

Dark Canadee

The Third Voyage

Previously on DARK CANADEE.

'It's from my mother, it's our paper shipment...' 'writhing of its own accord, fire at its edges, so bright I look away - what am I looking at?' 'You of all people? She's sent us the White Space...' 'I had a message for Max...' 'Three women!... some kind of cart, or wagon... I remember the colour blue...' 'The lovely snow falls all around them...' 'This is suspicious to the Land boys...' 'RAID!!! Got any White Stuff, ladies?' 'There are two wide eyes at the little window...' 'Can we help you?' 'I think she wanted to come in...' 'the old abandoned library looms aslant in the darkness...' 'who are they?' 'well one of them's Romanian... au un foc minumat... it means they have a lovely fire...' 'McCloud's boat, the sides stoved in, the precious box with the lid torn off and hanging...' 'They took it all, I don't know who they were...'

Upon the Thirtieth Day of March...

They call it Dark Canadee. Not because it's dark, it isn't, the famous port is a great red blaze upon the night, its colours ripple and play in the black water and you can see the glow of the marketplace from miles out to sea, you can imagine anything happening there.

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*, *PTs*, or the derogatory *Peets* 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. Their blood gets tested on the crossing, like everything gets tested. When they reach their place of refuge they must pretend to be gamblers, or vagabonds, or hopeless, or no one will understand.

They call it Dark Canadee.

I do not know who *They* are.

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Because sometimes I wonder who will help us here. Beyond my friends in the Dockhouse, who have to hide their real purpose, all the figures of authority in Canadee seem hostile or capricious or a mystery to me. There are the boys of English Land, formerly British Land. 'We bigged it up!' they say and by the time I find a map so I can ask them what exactly has been bigged here, these young red-coated men are off. They patrol the place in various stages of dishevelment, with grins and flagons and a vaguely menacing air.

I see fashionable idle figures through the gates of the walled garden, but before you can ask them anything they retire with a bow or a flourish and you see nothing but sentries.

Out beyond the market are the peculiar Deal Porters who inhabit a low building by the shell of the great dark Library. They come out in small groups and stare at the passers-by. They count us we pass them, they note down their findings on clipboards and go in again.

Who will help us? Who will help me? Well there's my young friend McCloud who works the shoreline and I know from somewhere else, but I can't remember where and I don't know where she is tonight. It seems to have been

raining hard. About forty yards into the water there is what folks call the *sharkwater*, a tumultuous churning spout that's been going at it for hours.

And I know, because I've been standing here for hours, under the lamppost looking out across the bay for the benighted boat of the Plague-Timers that's been voyaging so long. The clouds are lighted shreds sailing through a crescent moon.

Ali, the dark vagabond, is propped against the harbour wall with his back to the ocean, he's talking through his aged hands. Two redcoats came by earlier, Private Field and Private Ward, lifted his pale friend Ossi away as they love to do, joshing with him as he turned and complained but he has to stay with Ali, they'll be getting Ossi drunk at the English Water (Only) Café then they'll set him loose again to find his way back. No one stops them doing that. Without his only friend, olive-skinned Ali just mutters to himself in his language and I can't make out a word that makes sense. I've been standing here so long by my lamppost I've heard the same strange words loop around once more, they can't help themselves: 'No mess, so don't come in, they must repeat her...'

'What you got there Ali.'

'*Me retro viper and a selfish guru...*'

'I know man they're the worst.'

'*Glad to read, I feel that here's my Rita...*'

Before long the silly meanings fall away and it's just a stream of sound to me: '*Nel mess, zo dulka meen day nustraviter, mi retro vaiper ana selvis kura, galad dirita viras marita...*'

And so we pass the time. I feel I may as well be a statue of me, and when the boat of the Plague-Timers comes tilting and spilling and plunging into view, and they know me at last, the white doubtful haggard faces, I will be unable to move. Where's Max, they will wonder? He wrote that he would meet us under the lamppost on the wharf, right beside that statue. What statue, that statue, the statue of Max. Behind me I hear someone's winding down the awning at the Belly of Lead, and lighting one by one the string of rainbow lanterns, but I won't turn round because I'm made of stone. Though it be the loveliest sight I know.

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I found myself one autumn 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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Six crumpled sketches on a piece of cardboard. Why. These are the Plague-Timers, why on cardboard. Why on cardboard? because we've got no paper. And... McCloud ordered some from her mother who makes the most extraordinary paper there is, and... something went wrong and McCloud has gone away. A lanky boy is down there on the shoreline in hip waders, he's doing her job tonight, he calls up to the statue that he can see the boat now, then I can see it too.

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East, Galton, Morris, Simon, Tench, Vishvantara... These ones seem to be carrying more than we get with the usual boatload. Simon has a holdall, it seems heavy, she looks white as paper, she says she always lived as far from the sea as possible, she didn't mean to, she just did and now she knows why. She disembarks with her friend East, who has a dog called Ziggy, which bounds up on to the wharf before any of the human folks have even started on the steps. Morris too has familiars, a swarm of flies that follow her everywhere but they also go where she tells them and she sends them ahead in their cloud to sightsee. She says they all have names too but she gets them mixed up. Vishvantara has a small instrument case of some kind, perhaps a toy ukulele, but that's not what it is because Tench, the only man in the group, who is assisting the lady off the lurching boat, just guessed 'Ukulele?' and she's shaking her head. Galton follows them off the boat, the boy helps her and she leaves him holding an empty bottle.

'Akvavit,' she winks as she climbs the steps, 'what *would* we a-done without it?'

'I'm the statue of Max,' I say, 'I've been here thirty years,' but their seasick faces look so puzzled by that I drop it and just join the throng.

There are some new stalls in the market, but as I lead them towards the lanterns and braziers on the square, I see not everything is open tonight. Back on the quay the Belly of Lead doesn't even *know* how to close, but **The Fish and Chop Ship** is dark and untended, the barbecue cold and rusted. **Fig-Roll Fantazia** is shut, **Sneau de Cologne** is boarded up and there's nothing doing at **I'm In The Snood For Love**. A sign says there's White Death at Ridgeport and it's badly affected the snood supply-chain.

But all they want is to eat, their voyage was long and rough and they want to put it behind them.

At this point Simon heaves her great holdall on to one of the deserted tables, unzips it and as it falls out it's clear that as a group they're good for olives, gummy bears and packets of venison, at least for the carnivores. I ask her:

‘Why didn’t you eat that on the boat if you were hungry?’ and they look at me like I’m quite insane. Simon, still white-faced and a little unsteady, gets help from them all unloading the jars and bags and packets and they find crates and boxes and crumbling walls to sit on for this feast.

‘I rustled this all up in the Plague-Time,’ Simon tells us, ‘it’s been a heyday for smugglers.’

And it’s good that she did, for when they’re all done we wander the market, there’s really no one about, and it’s true, all the food stalls are shut down, including the old olive emporium **Oliventure**, the garish new child-friendly **Build-a-Gummy-Bear-Workshop**, even the usually reliable butcher **Alfred Lord Venison** is blue and unlit. I see Morris’s swarm of flies hovering nearby in their disappointment and she sends them away to scout things out on the far side of the market. East’s dog Ziggy goes off in the same direction, taking the earthbound course, and the humans go on feasting.

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But something is wrong here and I don’t know what.

‘Maybe the rains made everyone sad,’ I said but it solved nothing and did me no good.

‘Look,’ says Tench, and something in his voice makes us all turn in that direction. He’s pointing up at a high window in the dark abandoned Library which seems to stoop down over the square like it’s trying to find one person. There’s a light burning up high and silhouetting someone.

As we narrow our eyes to focus on the window we see it’s a young woman with long dark hair, she wears a robe of cloth, she’s just staring out, not at us, beyond us, over everything.

‘That’s her,’ says Tench with a long sigh.

‘That’s who?’ someone asks.

‘Can’t tell you.’

She reminds me of something too, and I say softly:

‘*They have a fire...*’ but when Vishvantara asks me what I mean I honestly don’t know.

‘She has a wild side,’ says Tench, turning away as the little light goes out. ‘Or she does if it’s her.’

‘You don’t *know* if it is?’ Galton’s frowning and caring, bringing out more akvavit. Tench nods: ‘She reminds me of her, same difference.’

He sighs to end that thought. Vishvantara sympathizes: ‘I’ve been writing for decades to someone I hardly ever met. They’re probably in there too, somewhere.’

Tench notices Vishvantara's instrument-case looks different, larger somehow.

'Lute?' he muses, 'mandolin?'

'Keep trying,' Vishvantara beams back, 'you'll get there.'

'When will you play it?' Tench wonders.

'When you guess it,' she says and a few of the others say it with her, all these groups have always bonded on the high seas by the time I meet them. Life was like that at nursery school. Life was like that thereafter.

*

Something is wrong here and I don't know what.

The Deal Porters in their cloaks are standing up ahead in a tight group beside the puddled path. They always wait for me when I bring the PTs, though they never do much more than whisper about us or count how many strangers I've brought.

'You're strangers too,' I always say before I'm near them.

This time they are pointing down at something close by, something on the ground, and as the lamplight of the market dims and our eyes accustom to the gloom of the muddy track that winds towards the Dockhouse, we see what they're seeing.

There are dozens and dozens of bright sheets of white paper strewn along the path, some dirty, some pristine, the Porters don't know what to do. The warm bothersome wind takes a couple of sheets, scoops them up in the air, flaps them over, lets them go, gets them muddy, lets them be, doesn't know what to do either. It occurs to me I've never seen any paper here outside of the Dockhouse, and I wonder if perhaps it's this new phenomenon that has closed down the market.

I lead the group forward: 'Don't worry about the dudes in cloaks, they just come out to look. But don't touch the paper either.'

'Why not?' the PTs variously ask me.

I try to remember by saying. I only know by writing, so I suppose the principle is similar.

'Why not,' I begin, 'why not... because I was expecting paper, but it's a certain kind of paper, of a singular kind, from the mother, whose mother, her mother... the mother of McCloud who's missing, who *I'm* missing, the stuff is dangerous in the wrong hands. I think the wrong hands got hold of it, and here's where we are.'

The sheets shine very bright on the earth as we go by, they seem to gleam and shimmer at us as they flutter and subside, so no one pays attention to the murmuring of the Porters in our wake.

‘We will have to watch ourselves tonight,’ I say softly, my warning punctuated by the green lantern clanking itself on in the Dockhouse tower, ‘but our friends are home, there’s that.’

*

Sal Bonny and the Dockhouse folks fill me in on what’s been happening. There were suddenly sheets of this strange white paper strewn everywhere. The boys of English Land shut down the market to deal with it, but they left the sheets where they were on the path to the Dockhouse.

‘They probably think we’ll do it,’ says Sal.

‘Which we probably ought to,’ says Sharp Practice, who’s just in from St Petersburg and needs to be in Lisbon later.

‘Yes we ought to,’ she agrees, ‘but not when they’re looking.’

I’ve a question: ‘How can Sharp be in Petersburg today and Lisbon later?’

‘He’s got a proper job, I don’t know.’

‘Forms,’ says Sharp Practice.

Sal says, ‘This is his new theory about the Deal Porters...’

‘Forms,’ says Sharp again, ‘if there are forms filled in they’re happy.’

Everything else seems to upset them. We just need to make up some forms and then pretend they explain the Plague-Timers, then the Porters will leave us alone, I’m sure of it. They used to lug heavy wood around in the old days and everything since then has been confusing, they don’t know what to do with their hands. I’ve got to go, I have a flight.’

‘Where’s there a flight?’ I say, suddenly homesick for flight, but Sal’s waved him off already, ‘Max is the weird bright paper something to do with you?’

‘I think. I think old Mrs McCloud sent it, I’m remembering now, McCloud stored it in her boat and someone smashed the box and her boat and took it all and it started pissing down. I haven’t seen her since.’

‘You haven’t been here since,’ Sal Bonny points out, sitting down at her desk by the door and resuming her novel.

‘Yes that’s probably why. Is Kemp the Temp here?’

‘*J’espère que non, c’est un connard.*’

‘Oui. Do the PTs need to learn the Playtime Drill?’

She says nothing, she’s at work and no, the PTs don’t need to learn the Drill. Because when I join them down in the candlelit basement they are already in their seats around the table learning Cheat and Racing Demons from Morris, who’s played these games for years at a high level. Her retinue of flies make dark dead constellations on the furthest corner of the ceiling, Ziggy the dog is asleep by the fire, Vishvantara’s case now looks like it might hold a full-sized guitar, though

she shakes her head when Tench makes that guess, and now Galton's broken out the pickled herrings: 'What would we do without them? Viking blood, you see.'

The cards are cut for order: *Tench, Galton, Morris, East, Vishvantara, Simon.*

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.

*

Lost in France

Barry Tench

and in the evening. the waiters come and go
talking of Ronaldinho

O a bat! I want to smack it from the sky, a pipistrelle
and you pronounce religiously and I am lost in the significance
of names, waving my arms, trying to save you from that tiny bald mouse

then barking like the village mutt disturbed from its ball licking
I make an impression, but not the one I want to, so I slip away spluttering *voulez vous couches avec moi?* to no-one in particular

port, whisky, Ricard, Pastis, sauvignon-blanc, a forgotten rosé
various reds in increasing degrees of anonymity
a desert white, gold in the restaurant light, brandy

you'd think by this point that the bat would be the least of my concerns
but I'm certain it sensed my pain and flew directly at me
like a boyhood Stuka or some midnight demon hornet

and in the evening the waiters come and go
talking of Ronaldinho

so I drain the blood from my hosts, the brainless, the spineless
the almost dead and suggest that sexuality is a continuum
I'd have thrown in anything struggling as I was to keep my head

I shout obscenities in English and French, fall into a ditch
and lie there laughing; sunflowers in the dark resemble the devil

Jean-Christophe the waiter who thought Ronaldinho
should be signed at all costs, found me next morning grinning like a loon a broken sunflower stem in
my hand, petals scattered on the battlefield and the bat? Hanging in an empty barn somewhere I
presume

and in the evening the waiters come and go
 talking of Ronaldinho.

*

‘I knew we should have used the dice. I guess they hid it away with all the
rest of the paper in the late panic. The discreet dice would have put Tench near
the end. But the capricious cards have given us this wonderful boozy rant while
the night is still young! They must have something in mind, they must know
about you people. How instantly good to see how the spirit in this poem, by
which I mean the alcohol, charges the content, giving it two of alcohol’s strong
features: raving recklessness (*I am spluttering away*) and weird temporary focus (*gold
in the restaurant light*) but also leaks into and messes with the form, giving us
repetitions, non-sequiturs, lines that don’t know when to stop, or even *know that
they’re lines at all...*

‘This is a splendid drunken poem, but I’m going to set aside the *Ronaldinho
Refrain* for a moment, and consider the main body of it. The fact that this is easy
to do tells us something. Spoiler alert: Ronaldinho isn’t yet blending into this
team. Then again, he often didn’t. The true opening is terrific, the sudden
beholding, *O a bat!* – how the vowel, and the sky, and the names of the bat –
pipistrelle fountaining spit into the air – so abruptly grip the speaker, and all else
being discussed is discarded. That *pronounce religiously* is also full of spit, sardonic
spit about the *you* the speaker is, or was, talking to, and now is a by-stander, a
sideshow Bardolph to the speaker’s Falstaff, as our hero gets *lost in the significance
of names...*

‘Then the sudden focus on the *mouse*, which gives us homespun rustic
shabbiness, and *mouse* dangles beautifully at the end of the stanza as the speaker
gazes at it openly, his giddy perspective swallowed whole again. This self-abasing
description has all the colours of Far Gone – *the village mutt disturbed from its ball
licking* – he’s making a terrible impression! and then this lovely sad annotation –
not the one I want to, I sense the ghost of Andrew Aguecheek’s poor ignored aside
I was adored once... and, even better, the drunkenness *itself* forgets about line-

break, forgets it's in a poem while *being a line in a poem*, can't hear the white space that thinks he's had-enough-mate-let's-get-you-home, or like the drunk forgets to do his zip up, so that endless intemperate line ranges embarrassingly on towards the far wall of the bar/the page, *I slip away spluttering voulez vous* etc etc, beginning on the worst Frenglish pick-up cliché in the world, and finally breaking at the most forlorn point possible: *avec...* and it takes ages to stagger back from that far wall/far side of the page, by which time all the women have shifted away... *moi?*

'*To no one in particular...* The next stanza is just listing booze (*listing* also in the maritime sense, so sorry to all you seasick vessels) but then finding the private light and delight in it, the mind then ranging back to the bat, what was that about? And a sad soft glimpse of far-faraway childhood, *flew directly at me/like a boyhood Stuka...*

'We then get half-time, the refrain again, and in its favour it really does feel like a line delivered *horizontally*, but more on Ronaldinho later. The hits keep coming, I mean the creaturely precision of the poet bodying forth the drunkard. There's the flagellating self-awareness of *I drain the blood from my hosts*, the unwelcome dogged lurch of topic as he *suggest[s] that sexuality is a continuum*, and then the irredeemable long and short of it, *I shout obscenities* (check), *fall into a ditch* (check) *and lie there laughing* (check). There's even time for this still, again *horizontally* delivered, lonely revelation with its regional ghost of desperate Vincent: *sunflowers in the dark resemble the devil...* Like all drunken perceptions, it can be *imagined being imagined*, and that's enough.

'But it's not just a drunken poem, it's a hungover poem, when a hangover is nothing but drunkenness-by-daylight. That penultimate *Jean-Christophe* stanza has forgotten there were ever lines and breaks at all in this discourse, as the breaks are all wrong and by now it doesn't matter, the pieces have all fallen to their final resting places, *my hand, the battlefield, an empty barn somewhere*, each one its own special kind of resting-place...

'Poems have postures, they ought to be *felt*, radiated outward from the blisses and ordeals of creatures and the words used should accord with the postures struck, whether it's standing, sitting, walking – or in this case, lounging, lunging, lying down and giving up – and this is full of good examples. The dishevelled body of the poem could *do* with a refrain, a chorus (even if it's only *refrain from doing this if you want to be served in here again*) but no a pause, a serenity, a calm between storms, where time idles and the felled drunkard is gazing at the ceiling, sky, or starry heavens, the instinct for a refrain is right, I'm just not quite sure it's *this* refrain...

‘Why? This Prufrock refrain has been commandeered for the *weird temporary focus* part of the work, and that old rhythm works fine, but it’s *such* an old rhythm, so embedded in poetic recall, that it might yield up too soon its reason for being there. Okay, so you brought Ronaldinho off the bench to replace Michelangelo but once the joke is made it’s made. It is a good choice of interloper – Ronaldinho was a singular player, a *poet’s* player, no? a wayward buck-toothed Brazilian genius, no work ethic but galactic skill. Waiters *would* come and go and talk about him, he’s one of the rare players who defines character itself, between the kind of waiter who thinks he’s an unaffordable luxury and the one, like Jean-Christophe, who thinks he *should be signed at all costs!* The latter kind, I feel and so does the poem, are kinder to drunks.

‘There’s a right old dignity to this poem, Tench, and the pathos (and the bathos) come from its shoot-for-the-moon heroics, its cheerful ruinous candour. Somehow the modulation into parodic Eliot in that refrain feels a little easy in comparison, a default, a disowning or repudiation of that pathos. It doesn’t *quite* feel like the same soul at work. And this vivid piece, as it throws its wild arm around our shoulders, also reminds us that to witness a drunk lose his shit in a bar is very much to be witnessing a soul at work.’

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The short break writes itself after such a rousing piece. Galton, who is next, lifts into view her ever-giving bottle of akvavit and brims a crowd of shot glasses. They spill trails in all directions, for those who want to drink and those who don’t – not yet thank you – the ritual’s the thing.

*

Foxoid

Sandra Galton

She searches for the best way back.
A fox sprints out from a thicket, assuming authority
on the path up ahead.
Follow your truth the boy had said,
but when your truth criss-crosses with others’
how do you tell which is yours?
If she had been raised by foxes, she might have been,
well, foxy –
there again, perhaps not,

perhaps she would have loathed those vulpine smiles,
those rasping calls.
She might have been born half-fox, some aberrant throwback
never awarded full membership to Foxdom.
No doubt she would have queried their habits, indeed
she might have driven them mad
with her endless questioning, only to be outfoxed by
their ripostes, their slyness.
She would have struggled to mimic their tricks –
any mastered she may well have spurned
only to return for more. She would,
however, have had little quibble with their omnivorous diet
and in due course she might have learnt to love
their strangled screams at night
but still,
how torn she might have been, both fox and unfox.
Even if she learnt to walk on her toes,
she feared she would be unable to trot thus,
always a foot and a half behind –
though how she might long to reach a point where she could
wholly grasp foxity, become integrated
into their troop, greeted without suspicion as *Fox fox*,
for where else could she go?

*

‘Foxes, eh. Loners, predators, they come with all their medals from old fables and sharp poems. For urban fools like me it also feels like they *changed* in my lifetime, got confident, got careless, and what animals change that fast? We don’t. Unafraid now, at home where humans are, in and out of their minds at times of night that are all their own, there’s no such thing as *foxes*. As Bowie nearly sang, there’s only room for one and here it comes here it comes...

‘What Galton does so well at the outset is *make it dark*. You can make it dark in a poem by suppressing nouns and names. Look at this – *She searches for the best way back*. See how there’s nothing to see? Thus the lights are dimmed. I’m reminded in passing of the writer who said (though I forget the writer) that there is only one story and it’s Little Red Riding Hood. (True that’s a wolf not a fox but *Lupus* and *Vulpes* always meet at fairy-tale auditions.) Anyway here comes Little Red again, losing concentration, *but when your truth criss-crosses with others’/how do you tell which is yours?*

‘Out comes the fox, and what happens here so well is to do with pace. Witness how the fox makes its entrance, all Anglo-Saxon words, timeless, over quickly – *the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog* has all the letters you will ever need in the forest, Little Red – but then see how the Latinate diction *assuming authority* slows everything down, turns the light grey, as the fox begins its confident walk... And the breaks here –

*A fox sprints out from a thicket, assuming authority
on the path up ahead.
Follow your truth, the boy had said*

‘– suggest the fox is in charge of line-break. Which means he’s in charge of white space too. After the end-stopped *ahead* the space is all him. She is wordless at the sight. *The page is printed* indeed, Mr Hughes.

‘Again, not much of a clue about the situation *she* is coming from. We suppose in the dark as we follow the leader, she’s trying to get home, she’s not sure how, something is awry, what *the boy said* is important... All eyes are on the fox. And because the consideration of what the boy said is muffled in a past tense, and *criss-crosses* muffles itself in contrast to the straight line the fox is keeping, what comes naturally are questions, unanswerable questions like *how do you tell which is yours? where else could she go?* Foxes don’t ask these questions. The fox knows there’s a path up ahead.

‘The strength of this plain and skilful opening, giving us a through-line of the fox ahead on the path of life, figuring out and knowing more, means the poem *must* follow in some way, and I think in this case it means I *miss* the fox as the poem develops. It doesn’t need much to put this right. What we have is the psychologically acute, persuasive, tragi-comic inner monologue of *She*, and though of course the fox may be metaphor, on some level that doesn’t matter. Someone of a Platonic disposition might point out that the fox and the metaphor have equal standing in the language. In other words neither one is there at all.

‘We don’t really see the fox again, except as the word *fox* is tumbled through the spin-cycle of her linguistic games, *foxy, Foxdom, outfoxed, unfox, foxity*, maybe this joke gets too chilled for the context? – until near the end we’re reminded she’s *always a foot and a half behind*. But by this time the metaphorical is very much in force. I’m not saying the poem has to be a physical description of following a fox, it’s not about that, it’s about her anxieties and misgivings – it’s just that *it does start like that*, very strongly, and visually.

‘In the absence of this *outdoor* sense of fox – what we have is an indoor poem riding an outdoor metaphor – the left margin does its work, because the fragile, hesitant, demurring and deferring monologue, with its lines of undecided length, its peppering of *perhaps, might have been, no doubt, may well have* – keeps slamming back against that hard line, as straight as the fox’s path. Tip the poem by 90° to make the left margin the x-axis of a graph, and what you see is a print-out of the speaker’s heart-rate, mood-swings, good days and bad days...

‘The monologue is very good, an actor would devour it like a fox – especially now in the Plague-Times – as in Tench’s drunkard, there is *posture* at work. How do I know? Watch how it’s cinematic:

She walks, head down, towards us.

SHE (*voice-over*)

If she had been raised by foxes, she might have been

She stops dead on the path, looks up with a kind of smile.

SHE (*voice-over*)

well, foxy –

She bows her head again and goes on walking.

SHE (*voice-over*)

there again, perhaps not

‘Other screenplays are available. It’s just that these things go hand in hand, writing with postural awareness and writing cinematically. They’re just two ways of expressing the motion of human form, or how human thought expresses itself physiologically through language.

‘So, while applauding the many successes of this kind in the poem, in a way the successes make me more aware how I *want* the dark night, the trying to find the way home, the whole Red Riding Hoodness of it. I want the sense of fox up ahead. Here’s another good example: *she might have driven them mad/with her endless questioning, only to be outfoxed by/their ripostes, their slyness./She would have struggled to mimic their tricks* – Again, she’s lost in thought, and that short line, *their ripostes, their slyness* full-stop, brings her up short. That’s where I miss the fox.

‘Because getting lost in thought is a bad idea at night. The adolescent John Clare became a poet by making up rhymes as he walked home in pitch dark, he told me in the snug, he did it to ward off the spookiness of all the local ghost legends... Well I’m surprised he ever made it home, or you might say he didn’t. I just want a little of the *price* of her getting lost in thought. Her restless mind-set is superbly drawn, the poet in me is happy. It’s just the playwright in me with his hand up, saying: *but it’s still night and she hasn’t made it home yet...*’

*

This reminded me McCloud was missing, so I went upstairs in the break to see if there was any news, while the Poets finished off their feast of venison and olives. The gummy bears were long gone.

‘News? not as such,’ says Kemp the Temp, who is back, and sitting at the first candlelit desk you come to, it’s there where he organises the filing systems for the Dockhouse, he was doing that when they first arrived. In fact the answer to Sal Bonny’s constant question *why can’t we get rid of him* is that he understands the systems.

‘He can operate Yohoho,’ say someone from the corner, ‘and he’s figured out Plankwalk.’

‘Bet he can’t do Saarsgaard,’ says another, but of course he can and soon he’s teaching them Saarsgaard. I ask him again if he’s seen McCloud *anywhere* in Canadee.

‘No, no sign of that one,’ he finishes up, ‘I reckon she’s in a right sulk.’

‘Somebody stole her paper and trashed her boat, why shouldn’t she be,’ I counter, making a dark’n’s stormy by the sink.

‘They did, they took the lid right off,’ Kemp says enthralled, ‘and then they threw white paint around!’

‘You went and had a look, did you.’

‘Common knowledge, mate.’

‘Right. Is anyone actually investigating it?’

‘Nah, not as such,’ he grins.

‘Yeah, why would they.’ *Because sometimes I wonder who will help us here.*

‘No one’s on the case, Max, but if they were, I’d say they’re missing a trick.’

‘Would you Kemp.’

‘Whoever did it, he didn’t care about the paper, or he’d of took it off and deep-sealed it somewhere. Stead he’s just chucked it all round town. Nah, whoever done this, it’s about the girl. It’s gotta be something like he *likes* her, I mean liked her at the time, or still does even, after the crime, he *spotted* her, I’m saying, nothing wrong with that, walking along, it’s the natural way, so he goes to her place, you know, when she’s out, and it’s unlocked cos she’s like that, y’know,

trustful and all, and he goes in and sees, whoever he is, who knows? I don't, he sees this amazing box that looks all sealed but it ain't all sealed cos she's taken a peek, naughty, but she ain't *there*, you with me? she's out on some shoreline errand.'

Everyone's listening. Sal Bonny sighs, closes her novel, blows out her candle: 'You seem to know a lot about it.'

'Yeah, I know, I do,' Kemp agrees, 'daresay I would be helping the police with their enquiries but, you know...'

'There are no police,' says everyone.

'So no enquiries! So I'm at a loose end!' he beams to the company, 'sue me for trying to solve the puzzle! And it was a sweet little boat she had! And I'm sad it's got all splashed and that, you're gonna need some turpentine I *like* McCloud! I do! Cross my heart and all but I will leave it right there.'

*

Beginnings

Erica Jane Morris

The mourner asked, *Where do poems
come from?* She smelt flint, rain, earth.

The earwig said, *They begin in mulch,
a curve of bark, mesh of leaf.*

No, the mayfly called, *They arise
from swirls in the stream.* The whirligig

knew they came from dipping, spinning,
looking down and up at the clouds.

Winter gnats were dancing above
the trough, *They are made from marks*

in mud, fodder and flame. The cattle swished
their tails, and the horn fly cried -

They are from the dark, drying blood.
The gall wasp was waiting on the oak,

No, no, *they grow from others' sap,
cast with light.* The wood ants began to chant,

*They are found with the frost, amongst
Bog Moss, stone, must be measured to last.*

*In the ditch, the snipe-fly hung: They are born
in the rhythm of ridges, rid and rot.*

*And the deathwatch beetle called out,
Grub and dust, a grinding inside.*

*But the lacewing was still –
They are woven out of wind.*

*

‘The beginnings of English poetry are in firelit songs, histories and riddles, but there’s another beginning of English poetry only *you* know about – which is where English poetry began for *you*, or *in you*. What stuck, what seeded, what started to grow. In me it was probably *Who Killed Cock-Robin?* which first appears mid-18th century, so compared to *Beowulf* is pretty contemporary.

‘*Who killed Cock-Robin?* Instant grip of our attention, dramatic material, not much of a whodunit, as the confession comes in the next line (spoiler alert – it was *passer domesticus* who killed Cock-Robin and our friends on the ceiling, *musca domestica*, saw it all go down) – but then comes a parade of interested parties summoned into action by rhyme, and a uniting refrain about the birds of the air that we folks of the earth can all join in on with our sighing and a-sobbing, and have done ever since...

‘I say this not to get Morris’s insect-friends up there excited, though it’s evident they’re listening, but to draw attention to how beautifully the opening of *Beginnings* echoes the old nursery-rhyme:

The mourner asked *Where do poems
come from?*

‘*Mourner* is a really valuable pun, both bird and lamenting human, so a lamenting bird like all of us, and of course Cock-Robin is pulled in in its wake, but, along with the force of meaning in *mourn*, its dark long vowel also throws a pall over the question, making it pulse with deep-lying heart-sobs like *where do I come from?* or *why do we have to die?* The line-break helps too, making a younger

voice, because the beat of thought contained in the break can only come up with the vague wonder of *come from?* It is indeed both a very old question and a very young one. It's always just been asked.

'Morris's chorus of insects is no more a chorus than the Dockhouse folks upstairs: they don't agree on anything but their disagreements form a genial buzz that might sound like a consensus. Even the strongest discords among them – the mayfly and the gall wasp going as far as to say *No* – seem respectful and muted, so what you have is the joyful phenomenon of contrary opinions in essential agreement. Which is poets, of course, all singing different things while facing the same way. The various versions of the answer make a multi-faceted crystal where no one's truth obscures or excludes or diminishes anyone else's. They build sweetly outwards, made of themselves, like a hive. One of about a trillion things insects have tried to tell us.

'But these are Morris's insects, like the little gang up there. Real insects aren't thinking of us lot at all. As Auden has it somewhere: *they are not with us*. Anyway the metaphor works, and we'll fly with it, pun not intended, but noticed instantly, then let go, then mentioned, so intended now. Once the insects are speaking lyrical English, politely in turns (like poems take on our pages) we are in a realm of faerie, but those realms come alive if you light them well, and that's what happens here...

'Before the manifold chorus begins, there is another sharp move, a very concise and subtle stage-direction: *she smelt flint, rain, earth*, whereby the stage is set by an unexpected sense, the olfactory, which is not a human strongpoint. Actually none of the senses is a human strongpoint... Talking isn't a sense. Anyway, we rapidly have the realms of earth and air for the voices to inhabit, and what else is fine about that little *setting* is it gives time for another sense, the auditory, to kick in, so the mourner starts to hear the voices. As we, in a place like that, need only listen for a second to hear *everything*...

'*Mulch*, says the earwig, *swirls*, says the mayfly and, in turn, every insect of the air does what Hopkins says it does, speaks as it is, sings as it must, *Selves – goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,/Crying What I dó is me: for that I came*...

'What the mourner has asked of the air and the earth can only be answered by song, such is the depth of the question. The answer can only be memorable, and therefore cadence has to play a role. Morris's choices of answer are excellent, sharp attention paid to consonant and vowel, the medieval chords

of alliteration, but the metre needs a little attention. There's a jaunty tetrameter tending to hold sway – let it! Once it sounds, it shouldn't be unsounded. Look:

Winter gnàts were dàncing abòve (4 stresses)
the tròugh, *They are màde from màrks* (3 stresses)

in mùd, fòdder and flàme. The càttle swished... (kind of 5, sounds too long,
so do it as below)

Winter gnats were dancing above
the trough. *They are made from marks in mud,*

fodder and flame. The cattle swished...

'Then the dance is danced. A perfect one is the third-to-last, which has one of the longest lines in the poem followed by one of the shortest, but metrically they're tetrameters, so they dance the dance like a happy couple who are tall and short, they're melodic, and the mourner will learn and will remember:

In the ditch, the snipe-fly hùng, *They are bòrn*
in the rhythm of rìdges, rìd and ròt.

'The snipe-fly's *r*-alliterative suggestion, four nouns out of four, feels as organic to it as the bands on its body or the whorls on its wings. But I think this tetrameter should keep its shape to the end. I do see an argument for shortening to a three-beat in the last couplet, *But the lace-wing was still – /They are woven out of wind...* - Morris is after all switching from element of earth into element of air – but I wonder if it's too much of a repudiation of the poem's delicate physics, and that what the lace-wing is saying is in itself revolutionary enough to achieve the effect. What is the effect? To silence the chorus, implicitly to provide the answer that makes thought (the white space) stronger than voice (the ink). I end here undecided on that point. Morris has a very sharp ear to the creatures, and there she'll find the answer. Rhythmic tweaks are all you need here, you need *ant*-work, and I believe you, Morris, can summon all the labourers you need.'

*

The flies lift off and depart. They had waited to hear the song of Morris, who now waves them away to explore, through a gap in the tiny window. The group watch them go. East keeps watching the window longer than the others. I hear a bell ringing at the Junction, the first? the second?

‘There’s a woman standing there,’ says East.

There doesn’t appear to be. East is nodding slowly, ‘there was, by the window, and I still see her. There’s an imprint. She wished she was inside.’

There’s no one, but they breathe a general sigh, they’re glad someone sees things that way. Then East adds, softly, ‘I come from Cornwall,’ and at once we take another look at the window. When we turn, she begins.

*

Talking to my lover in the rose garden in San Francisco

Anne East

Words tumble onto the table between us
slide off the edge
spill from the bench
roll around our feet
we are ankle-deep in words.

Some lie quiet in the dust
homely and unpolished.
Others, sharp-faceted
scratch and make us bleed.

Some, like butterflies, escape too soon
before we have a chance
to appreciate their beauty.

I want to call them back
feel the weight of them
turn them over and say
“How so?” and “What was that?”

I sweep them up
fill all my pockets
so in the silent days to come
I can take out a handful
and hear your voice.

*

‘Mist your eyes again, see shapes instead of English words, see clouds, bushes, city-blocks, see smoke, what do these drifting stanzas tell us? Instability, tenuosness, that they are spoken into a breeze, can stay but not stay long. The stanza-breaks feel necessary, otherwise the lines may drift off the page entirely. That’s why it’s no surprise that the stanzas all end-stop, there’s deep breath taken in the breaks, which already gives us context for the scene...

‘The physics of a poem is established in its opening. The first line, by being too long, shows what will *happen to lines that get too long*. Because obviously it’s enacting what it’s saying, talking of words tumbling, then making them tumble. And there’s a spatial accuracy to it – all accuracy in poetry, all exactness, is in the service of the *light*. The downward motion of the *slide* line and *the spill* line bring us to the horizontal of the *roll* line, then builds up from the ground to the present situation: *we are ankle-deep in words*.

‘Two lovers at a table always makes me think of Louis MacNeice’s *Meeting Point – Time was away and somewhere else* – where the first and last lines of all the 5-line stanzas are identical, giving us the circularity of love at its blind blissful height, where time simply steps away. Here’s something else in action – words *talking about words*, which has all sorts of implications for the nature of the bond: it could be that they are so in love they can bear silence. Lovers, monks and lighthouse-keepers, who can bear silence? But it doesn’t come across like that wordless ideal because the speaker’s eyes soon go downwards to the dust. Also mentioning the dust, as there isn’t dust in the worlds of lovers. So it’s equally likely that their words are in some way played out. Whatever the truth of it, and we don’t necessarily need to know yet – it’s after all private – this foreshadows the downward progress of the poem.

‘Now we have the sad detailing of the various species of fallen words, the *homely and unpolished*, the ones that *make us bleed*, and the break right after that plays a long, longing minor chord. The *butterflies* line somewhat does what the first line does – shows what happens when the line tries to stray too far in the air – *Some, like butterflies, escape too soon* – and is brought down by the gravity of the poem, I say *gravity* scientifically more than tonally. The white space will not bear the weight of that many words...

‘And something else is about to happen, which is all about the pronouns. The *we* in *before we have a chance* is waving goodbye, we won’t hear from it again. And at the same moment it does, just before the *I* appears in all its declarative solitude, the words become general, flat and forlornly distant: *to appreciate their*

beauty. This is the kind of phrase more commonly said in retrospect, when the beautiful thing has moved on, and the language is left there politely applauding.

‘Now the *I* is alone at the table in the rose garden in San Francisco. The isolation makes the scene blossom into view again. Without a lover’s face to crayon in, the poem crayons in roses, bushes and city buildings in the distance. As poets, your choice of how much background to colour in has a direct effect on the mood of the scene. Think how impressionist painting would do it. Incidentally the work the title does here is the effect of a caption on a photo in an album. This mattered, will not be forgotten, but is also sealed and labelled.

‘What’s fine about this passage is that East never actually tells us the lover’s gone. When they did, how they did, why they did. Whether it’s for long or how long. She switches the pronouns in a stanza-break, as if suddenly filming with a different stock, she turns the language generic, and gives the speaker the first active main-clause verb in the poem to relate to a human:

I want to call them back...

‘The speaker is alone with the words, which is a reasonable definition of being alone. This is emphasized by the doggedness with which she contemplates the absence of the words that were said – or imagines their return, which serves the same emotional purpose. That stanza ends with this wonderfully prim little spasm of *esprit d’escalier*: “How so?” and “What was that?” The fussy punctuation, the four sets of double-marks, saddens this – italics would look too slick and easy – and we’re reminded that the thing one specifically imagines happening is the thing one has just struck from the future.

‘So another stanza-break, to let those two unanswerable questions fade on the breeze, and that space is a great sigh of *Anyway...* as the speaker shifts posture, sweeps away both the past and the conditional, and lands in the present moment: *I sweep them up/fill all my pockets*. What works here is that the metaphorical life of this, that she is sweeping up words that were said, runs easily on the same tracks as a believable real-life action of leaving a table, say, putting sugar-papers in the ashtray, slightly tidying. This continues to the end: taking out *a handful* of words is obviously remembering them and consoling oneself with them, but it could just as well be looking at a photograph from then, or a receipt from where they went.

‘So this extended metaphor, the concretisation of words, has only augmented the physical life of the encounter, and kept us close. Too often metaphors and similes ask us to look somewhere else. *Tell us*, in fact, then ask us

to see it that way, then to bear it in mind, then return to where we were before. Metaphors and similes are dangerous, my friends, and they were dangerous here: East has tamed this one and made it work with her in this urban vignette.

‘Is the lover gone for good? Is this heartbreak or absence? I feel we ought to know, private or not. I’m inclined to go with absence, but I’m simply flagging that I’m not sure, though I declare this scene is admirably painted. It may well be clear to the rest of you! Sometimes I’m right, sometimes I’m right at the back of the peloton. It’s clear to Ziggy by the fire there, Ziggy knows what happened.’

*

Another bell went as I was talking, and the Poets asked about it.

‘Wagons leaving from the Junction. That one goes to the Blackhouse Fields but I’ve never been, there’s never time.’

They all want to take the air, so we go up in the stanza-break – sorry *break*, force of habit – and we stand around in the glow of the green lantern. The white papers are still strewn along the path, but the market seems to have started up again, and we can hear fiddle music from the Belly of Lead.

‘It’s Celtic Night,’ says the Jazz Lady, who’s sketching the scene on a piece of card, and I notice Vishvantara’s instrument-case is now larger than ever.

‘That a cello you got in there?’ Tench guesses again.

Vishvantara smiles, the game is clear, she’ll never say.

The Jazz Lady asks me why we can’t touch the white paper.

‘A feeling. We’ll order some more. When McCloud’s back from wherever.’

Simon and Morris are offering the leftover food to the Dockhouse folks, and Tench and I, the only men here, discover we’re grandfathers. We end this little chat in a transport of joy.

‘There’s something chalked on the window-sill,’ says East from below.

She and Galton have gone down the narrow steps alongside the Dockhouse and are peering in at our little window as if we were still inside.

Galton spells the word aloud, and one by one we go and look.

‘Maybe that’s her name?’ Tench suggests to East, ‘the person you saw.’

We all feel she ought to know, as no one else saw anything. The Dockhouse folks don’t know, they didn’t see her either. They say the women from the derelict buildings hang around here sometimes. What’s written is –

AJUTOR

*

Une pluie fine

Vishvantara

A fine rain was falling on the school yard
as the child at her desk translated those three words
and Parisian rain began to soak small-town England.
The yard drain gurgled; water and top-cream mingled.

She'll always connect that particular gauge of rain
with the sharp edges of milk and mildew that came
to meet her nostrils during morning break
when Jesus' heart leapt clear of his chest for her sake.

See how her current stillness partakes of the same
school yard tedium: dullness as drizzle, as blame
cast away from the self. The memory of reading.
Jesus pointing to his heart, pierced and bleeding.

Jesus, be quiet. Sew up that gash in your chest.
Put care aside. Look, she is clearing her desk.

*

'To write a childhood memoir is to create a compound out of four essential elements: what the child was thinking, what words for that did the child have, what is the grown-up thinking, and what words for that does the grown-up have. Done well, and it's done well here by Vishvantara, the reader comes away with a strong image of the child and a sharp sense of the grown-up; done less well, there's a mist, and a vague sense of emotional investment one can't entirely share. Fine canonical examples include Coleridge's *Frost At Midnight*, Schnackenberg's *Supernatural Love*, and Heaney's *Alphabets*:

*There he draws smoke with chalk the whole first week,
Then draws the forked stick that they call a Y...*

'The visual sense is of a mature mentality in motion circling the still child. The mature mentality is in motion because it has come back seeking enlightenment of some kind, while the child is still because, as the object of interest, she needs to *stay* still.

‘Vishvantara’s way into this is quite lovely. Taking the soft French words, which are either understood or at least, and it’s a lot – relished in the utterance, *Une pluie fine* – then has them fall spatially, both on page and school yard, translating them in the white space, like the distance left for you to *écoutez et répétez* on an old language tape, so they land and the poem begins: *A fine rain was falling on the school yard...*

‘This has the simple authority of the imperfect past tense: *what I am telling you happened, and is happening again so don’t look away...* And it’s plain in the best way: this needs to be any rain and any school, so we can come through the gates with you. Too much detail and we start wrinkling our brows to see it as you do or, worse, admiring the poetry. And bringing in *the child at her desk* in the second line gives us the window that the child, by implication, occasionally looks through. There’s also a nice contrast between the brisk cadence of the first line and the longer, careful journey of the second, which gives us the border between the Edenic freedom of the world outside and a child at a desk in school hours. This is a border every child grew up beside. Out there! Out there! But I have to be in here...

‘Translation in a deep sense: the rain itself now feels Parisian – the child’s vague sense of that turns metaphorical in the adult’s eyes and is given factual status in her voice, that’s the compound working, bubbling nicely. The adult now widens the perspective, *began to soak small-town England*, that perspective being a power no child has.

‘A note on the rhyming here: *yard/words* is a 40% rhyme soft enough to go by unmarked, but *England/mingled* is assonant and anagrammatical (it’s not but it feels like it is) at the same time, so it functions like a full one, a 100% rhyme. It’s a risk, but all structure is a risk. Only poems without structure risk nothing, which is why they get forgotten. Rhyme works fine in a memoir for obvious reasons one should always go back to. It’s mnemonic, so it enacts the work of the brain – *this reminds me of that, this is how I remember*, past-imperfect indeed – and the limitations of rhyme, the occasional feeling of *that’ll do for now* or *that’s all I can do with the language I speak* – is a perfect Virgil for the brain’s hopeless, hopeful Dante, as they cross the dark hills of the soul together.

‘This contingent, provisional quality of finding rhyme gives us the act of the adult finding what she’s looking for in the child – *here it is!* And *here’s why it’s returned to me!* – which we see happening here:

She’ll always connect that particular gauge of rain

with the sharp edges of milk and mildew that came

‘where *gauge* is one of the tools the adult brought to the exploration, but we’re soon within the child, we inhale through her nostrils, and this readies us for the most childlike moment so far, where the child’s perception pretty much bounds free of the investigating grown-up:

when Jesus’ heart leapt clear of his chest for her sake...

‘The violence of this snaps the stanza, breaks the bond. Yes this is a sonnet, but it’s also stanzaic, and its stanzas are more important than its sonnet status. The adult perspective now turns back upon the adult, and for this stanza (in this room, *stanza* being *room* in Italian, a fact worth going blue in the face for) the memory is distant, the child seen through a filter of intellectual, spiritual fatigue: *dullness as drizzle, as blame/cast away from the self...* Now the full, feminine rhymes (useless adjective that is) *reading* and *bleeding* have a forlorn quality, a sadness that the language can seem to do no other. But it’s the four-square obviousness of that rhyme that provokes the next move.

‘I talked about posture a lot tonight. I mention it when it’s being done right. Here the poem stands up, or sits back, either way it vividly shifts its posture: *Jesus, be quiet*, coming at the end of a stanza break, after twelve lines of a sonnet, where centuries of Italian and English poetry have taught you to get ready for the end, the point, the meaning – *Jesus*, a word that has to bear its cross as a curse-word as well as a holy name, and both are acutely active here, dissolves the memory, *be quiet*, sends the child home to the past. The delicate dance of childish and grown-up thoughts and words collapses into pure metaphor – which is often a violent act in itself – *Sew up that gash in your chest* – holds it back with a full-stop, turns to the healing, abstract, conciliatory translation – *Put care aside* – and leaves us with this visual aftermath: *Look, she is clearing her desk*. The child is? Why? The adult is? Why? I don’t think it matters. Or sure it matters, but what matters is the double-image we’re left with. Adult, wounded, badged with sores (as Heaney says elsewhere), bringing the infinite implacable mysteries of past life to bear on the brief instant: poetry can look where the heaven or hell it likes, but in passing life it is one thing at a time.’

*

Upstairs I hear knocking on the door of the Dockhouse and I confide in my old friends, they are always old friends by now, that we might have to start

playing Racing Demons any minute, and I realize I wasn't there when Morris taught them how.

'I'll say my money's gone,' I announce with a sigh, 'so I'm out of the game.'

'Why can't we say we're poets?' Tench demands, draining off his akvavit.

'They won't understand,' I say, it doesn't sound like me talking.

'No one ever did anyway,' he says, and most of them are nodding or otherwise in accord, 'what's the worst that can happen?'

'I don't know, Tench. My money's gone. I'm out of the game, I'm a grandad like you. Can you pass me some of that?'

*

Guide wanted

Emma Simon

or perhaps not wanted, needed now.
I hear that sometimes works.

Someone with proven competencies
in dead ends and T-Junctions,

exits from speeding motorways –
who knows how to untangle woods.

Experience of incoming weather fronts,
chess gambits, emoji-speak, preferred.

Not necessarily someone. I'm open
to resumes from sparrow hawks

and ash trees, the wisdom of moss
summarised on a single-sheet CV.

Can you solve the riddle of an egg
in less than twenty words,

wrap it up in a bedtime story
spooled from high-tensile yarn,

knit the shadows into hoodies
and disappear in crowds?

Please leave your application
at the end of a crazy paving trail

of pavement gum/pine cones/
elastic bands (delete as required).

Successful candidates
should be waiting by the gatepost,

counting the furthest ripples
made by skimming stones.

*

'Guide wanted

*or perhaps not wanted, needed now.
I hear that sometimes works.*

'Simon's careful step down from title into poem is more interesting than most moves of this type, because it modifies the title already, establishing the speaker as thoughtful, hesitant, sensing the pressure of the time: *needed now*, with the stress on *needed*. *Now* has become too all-encompassing to need emphasis. For this feels like a Plague-Time poem, not that its concerns are exclusive to that woebegone era – that in poetry is now and also long-gone and yet-to-come – but because the voice sounds as if it's been walled into stasis, a presence that is eloquent and self-aware but has also been going round in circles for so long that its interests have become giddingly specific. A nesting impulse gone so deep that all the bric-a-brac of the outside world has started sliding into it, and what begins as a mild desire for guidance of some kind through the throbbing stillness has morphed into an official job-search complete with resumés and applications.

'There's a lot going on in the second line, the plaintive and provisional *I hear that sometimes works*, which manages to lessen its chances twice in five words, *I hear* (it might be true) and *sometimes* (even if it is it won't be always), conveying isolation, detachment from society, and the sense that something needs putting right, for what was *wanted* is now *needed*. This is sunlit, self-cheering, end-of-the-tether stuff. Then end-stop and stanza-break allow the speaker to ponder the outline of the imagined Guide, the salvation, and take temporary shelter in *listing...*

‘Now listing is always at some level comedic. It presents human folk, hapless in the chaos, trying to draw some lines, denoting whimsical options as recorded fact. It pretends there’s a logical and linear path through the wood, it tries to make mathematics of language. As Simon says, it *untangles* woods, which can’t be done short of removing them. (All acts of English destruction begin with lists, whether in dreams, around pub-tables, or in Hansard.) Making lists is also, alas, the traditional province of a woman sitting at a kitchen table, and the sense of *that* particular place in the Plague-Time, bright, clean, silent, slowly desperate, comes off the poem so strongly I do a double-take to see it is nowhere stated. I shall take the gift regardless...

‘What’s good about Simon’s list here is that without actually saying so it suggests a string of challenges and failures the speaker has endured, relating to *dead ends, speeding motorways, woods*, so it subtly renders biography along with topography, like a mood-board, or the miscellany of what’s magnetized to a fridge. Then the desperate specificity kicks in: *weather fronts, chess gambits, emoji-speak* (I assume you don’t mean that comma before *preferred*?) This is modern detritus of the Plague-Times, but look how all these have a marked relationship with *all* time – weather, which gains weight as time loses it; chess, which is an escape from it; and emojis, which are a daft shortcut through it and seem increasingly absurd at a time when time is long. Simon’s poem also makes me want to say that although this feels very like the texture of Plague-Time life, maybe the salient features of Plague-Time have been present all *through* our lives, and now we simply know them better – that the only way out is impossible (hence this job ad), that there’s no one around to make sense of it, and that the rooms are filling up with words where there used to be people.

‘This has prepared us for the veer towards the nonsensical, that the Guide doesn’t have to be human at all, could be *sparrow hawks, ash trees, moss...* The line-break *open/to resués* has a postural sweetness, suggesting the eyes-to-the-window, pen-sucking moment before taking the plunge: yes, she’ll take applications from flora and fauna, as long as they’re properly submitted *on a single-sheet* CV... In the Plague-Time, where the borders between the personal, local, national and global dissolve further every day in our minds, these sort of moves from rational to crazy seem at least as rational as they seem crazy. In the Plague-Time we say things we would never say, or were never going to say: *Can you solve the riddle of an egg/in less than twenty words...?* Find a laptop, form teams.

‘So the poem now pivots into questions, or actually one single question sprouting branches in its oddity, *wrap it up in a bedtime story/spooled from high-tensile yarn,// knit the shadows into hoodies/and disappear in crowds?* But this works

well because its conditional mode – could you do this when the time comes, please? – raises eccentric issues of the future, just as the items at the start of the list implicitly addressed shortcomings of the past. They balance either side of this swollen present, where the hapless speaker sits alone, glancing back, gazing forward. Either way they suggest the crazy outline of *everything the speaker wants – lacks – needs* – so the improbable figure they create has the outlines of white space where the speaker *isn't*. And of course by depicting everything one *isn't*, one effectively, gracefully, depicts what one is.

‘The perfect match any human heart imagines, for whatever reason, has impossible outlines, an unstable physics and collapsing geometry. Simon makes a wry game of this, the familiar game of imagining potential *guides* – or by extension suitors or lovers – as applicants in an office setting. This particular yellow brick road is literally a read-out from the Time of Looking Down, because one has looked everywhere else by now, and all that’s left to investigate is

the end of a crazy paving trail

*of pavement gum/pine cones/
elastic bands...*

‘The sign-off here is terrific, as the plan – dream – vision – subsides into a beautiful tableau of its impossibility, and we’re left with the isolated soul staring into the imaginary distance, with the insoluble problems solved for a dazzling moment which combines the outdoors, the far away, and – implicitly with skimming stones – the long ago:

*Successful candidates
should be waiting by the gatepost,*

*counting the furthest ripples
made by skimming stones.*

‘We are left at the very brink of the daydream evaporating and the Plague-Time starting its clock again, though the minute hands don’t move any more. But what a very fine daydream it was, it was...’

*

O we're done, we're done. And it's in this moment of delighted distraction, as we seven stand and raise our glasses and cups to the work, that we are finally off our guard, and the drunken redcoats come pushing and staggering downstairs barking orders, and Ziggy barks too, to warn us but we're toasting and reciting, no one's playing Racing Demons, and our cover is blown.

*

Our cover is blown and the word is out. And now I'm sitting out front of the Belly of Lead, which is heaving inside, in the small hours of the morning, and I'm telling you what happened. I couldn't tell it *as* it happened, it wasn't that kind of time, and I wasn't sure we'd get out in one piece.

We'd heard the noise from upstairs, the redcoats had come to drink rum, they said Sal Bonny had offered them rum the other day, and so the Dockhouse folks were off-guard too, and the redcoats blocked the stairs. Three of them came down, Privates Ward and Field and Lane, and they demanded what we do down here.

'What is it,' said Ward, 'you don't play cards, *do* you.'

Ziggy by the fire had taken a defensive stance, but wasn't the only one. All the PTs seemed to be bristling with defiance as they stood swaying around the table, though unsure how to act in this foreign realm. There was only one who let the side down.

'Indeed we do play cards,' I said, me, Max, 'we are drinking a toast to our wins and our losses. We'll soon be back in the game.'

'We don't believe you,' said Field, 'do we, Private Ward.'

Ward shook his head, and Field, to be clear, gestured towards the third man, Private Lane, who was very pale and unsteady and whose hands were always moving, and Field said: 'yeah and that goes for him and all.'

'Me an' all,' said Lane weakly, doing more things with his hands.

The moment lurched into drama – Ward raised a kind of musket he carried, he didn't point it at us he raised it beside him and warned us:

'You want me to load this? I can in *under forty seconds*.'

'I can in about fifty,' said Field, and they both looked at Lane, who also had a musket.

'I've also got one,' he said.

'You threatening us, fellow?' said Tench. None of my friends had sat down.

'Bloody flies in here,' said Field, as a cloud of them descended and made him wave his arms for a while.

I say the Plague-Timers stood their ground, they did more, they *sat* their ground. Galton sat down, announcing, 'I was born with a caul on the Ides of March, moreover I have Viking blood, so share our pickled herrings, mate, or

leave us alone.' East said, as she sat, that she was born in Cornwall, and the three men seemed to all glance nervously at the window. The others all sat down while making various statements, though I remained standing, didn't know which way it was going. Do we get hurt in Dark Canadee?

'They're Plague-Timers, off the boat,' I said.

'We're *Poets*,' they all said, and so it went that way.

Ward bristled, lifted his musket he could load in under forty seconds.

'*Poets*, is it, *Peets*? How much do you make.'

'Nothing,' they all said before I could think up some dumb white lie.

'You can't do that in here,' said Field, 'can they. They can't make nothing.'

'There's White Death in Ridgeport, there's rumours in Highwater,' said Ward, 'and you're bringing in *this*'?

He had white space in his pocket, they all did, they must have picked it off the pathway for evidence, it shimmered in their hands, was black with fiery edges for less than a second, then silver, blue, bronze, and dazzling white again. They didn't seem to see what it was doing.

'Who brought this stuff in?' Private Ward demanded.

'Also,' said Field, 'if I might add, what is it?'

'Yeah,' growled Ward, 'what is it, and *then*, if I'm satisfied, we'll turn to the other question I said earlier. Um...'

'It was who brought this stuff in,' Field reminded him.

'I know what I said. What is it.'

At this point I sat down too, placed my hands with the fingers outspread on the wooden table, and told them everything I thought the white stuff was, and the Poets chimed in, and we told them it was what we weren't and what we hadn't written. It was what we feared and what would find us in the end. We said it was our guide and our goad and our worst nightmare, we said it was the end and the beginning and the everlasting middle. We said we loved it, it was listening, and we said it didn't care.

The accumulation of this was too much for the redcoats. Private Ward started cackling with mirth, and the other two joined in.

And what happened next was that Private Ward scrunched up what seemed to him like white paper, and when that wasn't quite enough he tore it into shreds and let them fall from his hands.

'Didn't stop me doing that, did it,' he shrugged.

'Or this,' Private Field exclaimed, having an idea, and soon what seemed to him white paper was thrown on to our fire, crackling and bubbling like something else, and Ziggy backed away from the hearth.

'Or...' Field said, and they both looked at Private Lane. They were obviously very keen on doing things in a certain order, but this seemed to

surprise the pale awkward Lane, who didn't know what to do with what seemed to him white paper.

'Go on,' said Ward.

'What burn it,' Lane queried.

'No I burned mine,' said Field, 'you gotta do a new thing.'

'Maybe step it up though,' Ward piled on the pressure, 'or they won't get the message.'

I'm sitting outside the Belly of Lead and I wish I was in there dancing, but I need to figure this all out, so I'm telling you what I saw.

Unlike Ward and Field, Private Lane hadn't planned his aggressive act, and he was clearly at a loss for a while. Then suddenly he stuffed the white paper in his mouth and started eating it.

This even surprised his colleagues.

'That's good that,' said Field.

'He's eating it,' Ward told us in case we needed telling, 'he's eating it and what's it doing back at him? Nothing. FA. And that, *Peets*, ye makers of nothing, is what we think of your new paper. *Under forty seconds*,' he reminded us and that was the parting shot for him and his musket. The others followed. We heard Field muttering 'I can in about fifty,' and Lane glanced back at us, made rude gestures with his hands. They went stomping up the stairs, sounded rude a bit more and were gone.

After a pause, East said, weirdly: 'I do not like my work.'

'On a pink official form,' I intoned, taking refuge in an Auden poem.

'No,' said East, 'the pale one, that's what he was saying. He's a lipreader, it's sign language, I know because I know it. He said he doesn't like his work.'

'He just ate the white space,' said Vishvantara.

'What happens if you do that?' Simon wondered.

We don't know yet. We went up and saw the Dockhouse folks, no one had been harmed but they were angry with themselves that English Land had found them out. Sal Bonny, without looking up from her novel, said they could close us down. The Jazz Lady had some of the new paper she'd salvaged, she was cleaning it and drying it, the safe was open. Kemp piped up from the corner:

'Whoever ripped off McCloud must feel a right fool! For throwing this weird stuff everywhere! And what he did with the white paint, or she, it might have been a she that time. Must be totally kicking him - or her - or themselves. I'm not though. Though I'm here to help if need be.'

*

We all went around the market to the Belly of Lead, where Celtic Night was still in full swing, and they were happy to let us all in because Vishvantara's case, which by now stood taller than the doorway and was made of crimson leather, was the shape of a huge angel. Tench cracked it: 'It's a freakin harp!' and soon Vishvantara joined the band on stage. Tench and Galton hit the bar to get us all drinks, while Morris, Simon, East and Ziggy found a quiet table somewhere, though there were no quiet tables.

This is the only quiet table, and I'm alone here outside. One of the times I went to the bar the young guy gave me these, these notes he said were confiscated the last time I came. I don't remember. But I recognised him, the lanky kid who'd been doing McCloud's job with the boat earlier.

'Why would you give me my messages back?' I asked. No one does that sort of thing in Canadee.

'It's Celtic Night,' he grinned, lifting his pint to his lips.

'Did you write these?' I asked him at the bar and he shook his head.

Now I've laid them out on the table.

3 women in distress

ROMANIAN

they have a lovely fire

I don't know what they mean. Much more exciting was a man from English Land, not a redcoat, a man with a gold cravat, he came to me in the Belly and said:

'We hear your secret's out, sir, you have *scribes* down there.'

'I'm not from here,' I say, I'm quite far gone by now, 'I don't wear cravats.'

'We have a job for you, sir!'

They want me to write a script for the Wagoneer. No one takes him seriously and people ask him tricky questions. They want me to write him a rhyming script that tells visitors all about the Banshee-Woman, who screams, then prays, then weeps when the Blue Wagon departs the Junction, but always from *three different places* because she can fly through the air, because she has powers or is evil or the ghost of someone – apparently that's up to me – but folks will have to pay to hear this.

'So bring your *scribing* skills to it, sir!' said the man with the gold cravat, 'and we shall talk doubloons.'

I pocket the mysterious messages, and start thinking about my new project. It's nice to have a new project. But then the harp music's plucking at three-quarters of my blood that's Welsh, and I'm off to join the dancing.

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