

Dark Canadee

The Fifth Voyage

Previously on DARK CANADEE...

'Our work on poems is no longer a secret...' 'I've got a commission, the Ballad of the Banshee!' 'There's no banshee. The spirits are many women, they come to that window...' 'The three tommies, the night they entered your workshop...what on earth did you give them in there?' 'One of them ate the paper...' 'He is trying to be the white space for the women to survive in...' 'the Deal Porters keep staring at us, and the merchants reckon we're witches...' 'Kemp is gone?' 'Thank God...' 'Weir the Wagoneer, hat your service!' 'What are you doing here Kemp...' 'I love Max! always just a tad behind the times...' 'McCloud!' 'I'll remember for you, Max: three women cry but where have they gone?' 'I loves a riddle, Diss Cloud!' 'Don't come near me again...' 'There's White Death in the Blackhouse, people think it's you lot...'

Upon the Seventeenth Day of May

*They call it Dark Canadee
Don't ask me, don't ask me
I can't tell you why they do
For I don't know me from you
And I don't know you from me
Poor Pirate Max of Canadee
But if you ask me what goes down
At the Junction at the north of town I.*

I what. I stand beneath my lantern on the wharf at Canadee. I'm trying to recite my ballad as night falls, but I never get past there.

*But if you ask me what goes down
At the Junction at the north of town I.*

I don't know if I never get past there because I never wrote past there, or if my memory just fails. Maybe I've not been paid and my brain won't have it. That doesn't sound like my brain. The sheet of paper in my pocket is no help, it's a list of names. It's the one in the inside pocket I want, and I unfold it twenty times until it's draped all around me, a yard in all directions like my own crinkly copper cape, the foil showing back tiny splintered facets of my face. I fold it all away again. The paper from the first pocket says *Eastman, Farnes, Ghyll, Markwick-Staff, Zhang, Zimmerman*, and bears six fine luminous portraits of noblewomen, oh some very fine paper my young friend brought me!

*They call it Dark Canadee
Don't ask me, don't ask me
I can't tell you why they would
I don't know wind from firewood I.*

I what? It's called the Ballad of the Blue Banshee, it's a local legend. I and my research assistant Weir are going to make money reading this ballad to visitors and passers-by, for doubloons, for escudos, so Weir says, whom I know from somewhere, he's always jumping out: *ba-naa!* You take what help you can.

And you give it too, here's pale Ossi limping up to me on the wharf, the lamplight tans his scored old face and he's asking for more light, what light, oh a *light!* And as I strike a match for Ossi, he murmurs 'There is no power on earth which can hasten...' he catches the light and lights the smoke and sighs it everywhere, 'the movement of honey pouring out of a tilted jar...'

‘How is Ali?’ I ask him as he turns to go, for most of what he says he says about the vagabond with the wounded olive hands and feet.

‘The more we succeed, the further we are,’ he says as he goes.

Once he’s gone I’m alone again. No sign of the boat on the sea, or my white-haired friend who brings the boat to land. I can see the little inexplicable whirlpool, some way out, softly escaping into itself. The night has fallen, the lights are twinkling on in the market, lovely to behold. I wish I were a statue there, colours playing on my marble face.

And all at once two small frightening people in cloaks and hoods are walking rapidly towards me.

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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. 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 –

‘Be quiet,’ says one of the Deal Porters, and I didn’t realise I was speaking aloud.

‘At least I memorized *that*,’ I assert, arrested, they are holding me on either side by the arms with thick dark woollen sleeves that engulf their hands, and walking me down the side of the Belly of Lead towards a small green door, where the path turns to waste ground, beside a dirty channel groping in from the sea.

‘Yes because it’s true,’ says a female voice from the other hooded figure, ‘maybe your ballad isn’t.’

‘Isn’t what.’

‘Isn’t true.’

‘McCloud?’

‘Just be quiet.’

‘You’re a Deal Porter now?’

‘Or shut up Max, either way.’

Understanding nothing I subside. We go through the door into a high-ceilinged windowless storage room, there are chairs and tables, dusty musical instruments, canvas sheets over who knows what.

It’s McCloud and it’s Helly from the Belly, the barman, he hails from Heligoland, the pair are taking off their cloaks and dragging chairs into a circle.

‘There’ve been some changes,’ Helly grunts.

‘We can’t go to the market,’ says McCloud, rearranging the chairs a bit, ‘unless we wear these cloaks.’ Now she’s back in her waders, her windcheater, her bright green sprig for good luck.

I notice for the first time there are several cloaks in here, and McCloud has laid out one over every chair-back.

‘I have to meet the Poets,’ I say, ‘I always do, I said I’d meet them on the wharf.’

‘They won’t remember that,’ she says, ‘they’ve been out in the salt air, their crossing was stormy. I’ll bring them in and I’ll bring them here, we’re all Deal Porters now.’

Heligoland grumbles as we wait.

‘They’ve got your number, mein herr. They know what happened to the English Land boys at the Dockhouse. Them lads are sick and not in a good way.’

‘There’s a good way?’

‘They think you have witches in there.’

‘Who’s they, Helly.’

‘Put it like this. Think of your friends, right? How many you got.’

‘Um... Her, Ossi and Ali, Sal, Jaz, Sharp, the Dockhouse folks. Weir.’

‘Halve that and add on everyone in the world. *They’re* They.’

‘Oh I forgot you, Helly,’ I say.

‘I tend bar, mein herr, I’m in no-one’s column.’

‘How did you get all those cloaks. The Deal Porters don’t like us either.’

‘Who knows what them Porters like? Except they like official paper. Your man Sharp Practice did a deal with them. English Land had been giving the Porters forms in triplicate: white, yellow, pink, it’s all they wanted, forms to fill in. McCloud shipped in some stuff she called *shar-trooze*...’

‘Chartreuse?’

‘That’s the feller. Sort of green. So they had forms in, y’know, four-ti-cate.’

‘Quadruplicate?’

‘Next thing, English Land does one in *teal*...’

‘Quintuplicate!’

‘Blue I call it. Practice sees their five and raises it, cos your girl’s got *mandarin, rose taupe, Payne’s Grey*...’

‘Wait, wait... Octupulate!’

‘What he said. English are all out of colours. The Porters sign up with the Dockhouse for their future paper, so they can do their forms in, y’know, octopus-plate. We do a loan on the cloaks. Now your Plaguer ladies can go freely in the marketplace, but they gotta go in twos, Max, hooded like the Porters, and they gotta learn the signals.’

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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 Dark Canadee.

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Heligoland leaves me alone in the store-room, when he returns he's opening the door for six seasick-seeming ladies, which is hard to say when you're drinking, which I am, but I've poured dark ale into flagons for them all, which Helly bade me do.

Each takes a chair in the ring. I know them from their pictures. Markwick-Staff asks if there's rum, Farnes mentions vintage cognac, and Ghyll wonders do we have Organic Raspberry Leaf Infusion?

'I sell seashells on the seashore,' I practice to myself in the pause that follows.

'When we leave this place, we're wearing them cloaks,' Helly announces, ignoring their drink orders, 'and I will tell you why, -'

'Is this where the poems are read, Mr Max?' Zhang enquires of the barman.

'He's not Max,' I say, 'he's from Heligoland.'

'Legoland?' Ghyll cries in amazement.

'Legoland's great,' Eastman goes, 'I took my boys, what's it like to be from Legoland?'

'If you're not Max, who is?' Zimmerman persists, and she has a dog with her, 'we were told Max would be waiting.'

'I *am* waiting,' I say and she looks at me.

'Can *you* tell us who Max is?'

'Not really,' I say, passing over the fact it was her dog who asked.

'Meine damen listen up!' Helly growls in irritation. 'Now, this is Max, and it's his fault we have to do this, what with his creepy goings-on, but you ain't wanted in the marketplace. Only you have to pass through it to get to the Dockhouse. So. We have to go in these get-ups, we are now the Deal Porters.'

'Is that like the Peaky Blinders?' Ghyll wants to know, and suddenly they're all talking about seasons and spoilers and endings and making no sense at all.

'Ladies! Ladies! Ladies!' Helly's face is going red, 'this is not a holiday, this is life or death!'

'Every day is a holiday, and everything is life or death,' Zhang reminds him and he looks like he's about to quit. I step in.

‘I’m Max, I’m a balladeer, I’m working on a commission. The Deal Porters are a secret group of people in cloaks. They want to know what’s going on, and the less they understand, the more of them appear, and the angrier they seem.’

Helly says ‘True that, but they’re on our side for now. They’ll let us be. For the market people to think you’re Deal Porters, you have to go in pairs through the stalls, and you have to hold your arms out like this.’

‘Palms inward,’ says McCloud by the door, ‘like you’re carrying a rod.’

‘This is what they used to do,’ Helly continues: ‘only they don’t know these days why there’s nothing in their hands. When you greet another pair you must put your palms on the backs of their hands, and draw all four hands inward to a clasp. Whoever’s hands are wider spaced, their hands go on the outside. Now form pairs and try it.’

Bonds were formed on their perilous voyage. Eastman and Farnes, Ghyll and Markwick-Staff, Zhang and Zimmerman practise together with Zimmerman’s dog giving harsh critical notes, and I practise with McCloud. Helly’s had enough.

‘If they think you’re Deal Porters, you won’t be messed with. Get them bastard cloaks on and mein gott go with you.’

*

I wasn’t there, I wasn’t there, I didn’t see my sea-sick voyagers muddle and frolic and haggle through the marketplace, I had another place to be.

So I record their adventures in the tense of the future, which is protean, mischievous, kindly and a cheat. It tells you what the six will do, the word *will* is its little sword, it can mean it’s what they wanted to do, it can mean it’s what they did do. Either way it crystallises mortal wishes. It tells there’s something up ahead, no need to plant obstacles, there’s no one stopping you in that tense, the future tense will *feature* you, feature my Voyagers, one by one, the six, lost for an hour in which they *will* accomplish what the past tense took or is taking days to do. The future tense will pepper the air with details only the past would know, so Time turns a blind eye, and by the time Time sees it’s been had yet again by Language, it can’t frankly be arsed to turn the clock back.

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Markwick-Staff will delight in the donning of a cloak. As she leaves the Belly of Lead she will be heard to say: ‘My manifesto states that all spiders are philosophers.’ She will walk with Ghyll, her partner in the masquerade, they will talk of dreams and art and folklore, and swimming to other worlds in the bath.

Markwick-Staff will be glad in her dark cloak, but will wish it might be purple, so is even gladder when Ghyll points out a neon violet sign that says

Famous Purple Raincoat, where all the clothes on the racks are burgundy, magenta, amaranthine, plum, and the pair will soon be purple strolling gesturing Deal Porters, which makes the market folks back away respectfully, believing them of a higher order, more mysterious, more exclusive, more purple.

Ghyll and Markwick-Staff will stop for souvenirs at **Octopus Plate**. Ghyll will purchase an eight-sided book for her partner Sukie – they were years in the wilds of Newfoundland – while Markwick-Staff will buy eight pieces of Eight, until she bears in her hidden hands one almighty One.

Ghyll will see the stall beyond, it sells mugs relating to the Family Of The King. On the sides of the mugs are pictures of the King wearing different funny hats through the ages, and the five old couples by the stall will have been chuckling at his antics now for nineteen hundred days. The stall is called **Mugs R We** and the stallholder urges the supposed Deal Porters Of The Purple Order to try some rum poured in the mugs of royal faces. As the mug is drained, the face of the King, Queen, Prince or Princess starts to show what they've done in their lives. When empty the mug is sometimes plain white, sometimes cracked, and sometimes bears a likeness of Dorian Gray. Then the merchant fills it up again.

I will tell you the adventures of the others in time, but for now I am still in the storage room and not quite understanding.

'McCloud if we have these cloaks and hoods and we walk in a pair, why can't we go to the market? My poets will get lost.'

'One they won't, they crossed an ocean. Two we haven't time. We're going to the Sanatorium, see what happened to those soldiers.'

*

And that's where we're now heading, but you know I would make it to the Dockhouse to be there for the Poets, for I had this to say:

'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: *Zimmerman, Eastman, Zhang, Farnes, Markwick-Staff* and *Ghyll*. 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.

*

Melinda Zimmerman

Crows Nest

Been
Sitting up here way too long
Feathers jammed in my back, unused

Been
Eyeing four corners way too long
Sharpened sight on horizons fused

Been
Calling out warnings way too long
Salted songs my throat is bruised

While
Down
Below
Forsaken
Decks
Lie
Littered
With
Wasted
Words

Descending from my roost on sea sprayed hair in hanging ropes
From bow to stern I wonder where I left my youthful hopes

A vast and thirsty silence amongst syllables of yore
Parched dreams fled with the crew, the ship still far from shore

*

‘Zimmerman sailed to Canadee wreathed in rumours – that she trained with the circus, was once a pirate princess, that she commands the stars. Many vertices in there, towering over danger, reaching and risking, not looking down, and she brings a poem called *Crows Nest*, maritime, lonely, vital, a dogsbody post with equal opportunity for the hero and the fool...’

The dog looks up from by the fire when I say *dogsbody*, seems about to comment, but Zimmerman says ‘leave it,’ and I may proceed.

‘One could make a concrete poem of a crow’s nest more literally, with a two-word line teetering over many one-word lines and then the long lines of the deck below, but Zimmerman does something more interesting. She makes the crow’s nest a foreground, it is bigger in the picture because it is bigger – to the soul inside it. So far, so near, so good.

‘Let’s talk about Capitals at the starts of lines. Under Modernism and post-modernism these were like sympathetic aristocrats swept up by the Committee of Public Safety, along with – among others – rhyme, pattern, clarity, sunsets. Ha! They were helpless in their uniforms, too tied to the past to escape the new order, or the newer order that followed that. I once heard the judge of The National Piracy Competition publicly say a book in contention was eliminated *because* it had capitals at the starts of lines. Mind how you go, Monsieur Robespierre.

‘New lines always come with force, the capital simply heightens it. It no more needs to be nostalgic or parodic than rhyme does, though of course it can be. There’s something heraldic about those Capitals nowadays, *because* they are a choice, but all they’re doing is pitching the shudder of the line-break *up* a notch. Concrete or visual poems, by making pictures with the black, are, to a further extent than more regular poems, making pictures of the white, will-they nill-they, or rendering it *elemental*, and here of course it’s air, wind, salt wind, rain, cold. You know all about that, friends. *Eyeing* strains the muscles in a way that *Seeing* or *Looking* don’t. This accounts for the relative violence or discomfort of the ‘starting’ words picked from the line by poetry’s drill sergeant: *Feathers jammed, Eyeing, Sharpened, Salted, A vast and thirsty, Parched...*

‘This also works with that isolated *Been* that forms its own crow’s nest for the first three stanzas. Against tumultuous wind a single word comes first, cracking the ice for more to follow, for the frozen cheeks and lips to get it out. The repeated *way too long* is more than fine, what *does* a soul do up there? Repeat things, survival songs, life-saving doggerel...’

The dog looks up again, Zimmerman shakes her head, the dog makes a scornful grunt and settles back to sleep.

‘Look I know this is a metaphor, most likely of growth, or age, or progress in art, as all poems tend haplessly to be, but what I like about it is I don’t care

quite what that metaphor is. I feel the poem's obligation is to give us the best crow's nest it can, and by those swinging lantern-lights I'm satisfied.

'While I like the repetitions, Zimmerman, the rhymes are reaches. They are the creaking of a poem's timbers. In a formed poem, that is. The freest verse doesn't creak in the same way, sometimes because it's underwater, has already opted to sink from memory, but any formal effort is put together in dry dock, its timbers are aligned with hope and they creak when the wind blows. The first one – *unused* – is fine, but then again a first rhyme doesn't know it's a rhyme yet, *not me guv, I work alone, wot you on about?* But *Horizons fused* is a reach, you had to invert the grammar to make the rhyme. That sort of thing isn't hard to fix, so shin up the mast and try, but perhaps you don't need to knit this thing with rhyme – you already have the recurring *way too long* – and *-used* is not the easiest rhyme to have, well, *choosed*. That said, this is very good:

Been
Calling out warnings way too long
Salted songs my throat is bruised

'It's doing crow's nest, doing poet's life as object-of-metaphor, and *Salted songs my throat* puts in a great shift. No *with*, eliding coz it's cold. Then the long climb-down is good too, it enacts the process, it's circus stuff, we all know what it's doing but we're still watching circuses, whatever the century, however pleased with ourselves we got. Circuses criss-cross the world. Doggedly.'

There's a mutter from the dog by the fire: 'Notice I haven't moved, sunshine.'

'Okay, thing is, Zimmerman, don't lose sight of the visual, the vertical geometry you've nailed in place. Don't say *Descending* there, because we already just descended with you. Now you're pacing up and down the deck, and it's a long deck, it's heptameters. In fact we know you're alone before you tell us the crew fled, we know you're like the Mariner, the Dutchman, we know them here in Canadee, we've heard their stories. How do we know you're alone? Because the sort of maritime employee who gets the crow's nest job doesn't get to saunter up and down the deck iambic-heptametrically without being told to friggin' splice the deck or swab the freakin' mainbrace.

'So you've nicely set up the drama of that, both playing along – your crew has abandoned ship – and playing metaphorically – your hopes have abandoned you. There are some fine details helping you sail, like ghost-crew, *sprayed hair in*

hanging ropes is great, doing *ropes* as real and as resemblance – but again you get snagged on the rhymes – no one can get away with *syllables of yore* my friend! My guess is that if you keep the heptameters martially steady like you do, rhyme is a play too many. Try it unrhymed, it would work with this shanty of loss and isolation. I think the errant crew took rhyme with them when they legged it. They're out there on a sinking raft gibbering to each other *craft, staffed, daft, laughed* to save themselves! But an iambic heptameter without a rhyme to catch its breath – is one doomed old sailor, babbling to hear itself, afraid to stop and hear the silence and see out there more empty space than anyone can bear. And there, midshipwoman Zimmerman, is where we find your lonely shipmate.'

*

They crossed the ocean, they made it through the marketplace, they sit around the table in the basement of the Dockhouse, they make small talk.

'I can still remember the nightwatchman,' says Farnes, gazing at the firelight through her cognac, 'leaping from the table he slept on, to scare the howling hyenas away.' 'I sold my soul to the stars,' says Markwick-Staff, topping up her Captain Morgan as the women around the table nod in turn, they make a Mexican Nod of approval. 'How should I run?' Zhang asks softly to the backs of her hands, 'what's the way to walk?' and they agree with that too, at least they sympathise with her questions. Zimmerman says she's always late and somehow always on time, and they all know how that feels. Ghyll has two daughters, Eastman has two boys, and two of these four are called Alfie. Ghyll has a beautiful baby granddaughter and as it happens so do I.

As a poet who teaches, I have often been alone at a table with women. Older women, younger women, sad women, happy women. Sometimes I struggle to believe I was chosen for this honour, was it some raffle in a dream? I beam when it's beyond words. When it's not beyond words I choose one of them to try and impress, like I've been sent in to parley from a whole town of idiots, and if I can't think of anything I try to think of a joke to break the ice, even if they all broke it hours ago and are swimming lengths of an infinity pool.

*

I barely noticed when they became transactions.
A certain number equated to a new boiler,
a month's mortgage, a week in Cornwall.
Most were traded for childcare.

Before, I had traded them like promises -
time, love - the odd late pint, but now,
I had to bargain, barter, stockpile them into
barricades, into walls with pegs for

gym kits, and impossibly small coats -
illusions of safety, a child's faith
that comics grow on trees,
that raspberries are always in season.

But I didn't sell them all.
There's a few, indulgently kept,
in a bedside drawer. And
when it is just us, one lazy
Sunday morning I can't quite
believe in, I'll give them
to you, wrapped in a scrap
of tissue.

*

'This delicate haunting poem is a dance of objects and pronouns. What are *They*? They sound like money at first until slowly but surely they evolve into something richer and stranger, a metamorphosis which evokes the way deep relationships transform all things around them. And who shares this space with the *I*? No one is named, not by noun or proper noun, so the sense of family is eerily becalmed, as if the house is frozen, or seen as its opposite element, like Rachel Whiteread's *House*, where the breathed air is the solid. White space in the flesh. As the lines begin to spiral and focus, though, they ignite an *us*, and from it flows a *you*. Somehow - let's figure out how - Eastman makes this house a living house, voyages to an indefinable heart of the matter. Makes it empty, makes it full, makes happenings within it long-gone then suddenly soon-to-be.

‘The tone begins almost forlornly, as if reported to a questioner in the wake of a sad outcome: *I barely noticed when they became transactions*. For now the poem moves hesitantly, end-stopping, as if the voice is trying to wind or warm itself up towards understanding. The metre is soft, withheld, the line-lengths follow the rise and fall of thought becoming answer. In the first stanza it inhabits a certain kind of past tense, where the turned pages of the photo album never stop at a single page, so memories are fading to the general: *a week’s mortgage, a week in Cornwall*, a recital of routine, a furniture of happiness. There’s a blur to it all, *transactions, certain, equated*, the intangible greys of the Latinate. The stanza ends abruptly, the shortened line bumps on *childcare*. The next space is a sinking in, and throughout the poem Eastman uses space – line-break, stanza-break – to approach from distance, make turnings, try doors.

‘The voice deepens as it thinks things through: *Before, I had traded them like promises*. Traded like promises? There’s a ruefulness there, a foreshadow. The thought is branching, ramifying, growing into the past, *Before*, into abstraction, *time, love*, the emphatics of alliteration, *bargain, barter...barricades*, and the punctuation is crumbling – the dashes – as part of this process, the disquieting of breath, and tightening of the heart-strings: *the odd late pint, impossibly small coats...*

‘These middle stanzas are states of agitation, fleetingly considered, provisionally healed. For stanzas really *are* rooms in this poem, but they are rooms in dream, doors opening where you didn’t know there *were* doors. (Or, as I’m sure you’ve dreamed if you dream, especially in the morning, *this door DOES exist, it ISN’T a dream after all!* – I do love those ones.) Now this is an audacious stanza-break, as if the wall starts giving and turning, a secret panel in a Narnia house –

barricades, into walls with pegs for

gym kits, and impossibly small coats –

‘And it works because the space is revelatory – pegs for what? for *gym kits, and impossibly small coats* – that unearthing perspective that an adult can have on the world of children when her contemplation turns weirdly objective. That can happen any time. When the kids are at school. When no one is home. When you’re suddenly Goldilocks as well as the Bears. Who are these people? We made them, I carried them, how did that happen? How did I get here?

‘It’s taking steps back from the hearth of family, an act of pausing, a necessary sensing of the cold *nada* ever stationed behind and beyond you, for there are little shards of heartbreak in these steady conjurings: *illusions of safety, a*

child's faith/that comics grow on trees,/that raspberries are always in season... Each one of these is blued with sorrow, like the marbles of memory in Pixar's *Inside Out*, along with traces of this benighting shudder in Robert Frost's *Directive*:

*Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,
The playthings in the playhouse of the children.
Weep for what little things could make them glad.*

'I wonder if there could be a couple more pictures of the sweet assumptions of the child? And *comics grow on trees* seems to sprout from a heart more childlike than *raspberries are always in season*, no? Then again the list ends abruptly, which makes its own bleak sigh of a point.

'For the shadows here, which are really the shadows of the eyes briefly shut in the daylight – there's an almost gentle ever-presence to them – feel like they're part of the transactions we began with, as if this is the silent creeping cost of the currency. But by now the currency seems to be shape-shifting, it's harder to pin down what *they* were. Slowly, ineffably, the units of it begin to take on a kind of luminous charm or force, and incarnate a hopefulness against the softly hinted fears... Whatever was traded or misplaced or paid, some were kept, and I shall show you where...

'This last stanza is really something. It may be crystal clear to you all what *they* are, the objects emitting all this radiance, but it's not to me, and I am happy in the mist. I just love how the pronouns start to pulse with light. They emanate that warmth of knowing something lovely's come to mind but you've mislaid what it is. There's a gemlike hardness to the logic of it, magical house-rules you won't get unless you're guided.

'And I do know about line-length. The lines narrow here like talk narrows to a secret. The speaker goes through a private door, to a quiet place in the house and the mind where *they* might be explained. They will not be explained. Candles will be lit around their meaning, one by one, *I didn't sell them all*, they're *in a bedside drawer*, and, beautifully, they are the altar-piece of

*one lazy
Sunday morning I can't quite
believe in...*

'May every week have a shaded spot where peace passeth understanding. And this gradual lighting of the space is suddenly transformed by *just us*, Time

slowing towards a point, and *I'll give them/to you*, Time stopping in awe of the higher power. Poor Time. Thought it had the place to itself. No one told it there'd be love and there'd be language. And it may be future tense, but yet – this reminds me of something – with detail so rich Time could mistake it for the past, or even, now it's *wrapped in a scrap/of tissue*, mistake it for a present.'

*

Back when this was the future, Farnes will leave the Belly of Lead in her new Deal Porter cloak, and declare to the night air, and to Eastman, her partner in disguise: 'In Thailand they say I am Burmese, but in Cyprus I'm one of them.'

They will be quick to discover the small cherry-lit hut called **Tristram Brandy**, where of course she will find the hundred-year cognac she seeks, but they will also learn that under the cherry lamps all conversation starts to travel backwards, *ab ovo*, back to youth, past childhood, into the womb and beyond...

'I spent most of my childhood doing ballet,' Eastman will say, 'and the rest of it on my dad's boat *Tarika*. It was built in the shipyards of Gdansk...'

Soon both Farnes and Eastman will be remembering that sunny day the new Gdansk Railway Station opened in 1900, then they'll be swapping stories of old Mandalay. Farnes will turn into an obeah woman, Eastman will start to chat in Ancient Greek. They will leave **Tristram Brandy** much refreshed.

'You're still doing it,' Farnes will point out as they walk.

'να,' Eastman will answer.

Eastman and Farnes will stroll through the marketplace in their cloaks, they will gravely nod at two Deal Porters who pass by in robes of purple, and snoods of purple too, from **I'm In The Snood For Love**. Farnes and Eastman will happen upon a bright stall called **The Rack Of Beyond**.

Eastman's eyes will light up, for **The Rack Of Beyond** sells nothing but supermarket cookery magazines. And not any old supermarket cookery magazines, *ancient ones* from supermarkets long since gone under, from Alldays, Fine Fare, Mainstop, William Low...

'The Flying Dutchman brings them in,' the stallholder will chuckle as he bags up a load of tattered titles for Eastman, 'he says can we please take them back to their owners? I wanna tell him there's no point, but the Dutchman's got no eyes or flesh so it seems a bit petty.'

So much can get done in the future tense. Time doesn't think it needs policing. Eastman will wonder why there's a small oval space in the sawdust to the west of the market, between the last stall and the abandoned Library. She is told it's because of the old cannon pointing out to sea.

'We don't know if it's live,' the stallholder will say.

Within the hour Eastman and Farnes will found The Deal Porters Theatre Group in the space by the live cannon. By the time I meet them at the Dockhouse they have a well-received winter season under their belts.

‘Seriously?’ I ask.

‘ναι,’ says Farnes.

*

I’d love to have seen their work, but I was at the Sanatorium by then with McCloud. We sat in a dingy waiting-room lit by five oil-lamps. We were still in our disguises. No one had stopped us as we walked through the Walled Garden.

A slender nurse came out and sat down opposite in the gloom.

‘Mr Field is really quite poorly,’ she said. ‘What is the reason for your visit.’

‘We’re doctors,’ said McCloud from under her hood. The nurse frowned in brief surprise at the female voice, but then nodded and sighed and looked at where there should have been a window.

‘Good. We don’t have any doctors. There’s a houseman, but he’s always late. And I’m on my break. Mr Field’s through there.’

We couldn’t listen to Field for long. He spoke gibberish in a monotone. He was propped bolt upright in the only bed there was. His soldier’s things were strewn about the only chair. He wore a red vest, he had a growth of beard. He was strapped down but wasn’t struggling.

‘Mr Field,’ said McCloud, and he just carried on as if we weren’t there.

‘*Private* Field?’ I tried, but it made no difference. Not only did he use every fibre of his long departing breaths for his nonsense discourse, he was also screeching for the whole of the inhalation, which was ghastly to hear, nails going up a blackboard. There was no resting, no stopping, no meaning.

‘There there,’ I said.

‘He burned it, didn’t he,’ said McCloud as the swinging doors closed behind us on the man, ‘he burned the white paper.’

‘Yes. And *Private* Ward tore his to shreds. *Private* Lane ate his. He’s missing.’

McCloud looked around the dim waiting room: ‘Ward will be here somewhere,’ she said, ‘most likely he can’t walk. Let’s go and find him.’

‘Can you help them, McCloud?’

‘I didn’t come to help them. I came to see what happened.’

*

Blood pump inside of the vessels,
inside of the threshold tilted the unuttered words.

Silent sentiments power the fearsome unsettling angels: 'We,
impugned to the creator of the Garden of Ego,
how does one surpass the unsurpassable elastic film?'

On the other side of the membrane, a group of
Rascals, Urchins, Sprites waved.
Or are they the fiends, savages, reprobates? Perhaps,
ogres, which the cherubim would never know.

Every member in both sides soared.

Thus the semi-transparent membrane
becomes
the inoperable door, for the angles see the beam
through the tilted shadow while the opposite side knows not more.

Long after,
the angled silhouette turns away
from its core, its origin, its truth.

For guessing is only a play between the ingenuous children;
For adults, how much time do they have to surmise out a truth?

In "**Limen**", a multi-perspective is created in that every human being has a model outside of us, a person or a thing we feel interior of. However, what we often do not know is that the superior, which we often think superior because it only lies in our imagination, also has something it fears. No one can see through another's perspective, thus the only thing that is acceptable is to accept the difference.

*

'Now I included the note on the poem for reasons both weak and strong. First because I need help understanding the poem – I stand under it and look up, I mean to learn, I wish to know – and as Zhang has supplied the note I say that's part of the offering, part of our investigation. Second because this is an innately intriguing thought, idea, proposition: *that the superior, which...only lies in our imagination, also has something it fears...*

'*Limen*, or Threshold, stands where the threshold of the poem is: every title is a limen, we are asked to pass under and into. But once inside a poem, the limens continue, an alleyway of thresholds, do we understand, do we recognize, do we see? Are we side-by-side with our guide throughout, are we losing her ahead in the mist, or does she dart back and forth so we're sometimes guided, sometimes followed, sometimes royally abandoned?

'At the outset we go literally to the heart of our matter:

*Blood pump inside of the vessels,
inside of the threshold tilted the unuttered words...*

'This has a precious chime of *vessels* and *threshold*, like a torch held up and seeing stalactites, and it briefly sounds like a rhyming closure, allowing the rest of the line to enact itself, to *tilt* towards the oblivion of the space: in the white space all words are *unuttered words* – *unuttered* is the kind of onomatopoeic babble spoken in deep places – and what follows is end-stop, stanza-break. The next is *Silent*.

'*Limen* is sometimes mysterious (good), sometimes mystifying (less good), for there are hierarchies of mystery. High on the mountain is the dance of vowels that seem to stir us and fuse at a deeper level than the rational or even the psychological, down at the physiological, the pure biological strata. This is how Dickinson works, how Stevens works, how Frost works – *I shan't be gone long, you come too* – even when the proposition looks simple or proverbial. In the best kind of poetry – prove it? the longest-lasting – the openness of the composing soul to memory and music finds answering depths and chambers in the reader. All the sounds mean something to us. Ask my infant granddaughter what they mean to her: if she could tell you she would let you know.

'Not far below that plane of faith are mystery and riddle – that ancient ancestor of poetry – puzzles, lyrical hints, resonant clues, baffling composites, all have their place and all have their places here in Zhang's *Limen*, but beneath those are the passageways and realms of obscurity – the mist that stems from what's missing in the soul of the composer – the fog where the guide has gone, and means to have gone, and your only release from the maze is to *be more like the guide*, and since the guide has gone, and means to have gone, the realization dawns on you that the guide, on a level of human warmth in darkness, or that of being any good at Their One Job, *is not worth being more like*.

‘This is not what Zhang is doing, and the rich suggestiveness of the idea she is *considering* – i.e. bringing to light – is underwritten by the note. She is following the complexity of the idea, trying to light it for us in the caverns formed by the nature of the metaphor: blood, membranes, all subterranean but trafficking in *angels, Urchins, Sprites, cherubim...* And we stay with our guide for the reasons one does in *any* kind of poem, because the line-breaks are human, *humane* even, the spaces wait for us in our brow-furrowed listening.

‘Line-breaks are body-language. The progress of the body affected, filtered, occluded, by feeling, memory, thought:

*Perhaps,
ogres, which the cherubim would never know.*

Every member in both sides soared.

*Thus the semi-transparent membrane
becomes
the inoperable door...*

‘This passage – and I mean *passage* – is richly and flickeringly lit by how the voice processes the movement of the body, the word *becomes* is isolated because the speaker is trying to figure out where we are, and we feel we’re there too, though we don’t know where we’re headed. Technical accuracy matters, whatever realm you lead us into. Nothing in *The Divine Comedy* doesn’t feel like it just happened.

*Noi eravam tutti fissi e attenti
a le sue note; ed ecco il veglio onesto
gridando: ‘Che è ciò, spiriti lenti?*

qual negligenza, quale stare è questo?...’

[‘We all were motionless and fixed upon/the notes, when all at once the grave old man/cried out: “What have we here, you laggard spirits?//What negligence, what lingering is this?” – *Purgatorio*, tr. John Ciardi]

‘If *Limen* falls short of clarity, it falls short with dignity: the concept is difficult, untestable, dreamlike. The best that can be done is to guide us through the dream, and Zhang mostly stays with us, setting out the terms – *Rascals, Urchins, Sprites...Or are they the fiends, savages, reprobates?* – or letting time drain

away the tension – *Long after,/the angled silhouette* – or opening the door back out into daylight with a question: *For adults, how much time do they have to surmise out a truth?* Odd and unanswerable, as it should be. For *Garden of Ego* and *inoperable* are pleasingly skewed signs towards *Eden* and *un-openable*...

‘While the sensitivity of the line-breaks helps to light the journey, some of the dictional choices have a blurring effect, which happens when any word preens itself free of the line, like an actor on stage suddenly turning to the audience. I’m looking at you, *impugned to* (which I can’t follow), and there are culprits on the overloaded third line. The poem, like any poem really, draws strength where it’s at its most physically honest, it’s most *responsible*, responding like a gasp or sigh, responsive like a heart...

‘And is not Elasticity itself, which Zhang muses upon here, an under-considered idea in poetry? The elasticity of a long OH or EE, or of a good line-break – the best line-break can last whole seconds without a fading of meaning, right here’s where Poetry captains Time – or the elastic when it fails and snaps, because the rubber isn’t rubber, because the matter isn’t made of what you say it’s made of... I, and I suspect you too, Zhang, stand shoulder to shoulder with the *ingenuous children*, guessing, playing, in the sweet *Garden of Ego*, the bright one beyond it being barred to us for keeps.’

*

*‘They call it Dark Canadee
Don’t ask me, don’t ask me
I can’t tell you why they do
For I don’t know me from you
And I don’t know you from me
Poor Pirate Max of Canadee
But if you ask me what goes down
At the Junction at the north of town I.’*

‘Is that it?’ Sal Bonny wonders. I’ve gone upstairs in the break, and they asked about my commission, ‘it’s quite a sudden ending.’

‘That’s my memory,’ I sip my rum and wince it’s so strong.

‘I like it,’ comes a chorus from the corners, ‘we mean we all like it in different ways,’ they elaborate, until their ways are all so different they don’t like it much at all and go back to their typing.

*

against the foil of 2020
(that dark place)

Laila Farnes

past the April tolls, past the blue hour when ribbons of moon
were ink-scrawled across white silk, you were
already becoming one with rock and bark and odd debris
and this is about as close as anyone will ever get

to your sweet clarinet, to the thump and dribble
of you and twin and basketball locked inside the clouding
kodak copy, glassy tears score the corner
of the eye and this is about as close as one will ever get

maybe we were too few, or maybe we forgot
the rudiments as we exhaled sutras, Hail Mary's
and odd bits of verse, sun, water, air, moon to you
and no one could get close, touch you, tell you how much

in the village of our hearts, the drums, drummed
but on the great oak girth of your body, an asystole
reverberated out to all the clans, cities, continents
and this is about as close as anyone of us ever got

and all we were left with was the dust of your footprints
long distance jingles intermingled with wails, sleepless hours
(that night, is all nights) after the grand theft and long after
and this is about as close as I will ever get

*

'Poetry comes again to pay tribute to grief, or love, or, in Farnes's *against the foil of 2020*, both. And it's a high plane of tribute to take the shape this poem does: to put on the dark traditional clothes of a rhythmic quatrain but to let rhyme go, so that it survives as an absence, way-stations of healing gone by on the journey. To narrate, to remember, to lament in the three lines, yet come always to a refrain as some of the most enduring poems do, as if the three lines stir the pot like the Wyrd Sisters, but not to the recurring *que será* of an identical phrase, a *rain that raineth every day* or a *timor mortis conturbat me*, but a line that struggles in its mutations, *as anyone will ever get, as close as one will ever get, as close as anyone of*

us ever got, about as close as I will ever get, like kindred at the reception, sobbing in different voices for one reason...

‘The third stanza can’t even get to the end of the sob, staggers on through the wordless break:

and no one could get close, touch you, tell you how much

in the village of our hearts...

‘where the second-person pronoun seems to sink into the gap, unsayable, caught in the throat, where all funerals are held.

‘The Plague of the Plague-Timers, *that dark place*, will sing its songs in the years to come, and they will linger in anthologies like the ring of a terrible year in a tree-trunk. May they all show the formal instinct Farnes displays here, understanding that though the loss has descended the music must follow, follow with proportionate dignity, sweetness, anger...

‘We talk Capitals again: doffed like a hat on entry. Only four heights rise up from the mourning text: the acknowledging limen of the A in *April*, which we bow beneath to enter, the habitual communal last hope of *Hail Mary*, and the lonely tree of *I* still standing in the felled wood of the last line. The rest is lower case, lyrical, rapid, breathless, *got through* like a speech at the ceremony, where to risk taking a breath is to risk that crack in the timbre of the voice that will sink the ship in seconds. The high rhetorical pitch of the beginning has the same function as the deep breath before the speech: to make it to the next one: *past the April tolls, past the blue hour...*

‘When a poem has to draw from deep, for love or grief or both-as-here, we must listen for the vowels, hear which sounds are clustering where in the churchyard, which of the kith and kin are the strongest antibodies for the wound. Here *blue* and soon *moon* are two gentle ushers for *you, you* being the impossible presence at the feast, guided through the gate in a veil as a hush falls. Note how the tender *you*-vowel is then gone from the lines a while, and instead come utterances of a very different vowel – *one with rock and bark and odd debris* – try the short *o*, feel the throat constrict, mouth open, lips without a thing to do. In the next stanza, the photograph one, *you* is alone like all such images, and the next friends it finds are *too few, rudiments, sutras, moon* again, and the one refrain, the third, that *doesn’t* manage to stagger to the brief stepping-stone of the words *get or got*, is the very one that lets *you* into it, twice: *and no one could get close, touch you, tell you how much*, a pitching-up of sorrow that collapses the line’s implicit intent.

‘Follow the vowels to the nexus of bereavement. Follow the vowels to everything. Or, as the late lamented Pirate Brodsky has it: *In poetic thought, the role of the subconscious is played by euphony.* The poem feels written quickly. It may not have been, we shall enquire of Farnes at the Belly, and I don’t mean it’s careless for it is thoroughly full of care, I mean sometimes rapidity – steady rapidity – can free the subconscious. Of course the grief is conscious here: but the work of the subconscious is, as Brodsky suggests, to flower through the vowels, or make its presence felt via the lips and teeth and tongue, which is to say the consonants. Going fast can do that, not thinking it, not working it: here in this second stanza a bracelet – let us brace – of sensory recollections or symptoms – *clarinet, thump, dribble, basketball, tears* – all stem from and slide back into *the clouding/kodak copy*, the snapshot of the lost. After three or four listens the alliteration turns this phrase *clouding/kodak copy* to a sort of stricken clucking noise below meaning. Even the description of tears seems to fuse haplessly with basketball terms – *glassy tears score the corner* – as a tear will make the eyeball behold the world gone crazy...

‘The third stanza manages to be both tender and harsh, delicate in its musing, but concealing a wry cackle – the idea that more of us, or more prayers, or more poetry, could have been any use. And by the end of this stanza the sense of *about as close as anyone will ever get* has evolved from a generic sigh about words trying in vain to capture a soul gone – to the dire fact of the matter, that medically, legally, *no one could get close*, that the dying could have no company they knew, an effect of this Plague that seems literally infernal.

‘Not surprisingly that third stanza-break is simply a *gulp*, finding its voice at last in a violently compressed passage which is simultaneously metaphorical, lyrical, medical, with the cause of death, the *asystole*, the flatline, spat out, *sworn* into open space:

*in the village of our hearts, the drums, drummed
but on the great oak girth of your body, an asystole
reverberated out to all the clans, cities, continents*

‘There is a wonderful outward spiralling to this: the village, the drums, the oak (seen as a trunk), the girth, and reverberation itself, are all connected to the circular, the radial, the ebb, the eddy, as if the cruel denial of proximity at the death explodes outwards with a gnashing and wailing force that spreads around the world. After this the last stanza has nowhere to go but exhaustion – *all we were left with...dust...(that night, is all nights)...after...long after*, and the sleep-defying beat of the refrain, isolated beyond its sisters by the only use of *I...*’

*

This was all to come. I tell the past in the tense of the future, which is protean, mischievous, and kindly.

Zhang and Zimmerman will go through the market in their long Deal Porter cloaks, taking in the remarkable sights, enjoying the steadfast dirt beneath their shoes after the long sea-voyage, and the local smells of simmering and burning after the annihilating salt breeze.

Zhang likes to explore every possible place there is, so she will see the dark shape of the abandoned Library, and say to Zimmerman: 'Let us see what's behind that building...'

There will be darkness, lightless huts, the shiver where the woods begin. Suddenly a stick-man will stagger from the trees without seeing them: a pale soldier-boy with his red coat ragged: he will come to the middle of the wasteland and gape at the shadowy tilting structure, at the dimly lit windows on high floors, stretch his arms out as far as they will go until he bears his own horizon, and white steam comes pouring from his mouth though it's a warm night so what can it be?

Zimmerman and Zhang will look at each other in alarm, and Zimmerman's dog will growl from below: 'Let's do one, girls, he's a nutter.'

Back in the marketplace, Zhang will say 'we had better not be late,' and Zimmerman will answer 'I am always late, but I am always on time, I was a pirate princess,' and after that they both relax, they take the dog to **You Only Have To Ask**, where the range of dog foods, dog toys, and dog investments on offer renders the dog speechless for the first time Zimmerman can remember.

As the dog considers its portfolio, the stallholder will ask Zhang what she would like to ask for, and she'll say 'I would like to travel.' When he asks her where she'd like to travel to, she'll say 'I would like to travel here.' She will later say at our table that she meant in the future tense, but the man gave her a leaflet.

*

The ward of Private Ward was the same and very different. He was also alone. He was also lying in bed but in a St George vest like a crusader's body stripped in the desert. He was also semi-bearded, strapped, but also not struggling. The main difference is that unlike Field, who couldn't stop uttering or screeching nonsense, Ward was completely silent, as if playing dead. And his eyes were wide open. We stood and watched him for quite a while, until McCloud shifted her stance and said he blinked.

'Twenty-two hundred hours and ten, I shall mark it down!' bellowed a voice at the door, and the houseman came barreling in in his blue scrubs with a jotter and a glass of water: 'Houseman the houseman at your service!'

I said 'Go away Kemp.'

'I was at the Nightingales I was,' he claims, noting the exact time of Ward blinking, 'indeed Flossie N was a personal friend. Classy lady to be fair.'

'Does he ever make a sound,' McCloud asked flatly of the patient.

'That's a nope, or nothing worth waiting for.'

'Bit like you then,' she added.

'Ooh I don't know about you, Pirate Max, but I think Miss Nimbus and me we could get one of them *will-they-won't-they* stories going, d'you think?'

'They won't,' said McCloud, 'so they don't.'

'*Exactly* what I'm saying. Anyway that's that for this episode, no point in hanging around for this poor dab, he never says a word, boy's comatose.'

'So why have you brought him a glass of water,' I ask.

'That old thing called love,' he said gravely, lifting the glass to show me.

'His eyes are open,' McCloud went nearer to Ward, muttering to Kemp 'do you actually *know* any medicine.'

'Nah, it's too much, all them brainboxes, this *-ism* and that *-itis* and whatever *syndrome's* in town. People forget the true meaning of healing.'

McCloud stared in Ward's eyes and asked of Kemp 'what's the true meaning of healing if you don't know any medicine.'

Kemp grinned his grin: 'Same! *Love!* Spoiler alert.'

'Good grief.'

'I like it when we spar!'

McCloud rolled her eyes through the universe: 'Max I'm going to stay here and watch the soldier.'

'Okay.'

'Woh no,' said Kemp, 'visiting time's over.'

'No it isn't,' she said, drawing up a chair by the bed of Private Ward.

'*No - it - is - not*, the lady stated,' Kemp repeated, writing down the words on his jotter, 'at twenty hundred and sixteen hours... Ah well. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!' he chortled, and sat down at the end of the bed, 'though I would *never* beat you, Nimbus.'

'You even look at me I'll break your fingers.'

'Gotcha. Long drive ahead of us eh?'

'Max I'll see you after your class,' said she.

'I'll be the one with the busted hands!' said Kemp with a chuckle.

*

Night Prayers

Annabelle Markwick-Staff

Night, and the smooth one Pulls apart the curtains , And constricts my eyes with moon.

Outside, the Night Prayers are said.

An autumn leaf twirls in the breeze , and scratches the surface of the car park.

A lost knight releases his love, and pain, and vomit.

:Catharsis:

A siren howls . The night is wounded.

She is ecstatic.

Her heart a banging beat , dancing into God.

This is a no-time .

This is a tortoise in his shell , a fan folded up, a foetal position, tide gone out time .

Time holds his breath at night.

The night is forgiving, and clean.

Secret shame is star- sanctioned.

Less people are awake , and I can claim the freshest thoughts.

They are delicious, as smooth as the moon.

I wrap myself in the depraved, divine darkness of my lair, and I pray my own night prayer.

*

‘Once again, let’s responsibly mist our eyes to behold the poem, so we replicate the action of meeting a stranger, an apparition, an emergence. And what do we have for utterances? Long lines, short lines, single words, spaces. Nothing that stirs itself into sustained matter, for always the space intervenes. And as an explicitly nocturnal poem, Markwick-Staff’s *Night Prayers* is one of those poems one would like to see with its absolutes reversed, printed white on black for the proper effect. Then one would see black space streaming in between the broken or beguiling murmurs, fragile as white print looks against that oily black which turns paper limp...

‘Note also the left-justified margin. It might be a default, but let’s be aware how it functions *any time we see it* – here, as often, it is gravitational, the querulous words slam back against it when their foray towards the far side runs out of fuel. Note there are no enjambments, every line end-stops, which means the capitals at the starts of lines are not choices but physical obligations. Responsible use of forces. Still misted, they look like apocrypha, proverbs, clues. Then they sail back to the height to begin again.

‘We peer in closer and begin to apprehend the fractured punctuation, the commas silently uncoupling from their words, the lonely capitals standing alone in their fields at night: *the smooth one Pulls apart the curtains*, *And constricts* – and the jettisoned articles: *my eyes with moon...* What are we to make of these scars on the surface, they come and go, they are inconsistent, even incoherent – if intentionally – *why* do they come and go? they make the discourse feel provisional, vulnerable, helpless...

‘Yet celebratory too. Between the comparatively settled syntax of the longer sentences that book-end the poem, the voice embraces the slip-sliding physics of this nocturnal *un*-grammar. Old rules go softly *awol*, but not entirely *fubar*. Subjects and objects slip too, like when you find and lose a constellation in the faint city sky. Is *the smooth one* night itself? It could also be sleep, or dream, or somnambulism, it doesn’t really matter what *Pulls apart the curtains*, it is taking up its place for the poem’s eponymous ritual:

Outside, the Night Prayers are said.

‘The staccato delivery combined with the isolating space allows this trembling statement to feel both personal and universal, a fusion much easier to credit in the night hours than the daylight. Night is always coming. It will always find us. We may pray for it or against it, but are ever in thrall to its uncaring, as Auden sighs in *The More Loving One*:

*Looking up at the stars, I know quite well
That, for all they care, I can go to hell...*

‘Markwick-Staff’s narrative is murkily omniscient, it sees a leaf, *hears* it scratch a car-park – be careful with *autumn*, that vowel comes with tawny colours, orangey sunlight, where this one must be surely be a cold lamplit thing of green or black no? – it sees the clumsily punning *lost knight* out of time, out of place, throwing up (*because* he’s out of place and out of time?) and tumbles to :*Catharsis*: an abstraction pinioned by colons, like Gulliver in Lilliput. The grammatical threads hold, for *I* remains the original witness. *She* therefore is the night, *wounded...ecstatic.//Her heart a banging beat , dancing into God...* And God’s only appearance comes to nothing, is swallowed up in the space, or, as Pirate Don has it in *Stream*:

*God is the place that always heals over,
how ever often we tear it...*

‘It the poem has a pivot or turn, it is here, *This is a no-time*, the smallest of small hours perhaps, with its full-stop drifting away like debris or a doomed astronaut from a spaceship, still drifting as I speak. The compression of that line – let’s give it its outer space –

This is a no-time .

‘is much stronger than the metaphors that follow, which make us riffle through a rolodex of very different contacts – *tortoise, fan, foetal, tide* – and undermines the dizzying emptiness suggested by *no-time*, because to riffle through metaphors is a daylight pursuit, encyclopaedias, libraries open. True, the Net does those things instead, but the language is still processing this fact like an organism battling a virus, in this case the breathing analogue versus *corona digitalis...*

‘I feel *This is a no-time* could breathe deeply in the white/black space, cut the *tortoise* line and return with *Time holds his breath at night*, which may have been said before but is somehow such a deeply shared sensation that it never feels diminished. The following pair of lines beautifully present a conflicted emotion without explaining it:

The night is forgiving, and clean.

Secret shame is star- sanctioned.

{S}anctioned is an excellent new find in the galaxy, stars can sanction anything, be anything for you, they being the least responsive of objects in the cosmos, to the extent of not even being there when they say *Present!* at registration. Hidden in the extrovert alliteration here is subtler vowel work, as long EE and long AY mask into long AR and short A, along with the business-like book-closing of *sanctioned*, turning its stellar blind eye. Didn't see it, wasn't there, wasn't here, am not here now.

'I would ditch *Less* for *Fewer*, and not only because I still have stickler genes from the 20th century, but also because I like the alliterative high-five with *freshest*. The first-person returns for the first time since the first line, *constricts my eyes*, and is happier with the night than Robert Frost's poor sleepless fellow:

*One luminary clock against the sky
Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.*

'Markwick-Staff's night-watcher has a sweeter acquaintance, steps into the synesthetic bliss where *thoughts...are delicious, as smooth as the moon*, we see the commas and full-stops return home to their mother-ships, and solitude can always have it both ways, or any way it likes - it's its consolation medal - so the darkness is both *depraved* and *divine*, and from the *p* sheltering in *depraved*, blossoms the rightfully simple close:

and I pray my own night prayer.

'One can believe or not in prayers, but night sure turns our words to them, or to our secular prayers, the words we cannot help but say, which I believe are known as poems, or, as Auden memorably closes his night-watch:

*If equal affection cannot be,
let the more loving one be me.*

'Actually he doesn't say that, he says this:

*If equal affection cannot be,
Let the more loving one be me.*

'Get it?'

*

‘Is that your ballad there, Max?’ Zimmerman asks me in the short break, ‘you said you had a commission.’

I look up vaguely, I was miles away, sitting there while they shifted papers around for the next poem. Ghyll appears to have six new versions of her poem, like the smoky air is revising it for her by the moment. But my paper reads:

*field = burned, no white space, can't stop
ward = tore, broken space, silent
lane = consumed, where*

‘That looks quite experimental for you,’ Eastman says cheerfully from across the table.

‘No no,’ I say, ‘it’s old doodleboard, from Signor Seguimi, I found it on the shelf. It doodles what you can’t help thinking.’

Now those words are gone and the doodleboard reads:

bit rowling that mate

‘Very cryptic,’ I sigh, and put the thing back as the message fades again.

*

Club Rules

Kate Ghyll

For dear Mrs Slocum, the republican doyenne
of Newport and donor numero uno
there was never any blood that she knew about
none at all that she could see, just maps
and cocktails and gentleman callers from the party
with vibrant attitude and their silvery policies
that she caught upon a platter of gratitude
amongst the nuts and bolts for her planet earth,
project olde worlde in a bowl of soupcons and bon mots,
coca cola and McDonalds and so the aerosol of soldier
boys into Vietnam and Cambodia and so on and on
are serving to keep the tone because, “By being rather fastidious
about people in the clubs,” she said, “We’ve managed
to control the particular atmosphere of the community,”
and pointed her pointed toe into the drench.

*

‘The phrase *Club Rules* arrives with all sorts of baggage, all of which is about to be rummaged through by the border guards of this vigilant poem. The phrase comes with a sense of arbitrary authority, not the deep-held traditions of a community, or a government, but a well-heeled primly local culture, a thing one is for or against, in or out of, a thing with a door, where instead of signing in you must try saying *shibboleth*. Or in large English houses *napkin, scent, sofa, pudding...*

‘Rules are rules, not really laws, except in the minds of people who make them. New England WASP society lady Mrs Slocum didn’t make them but they’re laws to her, laws of property or propriety – which is literally *property* with an *i* dwelling inside. Ghyll makes the air round Mrs Slocum fizz acidically, from the multi-purpose epithet *dear*, with its long open vowel you can stew as you wish, to the faux-cosmopolitan *doyenne, numero uno, soupcons, olde worlde*. Of course the British have their own proud linguistic traditions, for example how the words of subjugated peoples people the language. Here’s Pirate Max’s poem about that:

*Bungalow, blighty, pyjamas, shampoo,
Yoga, doolally, mantra, guru,
Kedgerree, cushy, jodhpurs, gymkhana,
Cashmere, shawl, lilac, veranda, nirvana!*

‘India alone gets some people through the day in parts of Surrey.

‘It’s a feature of such clubs that these shards of other registers, often despised or vanquished registers, flash and distract like jewelry from the real business. *Republican* and *donor* are two words of real business. They are making a decent fist of collapsing the Age of Enlightenment as we speak, right now in the Plague-Times, not just the black-and-white civil-rights backdrop against which our Mrs Slocum glitters and glowers.

‘Ghyll could do the lady up like a kipper, as we say in English ports, and she could do it merely by showing up her language, as a Chaucer or Browning or Pirate Duffy would, simply letting the lady hoist herself. But what she does is different, she lets us glimpse the blood – simply by saying *never any blood* – remember, *Voyagers*, in poetry if you want a thing to be both there and not there, just say it’s not there. Because the word still is there. Not only *never any blood* but *none at all that she could see*, and though Ghyll has set this in the Vietnam time, it rings true this very night, when some of the most powerful and deep-funded

cultures on earth – let’s call a *republican* a Republican – call a lie the truth and the truth a lie. *Never any lie. No lie at all that I can see.*

‘The beaming, cringing, physiological cost of such immersing deception is audible and visible in human creatures, whether we’re talking imperialists or fascists or Soviets or the GOP. These figures bend themselves into the molten shape of the untruth, and the language goes down burbling, frothing, spasming with them: from the archaic puerile *gentleman callers from the party*, to the giveaway glint of *silvery policies*, to the pre-dinner babble of *platter of gratitude*. Here, by way of comparison, are the jolly euphemisms of a famous English gentleman as he mourns a lost opportunity for gloating mob violence:

This was the Friday when [our] retainers were meant to be weaving through the moonlit lanes of Sussex, half blind with scrumpy, singing Brexit shanties at the tops of their voices and beating the hedgerows with staves.

‘I do not digress. Dishonesty in power has never prevailed without disgracing the language for its own ends, either by appropriation, reduction, evasion or distortion. What starts over cocktails in Rhode Island or the Cotswolds often ends on the street or in the village, at the business end of staves. Club rules, indeed.

‘Note that the tone of Ghyll’s barbs is not always the same, for sometimes she’s ventriloquizing Mrs Slocum, sometimes she’s standing apart and observing, but the squeezing and twisting of the language is consistent, and the variety of angles helps to keep the picture moving, as if the poetic eye sails through the party with the delicate geometry of a waiter, one-handed with the platter. And of course what a waiter numbly overhears at such cocktail parties, as he or she make their painstaking loops around the Members, would indeed have this quality of overlapping swirl or collage, all the sub-strata of what Gulliver’s pure-reasoning Houyhnhnms would call the *Thing Which Is Not*: irony, mimicry, sarcasm, euphemism, gossip, allusion and all manner of *idioglossia*...

‘For my money – which won’t get me into any club like this – the first half of the poem works better, where the registers all babble and collide, and it overplays its hand slightly when we get to the proper nouns, which are often the culprits, with their conspicuous sagging sets of medals, *coca cola*, *McDonalds*, *Vietnam*, *Cambodia*. By this time we can read the dead hand of Mrs Slocum and her bejewelled ilk: this is country club as industrial-military complex on a Sunday.

‘What *does* work is the accumulation. The voice Ghyll has brought to this poem eventually fills up with so much dirty *consequence* – Vietnam, Cambodia, *aerosol of soldier boys*, and how brilliant is *aerosol*, freshener redeployed as atomizing slaughterer of teens – that Mrs Slocum can no longer keep schtum. She hollers out from the circling swill of this Dantean realm. Hers, of course, is not so much *This will not stand*, as *Here’s how it WILL stand*, precisely by keeping *the tone*, by *being rather fastidious about people in the clubs*, and thereby controlling *the particular atmosphere of the community...* And that’s what keeps her swimming in the swill.

‘The last line of *Club Rules* is, if I may be permitted to retain its English pronunciation and traditional gravitas, awesome. First by way of its perspective, the way Ghyll makes the language *itself* exit the club. The indoor cacophony of impressions, snippets, loud voices is gone, and we see the lady clearly for the first time. She exits girded with her two direct statements either side like burly minders, and thus armoured:

[she] pointed her pointed toe into the drench.

‘This blade-sharp repetition of *pointed* gives us toe, toenail, nail polish, shoe polish, a palette of killer reds and blacks, and, by the by, *makes it rain*. Drench. Into the drench. Some arbitrary club rule has told a verb to put a tie on and behave like a noun on this special occasion. But the venomous munching mouth as it mouths a word like *drench* gives us lipstick, skin-tone, powder, concealer. Nouns get people talking, friends, but verbs will see clean through you. We see you, Mrs Slocum.’

*

O we’re done, we’re done. And the phrase sets bells ringing in my ear so only then do I say: ‘Did you hear those bells at the Junction?’

They did not, and nor did I.

When we don our Deal Porter cloaks again and leave the Dockhouse we see the last tilting wagon far down the lane, swaying into the trees. There’s nothing left at the Junction, no light in the Wagoneer’s hut.

‘What happened to the bells?’ I say when it’s gone, ‘I’ve got them ringing in my ballad.’

‘Maybe that’s where they went,’ Eastman suggests. ‘Could your ballad work as a play, Max? I’ve got a season to fill.’

So there’s nothing to see or hear at the Junction. Zhang and Zimmerman tell me what they saw behind the Library, the man with white steam pouring from him, and we all head that way to take a look, but suddenly there are wire

fences strung where there were none before, and there are men in dark overalls and helmets and blazing torches. We are looked at, pointed at, shouted at, waved away.

‘That’s not a club we’re welcome at,’ says Farnes.

‘So let’s go dancing!’ Markwick-Staff cries and this proposal from the Ancient Purple Order Of Deal Porters is unanimously supported.

In their excitement the Six Voyaging Noblewomen tip over into the tenses of the future, and nobody will be sorry as we seven pass into the Belly of Lead in our simple disguises. Inside we will take them off and give them back to Heligoland, we don’t need them here, for the Belly and the Dockhouse are the two places in Canadee still friendly to Plague-Timers.

All six of them will dance, all six will teach a dance to the others, all six will tell a true story no one believes. One by one all six will spot Ann Bonny at her low-lit oaken table in the corner, guarded by her pirate crew. Ann appears to be wearing sunglasses, but when you’re close enough you see she has eyepatches on both eyes.

Nonetheless she summoned me to her table and asked after Sal.

‘She’s fine. But no one likes us here, Ann Bonny.’

‘Join the crew, teacher,’ she scoffs and drains a shot.

‘What, you mean – join – the crew?’ I venture with a thrill, and her pirate-women cackle for ages till the splinters come down from the rafters.

‘No one likes us either,’ Ann grins when they’ve stopped cackling at me about five songs later. ‘Tell Sal howdee.’

The Plague-Timers will dance, did dance, are dancing, and I went out into the night to get some time by the sea. I stand very still beneath the lantern on the wharf, trying to remember.

*They call it Dark Canadee
Don’t ask me, don’t ask me
I can’t tell you why they do
For I don’t know me from you*

And I’ve not got much further when McCloud and Kemp approach from across the now quiet marketplace. Kemp looks very jolly.

‘First public recital next week!’ he goes.

‘When’s next week,’ I wonder.

‘I shall paint this town with posters! Hear ye, hear ye!’

‘Why is he still with you,’ I ask McCloud, I’m too tired not to ask this.

‘Ooh,’ goes Kemp, who seems to have dressed for dinner, ‘will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you, will you join the dance!’

McCloud breathes out and looks at me: 'I waited till the soldier spoke. Then I waited again. It was hours between words. Soldier tore the paper so it tore him back. And this clown wouldn't leave.'

'Except to get you tomato sandwiches,' Kemp mused, with his fat fingers stroking his chin.

'Which I don't like and didn't ask for.'

'She ate them though,' Kemp told me with a nudge in the ribs, 'and what did the poor tommie say in all that time?'

'Naught. Go to the boat, Kemp.'

'Dock Four, yellow flag, third one along!' cried Kemp the Temp with a monstrous wink, and off he danced towards the boats, playing air piano.

I couldn't believe it.

'You're letting him sleep in your boat, McCloud? Did I miss a chapter?'

'I don't have a boat any more. There is no third one along. There is no Dock Four. My bed is in the roof of the Belly, he won't get in there. The tommy did not say *naught*. Fool said we should say he did.'

'Why?'

'No time Max. Let's walk. Just after eight Ward shut his eyes and said *their men and their babies*. A while after nine he did it again and said *off to the blackhouse*. Just before ten he said *we need 'em in Dee*. On the stroke of eleven he said *they scream when the bell goes*. At a minute to midnight he said *so now we won't ring it*. And at a quarter past one it all started again: *Their men and their babies... off to the blackhouse... we need 'em in Dee... they scream when the bell goes... so now we won't ring it*. Do you understand this, Max.'

'Yes,' I say, although all I'm sure of is that I'll have to rework the Ballad of The Blue Banshee.

'Their men and their children were taken in that wagon, the one that leaves at the third bell. They are being kept here. The soldiers know about it. Do you understand we have to help them, Max.'

'The soldiers.'

'No Max not the soldiers. My mother will fix the soldiers. We have to help the women in that building.'

'What building.'

'That building.'

* * *