negative, like the skeleton crew of *The Flying Dutchman*, a thing we glimpse from time to time, far out on the horizon when the moon is blue.

*

I check my four charcoal sketches against the faces down there, each is lit by the oil-lamps of the wharf. In the sketches they all look cool and faraway; on the shore they just look seasick, but happy to have reached a destination. They start to make their way up the steep landing-steps, and one of them shakes my hand before she's even reached the top.

'That's some strangely long arms you got there, Lampert,' I say, not looking up from the sketch of a lady with strangely long arms.

'I'm a Water Tiger,' she says as she passes, which presumably explains it.

Next comes a fellow with eyelashes so splendid I think I've seen them before, and I suddenly know where.

'Prince... were you at Toulouse?'

He stops, catches my eye: 'I was. And at Almería.'

A shudder of recognition passes between us. We don't need to go there.

The next guy up has a great old Empire typewriter strapped to his front like some kind of munition. He's actually hammering it as he walks, and he sweeps the paper from the roller with the type still glistening, brandishes it my way.

'This finished, Bloor?' I wonder.

'Yes,' he says, then 'actually no,' taking it back, and then he's sliding another sheet under the platen and beginning again, his typing keeps a ragged staccato beat in the great cacophonies of the market.

Did I miss someone? I go back. McCloud's come up the steps and points me to where the fourth poet is still down there, stooping to the pebbles, looks like she's hunting for something on our shred of shoreline.

'We keeping you, Levy?' I call down. Process of elimination, I can't see her face.

She doesn't look up, but an arm is raised with a card for me to see.

McCloud's still tying up the ropes as she explains: 'Mudlarking. That lady's got herself a Thames Port Authority Foreshore Licence.'

On the stones the poet's straightening up with seaweed in her hand, so I ask her, 'What you got there, Levy?'

'Found poem,' says she.

'What's it like?'

'All the others,' says Levy, and then a word I can't print.

*

It's not a long walk to the Dockhouse, but I have to lead them through the market, and keeping these four together ain't so easy. Every time I look back Lampert has gone off cheerfully in the wrong direction, so I ask Levy to tug on one of her long sleeves to bring her back. Bloor has a chiropteran instinct for missing obstacles, and he needs it, as he's typing all the time. (I only know *chiropteran* because I'll learn it soon from the man himself.) I notice Prince has a bit of a fig-roll habit – hey we *all* did at Toulouse – but as bad luck would have it the blaze of Fig-Roll Fantazia is the first stall we pass.

'Back off, no sale,' I tell the gibbering barker.

To the left we pass the dark tilting edifice of the Library, I've seen ghosts in the upper windows there. Soon we're out of the market and on the narrow muddy pathway that winds away south-west. We pass the Deal Porters in their cloaks, they stop their murmuring conversation as we pass. I heard one of them hiss – 'more P-T's...' – and I lead my group a shade faster. On the right is the high-walled private garden where the local gentlefolk take walks under flood-light, until at last we see the high thin tower of the Dockhouse in the distance, with its green lamp burning.

The green lamp 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 are where we're meant to be.

*

'J'essaye d'écrire mon roman, messieurs-dames,' a woman murmurs from the shadows. You can see through the smoky dark she has a patch over her right eye. She it was who let us in, but she's already back scribbling at her tiny candlelit table by the door.

'Sal Bonny,' I tell the poets as we're moving through, 'she speaks French when she's busy. They say her sister's a pirate on the high seas. Patch on the other eye.'

'No one's ever seen them in the same room, mind,' says a man's voice from behind one of the desks that line the walls of the gloomy chamber.

'Sshh...' go all the others.

At the far end we reach a door ajar and steps that spiral down, where the rough earthen walls are bathed in faint blue light.

'Straight on till midnight,' I say, and down we go.

*

I take my armchair at the nearest end of the small subterranean chamber. Lampert and Bloor sit to my right, Levy and Prince to my left, and at the far end is the glow of the log-fire. The bulbs hanging over the table are blue. All five of us have a card-game set out, so we can quickly look like we're playing poker if the British Land boys happen to swing by.

I cut the cards for the order of work. Fate gives me *Prince, Levy, Lampert, Bloor...* 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.

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Memory, so far from being merely a passive receptacle or storage system, an image bank of the past, is rather an active shaping force that is dynamic – what it contrives symptomatically to forget is as important as what it remembers.

RAPHAEL SAMUEL

History and memory intersect, overlap (I'm by Snake Pass, the road that bisects the Pennines) cause elisions and whenever there's a gap, I rush to flood it with fictions, as if I can't be explained without the myths I've sustained. Manchester, mistily seen, over there, its high-rises, maudlin and exhausted recall couples that dine together, but don't converse, just listen rapt, in their own placidity they wane as the light fails, with every sodden blink its brittle-edged horizons dissolve. If I've never felt I've left somewhere, my return can't happen, or already exists. 99-04: I was scholastic, younger, hyperreal, grooving on the minutiae of national decline, head down for murmurs in the archive, compiling copious quotes on Imperial demise. Each morning, the same walker would loiter for his dog below my window in Platt Fields; I'd wake and press against the hall storage heater watching my breath, the shower hose was taped intact, but that's no excuse for carrying a knife in my boot the first time I experienced that seismic rift that split to my quick and caused the collapse, that sucked the atmosphere from me and left a vacuum – a vacuum I've suckled since. Today, on the drive through Hyde, in the Coventry blue Fiesta, punctuated by the arthritic indicator clicks, the swash of beige buses, steam-stewed vivaria, their passengers fending raw tonsils and sundry dejections, I attuned to what's meant by the fragile present – the separation anxiety of letting yesterday be, but fated to the species need to retrieve, recover, resuscitate, find refuge in memory in moments of aloneness, apart from the crowd's honeycombed commotion, its fractals of noise. So, there I was, as here I am, subdued by the rampant dankness, industrious gusts and the frigid sense, I'm indivisibly where I'll meet myself again.

*

'Prince, I walked with you at Almería and Toulouse. There is always thought happening in your work, sparks and fires of interest. Quickly I become a willing listener, I go alongside, or I follow. Here you tell me at the entrance *Mistily Seen*... and what a wise move that was, on behalf of the playing-cards! To cast you first tonight, for let's all see *mistily* as we begin on any poem. Mist your eyes, you four seers, till it's not English, till all it is is daubings on a cave-wall and we're home with all our ancient kindred...

'It's a block, long ranging lines, almost close to the prose border but don't be fooled by that. The mind is working at both ends of these lines. The prose mind goes to sleep at the far wall, we have to carry the damn thing back to the start. Poets stay alert, bounced off the white wall, a little tipsy but still talking. So the long unbroken lines, the dispensing with *stanza*, we'll find out why that is, but first, Prince, *The Epigraph in the Room*...

'With our misted eyes we see a banner flying over the poem, or a signpost, milepost, monument, anyway something that casts a shadow. With our English eyes as they open, we see the wise words of a historian. I'm not opposed to wise words flying or standing over a

poem. But I feel overburdened by the time I reach the glow of the entrance. *My Manchester Past, Mistily Seen*, this gives us much: gravity, humility, and it makes us ready. The wise words intervene – I said a banner, I mean a *standard*, a standard to live up to: does the poem bear out Raphael Samuel? How does it? All we know is, he's still standing by the end. Epigraphs come out of poems unchanged, unscarred, unbothered, palms upward: *don't ask me, it's a gig*. Save him for the notes, Prince, save him for the interviews...

'Without it, we have the querulous brave lifting of a flag – *History and memory intersect* – which would be hard to swallow were it not for the instantaneous placing – *I'm by Snake Pass, the road/that bisects the Pennines* – the human spot in the mist, the granting of the gift of puzzlement. The yearning instant set against the grand abstract. Now the lines justify themselves, doing what they are, these are the restless fires of that deep incessant trinity, See-Imagine-Remember, SIR! – *there's a gap, I rush/to flood it with fictions, as if I can't be explained...* Now that *explained/sustained*, that very conscious chime, could be a little showy in this context, as you only do it once, but I grant it serves as a kind of duelling stance, cartoonish...

'Because then we're into a reward, that your Manchester is mistily seen *literally*, tower-blocks in the distance. This grounds us, even as it lifts us in the air to see – you do need to ground us sometimes, so we can absorb your perspectives, sensory, intellectual, rapid either way. Your work is consistently rewarding at the place where wonder and momentum meet, both of these need the friction of the passing earth...

'The mind approaches the distant high-rises, the Seen transforms to the Imagined, and, perfect creaturely progress, the trinity of which I speak, into the Remembered. *I was scholastic, younger, hyperreal, grooving on the minutiae of national decline...* Now this younger self is a kind of straw dog, a parody Prince, who is *head down for murmurs* (brilliant) *compiling copious quotes* (also). But you have to respect the arrival of this creature in the poem – let's call him Prince-99, because tonight he's gonna party like it's – sorry, couldn't help it... Point is! This is pretty much the only thing in this poem that needs straightening out by Prince-21...

'The elder self *knows* the younger, enters his recollection with elder-brotherly care, that's tenderness with a side of scorn, *Each morning, the same walker/would low for his dog below my window in Platt Fields* (beautiful), then *I'd wake and press against/the hall storage heater watching my breath...* So you have the diction of the elder reliving the moments of the younger. This is where one has to be careful. There's a collapse where you *say collapse*. The elder starts talking like the younger: slick, showy, over-compressed: *that seismic rift that split to my quick...* Prince, you're a very fine phrase-maker, but I don't want to be reminded of that fact at the point where I was listening to an elder mistily seeing his younger self... And at *a vacuum I've suckled since* – you're cornered there, you can't work with that one...

'Then we get the elder back. *Today, on the drive through Hyde, in the Coventry blue Fiesta*, lovely, then again I think the diction turns too quick-witted, almost too sharp for the moment, *steam-stewed vivaria*, the elder who sees wisely because he sees mistily is being a little too *scholastic, hyperreal, head down for murmurs...* for what we see in this poem is the evolution of character painted in word-choice...

‘So the car gets back under control, the houses go by and the reward is misting into view: *what’s meant by the fragile present*. There’s still this flickering of the younger voice, and perhaps it’s what you’re going for, the mind split to the quick, as it were, but somehow the flamboyance – *honeycombed commotion...fractals of noise...rampant dankness* – feels wrong near the end there, because the plainer, sadder, wiser voice, *there I was, as here I am*, is actually *causing* the younger voice to sound shallow, like its conclusions in ‘99 were too quick and cool and too linguistically glittery, you know? Because these are the clothes you put him in, when he was *grooving on the minutiae*, the poem is about you knowing him as well as being him. Yes, we still all carry our youngsters, but we’re only partly them, and some of us, including you, *do know them...*

‘There’s a loneliness to this poem, like a lament, now I think it’s a block, crammed and buzzing with life, because it’s afraid to let the white space in for sorrow, and the reached-for phrases are making it less lonely in the car! No? Be lonely in the car. Can’t say *honeycombed commotion* when you’re driving! I’m playing the fool to make the point, y’all get used to it...

‘The only work to do with this is tonal. Don’t forget the high-rise in the mist. Don’t forget the walker lowing for his dog. That’s a memory had while driving. Don’t forget you’re driving.’

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Between poems we go to the drinks on the side. Big drinks, small talk.

‘Do you *have* any fig-rolls here,’ Prince enquires politely, ‘given they’re selling them right outside,’ but just in time a whole cake on a plate appears, presented by a long arm, then Lampert whose arm it is and whose cake it is arrives and says to him:

‘I saw you give your Mustardseed.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘In a dream at school.’

Bit weird, we both think. Then we realise she means in a *Dream* at school, in a production of the Shakespeare, Prince smiles and says he was Cobweb.

‘I don’t think so,’ says Lampert, Prince considers: is she right? and I say:

‘Shall we?’

*

Paying careful attention to the instructions
on the back of a boxed cake mix
bought from the grocery store which opens
at odd hours, smells of laundry powder, parmesan
she removes each sachet, lays them on the table
beside an egg and room temperature butter,
until she comes to the paper bag of icing sugar
for dusting across the crown of the finished cake.
Zucchero impalpabile printed in black italic font.
This packet she cradles in both hands, rocks
to and fro in the sun-filled kitchen, saying aloud
its magical name over and over, until
glucose tears run down her cheeks,
she marvels at the delicate impalpability,
picturing its sugary cloud breath and the crisp
white cotton of tiny clothes in the window
of the shop in Via dei Pandolfini that she
will never set foot in.

*

‘Teacher Walcott, I knew him in Old Boston, used to unfold poems to us one word at a time. One I remember was *Deftly* – it was Auden’s *Deftly, admiral, cast your fly* but at that point all it was was *Deftly* – and he asked us what’s *problematic* about starting a poem like that?

‘After a silence I took a wild guess *Because if you’re now too deft you didn’t need it, and if you’re not you shouldn’t have said it?* He said *Exactly* and the young man breathed again... This is one of those beginnings, Levy, and you pass with flying colours. You do pay careful attention, the cadence is hesitant, step by step, and here and throughout the poem you’re sensitive to a relishing of sound-values: *the back of a boxed cake mix*, the mouth is really working here, like being hungry while shopping, and anything to do with cake mix is a lane to the land of the child...

‘Now I think the third line-break is wrong, for a line-break is a fraction of time and it’s small but it has to shine with reason. Whereas that sweet phrase *which opens at odd hours* is pleading to be run together – *bought from the grocery store that opens at odd hours...* We sense she needs that grocery store, needs the thought of it around her as she gets to work...

‘Everything in this poem is relished, savoured, a fetishizing of places, smells, tastes, things, to distract from what? We know tears are coming, and a sad, yearning *picturing* of a thing that’s unattainable: we pretty much have that from the title – *Florence* hanging there like a postcard on the white space of the fridge – but up ahead we see *tiny clothes...she will never set foot...* The lack of stanza-breaks suggests a conscious determination not to let the silence in – it’s often that, whether conscious or not – but perhaps there’s a case for letting the white space do battle? By which I mean varying the line-lengths more, so they can

accommodate the ebb-and-flow of emotional modes in this poem? So, as I say, you could lengthen this: *bought from the grocery store that opens at odd hours*, a clinging to the familiar, or shorten this: *of tiny clothes in the window*, a line that frames itself and freezes, like the legendary six-word short story attributed to Hemingway: *For sale: baby shoes, never worn...*

‘But I do mean ebb-and-flow, Levy, because here comes joy engendering sorrow, and there goes sadness sprouting joy again, there’s a lost child running through it like a cracked red word through a stick of rock: *This packet she cradles in both hands, rocks/to and fro in the sun-filled kitchen, saying aloud/its magical name...* it’s a delicious spiralling down of emotions, played out in these kitchen things, and I wonder if the white space might dip its fingers a little further into the cake-mix, the mistaken unmistakable act of any absent child...

‘Hear how this travels at the pace of its enactment: *she removes each sachet, lays them on the table*, but in the next line I would get rid of *and* and emphasise the steady *listing* that is holding back the unsettling thoughts, so I would have *beside an egg, room temperature butter*, we hear things being set on the table, maybe have this next phrase *until she comes* as its own line? Arriving at the weighted object: *the paper bag of icing sugar...* so:

*she removes each sachet, lays them on the table
beside an egg, room temperature butter
until she comes
to the paper bag of icing sugar
for dusting across the crown of the finished cake...*

‘Witness the white space here like a spar of silence, space for a wound. That last line above is the kitchen-work attentive to the fragility of this one heart. Maybe the *Zucchero impalpabile* line is a beat too long, given how she – and we – need to bask and elongate in the Italian sunshine of the phrase... Could it be *black italic print* and *lose font*? The next part’s terrific, culminating in *glucose tears run down her cheeks*, which is metaphorical but also feels organic to the scene, as there’s so much sugar and powder in the air...

‘Thing is, the *glucose tears* are an act, a moment, they have to be absorbed by the poem. Important distinction: the *Poet* is ready to go on, redeploying *impalpabile* into *impalpability* – but the *Poem* is not ready for that yet! The *Poem* is still brimming with tears! It’s about relationship to time. I don’t know – and Levy you probably can’t remember because you were under the spell of *making* – I don’t know what exactly Time was doing when you wrote this part, so you *as Poet* may have been ready for turning the tears into the Latinate processing of *the delicate impalpability*. But the *Poem* wasn’t ready, it arrives too soon. Perhaps one or two more lines are needed here to absorb the onset of tears – our common miracle – before pressing on with *thought...*

‘So the English word echoes, but don’t let it echo too soon – *impalpability* – it will still sound like a stiff Brit abroad, trying to look good in Italian togs, while *impalpabile* is still sounding its music in the sunlit kitchen, which the tears have made blurry and crazy, like the star dancing when Beatrice was born...

'The *sugary cloud breath* clearing to *crisp white cotton* and *tiny clothes* and *Via dei Pandolfini* is well done. The proper noun arrives with the gait of a kindly undertaker, coz it's kindness always kindles the tears, so the poem caves to let them flood the light:

*...in Via dei Pandolfini that she
never will set foot in.*

'I've reversed *will* and *never* because it eases the rhythm and I do think it should ease there, as her character is tumbling towards sweet conquest by these tears of whatever the loss, so she needs to lay the poem down. And you can see the white space reaching in to touch there on the final line, its power now greater than the consoling courage of her baking, and so we lose her in the sunlight.'

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At the midway point I say let's take the air. We go up the stone steps back into the gloomy chamber and out through the door. The Dockhouse folks are all out there too, watching the various table games that have sprouted up beside the muddy pathway. Poker, rummy, dice, all sorts of dirty money changing hands. Lampert and Levy join some hoodlums crouched over a strange game of tiles, and I don't know, someone's said something, two of the men start shoving and shouting and then others join in and there's tables kicked over and pieces flying everywhere.

*

I hurry the Poets back into the Dockhouse. Levy is trying to explain the fracas: 'All I said was *BUTTERFLY* over a double-word score is 34, not 38, and all hell breaks loose...'

'Scrabble quarter-finals,' say I, 'that's some high-stakes stuff. Lampert, you're up next. Er. Lampert?'

She isn't there, she took a wrong turning coming down the steps – which is technically impossible – but she looks well pleased with herself when she does arrive, turns out she's reached the Hangman final.

'You go girl,' says Levy.

*

I'm walking up this mountain for the sky
and I've just received my decree absolute,
so I need to see something through

to an end all parties have agreed on.
No living thing thrives here. The air is thin,
overcrowded with dust. Near the top

a woman called Sue tells me her job
is to maintain the stiles in Oxfordshire
and Gloucestershire, and a man called Ian

tells me he trades in Fibonacci ratios.
Ian says his job is a real conversation stopper
with women. Inside the thrumming silence

I imagine Sue wearing walking boots
in a lush green landscape, with a hammer,
nails, and a cheese roll in her rucksack.

It's getting hard to breathe. Ian starts to cry.
A guide escorts him down. At the summit
we enter a flimsy cloud that shifts

to offer glimpses of graffiti and litter.
My heart beats hard. I wish Ian was here.
I have no idea what he does at work.

*

'Like I say, the cards are wise. They are introducing us to white space slowly. No stanza breaks in Prince or Levy, just a-trembling at the ends of lines, but now with Lampert we have *verses*, and up ahead with Bloor we have a highly active and unstable field. Each case is different, though the principles hold. We all know *stanza* is room in Italian, and that's a useful way to think of them, but here's another. When we mist up responsibly again, and see the regular shapes, the tercets, you should think of chords in songs...

'The Poet is implicitly saying her thought here is bound into shapes, into repeating patterns which will at the very least suggest the experience of life by fusing its recurrences – pulse, breath, footsteps, daytime – with its divergences – what happened then, what happens now, what happens next. The frames are the same, the pictures differ. All this is proclaimed with dignity and intent in the choice of making stanzas. It doesn't mean the Poet knows where this is going – gods forbid, in fact – but she does know it has a tread, it takes a breath, it leaves a trail, it knows a *way*, a *way of happening*, let us say with Auden, *a mouth...*

‘So here you are, Lampert, rapidly giving us thin air and distance in your title, bringing the slight breathlessness of energetic motion by eliding *I am* to *I’m*, and again with the open, sightseeing, almost onomatopoeic value of the vowel in *sky*... The second line turns everything internal, breathe in and breathe out, universe and village, proclaim and confide. A terrific opening, I think, and the third grows out from it, because yes it’s about the divorce, *I need to see something through*, but in its dogged rhythm it’s also, remember, walking up a mountain – and not, I might add, a friendly English hillock, but *Mount Toubkal*, which is in Southern Morocco, and it will soon be *getting hard to breathe*...

‘*I need to see something through* – this hangs properly over the view, but I’m not sure the fourth line is the right step, because it dispenses with the sense of movement and mountain, which includes the gulped oxygen of the stanza-break, in favour of, kind of, a wry smile at an indoor thought: *to an end all parties have agreed on*...

‘What do we know about Lampert on these shores so far? She has shall we say a *challenged* sense of direction, but she also has strangely long arms and made the Hangman final. (You’ve got Pierrepoint in the final, by the way, and he actually *is* a hangman.) Anyway – reach, strength, wit, sharpness all in place, but those fine qualities might furnish you from time to time with *one or two too many choices*. That’s the only general point I’d make here. This poem is funny, sad, ingenious, winking, chuckling, but it’s also *someone walking up a freaking mountain*, so temper all those options with the matter at hand! When you’re on a ledge you’re – well, on a ledge, and that’s kind of your priority for now. Prince in the car, Levy in the kitchen, Lampert on the steep slopes. You are our tour-guides, folks: remember where you’ve left us. Anyway the fifth line gives us ledge, deep breath and air, so the poise is well recovered: *No living thing thrives here. The air is thin,/overcrowded with dust*...

‘Nothing wrong here except *overcrowded* is too heavy for dust and we need a slightly thinner, powderier verb. Then again, *overcrowded* might, along with *all parties*, have subtly helped to say the speaker is not climbing Mount Toubkal alone, which is now important, as the intrepid group is clearly taking a break to have some conversation. This is a better place for you to take your *options*, Lampert, on a level plateau, for you to improvise and vanish off for a sec and come back laughing like you do: our venerable mountain pilgrims are now doers of odd first-world jobs in the Cotswolds...

‘It may just be the Edward Thomas acolyte in me, but I think if you’re going to do *Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire* you should hold them on one line, books on a shelf sort of thing. I like the deliberately laboured story of Ian, who both stops the conversation and then *says* he stops the conversation, a level of comic prod I would call Chaucerian. And I do like *thrumming silence*, which reminds us that silence is virtually never silence, but can be rendered in infinite guises: here it has the necessary warm air and distance...

‘After this, be careful. We have our dry mountainous scene, it’s hard to blink and be with *Sue wearing walking boots* (which she is anyway) *in a lush green landscape* (which she isn’t, any way). Not sure what menace lurks in Sue’s *hammer,/nails, and a cheese roll* but again the image is undermined by what we presume is *actually* there – the rucksack... watch the overlay of images here, Lampert, watch out for the double-exposure, for we will go where you guide us, but you’re also responsible for our safety...

‘The next stanza is excellent. Three phrases of iambic trimeter see off Ian, and that recurring cadence enacts the guide’s care and Ian’s plodding down again with oxygen. Then *At the summit/we enter a flimsy cloud that shifts* – here *flimsy* and *shifts* are right where *overcrowded* was wrong, we get the sudden coolness of all altitude, and short i-vowels sprinkle down on the last stanza so that the cloud stays with us, and give us the wry bathos of *graffiti* and *litter*, the ultimate high-up comedown...

‘Yes I swallow the penultimate line, the heartbeat and sudden affection for strangers that comes on in extremity, but I don’t think the last line quite pays off, because we *do* know what Ian does, how could we forget, *he trades in Fibonacci ratios* – what you mean is what exactly does that job entail? – and it feels too frail a point, or too nice a distinction, to make in such a lofty affecting place, as the ascent and summiting and divorce feel weightier. Of course it *could* be the light-headedness of being up there, but *we’re* light-headed too, who’ve been guided here by Lampert-as-Poet, so we vaguely think we *know* what Ian does. Just a little reshuffling down there maybe...

‘Stay walking, stay breathing, stay taking a break. All the Cotswold details are good, affecting and believable, but, to a degree, stay with the group, don’t wander, Lampert, not on Mount Toubkal, never in Dark Canadee...’

*

Then we’re back at the drinks, and there’s a rum concoction that’s appeared from somewhere, and the gang ask me about the dead poets, someone shyly at first, then Levy not shyly – well she does have a licence to mudlark – and I say yes, I know some, and yes, they come here sometimes, and sometimes to the Belly of Lead and sometimes they don’t, but if the vibe is right I’ll introduce you.

As we sit at our now beloved table, Bloor winds another page into his typewriter and we’re back.

*

I dream of Sisyphus and wake

Roger Bloor

1

beneath the olive tree we sit
Sisyphus and I
 discuss the weather out in space

that universe of blue despair
one step
 beyond our door

we listen quietly
as galaxies
 are born

as trees drop leaves
dry and dried
 complete

2

outside the window
looking in
 I see

a fire
a clementine
 a world beyond the curtain

where
beneath their olive tree
 the seven sisters weave

3

I wake to find
the day
 has left

see it striding down the road
hands deep in pockets
 buttoned high

cloaked in the overcoat of a man
who wants little
 from life

an overcoat
that shuns both mood
and fashion

4

I follow
keeping one step behind
in time

at edge of night
he pauses
turns

asks me
what it is I want
from him

I say

*your overcoat
for there is little else
I want from life*

and he replies

*the overcoat is yours
woven by the sisters
from the threads of life*

*each thread is yours my friend
so follow me
and let us walk together*

*walk on past
the olive tree
and out into the night*

*

‘I’m glad to start with an olive tree, even better beneath it, as I have seen your work here and there on the treasure-charts, Bloor, and every time what I see are strong flowers with deep roots. I see things stark and sharp-edged with the white space bristling. Sometimes you keep more below ground than above. But this is a different kind of cutting from your greenhouse, it’s more exotic, sort of transplanted...

‘At once you go into combat with two tricksters who are not always friends to poetry – dreaming and waking-from-dream. Dream always feels to me a little nearer Coleridge’s sense of *Fancy* than his sense of *Imagination*... Remember that legendary derby we saw? Thomas Otway (playing for Fancy Rovers) has *Lutes, laurels, seas of milk, and ships of*

amber VERSUS one W. Shakespeare (Imagination Albion): King Lear looking at Poor Tom and crying *What, have his daughters brought him to this pass?* One nil the Albion.

‘Anyway, we don’t have to agree with Mr Plato – how could we, when he would banish all the poets from his own Republic – but we should sometimes stack his objections up and gallantly try to meet them, if only to keep fit, lean, contrary and hungry... so, *pace* Mr Plato, it’s not an olive tree but *writing* about one, no it’s not writing about one but writing about *dreaming* about one, and yet, and yet, Mr Plato, I am seeing it, and a panel in my brain is reacting as it would if I really were. I am seeing the Poet and Sisyphus together there, the latter granted a rest for once. The problem is not the philosophy of Plato but the behaviour of *dream*. The cheerful unlikelihoods of the opening give us prime colours, the curious match of characters, the odd topic of discussion – *the weather out in space* – so far so far out...

‘The problem comes next, with the thoughtful qualification of that line into *the universe of blue despair*, for it doesn’t seem like a *move dream makes*, does thoughtful qualification, or sharpening of description, and of course the poem is still trembling with the presence of Sisyphus, why him, how is he available, how has his task been set aside? Like Prince’s younger self of 99-04, a stage entrance has been made, and we the watchers are watching *him* now. And *one step/beyond our door* doesn’t help, there are no doors in outdoors. Poems are always going on indoors or outdoors, right? Literally or tonally. That can change by line or stanza, but walls are walls. I like *we listen quietly*, but it’s the last *dream* move made in that section 1, the rest feel like *poetry* moves. Mischievously, I picture Sisyphus under the olive tree wondering *why have you brought me here, Mister Bloor?*

‘The numbers are okay, but not essential. Dream can certainly fold like that, and can cut like film, which is what you do here. I like the sparseness of part 2, I can’t lose MacNeice’s *Snow* from the scene though, what with the clementine through the window, and by the end of the section I see the tree, and the suddenly conjured card of *the seven sisters weave* but I’m blurred between indoors and outdoors now and some distance away Sisyphus is asking me *Do YOU know why he brought me here?* Dunno mate, probably the drunkenness of things being various...

‘I jest with you, Bloor, because you’re not at wizard school you’re at Wizard University, by which I mean you conjure, cast fine spells, and don’t always know your power. Here you spring *Sisyphus* and *olive tree* and *seven sisters* like from a personal Tarot, but it leaves the Poem slightly giddy, and wanting the cards explained, so it might glean what’s in its future. I have heard explanations from Bloor so fine they ought to be published, but I’m looking at what was typed and not at what was not typed! There’s a reason you, type, right? You feel the *cost of choice* in a way the penfolks and laptopers don’t feel, yes? You *strike* work into being, this is something all poets should think about trying. The air ringing with your choice! Once the air’s been struck with typing, its quality is different, there’s a tension, when is that sound coming again? Thinking as percussion. Sometimes I dream I’m typing, but in life I baulk at it...

‘3 is the poem at its best, but it also demonstrates that dream and waking are harder to distinguish in a poem than in a life. Because *the day...striding down the road/hands deep in pockets/buttoned high* is wonderful and dreamlike, has an *Edward* feel, Gorey or Lear,

and yet it's explicitly preceded by *I wake to find!* I want to follow the day as it becomes a man in an overcoat and finally just an overcoat – now *that's* what I call a dream...

'4 is also the poem at its best, but a different kind of best, here it's exact deployment of line-break and indent to give us a sort of trembling at the brink:

at edge of night
he pauses
turns

asks me
what it is I want
from him

'And then I think the end of the poem is itself a weaving of elements, but it's the Poet – not the Poem – who has lifted the cards to look at them, and is wondering what to draw from them. The tone becomes triumphal, kind of trumpeted, *let us walk together//walk on past/the olive tree/and out into the night* but I don't feel that flowering has deep enough roots to bloom like that, the journey's been too fragmentary and flickering, and by this time Sisyphus has wandered back to his eternal labour, as no one seems to need him here...

'I think the soul of the poem is the man in the overcoat, a spirit of daylight striding away from the Poet too quickly, now *he* is with Imagination Albion, while the *seven sisters* and the *threads of life* and *Sisyphus* are on loan to Fancy Rovers. Even in a dream, Bloor – especially in a dream – storyboard, storyboard, what's indoors, what's outdoors, walk with the elements that are lighted from within – *we listen quietly, hands deep in pockets, who wants little from life, what is it I want...* and with the white space too, or at least *your* white space, which at your best you wield like light.'

*

And soon we're out in the cool green lamplit air by the Dockhouse, and everything is smoky, wild and raucous.

Lampert makes short work of Pierrepoint in the Hangman final, beats him seven drops to two, would you believe, and when his crowd turn nasty we hear a sudden almighty crack, and there's Levy standing up in the mud with her arms akimbo and a single tail whip in one hand:

'You're not singing any more,' she says.

The crowd starts melting away, all except the Fig-Roll salesman, and Prince says 'maybe just one, for old times' sake...'

Some of the Dockhouse people give us an escort back towards the market, but we take the eastern ring around it, passing the great muddy crossroads where the carts take the poor folks back and forth from the Interior.

We pass those two old fellows huddled begging by their brazier, there's pale Ossi and Ali of the olive skin, they're always there, Ossi always jabbering on, but Ali never says a word, he just drinks from a hipflask while Ossi sings his praises:

'He... is a master of the instruments... scorching hot sands make up the landscape... it's an extremely durable carpet... *He*, when he feels the need, calls eyelids the lips of the eye!'

We all drop coins into their box, and Ossi's saying as we pass, à propos of his inexhaustible nothing, 'how many pairs of sandals... worn out on the goat-paths of Italy...' and he's pointing to poor Ali's battered feet.

'About the dead poets,' I murmur softly and someone asks me *what's that Max?* 'Oh, another time,' I say.

*

And so the night goes by in the free port of Dark Canadee. We make it round the market to the blazing threshold of the Belly of Lead, where things are already out of hand. I get the Poets in through a side-door, Sal Bonny has some pull in here, but when we see her drinking white rum with some pirates in an alcove, the patch is on the other eye.

'That's Anne, her sister,' says one of the Dockhouse fellows, 'you never see 'em in the same room.'

'*Sshh*,' go some of the others.

Soon the Poets are flowering into dancers or musicians. Levy and Lampert jump and jive amid the drunken throng while Prince is taking out a clarinet, Bloor a saxophone, and they're suddenly essential to the band. The fuming air in the Belly of Lead flashes green and purple and green as the dancers dance and the music stomps and plays. When Bloor's solo ends he straps his typewriter back on and types new drafts of his poems while keeping a syncopated rhythm.

'I always write in the morning,' he says.

'It's morning?' say I.

*

I take the air after a while, get the heck out of that scene, wander over to the wharf, where the young white-haired McCloud sits, with her legs dangling down over the drop, her eyes looking past the pirate ships and out to the moonlit sea.

'Everyone comes here, don't they,' she says without turning.

'They do.'

'I used to think everyone leaves in the end. But they all come here.'

'Beginning to seem that way, old girl.'

'I'm tired, can you bring them in?'

'I can.'

'Night then,' she says and she scrambles up, wanders off to whichever boat it is she sleeps in.

'Night, McCloud.'

And I go back to beside my lamppost, though no one's looking now, until time passes and the only one who is is the hooded pilot on the dark distant water, one hand on the tiller, never any different he, on his way to these bright shores to fetch the Poets home.

* * *