

Dark Canadee

The Second Voyage

Previously on DARK CANADEE...

'It's always night-time here...' 'Poets come, from the Plague-Times, piloted by hooded figures...' 'the paper turns shy around exceptional beauty...' 'there is - a hole in the water...' 'the Ancient Mariner's out there somewhere...' 'WHITE DEATH IN THE CHANNEL PORTS...' 'should we be worried?' 'they don't know why we're doing what we're doing...' 'the wagons take the poor folks back to the Interior...' 'how many miles to there?' 'witness the white space like a spar of silence...' 'they say you hear a woman crying when the third bell tolls...' 'she do fly at incredible speed, you see...' 'a fellow swam out to look at the whirlpool... look at it now...' 'a wild thrashing turbulence...' 'we're finally bloody free!' 'one last blue wooden wagon...' 'maybe it's three different women, and no one can do anything...'

Upon the Fifth day of March...

They call it Dark Canadee. Not because it's dark, it isn't, though there is no moon tonight. The clouds are low and still. The night is lit by the crimson glow of the marketplace, you can see it for miles from out on the Bay.

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.

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.

Therefore Poets come too, from the Plague-Times. *Plague-Timers* or *PTs* are what they call the Poets here, 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, piloted by a hooded man, the same man or a different man, nobody asks, nobody knows. Their blood gets tested on the crossing, like everything gets tested.

'D'you see them,' I ask the young shorewoman McCloud. She's down on the pebble strip in her windcheater and her white hair up, she's sorting through crates and boxes that arrived before I got here.

'No I don't,' she says without even looking. I point this out and she pays even less attention, then suddenly she's stark-staring at an aged dark oaken box that stands out from all the others. She kneels down on the wet stones to contemplate it further: her eyes are very wide.

'From my mother,' she says, 'it's our paper shipment.'

'That? It's too small, we need six weeks of sketchpads and writing blocks, they can't all be in there.'

'They can,' says McCloud, 'they are.'

She starts working on the fastenings, as I look out to sea. Still no sign of the boat, but I have my six sketches made by the Jazz Lady, on the last of the featherlight paper Signor Seguimi sent from Florence.

'This isn't from Seguimi,' says McCloud as if she heard that thought. 'Only my mother does this. She never taught it to Seguimi, said he wouldn't understand.'

Seguimi's paper turns to ash when there's too much beauty. The Jazz Lady didn't think that would happen on a cloudy night like this, and so far it hasn't. I've memorized the names, just in case: *Davies, Hall, Mair, Martin, Ross, Saiyid...*

'I ought to be under my lamppost by now,' I say. I like them first to glimpse me silhouetted below the lantern.

'Go your way, come mine, like the old poem.'

'What poem,' I say, 'I've been a poet now and then.'

She says nothing, just beckons me down with a quick hand. She has the heavy dark lid slightly tilted off the box and is now peering inside, as if a creature dwelt therein...

I trudge down the stone steps to the water and squat beside her in the seething pebbles. We look in the box together - nothing at all is in there, nothing. Then - something, something like a single sheet of black, but now it's writhing of its own accord, twisting, fire at its edges then it's shrivelled and gone, when it returns to its size it's powder, then silver, then banded blue-and-gold and then it's white so bright I look away - when I look back there's nothing again, a box of nothing sent from overseas. I sit back in the stones just as the water comes in all around me.

'What am I looking at,' I bleat, soaked, into the sea-wind.

'D'you not know it when you see it? You of all people,' and she turns a triumphant grin towards me: 'she's sent us the white space.'

*

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.

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McCloud takes the box away to whatever boat she sleeps in.

'It has to settle,' she says when she's back from there, wiping her hands on her windcheater, 'then it looks just like white paper but it can still do anything.'

'Bring it to the Dockhouse by eleven.'

'It's safer where it is.'

'No I want to show the PT's, make it part of the class, so we should do that in the Dockhouse.'

She is not convinced. The clouds seem to thicken above us.

'Talking of which,' she says, going out to meet the boat.

I make it to my lamppost just in time to see them all trudging up the stone steps, but no one even looks up. I can hear they're talking about that little hole in the sea, which has resumed its mysterious soft tunnelling operation about forty yards into the water.

'Don't think of going near it,' I call out as I approach them, at least that's a striking start.

‘Are you Max?’ one of the women asks, Ross I remember from the picture, there are five women, one man.

‘Might be,’ I go, a bit irked they don’t know that.

‘Well make your mind up, I had a message for Max.’

‘I’m Max, what is it.’

‘That I don’t know,’ Ross says with confidence, ‘but I do know I had one.’

‘The salt air scrubs the messages,’ McCloud calls up from the shoreline.

‘Three women!’ Ross calls out in defiance, ‘mind you that’s all I got.’

‘Some kind of cart, or wagon,’ exclaims another who may be Davies –

‘I remember the colour *blue*...’ says one I think is Saiyid –

‘See I divvied up my message, so there,’ says Ross proudly but it still means nothing to me.

Hall and Mair are standing at the edge of the wharf looking out to the horizon. The moonless night makes for an empty view, and they both look sad and homesick. Hall says she misses her wife, Mair agrees: he misses his husband.

‘They’re probably standing next to each other right now missing you two,’ I say feebly as I reach them but it’s all I have.

‘My wife is in London,’ Hall points out, imagining her.

‘My husband is in Hastings,’ Mair sighs, imagining him.

‘This far away they pretty much *are* right next to each other.’

There’s a pause.

‘How’s that work,’ Mair asks me.

Why does everyone else get away with saying sweet magical stuff like that? When I try it people look at me like I’m an idiot. I look around, frowning, wave this all away: ‘We better get going, crew!’ then a woman right in front of me looks familiar – I take a punt:

‘You’re Martine, and I once brought you a rose. Unless you’re Rose and I bought you a Martini.’

‘Either, neither, both, where’s the bar?’ says Martin, for it is she.

*

I want to avoid the market but no one ever lets me.

‘Why, it worked with my poetry,’ I joke but no one ever gets it. We pass the stalls for essential goods – **Fig-Roll Fantazia**, **I’m In The Snood For Love**, **The Captain and Chenille**, **The Fish and Chop Ship** – with barely a glance because up ahead at the end of this alley of the market it’s only *snowing!*

Hall looks delighted for the first time: ‘I love snow!’

‘It’s extremely local, isn’t it,’ Mair points out and he’s right, it’s a tiny snowstorm coming from nowhere, the snowflakes are blue and green and yellow as they float down by the oil-lamps and the lanterns.

And it smells amazing – ‘I used to go to sleep wearing this,’ Saiyid remembers dreamily, just as the electric sign crackles into life: **Sneau De Cologne** is written in white so white it hurts.

‘You were at Siena, weren’t you,’ I murmur to Saiyid, but she’s too captivated by the scented blizzard to hear me. Martin, next to her, replies instead: ‘might have been,’ and asks if they do mulled wine.

They do do mulled wine at **You Only Have To Ask** and we only had to ask. By the time we all have mugs of the purple stuff our hair and clothes are sprinkled with the melting scented snowfall.

The snow puts Davies in mind of Russia, where she once spent a while. Ross and she get talking. Ross spent two years in a house guarded by a KGB soldier with a submachine gun. She sips her drink. Davies is looking at her curiously.

‘Do you mean Oleg Trapeznikov?’ she says.

‘Oleg Trapeznikov! I do,’ says Ross, ‘sweet man, what are the odds.’ Short, here. The lovely snow falls all around them.

*

‘Any of you *ladies* like a turn around the Gardens?’

Sir Gilbert is here, drawn in by the eau de cologne, which he catches in his silken gloves and dabs himself with till he gleams for the night. But he moves off quickly when he sees three redcoats going by.

‘Enjoying the *white stuff* are we Peets?’ that’s Private Ward, he calls the PTs *Peets* but I don’t know what he means by the rest.

Private Field takes up the theme: ‘Letting the *white stuff* do battle are we?’

‘The *white stuff* like a spar o’silence,’ Private Lane says reverently, ‘very touchin that, you *Peets*...’ and they’re off into the heart of the market.

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‘They know something,’ says Sal.

She took me to one side as soon as we were through the Dockhouse door. She waved the PTs past, towards the blue glow of the stairwell and as the six of them trooped down she said to a curly-ginger-haired fellow in the corner:

‘Kemp, do the drill for Playtime.’

Kemp the Temp’s been here longer than anyone. Sal says he was here when they moved in, before the place had walls, just sitting there at a desk. Before that he says he was a Temp at what he calls Charts Cathedral, before that Adrian’s Wall and Camelodge but no one’s listening by then. Kemp the Temp

can't help himself, but he comes in handy. He turns back from the top of the stairwell and tells me more than he's meant to:

'Them English Land think there's something going on below-stairs in the Dockhouse! And there probably bloomin' IS!' he beams as he twirls away below.

'Remind me why we can't get rid of him?' Sal Bonny says without hope of an answer she'll like.

'It's a long story,' the folks in the corners chorus, and 'we're not a chorus,' they add, 'we just happen to think the same on this.'

'White *space*, white *stuff*,' says Sal quietly, 'you know there's White Death in the Cinque Ports. Whatever this is is suspicious to the Land boys. What is it. This white space.'

'It's just - what *isn't* written,' I say.

'Maybe just say that from now on?'

'They made comments in the market, but I thought they meant the snow.'

'*Je m'en fou*,' she sits down at her desk and opens the novel she writes when there's time, 'we're poker players here, remember. By the way I'm winking.'

'You have an eyepatch, Sal.'

'Oh yeah. *Voilà*.'

I get it. I decide not to tell Sal Bonny what McCloud will be delivering tonight in her old oaken box. It's not like you can tell from outside, I reason to myself. And I need it for my class.

*

When I get down to the firelit chamber, the six are all stock-still and waiting, each one has cards and coins set out before them, and Kemp the Temp is in my armchair, a leg slung over one side.

'On the count of three, me hearties - one, two, one, four, two... *RAID!*'

He's a bit of a clown but he's taught them the Drill. They go round and round and you've all seen it - someone bets, someone raises, someone folds, someone's out, they shift the fake doubloons around, take a drink, a dealer deals and off they go, they're having a whale of a time.

'*Ahat* your service, maestro,' sings Kemp the Temp, bowing on departure, and I think it's time we started.

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The paper dice is rolled for order: *Mair, Hall, Martin, Davies, Saiyid, Ross...* I will set down what I spoke to them. These excellent Poets said their pieces too in these exchanges, but their words are protected 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.

*

To My Guardian Angel

Antony Mair

I haven't called on you much, although
there was that time I howled with pain
in the kitchen of my small home - even now
I wonder if the neighbours heard. But that
was after a lover's death. I was so alone.

There have been other times I've called -
when worried about promotion, a house,
my overdraft, or how a priest might scold
if I confessed my nights with men - and yet
you can't say I've gone in for overuse.

There have been times too when I've felt
unreasonable joy at little things -
a sunbeam on a rug, a ballad's lilt,
a friendly dog - and wondered if by chance
you sent them, to make up for petty wrongs.

You never speak. I'd like some sign -
no thunderclap, more like a quiet
nudge, like that time a feather floated down
and touched my coat. I've heard some people say
this means you're hovering. I hope they're right.

*

‘Mair, this will seem a strange compliment but it is one all the same. I have never in my life consciously deployed an internal rhyme. Or assonantal chime. Or even alliteration, at least not since green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman... It’s my practice or belief, or both, that internal rhymes look after themselves, and when you are flourishing it’s the sound of *your creature speaking for you*. They are looking after you here, Mair, whether you asked them to or not. I compliment whichever one of your Conscious or Subconscious deserves the medal. (The Conscious shows up for the ceremony in a blazer, while the Subconscious breaks into a smile in a wood and hasn’t the foggiest why.)

‘This poem has an end-rhyme scheme that is subtle and fruitful, but listen to the internal *ohs* and *ows* of that first stanza, once *oh* has been cast as Private Thought (*although-home-alone*) and *ow* as Painful Memory (*howled-now-house*), a trembling geometry is made, and the sensibility looks out anxiously between its bars. It’s Vowels which paint the expression on that face: *promotion* tipping anxiously into *overdraft*, the short e’s of *confessed* and *men* as moral disappointments to the long-vowelled seethe of *priest*... Not to mention the other o’s in the O family, *oo* and *oy* and short *ō*, like children to the sorrowing parents *Oh* and *Ow*, they pitch in with *times too*, *joy*, *dog* – and they claim their own little trinkets among the sweet sounds on the carpet, assonant – *little things* – or alliterative – *a ballad’s lilt*, as Frost wrote heart-rendingly of children – *Weep for what little things could make them glad*...

‘At this point I feel that if Mair did this stuff consciously he is certifiable, so I hope he didn’t. If he did I take my tricorne hat off to him but will avoid him socially. Ha! What I want us to take from this is a thing I keep returning to, though no one knows whose guardian-angel I am: once you cast your leading sounds, starring *ay* or *ee* or lots of *k-k-k*, you can make character-actors of all the rest! If you’re me you imagine them like old hams in the dressing-room, alliterating *zh-* and *str-* and *thr-* like in their glory days, opening up their great sprung boxes of greasepaint, *there’s no rush, lovey, I’m a bad memory in this one, just a walk-on in the third stanza, I’ll be in the bar by ten*...

‘I taught a class the other day on Sam Coleridge. We also met him in the Cross Keys and he told us about his childhood, nightly walks with his father showing him the stars, so I got my class to colour in with highlighters all the significant vowels in *Frost At Midnight*, to see where the constellations are. You look long enough they come out. I’ll write it in a book one day, I’ll call it *Drinks With Dead Poets*.

‘What’s that? Oh. I did? Moving on... Before we get to the rhyme-scheme – yes it’s a soft ABACB, soft in the sense of pliable, *giving* – let’s look at the equally subtle metre, which sounds to me like 44555, that’s to say two tetrameters followed by three pentameters, but, again, not forceful, not forcing. What does that 44555 metre do? In the first stanza it plays the sound of bad memory coming into land, the tetrameter has momentum, can’t hold back such things – *I haven’t called on you much, although/there was that time I howled with pain* – and the extension afforded by the pentameter catches that impact, softens it – *in the kitchen of my small home – even now/I wonder if the neighbours heard. But that...* and then assigns it its place in the gallery of sorrow: *was after a lover’s death. I was so alone.*

‘The pattern is similar in the other stanzas. Each begins with new recollection, *There have been other times – There have been times too* – or a thought arising from the recollections – *You never speak*. The tetrameters tend towards encounter, the pentameter towards reconciliation, I say *tend to*, these are *tender* observations, thoughts I *tender*, stop, stop, just remember, people, *Peets*, whoever you are, every mathematical possibility of metrical progression affords you a different emotional through-line. Why does this fit especially well for a poem about a Guardian Angel?

‘Perhaps the tetrameters dramatize this *sense* of a being, or a being made up from an inner impulse to hope and healing, while the pentameters guide it gently to the real old world where there’s no such creature, but witness how the *sense* of it could heal at different times...

‘Now to the rhymes: half-rhymed ABACB mostly – actually entirely, *although/now, house/overuse, felt/lilt* – to mute the effect, and never consecutive couplets, the conscious-immediate where full rhyme acts as metaphor. Keeping the half-rhymes somewhat apart suggests thoughts giving rise to others *in time*. So a stanza of *thought in time*. What better? There are some good stuttering effects too, rippling or roughening the metre to convey a lift in sorrow or stress, like *was after a lover’s death*, or *when worried about promotion*, or this combination of animated line-break and, well, *nudging* effect:

*no thunderclap, more like a quiet
nudge, like that time a feather floated down*

‘Note this happens at that hinge where the patient pentameter takes over from the hurrying four-stress, and the longer line gives the extra time the feather needs to float down – Edward Thomas watching his daughter in ‘Old Man’:

*Often she waits there, snipping the tips and shrivelling
The shreds at last on to the path, perhaps*

‘Where that *at last*, serving the pentameter, yields just enough time for the shreds to land...

‘A fine performance, and much to learn from the rhyming and metrical patterns, quietly insistent, the sighing compunctions of present life in thrall to past. I don’t love the ending, in that the complex sensibility Mair has made by now somewhat caves to the simplifying sweetness of the concept. I don’t *believe* the speaker *hope[s]* *they’re right* that the Guardian Angel is *hovering* – this speaker knows it isn’t hovering, and has, much more responsibly, made a poem of *unknowing* about knowing just that.’

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‘She enjoyed that,’ Hall says to Mair across the table, ‘she made that sound people make when you’re not meant to be clapping. That sigh with a sound in the middle.’

‘He’s heard it all before,’ Mair responded, ‘he’s telling her my bad habits.’

It transpires that in the breaks Hall and Mair are playing a game of her wife and his husband having met on the promenade of England, then having decided to stroll along a while in the sunshine, and so they’re making a running dialogue of what they think the absent pair would tell each other next.

‘They’re closer friends than I am with *him!*’ Hall teases Mair and he goes along with the joke, while I earnestly interject: ‘what an excellent game,’ though everyone’s forgotten that it was kind of my idea.

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as time goes by

Kate B Hall

time is the future and the past
both remind me but it is
the present that holds you
briefly or for an age
until I have to remember
you have gone
and will not be back

yet you are held
fast in my memory
until I wonder
if you are really dead
sometimes I talk to
your photograph
you never answer me
I'm not sure I would
like it if you did

*

'First we mist the eyes as a poem comes to us through time. These stanzas are narrow, which makes the space around them strong, makes there *more of it than them*, makes it the senior partner. There are two stanzas, one short, one longer, something trying to grow? something tentative about that, like it's asking softly *what can be got away with here?* Nothing can for long, by the look, it's over soon, soon gone. Primitive you and me would think the same in a suddenly quiet place – *why can't they say more here? what are they afraid of? what's stronger than their speaking?* And contemporary you and me – and you and you and you and you and you around this old table – know we are in some peril here and now in the here and now. It seems our friends out there think our white space might be dangerous because they can't count it or account for it, deal in it, get rid of it. They don't know what it is. Hence, if they come, we're poker players from a world of win and lose.

'The poem comes closer and we see not only its form but its features. No capitals anywhere but I, not in the title, not starting a sentence. No sentences anywhere, except all of it, which is what then, breathless, tremulous, watchful, taking hits of oxygen where it can, and though some clauses are subordinate, the grammar amounts to one single, *level*, pulsing utterance...

'And so to what is uttered. The title *as time goes by* is almost defiantly plain, obvious, almost *whispered* it's so edgeless. *My, how the years roll by...* my father sighed, gazing at his sons and their children through doorways for most of his last years, open vowels for open doors...

'As *time goes by*. It could be the title of most of what is written: *Here's how it does, here's how I try to hold it in my hand, here's how it won't be held, and here is my account of how I tried...*

‘The voice is intentionally feeble, falling short, out of sorrow it hoists the high concepts, *time, future, past, present*, reaches for them, shows them falling through the hand like sand – or paper too overawed to bear them. Nouns, objects, *things* are elided, which emphasises the isolation of the person brought back to these thoughts. No handhold, no armchair, no leg-rest, no welcome mat...

‘*time is the future and the past* can’t help but come in the three-piece suit of the Eliot of *Burnt Norton* –

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past*

‘but see Eliot himself plays them as a jumble, whether or not he had a concept there that is actually true or helpful – this might make sense as astrophysics these days, but it doesn’t make much as philosophy, and to me is only effective in truly rendering the rainy-day pondering of a man in doubt... (take God away from Eliot and *what is he actually talking about???* Sorry, you didn’t hear that.) Anyway, for us poets, the fellow cornered those huge words, and one can only cry *Respect!*

‘Now the white space that laps at the edges of *Burnt Norton* is lapping at this too, each tentative statement begins to be erased – the *future and the past* ebb away when *the present* comes, *briefly* is discarded for *an age* which is in turn eroded by *until I*, and what *I* remembers is an absence, *you have gone*, which is provisional in a world of hope, and *will not be back*, which is not provisional in any world I know.

‘Hall keeps the measure in the breath: step, hope, lost, step, hope, lost, lost. No grammatical convention, no comma, no colon, no foregrounding capitals here or there to arrange the syntax, or move the furniture to best effect: all there is is the white space – sorry, I promised Sal Bonny, all there is is *what’s not written* – no word is ever more than three words from the brink in this poem, from the *unsayable* on either side – like a vertiginous path that winds around a mountain, one side is hard, left-justified, what to lean against, aghast, when the climb, or the vertigo, overwhelm, while the other side is broken, fractured, flapping out in the battering winds of the abyss...

‘It gets its breath back, takes on the impossible burden of

and will not be back

‘and finds yet, see the shape, the y, the little divot or handhold to use next, to keep going, onwards and upwards. Not in the cheerful sense of *let’s keep going guys*, no in the professional mountaineering sense of *if night falls it will kill us*. In this rarefied atmosphere, even *held/fast* is broken apart, the hand wavering in space to seek what can be held when it just lost hold of *held...*

‘I know, Hall, I’m vanishing up my metaphor, this is not about a mountaineer, a mountain or a drop – but let’s think what took me there... The deliberate, halting, hesitant movement of line to line, the cost of falling or stopping, the terrible colossal sky that’s all around, the loneliness, the need to call out, the need to make it to a further haven...

‘And what also happens at altitude, when the oxygen comes in drips and drabs, is a mental blur or trip which is just what is enacted here by the bewildered *I wonder/if you are really dead* and the numb *sometimes I talk to/your photograph/you never answer me*, where sorrow makes its one shy joke: *I’m not sure I would/like it if you did* and the thing ends marooned, on the mountainside – I’m sorry Hall, this poem can’t get off by nightfall – but the thing does end marooned, not on a mountainside, go away mountain-rescue we’re all sane here, the thing ends in conversation with the lost one, *imagined* conversation, *sweet* conversation like the game you and Mair are making with your absent partners... *you never answer me/I’m not sure if I would/like it if you did*, which doesn’t heal the poem, or the loss, or end with the cheap fade-out into endless sky, ho-hum there goes a poem, no. It stops with the predicament: *someone I could make this joke with is gone.*’

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In the break I go upstairs and leave them looking at their poker cards, rehearsing the Playtime Drill. Martin has offered to make them all black tea, which she seems to be pouring from a bottle of spiced rum. Someone points this discrepancy out, and she says as she frowns, concentrating on the levels: ‘Don’t betray me, me hearty, I’ll silent-slice you to the brisket...’

Weaponised jargon always does the trick at Canadee, especially if impenetrable, and by the time I get back we’re all drinking what she poured us.

I only went upstairs because I was impatient for McCloud, I wanted to show them what was in the box she showed me, get it safely down to the fireside. But she wasn’t in the offices, the folks hadn’t seen her, they chorused.

‘We did not *chorus!*’

They did not. They all said they hadn't seen her in distinctive memorable ways, until she shone in my mind's-eye, my ever-helpful many-faceted young friend of old.

Having said that where the hell are you.

*

'So Martin punctuated our break and now she punctuates our work. Couldn't be timed better. I am waiting for someone like *ellipses...* You five sit around like these ???, Martin takes the stage like this!!! I say *slainte!*' and I get 'Noroc!' from Ross, 'Santé!' from Saiyid, 'Iechyd da!' from Davies, and 'Cheers' from Hall and Mair and their partners far away.

Everyone knows everyone ere long in Canadee.

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The Punctuation Police

Kitty Martin

'ello, 'ello, 'ello, what's all this then?
Ladie's shoes? You are under arrest for
the misuse of the possessive apostrophe.
You must wear the shackles of Erasmus
(first known use, 1548)¹ and anything
you write may be given in evidence.
Other alleged offences are under
investigation: inappropriate use
of 'scare quotes' on October 31st;
omitting compound modifier hyphens,
which offends the hang-'em-and-flog-'em gang;
and overuse of the exclamation mark!
Sentencing will be meted out by Prof. Boldface.
You've got form. It's an open and shut case.

*

'The only essential lesson in punctuation is to do to any of Emily Dickinson's very few poems published in her life what *The Springfield Republican* did to them - replace her dashes with semi-colons and exclamation-marks - and I include the most unDickinsonian 'title' and 'epigraph' as presented in that esteemed organ:

To Mrs ____ ____, with a Rose.

(Surreptitiously communicated to The Republican.)

Nobody knows this little rose;
It might a pilgrim be,
Did I not take it from the ways
And lift it up for thee!

Only a bee will miss it;
Only a butterfly...

‘and so on, that’s not her at all, is it? *Semi-colons* ffs? And I’ve met her, so I know. And now you also know the Punctuation Police of whom Martin speaks...

‘Pistols blazing, and to blazes with the rulebook, this Secret Policeman is having a ball, commits the offence, cites it, makes the arrest – that’s like the boys from British Land, or *English Land* as their territory expands in its own special way – and we are rapidly incarcerated in a sonnet. Now sonnets are easy to spot as they breeze into view in the market-square, the length, the squared-off unstanza’d *Attitude* of the form: *I’ve a right to be here, I’m either Petrarch or Shakespeare, both, neither, might be, might be, get to know me and you’ll find out at His Majesty’s Pleasure...* but the immediate energy and attack of this makes me think of Browning’s compromised blank-verse blabbermouth Fra Lippo Lippi:

*Zooks, what's to blame? you think you see a monk!
What, 'tis past midnight, and you go the rounds,
And here you catch me at an alley's end
Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar?*

‘*With MY reputation???* I hear a Mr Whitehouse adding from the Plague-Time... Well Martin’s packing a lot of character into this equally boastful, self-serving fellow – of course it’s a fellow, only fellows sound like this – you hear the confidence of hypocrisy without fear of check... the confidence to come on the scene wagging a cliché – ‘ello ‘ello ‘ello – to commit the offence while citing it, to choose as the bad example a rather questionable focus for the officer’s rapt and incorrect attention: *Ladie’s shoes?*

*Thou hotly lust’st to use her in that kind
For which thou whip’st her...*

‘A dog’s obeyed in office, as King Lear also notes too late – and then the rapid deployment of some familiar tropes: obscuring Latinate diction, pseudo-academic annotation in support – *first known use, 1548*)¹ which works because it’s unbacked-up – and a corrupted disc of the Miranda Rights – *anything/you write may be given in evidence...* This Elevated Imbecilic mode, the sound of Injustice in Full Cry, has a noble English history that stretches from Dogberry through Gilbert and Sullivan, the Queen of Hearts in *Alice* – Sentence First, verdict Afterward! – Oh What A Lovely War! – all the Cleese rôles in Monty Python...

‘And those *shackles of Erasmus!* Stand back from the Book of Wicky, my friends, I have been there and done that and there’s nothing there at all. Though I believe you have the right to scribble your own thing in. I can no more find *shackles of Erasmus/(first known use, 1548)*¹ than I can understand *silent-slice you to the brisket*, but I know what Martin means (not her real name) and I know what her Policeman means (no name given) – what’s *more*, the language is better for them. If you’re going to make-believe, *make believe!*’

*

There are two wide eyes at the little window. A dark thin face, a young woman I think, faintly lit by the green lantern above, peering at us through the filthy pane. Her face is propped on her fists. Our world is firelit, hers is dark, but she’s almost in the room with us.

‘Can we help you?’ I murmur. They all look up from the poem and there’s no one.

‘Probably waiting for the wagon,’ I say, ‘where was I...’

‘If you’re going to make-believe,’ says Martin, raising her glass of very strong black tea indeed, ‘*make believe!*’

*

‘Any reader of any poem has the right to remain silent. (Someone scream *that* on a university campus before it’s all too late.) Here Martin casts us as offender – no stanza-breaks for even mental protestation of innocence, *don’tcha know this is a Sonnet speaking?* – of course we can’t speak but here we barely get to listen, or understand the charge-sheet, it all goes by so fast, and there *is* no legal aid, for the Plague-Time English kings don’t think it worth it... Like them, Martin’s Policeman has it every which way, cake and eat, dropping in the defensive legal *alleged*, for form’s sake only, using scare quotes on ‘*scare quotes*’, over-using the *exclamation-mark!* perpetually doing what I say, not what I do...

‘Note that in a sonnet the eye tends to dart around, curious as to the chosen form, so one often sees the ending coming, away in the furthest corner of the town square. By the end of this one the charges are read, sentencing is coming and *it’s an open and shut case*, square and public like the stocks. But it’s not only the reader who suffers this immediate awareness of the end being present. What is it for the end to be present? A revelatory compression of time – is that the source of the sonnet’s power? Discuss – no, remain silent, you’ve the right to. Anyway, the reader feels it, this presence of the end in the whole, but *so does the writer, before the ending even exists...*

‘Martin’s sonnet doesn’t rhyme till the last couplet, and I have an open-and-shut case against that in a minute... This is about the practical *writing* of a rhyming sonnet. We can’t help it, we get to the ninth or tenth or eleven-and-a-halfth line, pleased as punch we’re making the thing work, but now we know the end is near, we have to clinch this, tuck it, heal it, sod it, *do something, make it end!* That pressure has to give somewhere, there’s some generalising, centralising impulse in the writer – I’m not saying it can’t be resisted, but the resistance to it still underwrites its presence, like a skipped rhyme or stress.

‘Martin’s highly agreeable judicio-linguistic turn comes a slight cropper there, but only there, and it’s not her fault so much as it’s the sonnet’s. If you’re eschewing rhyme you can’t spring it back at us in the couplet, unless you’re really setting it up as a *moment*, an example, a joke. For example if the Policeman was telling us we’re also being *done for rhyming*. Here it’s still him speaking, and we are at home – well, under arrest but at home there – in his clattering blank-verse way with words. Which prods me to the mild conclusion that this isn’t a sonnet at all. The lines ride on their puffed-up authority, their unreasonable reasoning, their square Chief Wiggumish parroting of horseshit. I do like the late arrival of *Prof. Boldface* – from whom one expects no more reason or mercy than we’ve had so far – but he just makes me want Martin to do the same thing on *fonts*. Especially now there’s no such thing as handwriting...

‘And now, from Martin’s town-square blowhard to Davies’s lonely call to the sky... our magic dice of running order still has its wits along with its dots...’

*

"I lie awake; I have become like a bird alone on a roof" Psalm 102

As dusk falls I search the skyline
of winter trees with leafless branches.

As the ice settles I remember
being part of the skein – wing-tip to wing-tip –

our hearts like one heart
our low calls sounding a single note

the cold falling away as we gained height
each taking their turn

to pull us through the sky.
Where have they gone?

Was it men with guns and dogs?
Or something more silent

that crept through the flock
unnoticed as a fox

but lethal in its focus
on all that made us breathe?

I fold my neck until my beak
is tucked under my wing

gain a moment of warmth.
I remember that shape in the sky

we have always made
as I rise again from the dark.

*

‘Epigraphs cast shadows, and they need to be judged as attentively as lines. Scriptural epigraphs come with their own gravity, of course, and *Psalms* their own

distinct note, being the only Book from the Book that poets don't mind claiming for an ancestor... This one is fine, the right length, the right weight. It's also a good way of refracting the light, bending it slightly so it's not *the poet speaking*, it's a voice she has made, and the source of it is plain. The bird, the greylag, is awake, alone, for the Bible tells us so. All in all a fine epigraph...

'When you have *skyline, winter, trees, and branches* all active so quickly, the black-and-white spindliness of script comes into play. Any responsible font a poem is written in – and here at Canadee we swear by the printworks of our dear old friend Goudy, it's common to us all, like Arial has come to be the scripture of the Plague-Time – any true font looks frail and thin against the space, it quickly turns to scribble or to scratches on the wall of a cell, it can turn one compassionate. (Verse in **boldface** is, as was lately implied, **all wrong**. *Italics* we'll get to. I've no use for them.)

'Davies accepts this gift and keeps the discourse plain – the landscape is plain, the sky is plain, let the words be so – and my only suggestion on the first couplet, and it's tentative, is maybe doing without *of*, this lets the bird's eye *search the skyline* in the line-break, and return (like Noah's messengers) with the numb *winter trees with leafless branches*. Actually *winter trees* is so clear and evocative it could even shake off *leafless branches*, and that's a visual effect of the frail letters as well as the sound. Anyway, it's working, and end-stopping the thing is good for a cold place. She, Davies's greylag, only starts to enjamb when she's warmed by the memories, or frightened by the questions.

'The line-break in the second couplet is intriguing. Davies has chosen the former of two good options, *I remember/being* (i.e. what do I remember?) and *I remember being/part* (i.e. what do I remember being?) I hold them in my hands, look, like the scales of justice, and I think the choice is just. By the way, PTs, not wanting to give you too much work and all, but you have to do that with every line break you ever make for the rest of your life! Better get good at it, then you can delegate it to the Subconscious as it tracks through the woods...

'It's the right choice because the slight hesitancy, the truncation of that third line, pushes the energy for this first majestic recollection: painted on the empty sky is her memory of the crowded one, where she was *part of the skein – wing-tip to wing-tip* – aren't all sad memories more or less that one? Then the 5th line sprouts from that, but I would clip it, Davies, lose the *like*, birds may do similes in their youth, but this one is looking back – *our hearts one heart* – aren't all fond hopes more or less this one?

‘Then we’re into a harmonious alliterative mode, rhythmic, agreed-on, *our low calls sounding a single note...* Here I might try something vertical, like breaking after *the cold falling away*, let *away* make us tumble and lift through the air:

*the cold falling away
as we gained height each taking their turn*

‘because packing the next line gives you the work-rate, the pumping heart-rate of flight. Around here I think of punctuation again. After the earthbound full-stop of line 2, the flight – of memory, not flight – begins and the only punctuation are those dashes, which can arrow along fine (greylag feathers are used in arrows, thank you Wicky) and there are no marks at all in the empty sky till she abruptly slams against the wall of glass birds see too late: full-stop, capital, question-mark, white space – ’

*

Just as I say *white space* I hear emphatic knocking on the Dockhouse door, and chairs moving upstairs as the folks begin to deal with it.

‘I just mean – *what isn’t written,*’ but I see some of the Poets are readying their poker-cards for the Playtime Drill. I hear the single tinkling of a bell, poor folks heading off to the Great Hay Meadow...

*

‘*Was it men with guns and dogs?* This hits me too, a little, that the bird would know or say these nouns...? I know this isn’t one of those Les Murray gems in created animal tongue, this goose is speaking English, and I’m not sure how else you’d do it, but it might be worth a ponder. Then we’re into this beautifully almost touchable meditation on *what?* The Plague you people have all fled from?

Or something more silent

*that crept through the flock
unnoticed as a fox*

*but lethal in its focus
on all that made us breathe?*

‘There’s a gravity and urgency to this that sees the lines end right where they should, and that terrific mutating virus *flock-fox-focus* challenging *us* to breathe...

‘The animal response is good, too: *I fold my neck until my beak/is tucked under my wing* forms (if one line) a child’s-bedtime heptameter, with the half-rhymes cosyng up together, and then Davies does the eliding I think there should be more of earlier (losing the *of*, the *like*), skipping *I* – which is implicit in the stanza-break – to reach the briefly helpful *gain a moment of warmth...*

‘But that provisional second of self-care expands to a dignified and resonant conclusion. The word *I* is reclaimed, which speaks to warmth and spirit in the greylag, the lovely memory bringing up life-force:

I remember that shape in the sky

*we have always made
as I rise again from the dark.*

‘It is the pride of one’s own pronoun, the lone heart bolstered by the thought of the many, *I* becoming *we* – *W* can always be birds flying – and then, the truthfulness of this, becoming *I* again, because one is alone in the dark, at the point of recollection, or origin of poem... And this also works because the original skein has faded to the greylag’s memory of it at the start of the poem, and now at the close to *our* memory of *her* memory of it, a fainter imprint still, yet still the same shape, same work, same common desperate drive away from *where not to be now.*’

*

As if on cue, because we shouldn’t be here now doing this where we are, I am the dealer at a high-stakes poker game, and as our three friends from English Land – Private Ward, Private Field and Private Lane in their unhooked red coats – come stomping down the stairs to check on us.

‘Got any white stuff, ladies?’

‘Didn’t have you down for a card-sharp, Mr Max...’

But I know the Drill, and thanks to Kemp the Temp, so do my PTs, someone bets, someone raises, someone folds, someone’s out, we shift the fake doubloons around, take a drink and on we go. Private Field and Private Lane partake freely from our carafes on the side of the room – ‘Sorry ladies, we’re on

duty,' – but Private Ward is still looking at us one by one, he scrutinizes us like Heaney's Diogenes in *The Haw Lantern*, we wish he would test and clear us.

'Now who's up,' he says, 'and who's down?'

The PTs have their comebacks ready, they were told to prepare for this. Hall and Saiyid beam and behold! their gleaming piles of doubloons, Mair and Ross put their heads in their hands. It's nicely done, and all the Land boys are grinning. They need to see winners and losers, greens and reds, riches and destitution, for them to be assured this economy is working. They toast the ones they think are winning. And then they're gone away up the steps again, I hear Sal Bonny offering them rum, she's laughing, 'I *told* you, boys, we got the best game in town back there!'

The noise subsides. I hear the second bell at the Junction and the Poets, triumphant from their act, pat shoulders, high-five, go still as they hear it too.

'I don't hear any women,' Ross says,

'Is it a wagon leaving?' wonders Davies,

'A blue wagon,' Saiyid recalls what's left of the message they brought.

'It's violet. I can't remember where it goes. Never been, there's never time.'

*

The Violence of Roses

Nisa Saiyid

You wait upon God
listen to the silence of birds
Hang a relief of screams
face their reach, their flow.

You run the reels
Massacre in an Arcadian landscape
Turn to dusk-lit roads
walk under skies of no fixed abode.

The double of a kiss, you keep in a jar
tilt silk skeins, your glass to the light
Dust motes still as you frame their fall
mourn each fluid moment's passing.

Outside, the silence of birds disrupts
the violence of roses
you bring to the rivers of your mouth
Their confluence ends with yours.

~~~~~  
A black and white water-wheel turns  
through a language of mirrors  
After-images spin in jewels of time  
focus a stranger's frontier lines

their meetings in your gaze.  
Their negatives begin to mirror your positives  
kaleidoscope the burning of flags  
prior notice to the far from inevitable.

They break with your vanity, millstone tears  
to the sound of television drones  
The quietude of a smoke-screen, too high above  
satellites relay through cloud.

Each pillar of light passes, sleepwalks, wakes  
to the complicity of our joys.  
Soon, the collateral rosebud tears and soundless petals  
While you tend to the violence of roses.

\*

'Quite a title, a phrase I haven't seen before, though it feels so likely and implicit, so close to touch. Maybe we need this phrase for the history of England. You could sell it for doubloons like they want us to. Anyway far from that, I think of the sublime E. E. Cummings sonnet (*it is at moments after i have dreamed*) that ends

*– turning from the tremendous lie of sleep  
i watch the roses of the day grow deep*

'And we're here in a bewildered, slightly synaesthetic realm, where the language is scrabbling to keep up with the senses. Strong stony chess-piece moves, these, Saiyid: *Roses, God, silence, birds*, we are quickly deep in this walled garden.

'But you – or God – need to lay down the laws here, on punctuation, capitals, we don't want to think the software is making default decisions! I could see this without any capitals but *You* and *God*, everything lower-case, impacted,

bowed, there is no one else between the You and the God, it doesn't need punctuation, the breaks are doing that work, let's look at how that looks:

*You wait upon God  
listen to the silence of birds  
hang a relief of screams  
face their reach their flow*

You say *You wait upon God* and we will go with you, but the poem must absorb that power. This first stanza is a template: the force of the nouns and the stresses stay with us, that first line towers over what follows. Even perhaps the second line should pay tribute to it, maybe lose *listen to*? This *hang a relief of screams* is hard to grasp but in the best way, with vowels doing the talking, the e's of *relief*, *screams*, *reach* are a physical wound on the psyche that's trying to cope with waiting, *God*, and *silence*...

'Still trying to cope: *you run the reels*... This is good, concise, don't let the lines spring outward far, mist your eyes, look how the lines start elongating, you go from two-beat to six-beat in the course of this poem, but I still think *You wait upon God* is the bones of it, because the white space - (it's okay the soldiers are gone) - must be powerful here, must loom then compress, the best moments here are short lines, or phrases in longer lines that *should be* short lines - a fine scattering here: *double of a kiss*, *glass to the light*, *rivers of your mouth*, *language of mirrors*, *burning of flags*, *each pillar of light*, *rosebud tears* and *soundless petals*...

'They're ALL what you want, these ARE your soundless petals, Saiyid, they are all created out of *wait upon God* and *the silence of birds*, so the work to do is work of spacing, the breaks, not work of phrasing, the action of those first lines makes a chemical compound of the air in this poem! It makes lines into *gasps*, gasps of seeing, knowing, you cannot say too much before the air runs out!

'So, maybe, *massacre in Arcadia* is enough? And these two good lines are really three good lines:

*turn to dusk-lit roads  
walk under skies  
of no fixed abode*

'And that next stanza, *the double of a kiss*, is really two stanzas. These breaks will let the dust dance in the space, and let a moment pass before our eyes:

*your glass to the light*

*dust motes still  
as you frame their fall  
mourn each fluid  
moment's passing*

'I can't say I see how *the silence of birds disrupts/the violence of roses* but it gives rise to *the rivers of your mouth*, which carries the redness and openness the first stanzas have demanded. But do you need to say *the violence of roses* so often? I'm reminded of the poet – was it Mr Motion? – who thought that once Stevie Smith had thought of something as good as the phrase *Not waving but drowning*, she really shouldn't have used it twice *and* called the poem that.

'I like the *black and white water-wheel*, which recalls *runs the reels* in shape and hue, and the poem becomes increasingly mosaic. As its syntax tries too hard (*Their negatives begin to mirror your positives*), its beating heart stays fragmented, cinematic. Rumours in the Plague-Time say you often write from paintings, Saiyid, from architecture, film, and your mirrors and jewels and kaleidoscopes do put me in mind of Cocteau, or even M. C. Escher...

'But whatever is being said – and it doesn't have to be clear, or signalled, or easy to get – it *does* need to breathe the air the beginning breathes, be animated by the same lone heart. Here I think that horizontal stroke in the middle is unhelpful, it feels like an exterior and cerebral move, an imposed turning of attention. The same creature is still blinking from the wait on God, shuddering at the silence of birds, red mouth agape from the violence of roses, and I think it sounds like this – your words, and nothing changed:

*each pillar of light  
passes, sleepwalks  
wakes to the complicity  
of our joys*

*soon the collateral  
rosebud tears  
and soundless petals...*

'Am I calling for a poem of many more lines? I am, I am, I don't think length is an issue here, the issue is more like – what words has the human soul to

say in the face of this strange apocalyptic weather, with no sign of God or Godot and no sound from birds?

‘I lose the syntax in that last stanza, I can’t see what the petals are doing *While you tend*, and it’s not a poem that’s so far abandoned the steady hand of grammar. In any case that last line is lovely, *While you tend to the violence of roses*, and its deep red fissures of contradiction deserve more attention. There’s nothing odd about your last line feeling like a first line, Saiyid – it’s in the spiralling, *reliving* nature of this poem’s world – so I’m just leaving it here to see what that might look like at the outset:

*You wait upon God  
in the silence of birds  
you tend to the violence  
of roses*

‘A haunting dream, this, jewels twinkling out of it, and all it needs it is literally telling you: *listen to the silence of birds*, that is, pressure the utterance with silence and the eternal wait, then I believe this vision will be clearer, and *pace* Cummings, the roses of the day will grow deeper.’

\*

Saiyid wants to note down the name of the E E Cummings poem and the sheet of paper I pass her is the last one we have.

‘My friend was bringing the best paper ever, but she’s late, or she’s forgotten. Neither thing is like her, though. Paper like you’ve never seen. Her mother made it, far away.’

\*

## **Give Me Your Heart Sweetheart**

**Greta Ross**

you teased, cocky with your pun  
so I took a knife and sliced down  
my rib cage, reached deep  
for the aortic arch, slid fingers  
south to that palpitating lump  
plump like a dove with all the loving  
I had saved and pulled it out  
throbbing hot and sweet.

But you dashed it from my hands:  
*this thing is not*  
*what I had in mind, this raw*  
*bloodied beast,*  
*Where's the bluebirds with floral ribbons*  
*Cupid's dart with names entwined*  
*on a dainty painted picture card?*

My poor heart rolled into a corner  
and beat its tiny furious heels  
in a justified tantrum, feelings hurt.  
So I picked it up, rocked it gently back  
to tick, and slammed my door shut on you.

\*

'Can a scenario *BE* set up any quicker than this in a poem? I'd like to see how. The 'You' figure gets the title, joke, pun, command, instruction, and as soon as that leering exhortation is over we're down in the poem, with the voice of *I* reacting to the sound, which, holding title and standing over the poem like its boss, foreman, gaffer, casts a baleful shadow on the whole, foreshadows the looming shocker...

'The voice is giving evidence, and not for the Defence: *teased* can get out of hand, *cocky* knows what dirty card it's playing, and not just *pun* – low form of wit – but *your* pun, the pathos and indignity of being proud of *that*? And so *I took a knife and sliced down* is tremendous, because it still sounds like a real-life domestic in a kitchen, till in the direction *down* and the line-break we lurch into bloody metaphor:

*my rib cage, reached deep*  
*for the aortic arch...*

'[D]eep keeps the motion in motion, and that dab of expertise – knowing just where to start rummaging for the actual *organ* – goes on bleakly assembling the *character* of the speaker: enough is enough for it, end of its tether, done, defiant, you want it? I'll fetch it out, using the tools I have...

'Deep in the guts the language takes over, as I'm always saying, and Ross is now doing. Deep in the guts the nauseated short *ū* vowel bubbles into view like a

monstrous discovery down there, and listen back for what ill-meant sound woke it up in the body – PUN.

*slid fingers*  
*south to that palpitating lump*  
*plump like a dove with all the loving*

‘There’s *south*, which comes dragging *sour*, and from a poet named Ross it comes with the explorer and his Ice Shelf as far down there as we’ll ever know, where Englishmen go to fail gloriously forever...

‘A break like *lump/plump* isn’t wise unless you *want* the onomatopoeia, and we do, and here it is, this is tactile, *lump* is where it’s found, *plump* is it beating where it’s found, *dove* is a cackle of a simile – peace, purity, olive-branch, hope for the Ark when the old world is over – and *all the loving/I had saved* is a horrible swallow of misery which precipitates the final extraction. Exposed to the air the short *ū* oxygenates to *ō*: *throbbing hot and sweet...*

‘Above all notice how this violent metaphor enters the kitchen war-zone in the natural colours of A Real Quarrel. There’s a seamless movement into it, the physical and psychological actions, the verbs of discord – taking something awful literally, fingering, grabbing, wrenching, slamming down in view – all standard moves from the woe-begotten armoury of love-gone-wrong, as is this –

*But you dashed it from my hands:*

‘Now. Look at that colon. There’s a black-and-yellow ribbon round the site of this poem. Only me and the forensic expert – always an eccentric in *any cop show ever* – are allowed within, while Ross is in the corner giving details to my sergeant. Well, I stoop to the bloody floor and look closely at that colon. There’s your culprit. Ross had not put a foot wrong in this poem up to now!

‘Alors, c’est un *deux-points*, Poirot would frown and say at this juncture. Holmes would eliminate the alternatives in a nanosecond. But as Colombo I would affably enquire *Why a colon there, ma’am?* I could see an ellipsis, or a dash – the dash is crying out its name in the line – *dashed it from my hands!* – but a colon is what, too thought-out, too chosen, it is indoor, desk-bound, *behaving* punctuation. It thinks it knows what’s coming next.

‘What is coming next? Spoiler alert, this poem *totally* gets me back by the end, but this italic voice in the middle is confusing and gives me a murmur where

I want the next Act of the Three. If it's the voice of the title, the instigator, the object of fury, it doesn't chime with that voice, which is cocky and wise-guy. This is whiny and faux-poetic, and the parts don't really fit. It starts Anglo-Saxon, *raw/bloodied beast*, goes slack and slangy, *Where's the bluebirds*, and then queasily pretty, *with names entwined/on a dainty painted picture card...* If it's the voice of the poem, the sufferer, the self-butcher, it doesn't rise organically from the actions taken by that creature.

'This isn't hard to fix, Ross. Do something else there. Stay with the blood. Live with the ghastly vivid deeds of the first nine lines. There's another way and you'll find it. You'll fix it. You're an accredited hypnotist. You panned for gold in the Klondike. You drove to the Arctic Circle and hid from grizzly bears in a bullet-ridden hunting shack. For all I know, Ross, you may actually *be* the Explorer.'

'Fair point,' she says, and doesn't say she isn't. She told me all those things and more when we stood in the falling snow.

'Whatever happens in response to the Heart-extraction, whether you go with the Instigator's real voice, the same voice remaining within the Metaphor, or the Sufferer's account continuing – any might work – the third stanza brings us back to the realm you've made. In fact it deepens it, adds new shades of pity and farce, as the Heart itself joins the fray, like a child caught up in parental warfare:

*rolled into a corner  
and beat its tiny furious heels  
in a justified tantrum*

'Again, great concision as this thing comes to life – *corner, beat, tiny, furious*, this is a child, *heels* is the child teenaged, and so is *justified tantrum* – hilarious contradiction – but I can't make the bathos of *feelings hurt* work. I like the second last line, but don't think the very end is right. Primarily this is about the *hands*: to pick up the heart and rock it gently feels like the tender work of both, shielding, cradling actions, so *slammed my door* arrives too soon – hold on to your heart! – and is a blur to visualise. Just needs an action in between, because the great strength of this poem is how its realistic and metaphorical dramas share the same fibre (which is what we lose in the middle part): we feel the action, and believe it when we see it, however crazy it looked. *You won't believe what I just saw in there, sarge. I did, though.*'

\*

O we're done, we're done. We just missed the last bells at the Junction – the Playtime Drill took too much of our break – so the blue wagon has already tottered away into the Interior, and the three women who had borne the message from the Plague-Time remind me to listen out next time, though they can't remember now what for.

Sal Bonny and the Jazz Lady emerge from the Dockhouse and are locking the door behind them, then Sal wants a word.

'It had to be the Temp, I think he told the Land boys.'

'So he taught us all a Drill that was only necessary because he can't keep his mouth shut?'

The PTs all come over, like a delegation. Hall speaks for them:

'A young woman was at our window, I think she wanted to come in.'

Sal gestures away towards the old abandoned Library that looms aslant in the darkness, we sometimes see flickering lights in the upper windows.

'There's an alleyway from here to there, by the Deal Porters' cabins, the women come and hang around.'

'Who are they?' Mair wonders.

'Well one of them's Romanian,' says a voice from below. Ross has taken a few steps down to the small dirty window that looks in on our basement chamber. We can see the embers of our fire, in the little room where we talked poetry on this night. There's yellow chalk writing on the wall by the window:

*au un foc minunat*

Ross speaks these words, adding: 'I'm a member of the Romanian Musicians Guild. I write lyrics for a jazz-funk band. It means: *they have a lovely fire.*'

\*

I try to remember, there's so much to remember. My new friends scribble things out for me so I'll know next time, and can tell the right people about it, and I smile and pocket their important note. This note will be confiscated at the door of the Belly of Lead, where they take all papers of any kind away, but I don't remember that, as it hasn't happened yet.

The night was warm, cloudy, the air dark orange, we made our way towards the rainbow lanterns of the Belly of Lead. Martin and Ross were excited to dance, but Mair, Hall and Davies wanted to sightsee more, and Saiyid suddenly wanted nothing but to swim in the glistening bay:

'When I was last in France, I swam each evening in the lake...'

Everyone got what they wanted. Mair and Hall, plus the mildly quarrelsome avatars of their partners, went back to *You Only Have To Ask* to ask and be granted a table for four, while Ross and Martin disappeared into the Belly and soon were dancing silhouettes. Saiyid had already waded out into the dark water, warned by some bystanders to avoid the water-hole. Soon she was swimming serenely to and fro across the bay. The night-swimmers would join her later. The rogues and thieves here call them the *Legless*, but you probably know them by another name.

And Davies got talking to a couple who strolled by carrying easels and palettes. The fellow nodded, and we heard him tell Davies ‘Oh you mean Jones the *Painter*? We’re on our way there now...’

Where they mean is where an old man sits at the north edge of the market, sheltered under an awning, painting the scene, a semi-circle of admirers crowding into the shelter to do the same. I hear his low voice rising as I walk by:

‘When people say they paint for pleasure I am dumbfounded! It’s always a vast struggle for me. Perhaps I’m awfully bad at it really – but there’s nothing else I can do at all, nothing...’

And all his admirers, Davies among them, are smiling as they paint.

\*

They had a lovely fire. I was walking back to the shore, I had remembered McCloud and was wondering what had happened. Why hadn’t she brought the shipment to the Dockhouse for me like I asked her to? It had been quietly bothering me for hours. Droplets came, the thick low clouds began to yield up their warm weight, and soon the rain was falling in Dark Canadee.

I’d never known which of the softly bobbing boats along the shoreline was the one she slept in, but now I found it, because it looked different from the others. How. Why. Because its windows had all been stoved in, white paint hurled across whatever its name had been, and both its sides were splintered –

‘*Are splintered, Max, are splintered. This is happening right now.*’

She squats in the stern of this ruined little slowly foundering craft of hers, plastered by the rain, bedraggled with her hood down, what’s the point, and beside her is the precious oaken box with the lid torn off and hanging.

‘They took it all,’ she says. ‘I was shrimping on the inlet and I don’t know who they were.’

‘I think I do,’ I say, and as her sad eyes meet mine I say, ‘it’s okay, don’t cry McCloud – ’

‘*Cry? I never cry. I rain.*’

\* \* \*