

Dark Canadee

The Fourth Voyage

Previously on DARK CANADEE...

'Something is wrong here and I don't know what...' 'Dozens of bright sheets of white paper, the stuff is dangerous. I think the wrong hands got hold of it...' 'McCloud has gone away.' 'Someone trashed her boat, Kemp, why shouldn't she be in a sulk?' 'I'd be helping the police with their enquiries (Dax, but there are no police.' 'A woman standing there, by the window...' 'AJUGOR...' 'Maybe that's her name?' 'You don't play cards here, do you.' 'Our cover is blown, the word is out...' 'You can't do that in here, you can't make nothing...' 'Suddenly Lane stuffed the white paper in his mouth and started eating it.' 'What happens if you do that?' 'We have a job for you, (Dax, we want you to write about the Banshee-Woman...' 'Maybe it's not a banshee, maybe it's three different women, and none of them can do anything.'

On The Twenty-Fourth Day of April...

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 *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.

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I don't understand. I don't understand where my friend has gone, the young woman in waders who used to bring the boats in. There's this tall long-haired boy does it instead, but he's not here either. I just stand beside my lamppost, looking out to sea, as the last of the ink-red sunset's gone and the lanterns flicker on in the marketplace behind me.

I'm writing to my white-haired friend, I'm writing on a piece of the white paper that she causes to be sent here, her mother makes the paper, it's coming back slowly, it's very special white paper.

It's not always white, or always paper. At the moment it's a slimy petrol-blue material, but as soon as I define it it's powdery yellow and getting under my nails. Point is, with this special paper I don't need anything to lean on. It appears in front of me, it takes on what I need to say. So I don't quite know *what* I say to Cloud – *McCloud!* – in my letter, I know I mean to say where are you, come back, we need more paper, it's lonely here, but all I sense is what comes between my words, that's what this paper does, it sounds what lies between. I feel the distance of the sea, I feel the fathoms thundering below me in the dark out there, I seem to see her reading, I sense she looked up and had a reason to be gone, and then is gone, so as the last of the paper streams through my fingers I am left with a sense she got it, she read it, she knows. I have done what I could.

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A little way out to sea there is a small inexplicable whirlpool. It makes me smile. I am the Pirate-Poet Max. I have written nothing, I will write everything. Not only will I write it, but *I will have written it*, and that's what lights the way. And I knew there was something! I am already beaming before I fully remember. I've been given a new project! The Ballad of the Banshee of the Blue Wagon... I breathe again, professional, alone, and see the tiny shell of a boat struggling in the heaving waters as it nears the end of its long voyage.

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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 on the shores of Canadee.

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I am not the only one watching for the boat. A short, stout fellow in a suit is waiting with folded arms a little way along the wharf, but I don't think he's going to help me, he's not dressed to go in the water. By the time I reach his side I'm not sure what to say. So I'm glad he speaks.

'I have hydrophobia, you see. So I don't know how I came here. And I don't know how I can ever leave.'

I don't either, but feel the need to pretend I do, so I tell him a snow-white fib: 'I'm an old hand at this,' by which I mean I'm an old hand at not knowing anything, which is not a fib at all.

In the space this leaves I rummage in my pockets and find my list of Plague-Timers which I wrote on brown card: *Bryden, Edwards, Kulkarni, Magann, No-No, Puerta*. By the names are charcoal sketches, I smudged them reaching them out of my pocket, the Jazz Lady does them, I tell Kulkarni, 'I have lots of friends here, you know,' didn't mean to say it aloud.

'Did you say *No-No*?' he asks me.

'Yes. I mean yes-yes. *Madame No-No*... With a wicked pack of cards? Things must be getting wild in the Plague-Times...'

Kulkarni points out there are only four people on the boat, two on either side of the tillerman who sits quite still as the pale passengers sway beside him.

'You're right,' I note, then I see an outsize kind of heron or maybe stork (Dee of Canadee would know) flying above them, then it's descending towards

the boat, spiralling down elegantly, bouncing up a little and settling among these folks, folding in its wings – *her* wings – till they're not wings.

'That lady can fly,' I state, for the record.

'It appears so,' Kulkarni nods.

'And now we are six,' say I.

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The young shoreman appears in good time, and he goes splashing out to bring the boat in. It turns out Magann is descended from storks, but she brushes off that question, she looks a little seasick and Edwards starts distributing medicinal plants to them all.

'I have cold urticaria,' Edwards explains, as finally she treats herself to some kind of crushed herb, and I seem to be understanding fewer words by the second, for Madame No-No now steps onto dry land proclaiming 'I am two-point-four percent Denisovan.'

The other voyagers all know this already, but the helpful Kulkarni explains to their baffled host:

'The Denisova, an extinct species or subspecies of archaic human that ranged across Asia during the Lower and Middle Paleolithic,' and No-No looks pleased to be recognised in such detail.

'I have an eidetic memory,' Kulkarni explains.

'I don't remember what that is,' I say but no one gets it.

Bryden carries on his hip a lovely golden cocker spaniel.

'Mabel,' he tells me, and I look into her eyes and then his.

'You were at Tangiers,' I say quietly.

'Not now,' mutters Bryden, 'not here.'

Last off the boat is Puerta. He looks out to the rolling grey water, like Dante's simile of gazing back at what you went through, and says: 'Dark.' The red glow of the marketplace catches his eyes as he turns towards it, and his word is 'Light'. Then he gestures south along the shoreline: 'Love,' and then the blue way north: 'Absurd.'

'Pretty much covers it,' I say, and I mean it. I like a '360.

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Somehow I manage to get this motley collection meandering cheerily through the marketplace. Everything seems normal there, convivial and wild. I do remember it was closed once, but it's very open now. ***I'm In The Snood For Love*** is doing a good trade, there's a queue for fat dark cuts of meat at ***Alfred Lord***

Venison and an even longer queue for the **Fish and Chop Ship**. The filthy old cooker sparks and spits in jubilation.

‘They’ve opened some new places along here,’ I say, leading the way. The looming edifice of the abandoned Library squats at the end of the avenue of stalls, faint lights in the high windows. And down this new alley, the Poets all get lucky.

Madame No-No had no intention of going *near* the **Fish and Chop Ship**, so she’s delighted to find no takers at all at **Bush Ratatouille**, bush rat being a favourite delicacy of hers. She gets a whole one on a skewer.

‘Some people think I’m a witch,’ she admits between mouthfuls.

‘But you’re Denisovan,’ I say, my New Word in the Ladybird book, and she nods as she munches.

Edwards has stocked up with medicine at **Herb Your Enthusiasm**.

‘They don’t get any better, do they,’ I observe to no one in particular.

‘Oh they do if you drink this,’ says Edwards, passing me a small packet of mugwort tea.

‘You don’t have any shoes, Edwards,’ I’ve noticed.

‘I lost them in the desert. My only pair.’

Bryden glances at her: ‘Algeria?’

She winks at him: ‘Mm-hm, Morocco?’

They do some sort of elaborate hand and eye signal.

‘Remember Abdul?’ smiles Edwards.

‘Good old Abdul,’ Bryden grins, then he finds this stall selling **Goffee**, which he doesn’t want, its neighbour selling **Ice**, which he doesn’t need, and then a third one selling **Liquor**, which he doesn’t fancy just yet, seeing as we haven’t done any work. Fortunately the tradesman appears, and after a quick rearrangement of the signs is soon the proud owner of a larger stall selling jars of **Liquorice Goffee**.

‘All I wanted,’ says Bryden as he buys a jar and his dog runs round happily.

‘I have had nights like this,’ I sigh, I can’t specify dates.

‘*It is a privilege to see so much confusion,*’ goes Puerta.

‘Marianne Moore,’ I say so now we’re both joyful, ‘I once quoted Marianne Moore in a lesson,’ I reminisce to him below a yellow lantern, ‘the student remembered the quote but misheard the name, and handed in an essay where she dutifully quoted the words of “Mary and Mo”. So whenever I hear of Marianne Moore I think of an elderly couple in rocking-chairs on a stoop giving elegant pointers to passers-by.’

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The evening's going so well that when a gent comes up smiling, in a smart grey suit but with a pirate hat, like he's doing the basic minimum, I assume he's going to congratulate me for something.

'Ah, you have your new, new - *intake*,' he beams as if they're not people, 'I bet they're jolly excited.'

'Ask them,' I propose.

'Actually Mr, um, *Max*,' he says, as if his every utterance comes with one indigestible word he is obliged to attempt, 'I wanted to talk to you about something different, I mean, not - *immaterial*, but different.'

'I have to take them to the Dockhouse.'

'Private Means can take them to the Dockhouse, now we know what your, your *business* is...'

A redcoat's been there all the time, he says 'aye-aye, sir', and soon I'm being led forth by the gent in the suit towards a well-appointed Georgian building which is only accessible through the Walled Garden, a realm I enter for the first time, or the first time I remember. As I step into the bright glare - the Walled Garden is always floodlit to the level of broad daylight - I wince and turn to get a last glimpse of the stragging company of Voyagers as they're led towards the green lamp of the Dockhouse Tower.

*

I wonder what it means that our work on poems is no longer a secret. When it was I used to feel a tingling in my stomach, that we might be found out, that we had to dissemble and signal to each other. I have a different sensation now, but I notice it's also in my stomach. Or two clicks south of it.

Why should I worry? The man in the pirate hat, Geoff Palatine, wants nothing of me but that I sign my contract for the Writing Project. We're in an echoey marbly lobby, just inside the building. I start talking about my Project as if Geoff Palatine is interested, which he's already said he isn't, by saying I can write whatever I like.

'Within the, the *parameters*,' he swallows.

'I need to hear the Banshee again, I need to stand at the Junction.'

'Ah no, no need, we all know the, the *legend*.'

'Well, um - '

'Geoff. Geoff Palatine.'

'Geoff, yes, Palatine, it's just for my own research.'

'That's why we've got you an, um, *helper*, for precisely that purpose.'

I sign. I figure I can swing by the Junction at the right time anyway, these are probably just formalities. As we go out into the electric light and I reach the gate of the Walled Garden, I find it locked. I wait and Geoff Palatine says:

‘What on *earth* did you give them in there.’

‘Pardon.’

‘Three of the boys. They’re all a tad *poorly*.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

Geoff points to his own head:

‘Really quite... *poorly*.’

‘You mean... in your, um, head?’

‘No, Max. In their own heads. Their three heads.’

‘A tad *poorly*. In their own three heads,’ I rebuild, as if it will help me understand.

‘Since the night they entered your... *workshop*. Let me know when you remember.’

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‘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!’

The cards are cut for order: *Kulkarni, No-No, Magann, Puerta, Edwards, Bryden*. These excellent Poets said their pieces too in these exchanges, but their words are protected and they all know what they were. I turn my old red rain-stick upside down, it rains, it rains, the last drops trickle through, and we begin.

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Fear, Freedom, Felicity

Shardool Kulkarni

A watery wail ricocheted off the branches.
With her slippery rocks and clear streams,
the rapturous river called out to me. Entering,

I sank deep beneath her bubbling, babbling
surface, pockets full of stones of every
size and shape you could imagine, made of

fear, which dragged me to the mighty river's moribund bottom. As breath began to turn into a distant memory, something stirred.

One by one, the heavy stones of adulthood fell out of my pockets, settling slowly, surely, onto the soft earth of the riverbed and

freedom beckoned, and like air itself, I rose to the surface. I breathed in the silken currents of the fresh, clean spring breeze.

Is this how fish feel when we release them back into the water after a brief moment, a lifetime on the surface boat? I began

swimming in every direction I could name, the currents pulling me to my destiny. And in that moment, for the first time, I felt

felicity. A black bear stumbling upon honey, a first kiss amidst the sunny lavender fields, me, here today, in the chagrin river.

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'Bring me tercets and you bring me Alighieri. This isn't *terza rima*, but in this place, in Canadee, all tercets bear the ghostly outline of that sublime form. Here's what that does: the tercet accepts that, like you Kulkarni, we don't know how we got here, or how we'll leave, we only know we're deep in the middle. Our moments have layers. Oblivion is just ahead or behind. Even in the heart of a tercet, oblivion's a line away. This poem is a plunge, a plight that heals, and frees, its tripartite title a fresh take on Dante's trilogy of *hellish... purgatorial... heavenly...*

'Tercets are of four lines. The three visible ones can look backward, forward and at what's in your face - in Dante the stanzas (aside from the first and last) all do the following: (1) the second hearing of rhyme A, therefore development, (2) the first hearing of rhyme B, therefore new thought or sight, (3) the last hearing of rhyme A, the earlier matter being left behind in time. The fourth rhyme, X, the soundless one - the stanza-break, you at the back - is the sound of nature beyond expression, the sound of mortal limit, the sound of awe.

Terza rima is life – sight, thought, memory, nothing – passing as a rhyme-scheme. To a lesser extent, yet still, these effects are available to all tercets, and some of them are in action here. This poem is an instructive one: its blessings are silent, the light and space and movement, its flaws – actually *flaw*, it only has one essential flaw – are spoken, word-choices, weight of ink.

‘If we were alone, Kulkarni, I might set you a task. You don’t know how you’ll leave, so it may be earlier than you think, we may have æons to get through. I would ask you to trim each line by a single element. Not every line needs this, but it’s a good exercise. To take the beginning: *watery wail* is good enough, as it gives you white torrent and sound, and *ricocheted* is good enough for its onomatopoeia, but they’re not *both good*. The sound they make divides my ear, is it whole – *wail* – or fractured – *ricocheted*? So maybe prune that back by *one*. The second line is fine, for its plainness in fact. This sounds paradoxical, but what you’re going for here is *awe* – you’re dropped into this onrush in the midpoint of something – and awe is often spoken plainly, because the senses are busily processing awe and leaving word-choice somewhat scrabbling to compete. Coleridge’s awe in *Kubla Khan* is exotic, not plain, but then he distances us from the scene and hazes it with antiquity and myth – also Coleridge doesn’t go in the water like you, Kulkarni. So, if you encounter wonder, be plain in the beholding.

‘This is why you don’t need *rapturous*. The river is being rapturous for you! Again, one less element, one less filter on your lens, one less glinting shard of *English* distracting from the vision. What lifts the vision throughout is timing and placing. After the boilerplate of *bubbling, babbling* – fair enough, see above, you’re sinking and what’s what you can hear, it’s not English it’s just *sounds* – now the cadence itself starts to babble, look:

*surface, pockets full of stones of every
size and shape you could imagine, made of*

fear...

‘This move, the first of the three heraldic heads (*fear, freedom, felicity*) prefaced and empowered by white space, works well in all three cases, signifies a kind of floundering towards faith, that the next stage will be not only *reached for* but *reached*. Kulkarni, I’m sure you know what to cut from the next line, it’s the word *moribund*, it doesn’t quite make sense as Meaning, or quite give you anything as Sound in terms of colour or tone. Not hard to find something that will step up on both levels. The idea of *breath* turning to *memory* grows naturally enough, as we know this is dreamlike, a metaphor in spate, and the same goes for

the *heavy stones of adulthood*. We all make a pilgrim's progress, we can all make clumsy allegory with dignity, they're old utensils for the journey.

'And you can NEVER end a stanza with *and*. Except when? Except when you can. Stitch that, AI.

onto the soft earth of the riverbed and

freedom beckoned

'Because the space is the reaching for what's next, in this case freedom as light, the light above, which Kulkarni handles carefully and in good time with *and like air itself, I rose/to the surface*. I think *silken* needs looking at, as it feels a little too tactile or woven for the *fresh, clean spring breeze*, which is a happy and grateful gulping of airy near-synonyms.

'The restorative quality of the breeze induces the speaker to *think* for the first time: *Is this how fish feel when we release them/back into the water[?]*, which is akin to that atoning generosity Coleridge's Mariner finds when he sees the water-snakes: *A spring of love gushed from my heart,/And I blessed them unaware...* This of course is followed by the Albatross falling from the Mariner's neck into the sea, and here, somewhat likewise, is Kulkarni's visionary suddenly able to *[swim] in every direction I could name*, where the idea is finely and subtly augmented by that *I could name*, again an effect of humility, a gracious move.

'I think you can do better than *surface boat*, there's no gain to saying *surface* again so soon. Then we're back to the brow-furrowed hesitant accuracy of this:

*...And
in that moment, for the first time, I felt*

felicity...

'*Felicity* feels like, in fact *is*, a flowering of the word *felt*, a blossoming in the break, and this wouldn't work *without* a break, whether line- or stanza-. The last stanza is funny and dizzily triumphant in a blind-man's-bluff sort of way, but a poem of Dante's Three Realms has the right to riot in each colour at a time. As Kulkarna ends with a flourish, charm *almost* carries the day, but I don't know what *chagrin* is doing there, it feels a little like a pre-packed idea. It's not of the mood-palette, let alone the colour one, and all *chagrin* seems gone by now. But, I end where I started, with how excellent the rhythm here, the zest, the humility.'

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Kulkarni has an eidetic memory and finds it hard not to be talking all the time, but this happily combines into his reciting thus:

*'And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.'*

'Milk-break,' say I. I do not have an eidetic memory but in the last class of Teacher Walcott's in Boston Town in the year of nineteen hundred and eighty-eight, he asked if anyone knew Auden's 'September 1st, 1939'. Though he'd made us learn quite a few poems by heart (Emily Brontë's 'Remembrance', Thomas Hardy's 'Channel Firing', Thom Gunn's 'My Sad Captains') this wasn't one of them. But I'd only gone and done it anyway, cos why not, I was in heaven, and just sat there beginning, 'I sit in one of the dives On 52nd street Uncertain and afraid As the clever hopes expire Of a low dishonest decade,' word-perfect, ninety-nine lines, I was twenty-five, had fed on honey-dew, and drunk the anyway sailors, *sláinte*.

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*Are You sure that We are awake? **

Madame No-No

On the shores of Gitchie Gumee,
By the Big-Sea Shining Water, **
Stands Will's wonderous Globe.
Perchance my grandsire, Jeremiah Lamkin of Ratcliff,
(great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, that is)
Did stop to listen, enchanted by those bardic words.

Mistress Quickly: Get thee to the Lombard. He will advance us the gelding.

Doll: No, I shan't go for he is a, a, for he is a goombah.

Mistress Quickly: A goombah? What is this 'goombah'? Pray tell thee.

Doll: He will prey upon me. Brain me even.

Mistress Quickly: Certain it is you could use a bit of brain, Doll. Why so frightened, my viperous plum?

Doll: He is the crim de la crim.

Mistress Quickly: Creame de la creame?

Doll: Murderously souled he is. A widow-maker for sure.

Mistress Quickly: Well ain't it lucky you ain't married then, Doll. Just offer the Lombard a loving spoonful of your jelly and he will advance us the funds.

Doll: Such a sweet once pawned can never be redeemed.

Commotion-Enter Falstaff singing Elvis Presley's 'It's Now or Never'

Mistress Quickly: Ah, we are saved. Our redeemer liveth. Our very own Meistersinger. Welcome Sir Falstaff. Thy rod comforts us always. Enter! Enter!...

Now steps forward Shakespeare, as poet, whilst the King's players rest from their theatrical labouring.

Clearing of throat.

One if by land, two if by sea,***

Belching mustard ride the roses southward.

Slay they the sleeping weeds.

Weasels fell monuments to their fallow wombs.

Terriers cry blood and die.

Unwept, unhonoured, and unsung. ****

And so Lamkin of Ratcliff resumeth his journey only to fall foul of a cutpurse and be thrown unto the waiting jaws of the Gitchee Gumee.

* William Shakespeare *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 4, Scene 1

** Henry W. Longfellow *Hiawatha's Childhood*

*** Henry W. Longfellow *Paul Revere's Ride*

**** Sir Walter Scott 'Love of Country' from *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*

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'Madame No-No brings this to me and I bring it to our table with the care of museum porters bearing in an artwork. In this case what that means is I respect the fonts and spacing and point-size, as the visual plays an active part here. The visual *always* plays an active part, whether in sonnets or ballads or poems shaped like clothes-pegs but you know what I mean. Here there is an interplay between tones that No-No is using fonts and sizes for, even when the stage-directions punctuate, say, regular amid bold, or bold amid regular. Probably it's time for you to dwell on the ways in which *all* poems are stage-directions.

'Now, the cards that determine our order of play are once again working in *mis-cheev-ious* ways. I mentioned AI with regard to Kulkarna's poem, and here's how AI responds! I don't know if No-No is consciously aiming for this - one never knows the conscious intent of a poet and let it not derail us - but here's where the arrow got me. Moreover the playfulness here is of an order that spills out over its readers and I would like to play here too...

‘When I say that *Are You sure that We are awake?** reads like an AI poem, I mean it in quite a specific way. It doesn’t mean that No-No was going for this and has succeeded (in which case yea), or that she wasn’t and has done it in passing (in which case also yea), but that it reads like a *construct of overload*, as if the broad streams of traditional English-language verse – Longfellow, Shakespeare, Scott, and why not, Schroeder and Gold, who wrote the words of *It’s Now Or Never* – have o’erflowed the banks of our mental Gitchee Gumees and made a vivid chaos. This is a short step to imagining crossed wires, the flashing lights of an early sci-fi robot – *danger, Will Shakespeare!* – and the probably-ominous-but-still-at-the-sweet-stage poetic offerings of contemporary Artificial Intelligence. This, for the record, is GPT-2 of San Francisco honouring Emily Dickinson recently:

*That was all, a very solemn moment with a very brave mind.
The sun fell on us, we were left behind,
the world went dark –
Our only light was the moon –
And we were still there.*

‘Of course one doesn’t need to be having a software meltdown to fuse *The Song of Hiawatha*’s famous trochees with the old Globe sitting, banners flying, by the infested sliding Thames – that’s the mind of a human poet in action – and it’s the most natural thing in the world to then spiral into the dream of being on the legendary Bankside oneself, where else would we go, where we’re carried by the speaker’s purported grandsire Jeremiah Lamkin of Ratcliff...

‘For me, feel free to share if it’s you too, these years on the Bankside are what makes an Elizabethan Britisher proudest, in an era when Britain’s symbols – the pound, the royals, the *union flag*, which is now among the most vulnerable on earth – are clung to in a desperate see-through last-ditch death-rattle. I imagine Burbage, Condell, Benfield, Lowin, Kempe – oh god Kemp was there of course he was – when the day’s work is done, and I truly feel, I can barely state it, *love of country*. I wrote this before the *Plague-Times* and I delight to meet the gang again:

*Elizabethans then and now, the old crew
finished for the day, in silhouette
beside the river boozing, while the view
turns gold and lets us go
in our own sweet time...*

‘Here by the Globe, Lamkin stops to overhear a terrifically bonkers dialogue, parody-Shakespeare with its inevitable encrustments of the Goons and

Python and Blackadder – *for he is a goombah...A goombah? What is this 'goombah?'* – a dialogue that carries certain classic Shakespeare tropes and authentic structures. There's the dancing around a word (*goombah*) whose repetition turns it to mush, there's the ping-pong mishearing and misunderstanding (*Crim de la crim...Creame de la creame?*), the ingenious throwaway insult (*a widow-maker for sure*) and this wonderfully confident embedded gobbet of reason: *Just offer the Lombard a loving spoonful of your jelly and he will advance us the funds... Mistress Quickly is probably the most recurring character in Shakespeare, and The Merry Wives Of Windsor the ancient mummy of all sitcom, so here we are at the infinitely dizzy, drunk, forgiving heart of England and its language. Anything goes. All the world's a pub. Anyone will be here soon.*

'The yoking of Falstaff and Elvis – in fact an Elvis song so hackneyed and sentimental it will doubtless be sung badly over trumpets on the Last Day – it is indeed now or never – signals, as Falstaff always signals, the descent into further mayhem, as the scene collapses, bringing down with it Jesus and the medieval German guilds. *It is a privilege to see so much confusion.* (Much obliged and top o'the morning to ye, Mary and Mo.)

'The next man in is Will himself, while the Players settle at that Thameside table from my poem, and his words, after the wink of *Clearing of throat* are the most AI yet, or perhaps verse of which a Vogon might be proud, for I believe Mr Douglas Adams would be at home in this establishment too. Longfellow and Scott are glimpsed wandering baffled in the smoke – who on earth would set dead poets in a pub? – and the poor grandsire Lamkin meets his unhappy fate in the *waiting jaws of the Gitchee Gumee*. He barged into this poem in **American Typewriter**, ffs, he must have known the risks...

'Collage is always generous. Its very acts of reaching for materials, pasting, subverting, daubing, defacing, speak a faith in craft, a confidence in the wide arms and grinning soul of the witness. *We are* overloaded and confused, our culture *is* exhausted – exhausting for sure – and to show this or say it is a generous act of affable fatigue. Along with the anarchy comes a certain lowering of stakes – is there a cost to anything here? – but that's not really the point. It's as honest as – well – AI, which is always helplessly saying – consciously or not and *I have no idea which* – **HERE I AM AT THE POINT WE HAVE REACHED. THIS IS THE SOUND OF THE POINT WE HAVE REACHED. THE WORLD WENT DARK. OUR ONLY LIGHT WAS THE MOON. AND WE WERE STILL THERE.** Guess it's all we're saying too.'

*

‘I’ve got a commission,’ I tell them proudly, as I would have in the Plague-Times, ‘it’s called The Ballad of the Banshee, it’s a local legend.’

Edwards and Kulkarna sit to my left, Puerta and No-No to my right, the other two are on their feet.

‘You have a banshee here?’ says Bryden, who’s handing round liquorice toffees. He was at Tangiers.

‘It haunts the Junction,’ I say as I fold my arms, ‘I am getting nine doubloons.’

‘What’s that in our money?’ asks Magann, who’s passing out copies of her poem *Into Battle*.

Kulkarna recalls: ‘After the War of 1812, doubloons were valued in Nova Scotia at the rate of £4 and became the dominant coin there. – Sorry friends, I can’t help it.’

They all reassure Kulkarni they don’t mind at all.

‘Who needs the Book of Wicky?’ I smile and the great book stays shut.

‘Thirty-six pounds,’ Puerta makes it: ‘Absurd plus Love.’

‘Love plus Light,’ say I, embracing his concept. ‘When I used to get poems accepted in pirate almanacks, I would celebrate my fifty quid on acceptance, celebrate it again on publication, then a third time on payment, so it always felt like a hundred and fifty. That’s how I got rich while staying poor. Cunning, eh?’

Out of the vague approval comes the voice of Madame No-No from beside the fire:

‘I met a lady from Kernow, back in the Plague-Time. She says she sailed here. She says there are lost spirits at Canadee but not a banshee. The spirits are many women. They come to that window.’

‘Put that in your ballad,’ says Magann, sorting pages.

‘It’s a commission,’ I reply, as if that settles things.

*

Into Battle

Jenny Magann

My mother was delivered of me. ‘Quite easily.’
I tell you because I have come to these shores
to deliver myself of her. The bones, the urine,
do not foretell success. Indeed, I recall similar journeys.
Shipwrecks, many of them, to keep the story short.
But Commander of Words, let us not stand upon
a cold wharf, even when surrounded by philosophers
and alchemists. I long to enjoy the insights of this realm,
to draw finer maps of the landscape and mark the perils.

Like my fellow voyagers, I intend to fling my hopes beyond this earthly place and ether. I warn you that your secrets are not safe, for I will brave the affronts of a harsh world seeking small victories. Triumph hangs in the starry air waiting to settle as dew settles on the cactus, expecting the day's hot breath and the clamour of the sun changing black to mauve. Let us make haste. My mother cannot be foiled for long. But it is sleep now that I need, quiet repose before a battle planned, soon to be engaged.

*

'Magann, like the Ancient Mariner – and you are all now mariners, whether ancient or not – is in a precise way the *first that ever burst into that silent sea*, in that she's the first to a brand new genre: the poetry of coming here, here to Canadee. I salute what makes me smile, and here's another thing that keeps the edges of the mouth uprised: Magann was born before me. She didn't say she was older than me, she said she was *born before me*, which to my ear is a deeper way of saying *listen*, and one I'm more likely to heed. The people older than me have generally departed, but there are still plenty of folks around who were *born before me*, and Magann is one of them. I am not descended from storks, I am – literally – ascended from Welsh miners, and so I salute Magann on the earth's surface, a fresh adventure for us both.

'I'd forgotten she was born before me when I encountered these lines, which are sort of loose (in a good sense) hexameters or six-beat lines. Of course you can go looking for five- and seven-beat lines in this poem, or say you can't hear beats at all, neither disqualifies you in my book, but it suggests you were born after me. Magann's eventual hexameters work because they *take their own time*, almost as if they run on *until* they find their proper length, they find the point to break, so the freedom feels like the teller's not the form's.

'Our English poetic ears – wherever we're from, our English *language* poetic ears – are so accustomed to the pentameter that there are certain useful side-effects of choosing the forms closest to it, the fours and the sixes. These kind of hexameters are both relaxed in the telling, full of caesurae for shifting posture, and anyway no one can read hexameters with heavy stresses – the room will empty unless it's Molière – but they also give an impression of eager conversational plenty. Hear how the lines *expand* as the storyteller approaches our fire, and the narrative confidence grows:

My mother was delivered of me. 'Quite easily.'
I tell you because I have come to these shores
to deliver myself of her. The bones, the urine,
do not foretell success. Indeed, I recall similar journeys.
Shipwrecks, many of them, to keep the story short...

'The apparatus of telling is everywhere: the arresting cold-open, the interest in place, the payoff to the opening, the relaxed *Indeed* and we're not yet four lines in. As a general principle I try not to identify the speaker with the poet, which is always correct in that the poet is sitting over there and the speaker is a series of parallel scribbles on paper, so let us think about dramatic monologues...

'Dramatic monologues recognize rules that make perfect sense. The poet turns dramatist: draws a convincing human figure, a human *Other*, with all the demands of consistency and coherence that nature should ask of this Promethean act. It has to sound like a human creature. My essential deal with regard to poetry is simply that *all* poems should recognize those rules that we're so conscious of in the realm of dramatic monologue. Why? Because poetry should be memorable, and we remember the amazing creatures we meet. Anyone who does not consider memorability to be essential to poetry is – technical term here – a dickhead. You heard it from a *Commander of Words*. Prost, Magann. Good health, y'all.

'The speaker has the freedom to be general and gestural, why? Because she's not saying it Looks Like This, she's saying I hope it looks like this – *I long to enjoy the insights of this realm* – things are conditional, provisional, *I intend to, I warn you...* This gives the poem the kind of ragged ochre feel of a treasure-map, aided also by little dabs of the archaic: *alchemists, realm, perils, make haste*. In this sense it is validly exploring the new genre: it stepped on to a field of play – Dark Canadee is weird and changeable and I don't know what's going on – and played the game it found there. There's no call for naturalism or even fine detail, it's about catching the textures and colours of the atmosphere. This applies to anywhere, any poem! The abundance or scarcity of what you describe is also *rendering the light*. When it's bright you see lots, when it's dark you see little.

'Going back to what I said, the poem finds its line-length, like a bowler in cricket will test the surface with a few deliveries, and once it's found it begins, in a proper piratical way, to enrich itself. Some of this is a bit costume-drama – *mark the perils, let us make haste* – but some of it is real reward, as the oils start smearing joyously in the light:

*Triumph hangs in the starry air
waiting to settle as dew settles on the cactus...*

*the day's hot breath and the clamour of the sun
changing black to mauve...*

'Okay the poem is somewhat split-focus, between the mysterious menace of the Mother who *cannot be foiled for long* and the proclamation of hopes and fears directed at the Commander of Words. In screenplay terms the Mother disappears for the long second act, so when she reappears in the third reel, I slightly double-take to the start again to remember what the maternal problem was. But I'm not unduly hampered by this. The creature that Magann the Gemini has caused to wash up on these shores can be both romantic buccaneer and troubled daughter - we're most of us one thing trying not to be the other, or that's what C. G. Jung says we should do - and the poem somewhat peters out in the oddball logic of its premise. Which I'm happy to bear a portion of the blame for.

'And as she told me in her letter: Magann, scientist, seabird, and born before me, has trouble sticking to the word limit. I joke, but I would end the poem on the penultimate line, I would delete *But*, and punctuate the end with the ellipsis that, among its many charms, is saying *I don't know what to do now... I don't know where I've come to...* Or, to quote the poet GPT-2: **THE WORLD WENT DARK. OUR ONLY LIGHT WAS THE MOON. AND WE WERE STILL THERE.** Okay someone switch that thing off now?'

*

Everyone leans back after a session, some stretch, in fact all stretch, Magann and I catch each other's eyes like two masqueraders, we are now Canadeens in life *and* in fiction, or to quote the great Canadian Mr Cohen 'Only one of us was real, and that was me.'

Another Canadian but with Colombian roots, Puerta has his eyes fixed on the window: 'Dark, Love,' he exclaims, and we see a silhouette backing off quickly from the aperture. Puerta, Bryden, Bryden's dog and I all go over to look, and we see a dishevelled bootless redcoat staggering up the steps to ground level, toppling out of sight. When we rejoin the others we tell No-No we saw a man, so it can't be one of the spirit-women the lady from Kernow mentioned. No-No says she knows that: 'He is trying to be the space for the women to survive in.'

'You mean the white space?' Edwards wonders, people do around my table, and a memory swims up.

'One of them... ate the paper,' I say with a frown where the ellipsis goes.

‘That’ll be the one,’ says No-No, ‘and he’s bound to come to grief.’
‘I am bound to the stake and I must stand the course,’ Puerta quotes.
‘Wherefore to Dover, sir?’ Kulkarni joins in, ‘poor old Gloucester,’ he adds
with a sigh of atonement, as if quoting Regan made him party to her deeds.

*

Emilio Puerta

Silence

Hush!
Make not a sound
Lest you disturb the calmness of the day,
The stillness of the night;
Combine the darkness with the light
In the cauldron of your core-
Inhale 1, 2;
Exhale 3, 4.

Ssh!
Say not a word
Lest you distort the presence of the notion
Whose mere existence is a paradox.
Lead not your vessel on the rocks,
With time and space
Maintain rapport-
Inhale 1, 2;
Exhale 3, 4.

Listen!
The ringing in your ears
Is in your head;
The gleam inside your eyes
Is just your conscience.
And you’re a pearl amidst the oyster world
With hopes the shell be shucked
To therefore open a door-
Inhale 1, 2;
Exhale 3, 4.

Hold!
Your stance is key.
You wield the will and wear the way
To reach your destination.
Yet you'll fix no foundation
If you ignore
The sacred breaths of silence-
Inhale 1, 2;
Exhale 3, 4.

*

'Rumour had it, Puerta, from the Plague-Times, that you were *anachronistic yet contemporary*, but Rumour is well-respected here at Dark Canadee. That's why we have so many dark alleys and corners. If the parties are innocent, Rumour can be trusted, and everyone is innocent when I wake up in the morning... Then again, it's always evening...

'Well, *Silence*, that reliable old trick-door of a title, is evidently anachronistic yet contemporary. Enjoyably, it's tonally both and formally both. Formally it has the dancing indents of traditional lyric, but it also has the digital symmetry of being *centred*. Tonally it's happy with inversion (*Make not a sound*) archaism (*Lest, wield, sacred*) and heraldic repetition (*Hush! Ssh! Listen! Hold!*) but it also spirals down towards a persistent robotic refrain:

Inhale 1,2;
Exhale 3,4.

'So here are two old friends from earlier in the evening, the long ago - collage of traditional and archaic poetry effect - and the arriving future - the inanimate flatness of AI. What are the effects of this?

'It reminds me of Now, by which I mean Now *in poetry*. When I was a young poet in the something-eighties, there were one or two styles people wrote in. Then there were the one or two styles from twenty years back that people were trying *not* to write in, and then the one or two styles from two hundred years back that only *I* was trying to write in. I used to whisper to myself those thrilling chapter headings from *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*: Deep Magic From The Dawn Of Time, then The Triumph of the Witch, followed by Deeper Magic From *Before The Dawn of Time*... peel away the Christian allegory and that's a

hell of a spell for a young poet to chance upon, especially if up to then all he had to go on was *Try to sound like Byron...*

‘What I mean about Now In Poetry is that *all* styles seem to have arrived at the Junction where we find ourselves, post-modernism having been a general Interrail ticket meaning the young can go anywhere cheaply, and no one can ever be criticized for a style that’s out of time. Everyone has the right to try anything, and not only parodically. In terms of parody, I’m reminded of a great exchange in that modern-day Ben Jonson known as *The Simpsons*, with two stoners at a concert: *Are you being sarcastic, dude? I don’t even know any more...*

‘Puerta knows what he’s doing here and he’s not being sarcastic, but I wanted to have my little fun about the limitless dizzying spectrum of possibility, and how Poetry Now seems to have no universal principle other than freedom. You’ll notice my face beginning to turn faintly cerulean as I repeat: poetry fails when it thinks it’s freer than mortality.

‘The voice in *Silence* isn’t free, and the refrain, the pattern, is the rich fruit to be plucked from its peculiar yoking of long ago and any-day-now. Do the misting of the eyes... Puerta’s centred stanzas are Rorschach blots, they slightly vary in length and shape – which is anyway telling and useful in a tightly-constrained form – but they all, as we focus, end the same way. What’s something else that slightly varies in length and shape but always ends the same way? A breath, exactly, *cing points* over there.

‘This is central to my conception of poetry. It may not be central to yours but those of you drinking are drinking my rum. That poetry should reflect the proportion of power and helplessness that is true of *every breath, every day, every week, every year, every life*. You can vary them to your heart’s content, with all your might you can huff and puff, oh the places you’ll go! but they all end the same way: the lung deflated, the night come down, the blue sighing of Sunday or embers of Decembers, and whatever the other one was.

‘Regular stanzas are like magic boxes for shining out this truth. The pattern of lines and space makes an imprint of life – footprint, entrails, flower-press, brain-scan – which is always coming at you the same, differing, declaring and always ending the same, perhaps with a refrain, but always with what – stanza break? Yes: silence. *Dix points*.

‘Refrain is itself a creature. In the first stanza it’s just a strange spell that seems to arrive in an old-fashioned lyric from stage left. The second time it’s a

repetition: it's saying – with the giant in *Twin Peaks – It Is Happening Again...* It doesn't mean it's now *bound* to happen, but we know there is a linguistic compulsion close to the surface, an elastic pull at *whatever's being said*. The third time it's pretty much saying *I can do no other*. You come to see that, like mortality, the refrain *itself* is balancing power and helplessness – and the fourth time it's simply calling time on everything. Refrain.

'What a host of effects that is! Look at Wilfred Owen's *Exposure* or Sylvia Plath's *Daddy* for the effects of *making the same thing come and go*. You expect it and it comes, then you expect it and it doesn't, or then you don't and so it does.

'Or look what Glyn can do, if you can find it anywhere. (**Davy Jones's Bookshop** has been at the bottom of the sea for as long as I can remember.) But repetition's not only a property of words. There are subtle *rhythmic* shifts here in what seems a constricted poem: In the 1st and 2nd stanzas the one-word exclamation is followed by a dimeter then a pentameter, but in the 3rd it's a trimeter followed by a dimeter, which is a significant ruffle on the surface. Don't forget what the *freest* verse is giving up, in terms of these subtle aural games of expectation. This works beyond word-meaning – which is fine by me, as I don't entirely follow Puerta's argument – its effects are rhythmic, creaturely in the sense of helplessness trying to speak above the silence.

'Possibly the greatest exponent of that metrical subtlety is one whom Rumour tells me is very close to Puerta's heart, a poet who – at first glance – wrote all her poems in the exact same form, but brought the light through every poem at an infinitesimally different angle, by very slightly varying meter:

*We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –*

Or rather – He passed Us –

'Go and find this. She'll be waiting.'

*

We all go up for the second break, the Poets get some fresh air. I tell them not to be long, I want to make it to the Junction when the blue wagon sets off for the Interior.

'Cos I have a commission, you see, did I say?'

'You did. Sounds interesting,' says Edwards, which was kind, as the Poets head out to the lane outside.

Sal Bonny is rising from her desk by the door, blowing out her candle.

'Finished a chapter?' I go lightly.

'No. Got disturbed though.'

'We'll get back to work soon, Sal, I want to get to the Junction in time.'

'I know. You have a commission.'

'Word gets around,' I smile.

'It does if you keep saying it.'

'The Ballad of the Banshee.'

'Taking the English Land doubloon, are we Max.'

'Actually nine of them,' I proudly recall.

'Have you seen them yet.'

'Pardon.'

'Your nine doubloons, no further questions.'

Voices chorus from the dark corners: 'What's that in our money?' but then make clear that only some of them are interested, some of them not at all, and some of them didn't say a word.

'Where's Kemp the Temp?' I ask the Jazz Lady, who's passing by.

'Gone thank God,' she goes, 'when are we getting our paper?'

'Kemp is gone?'

Sal is making dark'n'stormies for them all, she says: 'Done enough damage. We have protection now, Max, we have two of those oafs on the door, Private Means and Private Dancer, and it's all because of Kemp and the white stuff, and those other three nightmares, say again what happened, one of them tore up the paper?'

'One of them burned it in the fire, and the other one ate it.'

'Uh-huh. Well they're all off sick, to say the least, and the Deal Porters keep staring at us from down the lane, and the merchants reckon we're witches.'

'I'll deal with the Porters,' says Sharp Practice, striding through with his deft pun and his travel-bags, 'I'm making them forms in triplicate, I'll do it on the flight.'

'What flight,' I say hopelessly.

'If Kemp's gone,' says The Jazz Lady, 'can anyone operate Saarsgaard?'

'Don't all speak at once,' says Sal when no one speaks at all, 'did he teach anyone basic Plankwalk? Yohoho?'

Nothing.

'Oh ffs.'

*

Shard of Mirror in a Wooden Frame
in the Famine Museum, Co. Roscommon

Kate Edwards

'In a subsistence culture, luxury objects such as mirrors would have had no use value. Rather, they were symbolic of an aspiration to a better way of life.'

Possessions inventory for the 4000
inhabitants of Gweedore parish:

1 cart, no coach or any other vehicle,
1 plough, 20 shovels, 32 rakes,

7 table forks, 93 chairs, 243 stools,
2 feather beds, 8 chaff beds,

3 turkeys, 27 geese,
No bonnet, No clock, 3 watches,

No looking glass above 3d in price
and no more than
10 square feet of glass.

Even now there are places where invisible lives
gleam darkly through the patina of a mirror –

4000 de-silvered faces: women, men, babies
and babies crowd the wooden frame.

They gaze upon our full-length lives and measure
up each stolen square foot of lustre.

No names can be gleaned.
Time develops the negative, like black-edge's

nitrous stain, or the onset of blight.
A decimated mirror, even now, may seem to hold
no more than 'no use value',

until held up squarely to the light.

*

'My mainland cloth-ears hear *County Roscommon* and I glance briefly at another title with a *County* in it – that's how faded powers remember who's who – Derek Mahon's famous *A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford*, but there's happily more to it than that, as subconsciously I clocked Edwards' mannerly nod to Mahon, who begins his wonderful poem *Even now there are places where a thought might grow...* Edwards, delicately, thoughtfully, holds that echo back until she's given us co-ordinates, by way of title, epigraph, and the left-column *Possessions inventory*, which starts one step ahead of the right one, thus softly igniting the echo:

*Possessions inventory for the 4000
inhabitants of Gweedore parish:*

*Even now there are places where invisible lives
gleam darkly through the patina of a mirror –*

‘It’s a fine way in. Not a throat-clearing, which we all have a weakness for, but a polite space for us to settle in our seats. The Mahon poem is present but not overshadowing the matter in hand.

‘Poems grow from poetry. This misguides too many poets into writing poems *about* poetry, instead of, as here, writing about humanity, about the love of things, the love *in things*, time doing for us all, and writing it *in verse*.

‘The poem is of course, as one would expect with a courteous tribute like that, thematically kindred to Mahon’s poem. This – if you don’t know it, do by now – uses the metaphor of mushrooms, *a thousand mushrooms crowd to a keyhole*, to imagine the forgotten and downtrodden of the ages yearning to be remembered. That loving act – perhaps the prime loving act of any age – is playing out here, as *the 4000/inhabitants of Gweedore parish soon become 4000 delivered faces: women, men, babies/and babies crowd[ing] the wooden frame...* How tremendous is that *babies/and babies*, and how unsettling is the use of the verb *crowd* for them, somehow the comical stirred in with the piteous and frightening...

‘Mahon’s poem has a similar cast:

*Those nearest the door grow strong –
‘Elbow room! Elbow room!’
The rest, dim in a twilight of crumbling
Utensils and broken pitchers, groaning
For their deliverance...*

‘Which also reminds me of the odd little plaint Robert Lowell gives his chorus of Quakers about to drown in *The Quaker Graveyard In Nantucket*:

*“If God himself had not been on our side,
If God himself had not been on our side,
When the Atlantic rose against us, why,
Then it had swallowed us up quick.”*

‘So an organic growth from rich soil, but the poem is formally all its own. Whereas Mahon’s lyric is the whole of *Disused Shed*, its beauty and authority amplifying (and if you’re of an aggressive tribe, underwriting) the helpless silence of what he describes, Edwards does something quite distinct and in its own way forceful. The *Possessions inventory* on the left remains just that and just there, its humble calculations confined to their clipboard, as the form of a diligent

parishioner ghosts forth to get things shipshape for the community, while Edwards etches her Description in the glass on the right. The spacing, which is slightly more subtle than I've managed to render it here – we need that paper, McCloud, come back! – allows the Inventory to engender the Description, but also, even better, suggests that the Description politely goes quiet in honour of the Inventory. See how *through the patina of a mirror* – stops at its dash to allow the Inventory to go on: *1 cart, no coach or any other vehicle...*

'This is form expressing character, but not conspicuously, simply noting the qualities it needs: the dutiful oblivious numbering on the left, the whispered and respectful song of it on the right. Groups of lines can of course look like anything if you put your brush to it, but they can do shards rather well, and the *Shard of Mirror* – which renders the rest of the frame cardboard, or nothing – functions like the keyhole of the shed does in Mahon's poem, the only source by which the forgotten, with their only hope – *Let not our naïve labours have been in vain!* – can glimpse the ludicrous chaos of us, the forgetters.

'Once the form is established, it runs on its rail-tracks. Not a soaring flight of remembrance, as in Mahon, but a whispering beneath the drumbeat listing of life's humble bric-a-brac, shovels, stools, beds, geese. Les Murray thinks along the same lines in *The Future*:

*And as I look, I know they are utterly gone,
each one on his day, with pillow, small bottles, mist,
with all the futures they dreamed or dealt in, going
down to that engulfment everything approaches;
with the man on the tree, they have vanished into the Future.*

'A thorough agnostic, I quote that poem to its Christian close for two reasons: because it's an astonishing close, and because it consoles me in a way nothing scriptural does – the childlike form of what I mean is *I will see Les again one day*. Well. Listen. There goes the bell, the cart is off to the Blackhouse Fields...

'What elevates *Shard of Mirror in a Wooden Frame* from its idea – so many new kinds of poem stay hunkered down with their idea, eyes glaring or rolling, waiting for us to crack it – is the care with which Edwards keeps the tangible surface of the mirror trembling through the poem: *patina*, a layer that forms, *de-silvered*, a process of decay, *lustre*, light in a shallow guise, *gleaned*, which carries *gleam* as well as echoes of subsistence farming, then of course *negative*, *black-edge*, *nitrous stain* and the best one of all: *blight*, obviously famine but also *light*, obstructed at source.

‘Again, the lyric poet lets the village clerk continue, before her plain, modest, and unarguable conclusion:

10 square feet of glass.

A decimated mirror, even now, may seem to hold

no more than ‘no use value’,

until held up squarely to the light.

‘Even the white space has an elegance there, being a wider stream than elsewhere in the poem, as the poet waits for the villager to reach the end of the list, check it one last time, fold it and walk away into where they came from, where they’re going, with the rest of the dear four thousand, and the passengers for the Blackhouse Fields, and Mr Mahon and Mr Murray, into the Future.’

*

In the short break I tell them about the Belly of Lead. I will point them the way there, or some of the Dockhouse folks will be going, but I have to go to the Junction for a while. I’ll meet them later.

‘We’re all coming to the Junction too,’ Magann announces.

‘But I’ll need to concentrate, I have a commission, did I tell you?’

‘You did,’ No-No nods, they all do, ‘but we have our own commission.’

‘We have a poem,’ says Edwards, ‘we had it on the voyage.’

Magann drains her drink: ‘they told us, in the Plague-Times, we’ll forget what we were told about Dark Canadee, the *Dark* means *you forget*, so we made it into a poem, and the poem’s all we remember.’

‘You should have written it down,’ says Kulkarna, ‘I have an eidetic memory.’

‘I can’t remember what that is,’ I say but no one gets it.

‘We were told some have tried that,’ Bryden is polishing off his liquorice toffees, ‘the salt air wipes all marks away. We did the one thing we could.’

And between them, the six mutter it into unison:

in the night three carts
when the blue departs
not a dream not a ghost
they are three they are lost

‘Good, dimeters, AABB,’ I say approvingly.
‘Our only light was the moon, and you were still there,’ murmurs Bryden
but I don’t get it.
‘Anyhoo let’s move on. Look at the time, and I’ve a commission, did I say?’

*

Keynot

Matt Bryden

A girl, dropped from space with her own smile,
can hear a recording by Aretha
and from the ruffle of applause

distinguish a single hand-clap,
the root note of the chord,
put her hands together and proceed

to give her tribute across the universe,
stepping lightly with her old soft shoe.
That girl possesses

a facility of mind – an inner sight –
to pick out the Evening Star
unflummoxed by astral chatter,

to cast a line through the pack ice’s one hole.
From the swarm of crickets, castanets
and swirl of pistachio scoop

identify the fall of a single domino tile.
Aspires to the nuclear family
even as locks are changed and uprooted

stumps of horseradish rot in the grass;
a key-ring –
tossed like a mobile phone

in pique – sinks through the nettle grasp
by the raised beds, the border fence
encircling a forty-hectare view.

*

*A thousand mushrooms crowd to a keyhole.
This is the one star in their firmament
Or frames a star within a star.
What should they do there but desire?*

‘Mr Mahon wasn’t gone long, or the Future was standing right there by the fire all the time. These lines from *Disused Shed* seem to my ear – given the fates the cards dealt us this evening – to be guiding Bryden’s *Keynot* into the room. Both are poems that let language spin to the farthest reaches, Mahon’s in time, Bryden’s in space, well, both with words, as Pirate Simon called out many moons ago from the prow of the good ship *Zoom*:

*It’s just words
I assure them. But they will not have it.*

‘Bryden’s study of *A girl...That girl* also reminds us that the overlooked and underloved are among us right now, hoping and hopeless, and here she is behind a border fence. Well we don’t know this yet, so let’s trace the progress...

‘No throat-clearing here. The Book of Wicky tells me there’s a place called *Keynot* in California, *yes in the Inyo Mountains of Inyo Valley*, thank you Kulkarna, and that seems a fit for the big-sky-plus-modern-trash atmosphere. But what’s more important is how Bryden delivers a first line that acts like *all first lines* – stumbles down out of the mist, unknowing:

A girl, dropped from space with her own smile...

‘Time to remember yet another distinct way that poems are unlike us. We grow all our words and deeds out of memories and experience. A new poem appears from nothing, from nowhere – *A girl, dropped from space* – and the reader’s need to give it a subconscious, a back-story, to make it human like the reader, fills its past with speculations as we gamely pay it backward. *Aka academia.*

‘So there’s a hard brilliant honesty to dropping a girl on the earth from space. Note also how the velocity makes the first description of the girl a little scrambled, *dizzied*, all the best humans lead with a smile, and Bryden’s way of making the smile so deeply key to the girl is to say that it withstood a journey from space. There really is velocity to what’s next: *can hear a reading by Aretha/and from the ruffle of applause//distinguish a single hand-clap...*

‘Lots to admire here. Aretha as recording artist doesn’t need to be chosen for this kind of work, she earns her spot eternally, but the name itself is stellar, *Aretha*, could be a constellation, she’s been an asteroid since 2018 – rightly Bryden lets the sound fall through space by line-ending with it, which also gives him the time to bring in the applause. Here we get that sense of how beloved music leaves us alone in the universe with a voice – a *star* of course – as close as we agnostics get to communing with the angel, and the stanza-break, with its longer fall, gives the girl the time to *distinguish a single hand-clap*...

‘What follows is a fine sensitive rendition of how song seeps and deepens into a creature. My youth in popular music was rock, mostly, and I ended up thinking that the best rock bands functioned like a single body singing and dancing. To use a piratical example, Jagger the mouth, Richards the hands, Watts the steps, Wyman the gut. Keyboards are the brain, you don’t always need that. So I love how *Aretha* spreads through the girl, from the *root note of the chord*, to her hands beginning to clap, her feet stepping in time...

‘But Bryden dabbles in The Beatles not The Stones, either way a perilous parlour-game but I think he pulls it off, for the girl who loves Aretha loves those fellers too, and the actual vertice of the poem stretches from *across the universe* to *her old soft shoe* stepping on the dry grass. I know it’s Old Brown Shoe, but again, to my ear, that’s the universal turning as it does into the personally beloved.

‘This modulates into *study*, really, the speaker brings a judicious observer’s diction to this – *facility of mind, unflummoxed, astral* – this is not the girl’s, but it’s consistent so it works, the quality of the observation seems like that of a genial devotee, admiring the mysterious gift of witness, like baffled Mr Cohen’s baffled king composing *Halleluia*, which was also dropped from space...

‘I lose the meaning slightly here – I don’t lose the cadence or the sense of affectionate guidance, which I value as equal to the meaning, just as body-language and tone literally tell the brain more about a person than the words the person’s saying. I take it as the girl casting her psychological lifeline to the Evening Star, with *the swarm of crickets* giving us the air, and the *castanets* and *pistachio scoop* – I don’t know if this is now or memory, but the domestic, familial nature of those elements reaches across space to *the fall of a single domino tile*.

‘To me, and I love it, so don’t rain on my parade, this is a memory of home, far in space, brought close by love and the star of *Aretha*. Anyway this is made clearer by what follows:

*Aspires to the nuclear family
even as locks are changed and uprooted*

stumps of horseradish rot in the grass

'What should they do there but desire? indeed. Keynot has been in outer space, heard from the departed, seen a star across the universe, but nonetheless I take it to be broad brutal daylight, the girl's *inner sight* including seeing stars in a blue sky like they said of Kaspar Hauser, and it's because of the work Bryden does here with light and filter, the poem's lens going low and detailed, where the *stumps of horseradish rot in the grass* and our eyes alight upon a some very American litter, a *key-ring*, and then a simile that works by faintly layering over it another species of ultra-modern detritus, *tossed like a mobile phone//in pique*, which allows us to see and then blur, as heat trembles the air: *sinks through the nettle grasp/by the raised beds...* Then the eye moves on outwards to the landscape, simultaneously giving her and taking her freedom:

*the border fence
encircling a forty-hectare view...*

'Well, Bryden, I may have this all thoroughly or partially wrong, and you can tell me at the bar in the Belly of Lead, but that's what I breathe from it, a fine perplexed humanity, as the educated elder looks across at innocence, finds innocence looking up at the stars and listening to an angel. All breathe again, and after all good poems a little deeper.'

*

O we're done, we're done. And there's still time to get to the Junction. The brown wagon's long gone to the Great Hay Meadow and the violet one to the Blackhouse Fields, and as we venture out into the green glow by the door, and the discoloured grinning faces of the tommies sent to keep an eye, we see the blue wagon in the distance waiting at the Junction. Or we see it if we use our hands to block off the blaze of the market.

As we approach I see faint silhouettes in the windows of the wagon, cast by the dwindling oil-lamps within.

I see the door of the Wagoneer's hut shudder open, and the old man in his cap appears, but sprightlier than he was before, he's with us in two shakes of a lamb's -

'Top of the night-time, campers, I'm Weir the Wagoneer!'

'Oh no.'

'*Hat* your service.'

There's no sign of the old man.

'What are you doing here Kemp.'

Kemp beams at all-comers in their semi-circle: 'I love Max, always just a *tad* behind the times, just a *tisket*, just a *tasket* - '

'Kemp was a temp at the Dockhouse, he understands the filing.'

'Ah, the old days. See this badge? I won this badge, my friends, for Knowledge, the Knowledge of what, anyone like to guess?'

'They don't, Kemp, they're here for the banshee.'

'Oh we're *all* here for the banshee, bless her, I won this badge for the Knowledge of Knowing One's Not Wanted.'

'Flying colours, Kemp. Where's the old man?'

'In the old world, Pirate Max. And it's Weir the Wagoneer.'

'The tommies got poisoned by the white paper you ripped off from McCloud's boat.'

'Did I now, such a teaser you are, I miss McCloud. I miss Miss Cloud! And now I believe it is time to ring my bell and let these poor passengers make tracks to the poor world...'

He jangles the bell three times, and we all stand watching the wagon and listening to the night air. There's no banshee wail this time, no cry, no voices. As the trundling of the wagon fades and it sails into the dark of the wood, everyone breathes and shifts.

'There wasn't anything,' I say.

Weir looks satisfied: 'Not to the non-believer, Max.'

'No there really wasn't anything,' says Puerta, whose relative youth would have given him good hearing. 'Absurd,' he sighs, then 'Light,' as he turns his face towards the market.

Some of the Poets are grouped around something one of them is writing. Magann presents it to me:

Three women cry but not now.

Where have they gone?

Wagon-man = dickhead.

'We think you should keep this,' she says, 'like a keepsake.'

'Keeping is as keeping does,' goes Kemp, Weir, whoever the hell, 'I'll keep an eye on Max for ye!'

A few of the Dockhouse folks pass by on their way to the dancing, the disappointed Poets join them, soon cheered up, and I say I'll meet them there.

'I need to research my project,' I say, trying to retrieve what it is exactly.

'He do, he do!' cries Kemp, 'you missing me, Dockhousers?'

‘No,’ they say, ‘we’re not a chorus but none of us miss you.’

‘Good luck with Saarsgaard!’ he calls as the whole group walks off into the bright lights, and beyond the stalls the rainbow-lanterns of the nightspot. He turns back to face me:

‘So Max. Where shall we start.’

‘What.’

‘Your project. They said you needed an assistant. *Ba-naaaaaa!*’

‘They’re wrong. Who are they. Why did you say *ba-naa.*’

‘You mystery man you! The Ballad of the Banshee, you write it, I ring the bell, the wagon goes, and it’s five doubloons to hear your words, we’re gonna rake it in my friend.’

‘I don’t know where to start.’

‘I know, you got writer’s blockage!’

‘Where to start with you calling me your friend.’

‘We’re beyond friends, Max, we’re partners. You get a cut from all recitals.’

‘A cut.’

‘You get an escudo.’

‘Is that like a doubloon.’

‘It’s a *bit* like a doubloon, Maxim, it’s a *bit of* a doubloon. Now, give me that piece of paper you got from the ol’ PTs there...’

‘What piece of paper.’

‘I believe they put it in this pocket of yours, Maximil, ah, oopsy there we go, ooh I say, *three women cry*, that’s sad, *but not now*, that’s better, *where have they gone?* I might add: where have *ALL* the flowers gone because you know what, *all flowers matter*, and the Wagon-Man’s a – ooh like it, like it, they be usin’ a sense o’yumour. I shall treasure this treasure, and look forward to your ballad work.’

‘Three women cry but not now. Where have they gone?’

Kemp and I gape at each other. Neither of us said that. A woman said it. She walks into the lamplight.

‘I’ll remember for you, Max.’

Kemp is suddenly crouching and jumping and can’t stand still:

‘Oh I weep for you, Miss Mac, and your box of magic!’

‘Look at this, Max,’ says McCloud, she’s got a tiny wad of pink paper between her finger and thumb, ‘how many times can a page be folded?’

‘Ooh I likes a riddle,’ says Kemp.

‘Seven,’ I seem to remember, but McCloud starts unfolding the little speck, five, ten, twenty times, I lose count, and by the time it’s a great sheet of glittering brassy foil, I’m laughing for joy, and Kemp is applauding.

‘New, from my mother,’ says McCloud, folding it back till there’s nothing to see.

'The Mysterious Clouds!' Kemp bellows, still applauding.

McCloud ignores him: 'They say three soldiers got ill in the Dockhouse. You ought to tell me what they did, but not in front of this man.'

Kemp goes still, places his hands together as if receiving benediction: 'I am mentioned by the lady, mentioned as a man, my work on Earth is done.'

She looks at him for the first time.

'Don't come near me again.'

Kemp looks at me.

'Do my feelings mean nothing to the lady? Put in a good word eh, Maximeen, it's been said I grow on people,' and then he heads back to his hut, singing a little tune to himself.

*

McCloud goes back to the boat she sleeps in, but not before I tell her about the three tommies.

'He ate... the paper...' she murmurs in dismay and says she needs to dream.

I make it to the Belly of Lead, which seems quieter than usual. One can even hear the conversations from the tables outside. I see Puerta and Kulkarni at one table, duelling with quotations, it's about 97-all. Bryden and Magann are with the Dockhouse folks at another. Madame No-No is talking to a tall dark stranger, and I hear her tell him he will soon meet another tall dark stranger, whom I see now coming round the corner.

Inside it's weirdly quiet and dark, and the music is soft background. Some are dancing distractedly, alone or in couples, but many are queuing for a table where Edwards sits, still with bare feet, dispensing jars of elder, mugwort and rose for medicinal purposes.

'It's the green moon,' says the barman as he pours my rum, 'the one night in nine hundred when we all need a quiet one. Make the most of it, I would.'

'I shall.'

'Oh and also, market folks are saying you got hoodoo in your joint. There's the white death in the Blackhouse now, people think it's you lot. Not good that.'

'We just talk about poems.'

'Sure you do, sure you do. And he's a Dutchman.' The barman gestures through the open door, out to the wharf, the ocean, the horizon, upon which a strange crimson light appears to hover. Screwing up my eyes to see better, I can see it's a ship out there, two-masted, sails shredded, tilting, trembling.

'Oh hang on he is a Dutchman,' says the barman, 'bad example.'

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