

Dark Canadee

The Sixth Voyage

Previously on DARK CANADEE...

'The Ballad of the Blue Banshee, it's a local legend. I'm going to make money reading it to passers-by...' 'We can't go to the market unless we wear these cloaks...' 'They know what happened to the English Land boys, they think you have witches in there...' 'No one likes us, Anne Bonny!' 'Join the crew.' 'We're going to the Sanatorium, see what happened to those soldiers...' 'A stick-man will stagger from the trees, white smoke pouring out of his mouth...' 'Houseman the house man at your service!' 'Go away Kemp...' 'The tommy did talk, Max, he said: Off to the Blackhouse, they scream when the bell goes... I think there are three women. Their children were taken in the blue wagon, it leaves at the third bell. They are being kept in the old Library. The tommies know this. We have to help those women...' 'And I'll have to rework the Ballad of the Banshee!' 'Max, Max...'

Upon the Nineteenth of July

The Ballad of the Blue Banshee

Pirate Max

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
But if you ask me what goes down
At the Junction at the north of town
I will tell you for free
In the night-time wagons three
Depart for destinations far
So far we don't know where they are!
The Great Hay Meadow, Blackhouse Rows,
But where the midnight wagon goes,
The blue one, none can say
But as it makes its dismal way
A bell doth ring three times!
And at those dim unearthly chimes
A cry is heard, a scream, a prayer!
But nobody is standing there!
A prayer below, a scream on high
From far along the lane a cry
A banshee-spirit doomed to fly
From tree to tree -

Stop it, Max, that's not where we are. Yes I didn't like *doth*, what the hell is *doth*? And you can't say you will tell us for free because it's not for free, you got nine doubloons, and you're charging twelve escudos each to the crowd, he should change that shouldn't he. Yes, could you not say *I will tell you for nine doubloons*? Wait, *I will tell you for doubloons nine, which is what I'm getting for these rubbish lines*. No *doubloons nine* is like *wagons three*. And it's just as bad as *doth*, no one says *doth*, and also who's scared of a banshee, you should have, I dunno, a *whale* that suddenly just shows up on land with like, a briefcase. Brrr. Which would, if you think, make as much sense as the banshee story. Given what we know now, it doesn't seem to be quite right to be saying there's a banshee. There isn't a banshee. It's three women and they're real. She's told us the whole story. Or they were real, allegedly, when they made those sounds. Where the hell is Blackhouse Rows, they're *fields* out there, not *rows*, you didn't do that for the *rhyme*, did you? I think what we're saying is that your poem's not good, it's not true, and it's not right. Apart from that it rocks.

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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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Just before I woke up in Canadee one time I had this dream that I was reading out my latest poem, 'The Ballad of the Blue Banshee'. It was a commission and I was going to read it that night at a special ceremony at the Junction. I was wearing a new burgundy shirt for the occasion. But it got interrupted by these voices of people who didn't like it, didn't feel it, didn't get it at all, had ridiculous ideas of their own how it should go, and though I tried to explain it, the words wouldn't come out. And now I remember in the dream they were all dressed in dark cloaks and hoods, like an order of monks, like they were sitting in judgement around my table, drinking strange concoctions of their own. As I broke out of my deep sleep, finally words came, as poetry will always find a way -

*A bell doth ring three times!
And at those dim unearthly chimes
A cry is heard, a scream, a prayer!
But nobody is standing there!
A prayer below, a scream on high
From far along the lane a cry
A banshee-spirit doomed to fly
From tree to tree -*

'Stop it, Max, that's not where we are,' someone is saying, McCloud is saying as I see where I am, at a table outside the Belly of Lead on a warm muggy evening, the waiters are trying to make the rainbow fairy-lights work, there must be a loose connection.

'Yes I didn't like *doth*, what the hell is *doth*?' and the Jazz Lady's there too, she has a foamy green cocktail, we all have a foamy green cocktail and are wearing cloaks.

'And you can't say you will tell us for free,' Sal says as she's stirring hers with the little stick,' because it's not for free, you got nine doubloons, and you're charging twelve escudos each to the crowd, he should change that shouldn't he.'

Sharp Practice is also there, he has a pull-along suitcase with him, he's taken my notebook calmly from me and is shading the phrase with a yellow highlighter: 'Yes, could you not say *I will tell you for nine doubloons?*'

I want to say it's not metrical and what rhymes with *doubloons?* but the words still won't come out.

Sal tries it out: 'Wait, *I will tell you for doubloons nine, which I'm getting for these rubbish lines...*'

'No, *doubloons nine* is like *wagons three*,' says the Jazz Lady, gazing out to the misty ocean, 'and it's just as bad as *doth*, no one says *doth*, and also who's scared of a banshee, you should have instead, I dunno, a *whale* that suddenly just shows up on land with like, a briefcase. Brrr.'

'Which would, if you think,' says McCloud, looking over at the glow of the market, 'make as much sense as the banshee story.'

I want to say it's a poem, it's make-believe, it's *imagination!* but they don't let me get a word in.

'Given what we know now,' says Sharp Practice quietly, still shading passages in yellowy-green, 'it doesn't seem quite right to be saying there's a banshee...'

'There isn't a banshee. It's three women and they're real,' says McCloud.

'She's told us the whole story,' Sal Bonny nods to the white-haired girl.

'Or they were real, allegedly, when they made those sounds,' Sharp adds.

'Where the hell is Blackhouse *Rows*,' Sal wants to know, 'they're *fields* out there, not *rows*, you didn't do that for the rhyme, did you?'

I've *heard* them called *Rows*, I want to say, but I never have, and no words come.

'I think what we're saying,' McCloud is saying they're saying, 'is that your poem's not good, it's not true, and it's not right.'

'Apart from that it rocks,' says Sal.

'Look Max,' says McCloud to me, with her hand on my arm, 'old man young, young man old, don't be downhearted. It's a sideshow.'

There isn't time to change it, I want to say and finally I hear my own voice:

'There isn't time to change it. The performance is tonight at the Junction, I have a new shirt and I'll have nothing to read. Are you sure this isn't a dream? Am I wearing trousers for example. Yes.'

'Max is back,' says Sal Bonny. 'He made his demon deal, he has a blood-red shirt. At least make a disclaimer at the beginning.'

'Say there are three real women?' the Jazz Lady suggests.

'Canadee will burn if he says that,' Sal sighs into her drink, 'English Land need the banshee. Everyone's on edge.'

'Just strongly imply it's fictional,' is the counsel of Sharp Practice, 'that'll hold it for now.'

'And do please get rid of *doth*,' says the Jazz Lady.

Sharp hands McCloud my notebook. She closes it and rises from the table:
'I'll write this out on mum's performance paper, Max, and I'll bring it to the Dockhouse in good time for your reading.'

'Where are you going?' I don't want McCloud to go.

'I have to find my way to the third soldier, see what shape he's in.'

She walks away along the side of the market, which is filling up with noise and people. The sky is still weirdly lilac but that won't last.

'What about the Poets?' I ask of no one in particular, but the Jazz Lady gives me a wafer-thin sheet of grey with six faces sketched in copper and gold:

'Hilberg, Lockton, McInerney, Reid, Sharyshova, Weiss,' I intone, I like to say the names before I meet them, and then the fairy-lights come on all around us in front of the Belly of Lead, and round the side of the building come seven more monkish figures in their hoods, accompanied by various cats.

I must look quite nonplussed for a moment, but Sal leans over and points from picture to picture, saying 'Weiss, McInerney, Lockton, Reid, Sharyshova, Hilberg,' and the leading monk is the barman Helly from Heligoland who says:

'All right ladies, acquaintance made, this is Max whose fault this is, and this is Dark Canadee. You are, quite literally, welcome to it.'

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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.

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All these Plague-Timers seeking refuge here, I've had to find ways to distinguish them quickly, especially now they wear cloaks and hoods. There is nothing much I'm getting better at in life, but this is an exception. As they spread out through the market in their twos and threes, I've already got it all down. I know Lockton has the

two cats with her, McInerney one skinny black one, Reid is walking barefoot and has webbed feet, which is helpful, and when you see the silhouette of a great blue heron looking down from a rooftop, you know it's looking at Weiss. Sharyshova sketches as she walks: as soon as her picture comes into being she throws it away with a sigh, for the nearest cat to play with. Hilberg actually introduces herself, saying:

'I find poetry more interesting than Global Health, which is my field. Ironically I discovered this during a global pandemic.'

I'm interested to hear that: 'People round here think there's something called White Death coming, Hilberg, is that a thing you've studied?'

'What did I just say.'

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They have a rare old time in the market. There are several new stalls, and the old ones are being squeezed for space. There's still a turquoise blizzard by the lights of **Sneau de Cologne**, the great cuts are sizzling at the **Fish'n'Chop Ship**, and **Rack Of Beyond** is doing well, for the pointless magazines keep on rolling o'er the seven seas. Hilberg stops now at **Liquorice Goffee** and says frankly to the stallholder:

'I do not understand how anyone can eat that.'

The stallholder smiles sympathetically and starts rearranging the signs again till he has three exceptionally narrow stalls selling **Goffee, Ice and Liquor**. As he does so he advises Hilberg: 'You want to talk to him, he understands everything.'

I, Pirate Max the Poet, happen to be standing there at **Liquor**, purchasing a dark'n'stormy in a can.

I say: 'I don't understand *everything*,' and am about to form some sort of witty clause to go with that when I realise he doesn't mean me anyway. He means an old grizzled man sitting behind me. He has a grey moustache and a tattered suit. He occupies his own narrow empty stall, he is staring into space and has an upturned panama hat in his hand.

'That's **Ted**,' says the stallholder, '**Ted Talks**. He'll tell you what you want to know.'

'Why am I here,' I hear myself saying.

Ted doesn't even look at me, he just lifts the hat for payment and I realise I don't have enough doubloons to be told why I'm here, in fact I don't have any doubloons at all. Stung by Ted's indifference, I remember when I'll next be paid.

'I'm reading my poem at midnight, Ted, it's a commission.'

'So now ya know why ya here,' Ted growls, 'whatcha bothering me for. Anyroad she was first,' and he indicates Hilberg: 'Why Does Anyone Eat Liquorice, that'll be six doubloons...'

At the far end of this alley I see the blue neon sign for **Davy Jones's Bookshop**. **Davy Jones's Bookshop** is generally to be found at the bottom of the sea, drifting,

shifting, turning dreamily into coral, but sometimes, when you least expect it, say, where there are lots of commercial shops, there it is again. It will have undergone something of a sea-change, though, into, I don't know, something –

'Richard Strange,' the stallholder introduces himself, 'I was Davy's first mate, and you are?'

'I'm Pirate Max, I'm a poet, in fact you might have some of my books in here somewhere...'

I see two cats nosing out from the bookstacks, and then in her cloak with the hood pushed back – Lockton, who crouches down to stroke her pets:

'This is Belly and this is Rosie. They've got my pamphlet here!' she says, rising up, she's got a pile in her tote-bag.

'My books are here too,' I say automatically.

'Oh? I looked,' she says doubtfully, 'what's your second name again?'

'Maxwell,' says Maxwell, 'but they may have sold out.'

'No,' smiles Richard Strange, 'I've got a load of your stuff, they're in Crafts and Hobbies. Would you mind signing some while you're here?'

'What. Why are they in Crafts and Hobbies.'

Like I say, when you walk into **Davy Jones's Bookshop** you will notice a sea-change. Richard proudly indicates to Lockton and me where my books are displayed in Crafts and Hobbies:

'We got *Neptune*, we got *Tale of the Mariner's Boy*, we got the new one *How The Devil Are Ye*, oh and we sometimes sell some of these...' He picks up a stained white book and reads a blurb off the back for the benefit of Lockton: '*The best book about pottery I have ever read*,' then he stands back, presenting me: 'And here right here is the author!'

'*On Pottery*,' says Lockton, turning over the book, 'I didn't know you knew about pottery. Look Simon Heritage likes it!'

'He knows about pottery too.'

I get away from the bookshop. At the end of the alley I turn back to check it's still there and of course it's shut down. I pass by the queues at **Herb Your Enthusiasm** and **Octopus Plate**. At **You Only Have To Ask**, I see McInerney with her skinny black cat on her shoulder, she's asking the stallholder:

'How do I get north from here? Loki and I need to travel north where we belong.'

The stallholder points over her shoulder in the direction of the Junction: 'Blue wagon at midnight.'

'Where can I buy a ticket?'

'No wagons going tonight. There's a performance. A poetical performance.'

And I'm passing by, 'It's me, Maxwell, I'm reading my commission!'

McInerney ignores me and asks the stallholder: 'Why did you tell me when it's going if it isn't going at all?'

From that point on the answers she gets diminish rapidly in usefulness, and then I see why. The stall has changed its name, an M has been scruffily glued up there and it is now called **You Only Have To Mask**. The stallholder won't talk any more to anyone without one.

'White Death in the outskirts,' say a man and wife going by, they both wear masks over their mouths so I don't know which one's talking: 'we reckon it's them PTs at the Doghouse, don't we,' 'we do,' 'what you say?' 'we do, they just play their voodoo card games and someone gets sick.'

'That's not how diseases spread,' says Hilberg, who happens to be in the queue, 'but masks are a good idea.'

'And I suppose you know all about it,' says the husband or the wife.

'Well I'm a specialist in Global Health,' says Hilberg.

'And I'm the King of Fiji,' says the wife or husband, taking off their masks.

You Made It Here is doing good business. Reid is finding the ground too rough on her webbed feet, so she's bought some espadrilles. As soon as she take possession of them, she says proudly: 'I made these myself.'

Something dark flaps overhead and we see the great silhouetted heron flying over. Weiss emerges from a cubicle at **You Made It Here**, she's bought several items of clothing and she also made them all.

The last stall before the edge of the market, where the dark abandoned Library looms, is called **This Is The End**. Music is playing.

Of our elaborate plans the end...

'All my dreams are of the apocalypse,' says Sharyshova, who is standing there, listening, eyes closed, as I draw up beside her.

'You mean the film?' I'm trying to recall it, 'with the helicopters?'

She breathes deeply till my words were never said. Then she says: 'Once I danced with Jim Morrison in the desert.'

I'll never look into your eyes again...

'I'm going to gather the troops,' I say after a pause, like my dad would have said after a pause, so I say 'I don't mean troops, I mean - gang, I mean,' then very quietly as I know which way the wind is blowing, 'I'm going to gather the... *poets*.'

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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 paper dice is rolled for order: *Sharyshova, Reid, Lockton, McInerney, Weiss, Hilberg*. 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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Summer-born poetry

Natalia Sharyshova

The air is stifling, palpable.
It begs for a touch.
Surely, a striptease to trick you to pay
with your ribs
 (grinded one by one)
then your lungs
 (so delicately, thank you)
to finally mute you.
I flirt with it. I let it stick.
My skin turns rotten.
It gives a panic attack to every single cell in my body
trapped in the smothering summer.

Today my mind is spiraling into a vanishing point
so dense that it starts to attract
the illusionary spindrift of all the things
living
 haunting
 (never existed?)
until they crash and melt and mold
into a melodic rattle of words
that I spit out and swallow again
to distill
 to dispel
 to
 - breathe out -

*

‘Poems that cry out in climatic discomfort from the off must stay within those constraints. Be it heat or cold or rain or high wind, we hear that voice, beset, beleaguered, out of doors, and we will not settle for less than the sound its suffering makes. The white space must have a consistent temperature, as it does here, and the line-endings will have to respond to it, as they sort of do here. Sharyshova instantly gives us warmth, wet warmth, muggy warmth, how do I know those details? Well *stifling* of course, and *palpable* backs it up with the glisten of sweat suggested by the near-homophone *pulp*, but the two words with their consonant clusters, teeth, tongue and lips all rapidly involved, not to mention the fatigued done-with-this-line full-stop, all help to thicken the air, slow the movement, raise the heat to power.

‘This gets better, warmer, thicker. *It begs for a touch*. The heat itself isn’t happy either, wants to be touched, thinks in its ascendancy that’s physically possible. Well the same invisible rules, unspoken rules that can get you hurt, apply to any man at any strip-club, and Sharyshova’s there already, with her sibilants, the sounds of *Surely*, *a striptease* being disrobed into *trick you to pay* – with the S gone, and the S was the sex. All climatic discomfort expresses itself either by reminding you of your body’s architecture (*ribs*) or its mechanics (*lungs*). Neither thought is welcome, and these two body-parts are harassed in distinct unpleasant ways. I don’t like the indents here, because it feels a little too hot to make that lurch inward, or leave your table in the strip-joint, but I like the brackets because they speak of your sides, your edges, your mortal coil not shuffled off at all, and, as I say, edges are where the action is: sweat, shivers, goose-bumps, rubbing, mopping, wiping.

‘The heat wins here. The lines are done, too hot to stir. For *mute* may seem a blank word, but *mute you*’s dense and chewy and close to babble. The flirting and sticking of the next line are a familiarly sleazy pair. People flirt when they’re stuck, people get stuck flirting, they hope something will stick with the flirtiest of efforts. Think of plays set on the hot estates around big houses, Chekhov, Turgenev, Tom Stoppard, Tennessee Williams. Some great plays are nothing but flirting and sticking. They don’t tend to end happily: *My skin turns rotten*.

‘What’s admirable here is how the descriptions of pure bodily unease lift out suggestively into the moment. Environments are sketched tonally – *a striptease to trick you* – relationships are hinted at – *so delicately, thank you* – and a psychology made to feel inevitable, the sense that the human-flesh-I am does not belong in this place which will turn the skin rotten. As Frost warns, *There are roughly zones*. As James Wright muses to the dusky sky from his hammock: *I have wasted my life*.

‘Up to now we are i’the’heat with Sharyshova. The physics of the poem is established, the heat is all-encompassing, has demanded it itself is the subject, the sole matter in hand. But the next line is too long for the heat, and it’s a little too fussy: *It gives a panic attack to every single cell in my body*. I don’t think *panic attack* is as good or surprising as what we’ve had, the striptease, the flirting, and *in my body* isn’t needed, we’re marooned there already. There’s certainly a home for *smothering* in this poem, but I think *trapped* and *summer* are already absorbed, breathed in like warm fumes. The stanza-break is just right here. Breath is needed to say any more. In the space the voice thinks beyond the immediate caging heat. I would consider breaking that next line though, after what, after *mind*?

Today my mind
is spiraling into a vanishing point –

‘or after spiraling?

Today my mind is spiraling
into a vanishing point

‘I could make the case for either (my mind is *what*? or my mind is spiraling *where*?) but I think both play the heat better than the long line. White space aside, I do like where the thoughts are going. I would drop *that* from the next line, *that* is too fussy and secretarial a word in this heat, so it’s *so dense it starts to attract*, and maybe space the next line out over two, mainly because *illusionary spindrift* is lovely and could do with its chance to seep into the mind. There’s no harm in giving *of all the things* its own line, not in a heat like this.

‘I think *spindrift* earns you these indents, so *living* and *haunting* can, well, spin and drift across. This time I like the indents but not the brackets of (*never existed*?) – because you can let the warm air caress that thought as it drifts by – maybe another stanza-break? As the energy changes here, there’s a quickening with *until they crash and melt and mold...* that’s what stanza-breaks are for, you can alter the energy as you tumble down. This poem is especially alert to sound and its mutations flecked with meaning, so here we see *melt and mold* melt and mold into *melodic*, and a similar process of ingestion and expulsion governs here (ditching the indoor-word *that*):

I spit out and swallow again
to distill
to dispel
to
– breathe out –

‘The dashes around *breathe out* do just what they should: at the start they interpose a necessary wait before the vital breath that ends the poem, while at the end they do what Dickinson’s dashes do, electrify the space, absolve it of time, travel on into nowhere – and if you think dashes and brackets are more or less interchangeable, well, imagine brackets there.

‘You know what, *every* poem takes place at a certain temperature. Rarely is it the subject itself, as here, but this poem teaches us the good effects of climatic consistency. Something tells me we, as a poetry-writing species, are going to have to learn how to write about being too hot, in the wrong place, fighting for breath, fighting for words, whether the poetry is summer-, autumn-, winter- or springborn...’

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As the poets are shuffling papers and looking for the next poem, Sharyshova says simply:

‘The light.’

Not yet understanding I say I think she has the light pretty much right in her poem, and I begin to dwell on that subject, which I’m liable to do forever unless stopped but she stops me by saying again:

‘The light.’

‘Night was falling when we arrived,’ says Weiss, ‘and now it isn’t, something’s changed.’

I realise no one’s talking about poems. Sharyshova and Weiss are talking about right now, this moment.

‘It’s too light,’ says Sharyshova, ‘it’s like the white nights back home.’

‘But you’re not back home,’ Reid points out.

‘But I’m not back home,’ she stares into space.

It’s true what they’re saying, it’s somehow still twilight but it should be dark by now. I gesture to everything: ‘I don’t know about that,’ then I gesture to the poem in front of me, ‘I know a bit about this, shall we begin?’

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Plastic Dancer on the Foreshore

Helen Reid

What accident or mischief has brought me
to this sludgy resting place?
Colours, fine features gone (my lovely lips)
washed away on the tides.

Yet I am complete, I hold the position,
pure delight in the eyes of a child,
just enough of a coquette
for those a little older. I lean forward,
left leg raised behind me
(I have never seen my left foot
but I know it has never touched the ground)
and I'm poised to revolve,
my loveliness made infinite
in a triptych of mirrors.
Gatherers treasure the broken,
shards of Delft, the chipped glass
bottle stoppers, and bovine molars.
But when I am found
(under this groyne - the indignity!)
I'll hear that gasp once more, the thrill,
as I emerge, exquisite, out of darkness.

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'For this special subject so close to my heart, I defer to Miss Charlotte Brontë...

Papa bought Branwell some soldiers at Leeds. When Papa came home it was night and we were in bed, so next morning Branwell came to our door. Emily and I jumped out of bed and I snatched up one and exclaimed *This is the Duke of Wellington!* Emily likewise took one and said it should be hers. When Annie came down she took one also. Mine was the prettiest, perfect in every part. Emily's was a grave-looking fellow, we called him *Gravey*. Anne's was a queer little thing - very much like herself - he was called *Waiting Boy*...

'I saw the Brontë sisters once, outside the village I teach in on Thursdays, they were playing with toy soldiers by firelight in a wood. Like the sisters, I pretty much went directly from playing with toys to writing stories about them. 'Cold in the earth, and the deep snow piled above thee...' is the first line of Emily's 'Remembrance' (which Teacher Walcott of Old Boston made us memorize in our very first class) but in some editions 'Remembrance' has the original title Emily gave it: 'R. Alcona to J. Brenzaida', the pair being characters - toys - straight out of the world of Gondal.

‘I still use figurines – soldiers, princesses, cowboys, farmhands – to help me plot out plays and remember who’s where in what scene. At the end of a day’s writing, I lay them down together on my desk so they can relax, flirt, gossip, they don’t have to stand any more. I look at them with a curious love, as Reid does here. I think of our brains beholding them, a little baffled, as if they’re strange messengers from before, when the light was different: *this was everything to me, and it looks just like it did. What have I forgotten?*

‘Of course Reid’s Plastic Dancer has undergone a bit of a sea-change, lips and colours are worn away, but she holds her poise – do we not still remember all those postures and expressions, the glossy faces dabbed with red and black? Good toy shops still sell figurines, Davy Jones will stock them, and you can see those self-same postures in the soldiers and animals, which is to feel an eerie kinship with unreachable souls. *We are still here, we still mean this, why won’t you play with me?* Reid voices this sense of dignity, *in-dignity* –

*What accident or mischief has brought me
to this sludgy resting-place?*

‘Who disturbs my sleep, indeed. Reid brings the creating light of a child’s – a poet’s – attention to the dancer, using a kind of dual consciousness. What’s excellent about this is that the detail in the description suggests that same loving curiosity that children bring to the shapes of toys – see the Yorkshire sisters – which means the dramatic monologue is functioning both as the dancer’s voice and the finder’s sight. One can almost feel the plastic lady held and turning in the fingers.

‘*This sludgy resting-place* can be the present, as if to the timeless the present is some negligible pond, but it could also describe the text – by which I mean the arrest and confinement of the Dancer, who thought herself free as Ariel, now stuck inside the ponderous gaze of a mortal. The bracketed *my lovely lips* is a sweetly consoling aside, a pang of personal loss within a relatively philosophical outlook: *resting-place, washed away on the tides...* Also very aware – the Plastic Dancer knows what it was to the youngest and what it was to the growing. Actually what she *is*, not *was*, as the Dancer has forgotten time. Like *Under Milk Wood*’s Rosie Probert, she has *forgotten that she was ever born...*

*Yet I am complete, I hold the position,
pure delight in the eyes of a child,
just enough of a coquette
for those a little older...*

‘How subtly she reminds us she stands at the gateway of the erotic, as anyone who played with figurines will readily attest, and her posture, determined forever by some long-gone designer at Whitmans or Mattel or Britains Herald, is her life, her fate, her character: *I lean forward,/left leg raised behind me...* How could a sensitive child not wonder why that particular shape was struck for the ages? And even the alien element here, the fact that such figures cannot move their limbs at all, becomes a facet of her character, a little forlorn, a little preening, a lot of making the best of, well, one’s lot: *I have never seen my left foot/but I know it has never touched the ground...*

‘Reid lets this feeling grow, as if the Dancer’s contemplation of her posture fills her with forceful grace, a kind of blameless narcissism which might develop in only the very alone, or those who lived only one kind of life from teenage onwards – ballerinas, pop singers, footballers, film stars – or anyone they make dolls of for children...

*and I’m poised to revolve,
my loveliness made infinite
in a triptych of mirrors...*

‘Plastic is doing all sorts of work here. It comes with a shrug of contradictions: *plastic* was malleable when it made the Dancer, but it’s not now, it’s solidly taking thousands of years to die. Our beautiful survivor may glow with self-respect, but she’s also a pollutant, a garish interloper, and our historical awareness of that adds yet another strand to the poem’s interwoven perspectives.

‘For the Dancer can only believe her return to dry land, to the world, to being known and by extension loved, is a welcome event, a delight to all who behold her. She’s been drifting in the shallows long enough to know what she’s competing with for the world’s attention, or that of its gatherers: *shards of Delft, the chipped glass/bottle stoppers, and bovine molars...*

‘Tellingly, Reid casts this vision into the yet-to-come, so the Dancer’s hopes are as frozen as her limbs:

*But when I am found...
I’ll hear that gasp once more, the thrill,
as I emerge, exquisite, out of darkness.*

‘Well, only in a children’s Hollywood film would the poor dear be found and treasured by the right little person: otherwise that gasp might be horror, or dismay, or disgust, as the blank face and whitened lips of our plastic decades – our years of fuel,

of doing it all wrong – hove yet again into view. It's lovely to leave this moment trembling in the future. The human resonance strikes deep. The Plastic Dancer wants her time with us again, though there is no time for her and precious little for the world, which she thinks has waited for her in a stillness like her own...

*'Cold in the earth, and the deep snow piled above thee!
Far, far removed, cold in the dreary grave!
Have I forgot, my Only Love, to love thee,
Severed at last by Time's all-wearing wave?'*

*

In the break I can't stop the whole curious company from ascending the stairs and going out to look at the sky. It's still lilac, but I say it's definitely darker:

'It's more like, I don't know, mauve.'

A couple of them glance back at me, no one seems convinced. It's the look I get when I say a poem is in rough tetrameters. They turn back to look at the sky.

'Also,' I say, 'the light from the market affects it.'

'Something is happening,' Weiss says softly. *Soft enough*, as Pirate Leonard might have sung.

What's soon also happening is a visit from two gentlemen. Geoff Palatine is a tall man in a suit and a pirate hat; Sir Gilbert is, or is dressed as, a libertine of some stripe, cravat and all. '*Ladies...*' he glozes, whoever he's addressing.

As the six Plague-Timers file back into the Dockhouse to resume the workshop, Sal Bonny and Sharp Practice come out to meet the delegation. I'm not really sure whether to be outside or downstairs, so I hang about unhelpfully in the doorway, enjoying the green light of the lantern in the tower as it slants down and soothes my old hands.

Geoff Palatine sees me there.

'Ahoj there, me, well – *hearty*. Is this peculiar sky a thing you people have – *concocted*?' Every sentence of Geoff Palatine's includes one word he egests like cat-hair.

'That's what the market-people think,' Sal concedes, 'and you're encouraging this crap so you can close us down.'

'I am – *affronted* to hear you say so, ma'am.'

Sharp Practice whistles, he didn't expect to have to explain: 'Infectious diseases don't manifest themselves in the sky.'

'Do they not,' Sir Gilbert murmurs beside him.

'One of our guests has a background in Global Health.'

'Does he really...'

'She. Yes I just said that,' says Sharp.

'Did you really...'

Geoff Palatine puts his hand on Sir Gilbert's embroidered shoulder: 'stop doing that,' and the fellow goes still.

'I understand,' says Geoff Palatine to us all, 'you have an, an, an, an, an, an, an... *expert*.'

'Yes we do,' Sal goes briskly, 'so get lost Geoff. If you want Pirate Max to read his poem at midnight you ought to tell the townsfolk to leave us alone.'

'Indeed,' Palatine smiles, 'his - *performance*... Will the Blue Banshee fly tonight, Pirate Max?'

'Don't get him started,' says Sal, waving us all back inside away from these visitors and closing the Dockhouse door on them, 'it's his worst poem ever but you get what you pay for.'

*

Katherine Lockton

Soon enough we'll all be dead so take
comfort in the little things; café
con leche, the rain in *el alto*, those
little hairs in his ears. There'll
be time for this and time for that. Do
not make homes of others' bodies
you have your place to go to.
If you are lonely, adopt a cat. Love
will wake you in the morning
its sharp claws wanting to eat.

*

'What is title-less-ness? What is not titling a poem? It is implicitly to accelerate the bringing of tidings. All poems *lurch* into being, tectonic plates within the poet's psyche slip abruptly, and your time can suddenly bear no more silence. This applies to everything from love poem to elegy to epic, via all the commissions and occasions, or even the need to exercise and get better at writing poems - which is all I think Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are, as it goes. Sorry Dark Lady. So writing a poem in your cell to save your life - as Eric Bloodaxe did, haplessly provoking a great publisher into being a thousand years later - or writing a poem because I asked you to for exercise? Same principle. Saying is relief, silence is discomfort. A title, whether you choose it first (don't) or add it on last (do), marks the admission that silence can't go on: saying is the outcome.

‘So to not title dispenses with that heraldic moment: the *Ba-naa! Poem ahoy!* moment, and simply begins. In my pirate transcripts I put the poet’s name at the top, but on most pages and most stages, this poem would begin with nothing and suddenly become Lockton’s writing or Lockton’s voice:

Soon enough we’ll all be dead

‘No pause to settle, or to *mmm, I like that title or why that’s intriguing or ooh I like this one or I wish she’d do the old stuff* (sorry Lockton, occupational hazard) and this opening also strides easily into the category of the Ancient Mariner’s *There was a Ship*, which is our great criterion for getting attention in these quarters. What I also love is that it could be stand-up, it could be Lockton’s small talk, I don’t know, it could be the intro, or it just might be that the poem has started. I have a feeling one should value lines that can bridge those possibilities, whether they’re comical or lyrical or skull-on-the-sill *memento mori* like this one.

‘Of course, as a pirate of Dark Canadee I can hardly argue with or better this opening statement, especially when the night has ceased to fall and I’ve clean run out of colours to call the sky, and I can’t remember what happened without my friends reminding me. I like its breeziness, its *anyway keep going*, and I like the subtlety of *enough* – soon enough for whom? For all of us? For Lockton? For some deity? The little distinction *soon enough* is playful with the essential absurdity of the concept, life I mean, which is why it works. *No one here gets out alive*, as Sharyshova knows Jim Morrison said, as half the poets from here to Eric Bloodaxe are saying, and Eric, sentenced to die in the morning, knows of what he speaks.

‘Lockton veers close to parody with *take/comfort in the little things*, as it impacts like a cliché, but remember, clichés emerge on the other side as world-weary truths. There is, essentially, damn-all to do but *take/comfort in the little things* – and all things are little things in a match-up with oblivion, ask Ozymandias king of kings, or tell Musk and Branson the pointless astronauts repeating tragedy as joyride – but by the speaker of the poem giving us *her* unique version of that, the coffee, the rain, the hairs in his ears, we are reminded that everyone in the world can make a trio of little things which are theirs and theirs alone. Let’s remember that an outdoor sighting of a human being has two elements which hit our retinas at the very same instant: a face and the sky. Mortality and eternity. We have a trillion pictures of that, we probably have a trillion each.

‘I tend to get things wrong when I check with the Book of Wicky, but I believe *el alto* is a town in Bolivia, and I know from the ship’s log that Lockton has Bolivian heritage. Then again it’s all small-case, which works for me as a valid diminishing of

proper nouns in the bright light of our death, the topic at hand. In any case it's raining, which gives me outdoors, plus *alto* gives me a high place, and the third component of the trio brings human intimacy: being close enough to another to know the *little hairs in his ears*. The pronoun dabs a man into the picture with the lightness of a brushstroke. Also, saying *little* again is no lazy repetition, it's saying the hairs qualify to stand up to oblivion: all she asked of us was that the things to take comfort in be *little*.

'Lockton embraces the futility by lowering the sights of the language to the vaguely waving sigh of *There'll/be time for this and time for that*. I would slightly question the line-breaking here. *There'll* hangs rather awkwardly over the edge, because the elision has swallowed *will* – a word with a sublime swirl of intention, desire and the future – so I might let *There will* hang there – it goes well with the delicate throb of the *hairs in his ears* and draws out the silence that stands waiting politely round this green islet of a poem. *There will/be time for this and time for that. Do not*

'Similarly I would raise up that *not* from the line it's on and let it finish the previous one, as above. *Do* is uncomfortable facing any space, especially if you're about to negate it, and furthermore – why not let a little shiver of Dylan Thomas's villanelle tremble there? *Do not...* Those who know that poem well will feel the ghost at the line-end. That would give you this:

*Do not
make homes of others' bodies
you have your place to go to*

'Which is beautiful why. Because the first line has proverbial weight, like a more metaphorical Desiderata: *Do not/make homes of others' bodies*, but the second line takes the speaker home, takes us all home from the sky, the eternal, home to indoors, to the hut, to the cave, home from daylight that silhouettes our faces upon nothingness: *you have your place to go to*. Actually that sounds like Desiderata too.

'I think the ending is almost perfect, how the cat that wakes *you in the morning/ its sharp claws wanting to eat* flows into love doing just the same, but *If you are lonely, adopt a cat* sounds too like jolly village-hall do-gooding, after that wonderful *you have your place to go to*, which speaks in analogue, not digital, not in the tongue of *if this, then that*. It's a shade too intrusive, too instructive, not now the You that has to take comfort in the little things is safely home. Maybe the problem is *lonely* – this poem has already covered *lonely* – and maybe the issue is *adopt*. I don't seek solutions near the ends of people's poems, that's for you to do, Lockton, I just want to make sure you never touch or tamper with *Love/will wake you in the morning*. Not while it still does.'

*

In the short break I venture upstairs to ask if McCloud has come back with my commission on new paper. I haven't made a copy so I'm depending on her.

'I have to read it at midnight!'

'Haven't you memorised it,' Sal Bonny yawns without looking from her work.

'I forgot to,' I say, and they all laugh but I didn't mean it to be funny.

'*Tant pis,*' says Sal, turning a scribbled page.

'*A bell doth make some noise,*' says the Jazz Lady, 'that's a line somewhere, but it's ironic because they don't ring those bells any more.'

Sal takes up the challenge: '*A bell doth chime, Max doth rhyme, coins get passed, can't be arsed.*'

Applause breaks out around the Office of the Dockhouse, which causes me to look through one of the narrow windows.

'Why's it still light?' I wonder, but they don't know that either.

*

The Ants In My Kitchen

Maud McLnerney

What I like best about them is
how purposeful they are, gun-metal
gray and small and so determined
as they go about their work.

What work is that?

I couldn't say, but they
are focused and intrepid
tracing paths around an alien
geography of chilly tiles
and blasting radiators. Mining
catfood keeps them busy,
manna from the pantry cupboard.

Their world
is non-dimensional, they travel
upside down and rightside up
and sometimes sideways
and they teleport.

Clearly they are beaming in
from somewhere else, appearing
without warning on a blank spot
near the baseboard, foraging
for dilithium crystals or rare metals
or whatever makes their antships go.

I think they come in peace.

*

‘As McInerney considers the ant in a tone that’s part-bafflement, part-wonder and all respect, let us bring the same careful light to the voice she uses in this poem. The brisk face-front outset, its clear and sufficient title followed by immediate commencement on the matter in hand, has a daylight plainness, literally *candour* – a word with its roots in whiteness – in the sense that the householder is affably conceding that her kitchen contains visible ants. But more importantly, that her kitchen also contains a human presence with the time and generosity to *consider* ants, bring light to them, as opposed to, say, extirpating them in some way, or sweeping them under the carpet. They are accorded the title. You could say they have the floor.

‘See how this same openness works in the finest of ant-poems, Robert Frost’s ‘Departmental’, which opens thus:

*An ant on the tablecloth
Ran into a dormant moth
Of many times his size.
He showed not the least surprise.
His business wasn't with such.
He gave it scarcely a touch,
And was off on his duty run...*

‘Whatever this is expressing about the relevant insects, it is – of course – saying most about humans, and above all that a human has stopped movin’ and shakin’ for long enough to bear witness to another very different realm, and while Frost brings a slightly fatiguing anthropomorphism to this attention (in the old Disney style) the poem – first – does no harm.

‘McInerney doesn’t need that style, with its jaunty trimetrical rhymes, and opts for a calm, distanced and detailed approval in colloquial measure: *how purposeful they*

are, *gun-metal/gray and small and so determined...* Throughout the poem we'll see that the Frostian attitude, which is not only Disneyish but mildly Linnean too, after the great categorizer of creatures with Mankind on the top of the pile, is exchanged for McInerney's wry and witty science-fictional speculations, which seem a more responsible way of addressing the inner life of an unknowable life-form. The speaker in the poem is prepared to sound silly in imagining these aliens, which pays its own compliment to otherness. Where Frost makes the ants sound like Americans in the workplace: [They] *couldn't be called ungentle,/But how thoroughly departmental,* McInerney makes a dance of distance: her extrapolations about ant-life are not only nuts but also quite sane. All in all, as one of Auden's mad wartime officials says about insects in 'The Orators': *they are not with us.*

'The word *determined* is doing great work here, its meaning encompassing both willpower and pre-destiny, but it also has a flash of *termite* in it, along with *deterrence*, and for an ant changing course in the face of some colossal crumb of ours, *deterred* seems the flattest, most formic formulation available. Many poets would go on in this vein for ages, being responsible and ant-aware, poem-faced – or *po-faced*, as one might abbreviate it – continuing the never-ending work of bardic atonement for Man's last two hundred years of planetary despoliation, but McInerney does something more interesting. This:

as they go about their work.

What work is that?

I couldn't say...

'The ants proceed in single file through these charming deployments of white space. Nothing like pausing in a poem to raise your hand: *What work is that?* And it's equally noble not to have an answer: *I couldn't say.* This bright, flawed, including kitchen is a friendly place to be, it makes room for the moment blankly passing, which is the very least that creatures ask of one another. The little bifurcation into observer and questioner is the speaker's own way of making humans seem equally odd. Suddenly there are two human voices in the space, one plus one, both nonplussed. No one is plussed! The combined voice, accepting ignorance for *homo sapiens*, who has always found that so hard to do, gives a humble human account of what's going on with Ant-kind.

'This is of course roughly what the voice in 'Departmental' does, but Frost's form is so *governing* that the ants have no real freedom from it: they are office-workers (not poets) and therefore fools like poets think them. Whereas McInerney just opens

up various spaces to wonder in, lets the possibilities grow from this precise and unarguable diptych: *focused and intrepid*. So the ants are industrial (*mining*) but also spiritual (*manna*). They are beyond us physically (*upside down and right side up*) but also technologically (*and they teleport*). After all, if the most resonant creature of our species can call us noble in reason, infinite in faculty, in action like an angel and in apprehension like a god, then our nearest neighbour to the quintessence of dust can be imagined teleporting.

‘What is teleporting? *The hypothetical transfer of matter or energy from one point to another without traversing the physical space between them* sure sounds like poetry to me. If you take out *hypothetical*. Let’s not forget that literary time-travel could be said to start in *King Lear*, where the Fool on the heath mutters to no one in particular:

This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time.

‘And who can argue with McInerney that the ants *are beaming in/from somewhere else?* To Suddenly Meet Something, to behold a realm *without warning on a blank spot*, in the morning, in the evening, in the course of a day or a life on the planet, is to reprise the eternal light of aloneness, and to conjure the yet-to-come instant of first contact with a celestial neighbour. (This prophecy Max has made but I die before its time.) McInerney trembles on the trapeze between the crazily vast and the crazily tiny, and ends up floating out into space with our old toy notions of the future, all *dilithium crystals* and *antships*.

‘*I think they come in peace*, she says, and with her tone she’s earned that hand extended humbly into the oblivion after the poem, shoring utterly uncertain words against our ruin. I’m not sure I agree with the optimistic conclusion you draw from the data, McInerney, but you have spoken well for our species. Let’s not ask the males to do it again. Though I’ll leave it to the Frost of ‘Design’ to open the trap-door beneath our fond hopes that anyone knows, or is listening, or will come:

*What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appal? –
If design govern in a thing so small.*

*

‘What but design of *brightness* to appal...’ I cleverly add, once we’re out in front of the Dockhouse in the eerie lavender glow.

All three cats have joined us, Lockton’s Belly and Rosie and McNerney’s thin black Loki, all three are slinking round in a ring, their stomachs to the ground: they do not think much of the atmosphere.

‘*Brightness falls from the air,*’ I go on, deftly quoting Thomas Nashe and annotating thus: ‘that’s from *A Litany In Time Of Plague*. Get it?’

‘Sshh,’ says someone, ‘we’re on a break.’

All at once I see the great blue heron perched on top of the old Library. You can see it’s blue, that’s how much light is still around. I turn to Weiss: ‘Why is your heron sitting up there?’

‘Sshh,’ says Weiss, ‘it’s sensing something.’

‘I’ll just be quiet than, shall I,’ I mutter to them all and no one seems to mind.

Down along the lane some of the cloaked Deal Porters have come out to look at the sky, then look down and note the details on their new forms in octuplicate.

‘What’s in that building?’ Hilberg asks, pointing to the great tilting edifice of the abandoned Library.

‘Well, my friends,’ oh *now* they want to hear from me, ‘you used to see young women waving in the upper windows but it’s been dark for quite a while.’

‘They’re still there,’ says Weiss with her eyes closed, ‘women, you just can’t see them. There are two on the far side, one just below the roof where the bird is.’

I blurt: ‘How do you *know* that?’

‘How do you not?’ she wonders.

‘And that one, the nearest...’ Lockton murmurs now, frowning as if something’s coming back to her from long ago, ‘has thoughts of – of falling.’

‘What?’

‘She is thinking of falling. I fell out of a window when I was a child, so I know that feeling and it’s coming from there.’

‘The light!’ cries Reid, ‘out on the ocean, look!’

While all around is the violet light of a day that seems to have forgotten how to end, on the far horizon is a cloud of bright white forming and widening, a broad oceanic fog is rolling our way.

‘A cloud, McCloud,’ I remember now, ‘*my mother will fix the soldiers...*’

‘*The days are bright and filled with pain,*’ sings Sharyshova.

‘*The Crystal Ship*, *The Doors*, you see a crystal ship in there?’ Out on the sea I see a tilting masted form being lost in cloud again.

‘I do,’ she says.

‘I don’t. But I know whose ship it is.’

‘Whose?’ they all turn and ask of me, all six.

‘Sorry,’ I go, ‘break’s over.’

*

Peonia

Linden Weiss

Golden leaf dust – entryway into glanced looking – float momentarily in hung mystery
Painted peach Iris rises toward air impression cast
Hedge of peony – the bone stairway opens onto this dragonfly note
Blood red ruffled skirts step between the broken oaks – mourn a message currently encoded on wind.
Straight jacket of brocade embroidered in sigils of silk psyllium
Last installment of perch was where anxious beating of wings created cause to leave town.
Invisible veins force the creature aboard Milkweed Seed – hot air balloon ride
They are after ideas that wait in vessels escaping an eagle’s notice
Flesh exposed – lay inside nest – barely cradling cracked blue eggs – a beginning.
Misfit marvel – dirt filled pockets hold the seeds of change or same
Black mold grows up the hem of trailing petal skirt – seeping toward beating vibration – Forgotten
Intervene – reach into taunted pearls – simple enough to break.
Written on chained necklace a numbered combination of heavy escape – walk toward the river –
a dock is where the boat covered in golden dust – pollen – follows the course of rising tidal marsh.
Release the loud bark of dying oaks – white pine needles litter a forest now too tired to stand
In the boat – oars drop – gliding past mist, directionless – compass held loosely in hand trailing ripples.
Unhook peonia skirts – hold dread
Color fades as ghost like breathing slips into watery bells – toward the Bone Stairs.
Dragon flies dart toward directionality – gravity is now a flowered invisible force – withholding nectar
– absent of sweet
Blood Red drips in rivulets around ankles under watercolor plantain pasted – an impression of
painting – wands dusted in peony.
Iris looking dilated – green etheric invisibility – face of telling it to the moaning – mourning.

*

‘This poem has the natural power, the *super* natural power, of openness, encompassing, a kind of ardent health. It has that in its form, these tendrils of lines fluttering from a left-justified mast – the leading capitals help to power the long pulses of wonder. It draws other poems to it, inviting, reconciling – the heat-thickened gasp of Sharyshova, the ‘gather ye rosebuds’ sigh of Lockton, the respectful dignity of Reid’s and McInerney’s encounters with stuff beyond our ken. It doesn’t say *Now This*, it says *And This*. It has the wide curiosity of a John Clare or an Amy Clampitt, where the narrative voice recedes, bows before the need to paint it right, where the poem seems to come to us untethered from the poet.

‘I would say at the outset, Weiss: lose all the punctuation except the dashes, which have the breathless awe of Emily’s – fancifully I say they lead *to* her and *from* her. Note that already you have no place for commas here, the line-breaks accomplish that, and they’ll do the full-stops too. And see how white space – *Weiss space*, can’t

help it, let me scratch that itch – is amplified in poems of variable line-length like this. The variability underwrites a significance in the motion of line and break, as if the wind is the controlling element, restless and capricious. *Peonia* moves in air, or more accurately *moving* air, the breeze, the wind.

‘Wind loosens the blossoms from the tree, in this case the articles, the conjunctions – not all of them but *most*, like October in action – for the invisible fibre of the poem is elision, the *not needing to say*. Elision can also imply awe, as it does here, in the face of cornucopia. The speaker takes eager and irregular breaths which mark the little or less time she has to take in everything. The poem has a cadence like the prose notes of Gerard Manley Hopkins, bewitched on country walks:

In the little wood/ opposite the light/ they stood in blackish spreads or sheddings like the spots on a snake. The heads are then like thongs and solemn in grape and grain-colour. But in the clough/ through the light/ they came in falls of sky-colour

‘In Hopkins’ prose you hear the future poem straining to emerge from the chrysalis. *Peonia* has the same sense of there not being time to set nature down in any controlled or ordered way – I’m not saying *Peonia* is uncontrolled, it’s not at all, I’m saying this is how to get that effect –

*Golden leaf dust – entryway into glanced looking – float momentarily
in hung mystery*

‘Let’s settle like bees on some sweet detail: how *Golden* catches the eye, ignites the poem, that’s the lurch into the need to say, as Weiss describes it well the *entryway*, and *glanced looking* has the dense precision of D. H. Lawrence, where what seems at first like repetition or tautology is actually a deepening of attention, a slowing or circling down to see. There is *looking* and there is *glanced looking*. The end of the line flutters like the tendrils they all are, as *momentarily* makes time tremble, doing nothing, and *in hung mystery* brings us mist and unknowing.

Painted peach Iris rises toward air impression cast

‘This works similarly, the splash of colour at the start, the line processing the effect on the mind, a movement from the primal Anglo-Saxon to the cerebral Latinate. The fourth line, same thing:

*Blood red ruffled skirts step between the broken oaks – mourn a message currently
encoded on wind.*

‘And now the same but with full-stop gone to highlight the gulf between them:

*Blood red ruffled skirts step between the broken oaks – mourn a message currently
encoded on wind*

‘Blow them all away in the manner of *she loves me, she loves me not...* The catalogue nature of *Peonia* makes it easy to pluck out favourite lines and dot the less successful but the real ore to mine from the poem is how to suggest the ecstatic intake of breath – intake of light, of oxygen, of beauty – and then the long various exhalations of spellbound English.

‘And in fact, with this genus of poem it’s not an especially fruitful act to do that pecking workshop thing and say *this works, this doesn’t*, one has to seek a broader principle that holds. I would say the poem functions at its highest where the sense of place, of the beguiled soul moving through this realm, is clearest, and leads most organically from bloom to bloom. This is it working – again, with full-stops gone –

*In the boat – oars drop – gliding past mist, directionless – compass held loosely
in hand trailing ripples*

Unhook peonia skirts – hold dread

*Color fades as ghost like breathing slips into watery bells – toward
the Bone Stairs*

‘It’s the glimpse of movement, a boat through trees, a perceptible ripple of dread – *the Bone Stairs* – but sketched lightly. It’s getting the light right, as *it always is*. (That, my friends, is the IN HOC SIGNO of writing poems.)

‘Another example:

Invisible veins force the creature aboard Milkweed Seed – hot air balloon ride

They are after ideas that wait in vessels escaping an eagle’s notice

Flesh exposed – lay inside nest – barely cradling cracked blue eggs – a beginning

‘Here there’s the skyward look of *hot air balloon ride*, which leads to abstract contemplation, *they are after ideas*, the long I-vowel keeping our eyes high. This is followed by the downward cluster of short e-vowels in *vessels escaping an eagle’s notice/Flesh exposed* all the way to *nest*, which is earthbound, up close, and then fills with these infant images in the pastel Easter colours of airy vowels: *nest-barely-cradling-eggs-beginning...* Why do I call the short e-vowel cluster a downward move? Only that it grows from, or rather moves *away from*, the long I-vowel that precedes it, which is located in the sky – all I mean is: if you cluster one vowel and then cluster a different

one, you will move in a distinct direction. In this case you were looking on high, so now you turn downwards to the earth.

‘There’s plenty of that sensitivity. A couple of distractions: *created cause to leave town* feels unnecessarily cryptic and hauls us from the natural scene too ungently, and *moaning – mourning* suddenly plays a game the poem’s not been playing. Ironically it’s a Hopkins move, but the game here isn’t close mutating homophone-synonyms as in GMH but those delicate vowel progressions and soft alliterations illustrated above. The last word that’s being teased here is surely *morning* – and as I open the Book of Wicky to its pictures of peonies and properly look one in the eye, could this poem have a better ending than

face of telling it to the morning ?’

*

That thing that happens in dreams is happening.

But I know Dark Canadee isn’t a dream. The Thursday village wasn’t a dream, nor was Old Boston with Teacher Walcott nor my summer plays in the Well-in-Garden, nor were Last Wednesdays or the Heavenly Village Hall. I really did meet all those people. There was a woman called Tina and a woman called Mimi. Where are they now? I mutter with Delmore Schwartz, my schwartz to the weiss –

*Bert Spira and Rhoda consume, consume
Not where they are now (where are they now?)
But what they were then, both beautiful...*

The six Plague-Timers chatter and get themselves drinks from the side-table as I sit here staring, trying to make sense –

*What am I now that I was then?
May memory restore again and again
The smallest color of the smallest day:
Time is the school in which we learn,
Time is the fire in which we burn.*

The thing that happens in dreams is that I have to perform tonight but I forgot to learn my lines and there is no script to be had. This is true right now. The fact that Dark Canadee is being slowly engulfed in a bright colossal cloud of white space is, in comparison, and by the standards of the locale, relatively lifelike.

Lockton's boyfriend is an accountant. Weiss is an edge walker and makes silk marionettes. Hilberg says she finds it alien to speak German now, but Reid speaks Italian and says why not try it, so they try it together. McNerney joins in in several languages, some of them dead. Sharyshova says she's tired of being human. There is a hush. Then their china tumblers all clonk together in a toast to the work at hand. Sometimes the beauty and breadth is dumbfounding. Here I am again, found dumb.

*

Eye Strain

Eva Hilberg

My large and my small screen I shelter
from the glare of day coming
in through the window, to keep the strain
from my eyes I retaliate
by counterillumination and
by just drawing the curtains,
I turn to shut out all evidence
of sun but the light does not
die easily on that afternoon,
instead it shines with the force
of a hundred Vermeer paintings, and
all the Dutch Masters of Light
would stop and sigh at this heavenly
spectacle, reach for their brush
to immortalise the afterglow
in all its shades of pastel,
but my screen is calling in harsh white,
other windows flicker blue
down the street, nothing stirs in the air
as I sit in my folly,
dumbstruck – I forgot that light is a gift,
not something we invented.

*

'The paper origami dice gave us this poem last – *the glare of day coming* indeed...
That's Fate having its joke with us, but there's already an eerie universality to the idea

that often nowadays light feels wrong, heat feels wrong, the air feel wrong – that’s in many of the poems we’ve had tonight, I mean this evening, this afternoon...

‘Hilberg battles with light here, in fact she battles back to the right side of it, but what a fascinating journey she takes. For what’s in play in these first lines is indeed a taking of sides. For *My large and my small screen I shelter* is the physical action of a mother shielding her young, like Raksha shields her wolf-cubs from Shere Khan at the start of *The Jungle Book* – and what does that make the ferocious tiger? Daytime.

*the glare of day coming
in through the window*

‘I didn’t like this line-break at first glance, but *glare* allows *day* to have this animal menace, which allows for the dizzying effect of breaking the line between *coming* and *in* – the head turns slightly in alarm, *where* is Day getting in? For that reason I would break after *window*: do this to incorporate the slight cringe from the new light, and give more force to *retaliate* –

*in through the window,
to keep the strain
from my eyes I retaliate
by counterillumination and*

‘And? And? Now that’s a line-break I can definitely set my face against! No but once again it isn’t, and you only discover that by moving through it time after time, being animated *posturally* by the words and breaks. You find that *counterillumination* is actually funny, over-determined, over-long, missing the bigger picture, so that the dangling *and* is left looking exhausted, wiped out, by *counterillumination*. All it comes up with is the comically modest *by just drawing the curtains...*

‘Hilberg’s speaker has done it now, she’s at war with Sol itself! I feel the next section, from here to Vermeer, needs attention. The shunning of the sunlight *seems* to have been achieved – *to shut out all evidence* – and yet it’s now described in terms which sound more like total victory:

*the light does not
die easily on that afternoon,
instead it shines with the force
of a hundred Vermeer paintings*

‘All that’s missing plot-wise, storyboard-wise, is a moment where the speaker concedes to the light, somewhere between drawing the curtains and that winning rhapsody on the Dutch Masters. A physical sign of surrender, I guess I mean. To say it *does not/die easily on that afternoon* feels a little general, like a recollection, compared to the sensitive motions of the first few lines. I’m missing that moment when the needs of the screen and the work-in-progress are utterly vanquished by the tall strips of light in the gaps between curtains, the cords and gems of light hitting your carpets and cushions so they bleed their colour. That still point of the golden afternoon when everyone you ever knew is out there playing, and you’re stuck doing homework.

‘But once the light is resplendently victorious, what a homage Hilberg pays to the gold medallist:

*all the Dutch Masters of Light
would stop and sigh at this heavenly
spectacle, reach for their brush*

– I’d say *brushes*, which would instantly give us a glimpse of Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, Brueghel and the rest all sitting in an art-class together (I wonder who the teacher is), each taking up a brush at the same time

*to immortalise the afterglow
in all its shades of pastel...*

‘This reverie turns the battle, as the speaker does what we need to do, have to do, hope we will do in the times to come – turn away from the ignoble pixels, see all the rainbows of the mind’s eye floating on the air, see past and future making their gold and platinum claims on us, mystery, memory, analogy, fantasy...

‘The speaker reminds us what that’s up against, the lure of the digits, the *screen* – a screen protects you, blocks you, stops you seeing – *is calling in harsh white – other windows flicker blue* is a deft way of doing the neighbourhood apartments all lit with consoles and laptops and TVs, the common connection made between the speaker and her neighbours. Only now it’s not the connection she wants –

*nothing stirs in the air
as I sit in my folly*

‘This is deft too, captures that sense that the digital hours most of us cave to far more than we’d like also deaden the air, drain life from it. I do like *folly*, an unexpected olde-worlde word, it links us to the Masters – they’re masters of light,

we're fools with LEDs – and it connects to a whole LinkedIn network of words like *forlorn, failed, fallacious, futile*.

‘The ending feels a little as if you see it there in the distance and try to reach it. You may not have known the ending first, Hilberg, which never works well, but it feels a little like that, so it needs attention. In fact the last line is a victim of the earlier glory. Once you’ve said *all the Dutch Masters of Light*, then all that red-golden treasure is embedded in the poem, and so the last lines feel like a prosaic annotation of what the poem’s already done. Kind of like a York Note.

‘I think what happened is that the chime of *dumbstruck* in the poem, the speaker reacting to the sunlight, maybe also happened to Hilberg writing it. The dash suggests that, it’s not sure what to do. As it is, the poem doesn’t escape from *dumbstruck*, it’s a black hole light can’t get out of. What we need here, for example – as I say, I don’t dabble too much near the ends of poems – is something blooming from the situation, something that includes the posture, the keyboard, the light, so that the revelation – and it is a revelation, at least a Damascene Reminder of the rival qualities of Lights heaven-sent and robot-made – animates the body, is felt in the moment, and is not sort of helicoptered out to a note on the margin, as now.

‘After all, every end of a poem concedes to the light, just as this port today has yielded to white space, so at this juncture light is probably *listening*, and maybe just maybe, Hilberg, it is asking less for an apology, and for more of your warm homage.’

*

O we’re done, we’re done. There’s something I have to tell them. But above I hear the gentleman of English Land have arrived to escort me to the Junction. The Plague-Timers say they’re looking forward to hearing my poem, and I murmur ‘it’s a commission, I don’t have it,’ but my words are lost in the brimful bonhomie.

I go heavily up the spiral steps and through into the lamplit Office. I stop between the desks, the place is full of people.

‘Did you cut the line with *doth* in it?’ the Jazz Lady demands, and I know there’s something I mean to tell them.

‘I don’t have it, McCloud has it. I forgot to memorize it.’

People chuckle at the joke. The oil-lamps are burning in the Dockhouse but what’s at the windows is white fog, not the yellow fog that rubs its back but the white fog that came across the sea enshrouding everything.

Sal Bonny asks the gentlemen where the boatwoman McCloud is, because she has the only copy of the Ballad in existence.

‘Ooh, that’s awkward,’ smiles Geoffrey Palatine in the lamplight, ‘that’s a little – *maladroit*...’

‘I don’t care what it is in French or Flemish or Frisian, he can’t read the poem without her, new red shirt or not.’

‘Well I’m awfully afraid she’s been, um, *detained*.’

‘What do you mean detained?’

‘Detained by, well, *us*, for trespass in the English Clinic... We found her in the ward of the young man who fell ill in these very... *quarters*...’

‘Fine, gig’s off. Belly of Lead, pirates?’

There’s something I have to tell them, and it isn’t about this stand-off. I nod because I always nod when someone offers me a drink, but Sir Gilbert the libertine is smiling in discomfort, saying ‘here’s a – *how-de-do*...’

‘We’ll give you back his fee,’ says Sal.

Geoff Palatine cringes: ‘Ooh, let us not play *politics*...’

‘We need our ballad don’t we, bards?’ Sir Gilbert gestures vaguely around as if he knows who anyone is.

The day is suddenly saved by Houseman, the house man, or Weir the Wagoneer, or Kemp the former temp, who barges through the Dockhouse door and I see McCloud behind him, silhouetted on the mist outside.

‘A reprieve, a reprieve!’ he cries, ‘do you even *know* who this lady be?’

‘Ah, Pratt the Diplomat,’ smiles Palatine, ‘exactly the solution, it was – *scripted*.’

‘She has in her hand a piece of paper! Peace in our time, peace falls on Dark Canadee, or should I say *Light* Canadee?’

‘Don’t leave the port, young miss,’ Geoff calls out to McCloud as if he were kindly, ‘we still have our little – *questionnaire*...’

A slim length of what looks like old crimson carbon paper trickles into my hands staining my fingers and this must be my poem. In the blankness of that moment I look up and remember what to tell them, I see Weiss and Lockton, and there’s Sal Bonny standing closest, I say into space:

‘The great blue heron on the roof. Tell Sal what it means.’

‘Emergency, emergency, poet in full cry!’ Kemp comes up grinning, putting his arms round everyone who doesn’t like that, ‘can *nothing* stop the man?’

*

I know we’re at the Junction from the distance we walked, but I could only see the four or five people walking closest to me. Beyond that people were lost in the white mist.

‘I had not thought death had undone so many,’ I say from somewhere, and I realise two of the figures walking are the vagabonds Ossi and Ali. Ali is murmuring

something, as he does, '*ch'io non avrei mai creduto che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta...*' and Kemp says cheerfully from right behind me:

'See Mr Max, even the ruddy beggars are translating your works!'

*

As I step up on to a raised platform, guided by McCloud, I see a vague grey crowd before me, and hear the murmuring noise they make. There are a few sprinkles of weak applause, and I find McCloud has left me alone to read my poem and Geoff Palatine with his hands in his pockets is saying a little sonnet.

'Our proud heritage...
A ghostly legend...
Our lady of the shadows...
Hope you sleep well tonight!
Truly puts us on the destination map...
And how very pleased I am...
Who needs no introduction...
Who divides his time...
Who is quite the busy bee...
Whose volumes include...
How The Deuce Are You...
Jekyll and Hide Now... Time's Tool...
And my personal favourite *Ring Of Bright Water...*
Pray silence for Pirate Max.'

*

I try to lift the long crimson paper but it's getting hot and starting to bubble until it's weeping through my fingers like blood. Then all at once my hands are clean and there is no paper and the poem has begun.

*

there is no time
there is no ballad
there is no blue banshee
there's these three women you used to hear
when the last wagon left at midnight
when the bell rang
one was crying

one was screaming
one was praying
because their husbands and babies went away in that wagon
so they don't know where their loved ones are
or what's been done with them
instead they are being kept here
by the men of English Land who organised this reading
for which I got nine doubloons the end thank you I'm here all week

*

There is silence. I can't see my hands in front of my face.

'I'm sorry I don't think I remembered that right, it didn't sound like me at all. Also I'd have made it stanzaic and wouldn't have centred it.'

At this point the noise begins to swell from the crowd inside the fog, there is booing, indignation, something comes spinning out of the white fog at me and narrowly misses. Someone pulls me roughly down the steps and I stumble, I hear grinding of things on a surface, one of the gentlemen is trying to cry out over the noise, 'we are terribly sorry there's been a bit of a mix-up on the programming front!' Another one tries louder, then it sounds like there's a cacophony of gentlemen bellowing out the poems they know -

'If you can keep your head when all around are losing theirs!' 'Oh to be in some small corner of a field in England!' 'To strive, to seek, to find the Holy Grail!' 'I wandered lonely in the madding cloud!' 'Cannon to the left of them, cannon to the right, here I am, stuck in the middle with you!' 'Is there crumpet still for tea?' 'CRY PRINCE GEORGE AND HARRY KANE AND LET THE DOGS OUT! HOO! HOO!'

*

And now the white space comes. All sound is muffled, lost behind me somewhere. The air is a cold silvery stillness, it seems to ripple as I move. I hear a voice I know, it swims through the space.

Are you there, Max?
McCloud!

Yep. Keep moving in this direction.

I can't see you.
No one can see anyone, my mother's doing her work.
McCloud I have a question...

...McCloud?
No I *don't* like Kemp the temp, he just follows me around.
Not that.
Good. What's your question, keep walking.
Did you ever actually *tell* me your mother makes white space?

Well. No I didn't. But she makes the paper. I thought you were the expert, I'm not signing up for *your* class. She'll be done soon. Just stay here, I have to help the Dockhouse folks.

Do they know about the heron?
What heron. We're going to get to the three women while no one can see us.
They're in the roof of the -
Hush Max. We know where they are.
What about English Land?
We told them the Plague was coming as bright smoke, so they're all on the ground trying not to breathe. It will clear, we don't have long. I'm going now.

*

Wowser!
What?

Not so much a pea-souper as a clam chowder!
Oh *ffs*...
Pirate Max Of Maxingbourne! Can you see me?
I can't even see myself, Kemp. Weir. Pratt.
That's not my name!
I wasn't using it as a name.
I can see *you*, Maxine...
What?
Not really. 'Tis verily a spell upon us!
I can't remember how, Kemp, but I think it's all your fault, that the soldiers ate the white space and got ill and McCloud's mother had to come here over the sea to cure them and when the air clears the townsfolk will burn the Dockhouse down and kill us all because they think we brought the Plague on them. So thanks mate.

Harsh, Max, harsh. But I hold my hand up. No one can see it but that's how I like it! You know whose fault it *really* is, all this jiggery-pokemon? I'll give you a guess, it's a friend of yours.

Oh come off it.

I did not want to feel what I feel. But she do know what I feel and she do not half play around with it.

McCloud doesn't like you Kemp, it's really not complex.

You're right, she is bravely battling her true feelings.

That's not what I said at all.

I see it in her dark eyes Max I liked your poem, by the way.

Did you Kemp.

I did, I can't make head nor tail of your poems normally so it helps when you read them aloud.

Everyone says that. Shall I go round everyone's fucking house then.

Ooh Max, *naughté*... No but I suppose you could do. Take a while. I do have one other question.

I'm not here. I've gone, I never was.

Question being... where do you get your ideas?

*

What.

What did you just say, Kemp.

Leave you to ponder.

Kemp come back, I know you from somewhere - Weir? Houseman? Whoever the hell you are come back!

*

*Brightness falls from the air;
Queens have died young and fair;
Dust hath closed Helen's eye.
I am sick, I must die.
Lord, have mercy on us!*

*

When the last of the white fog turns to streamers and then shreds, I see it is night again at Dark Canadee and I am on the south edge of the market square staring out across the ocean. The whiteness is shrivelling away over the waters, and in the

long receding cloud it makes at the horizon I see the silhouette of a dark ship with a very bright light on board. And then it's gone. In the last of the light it radiates I see a small plunging boat a hundred yards out into the harbour.

It's the Plague-Timers sailing home, no longer in Deal Porter cloaks but in their all-weather sailing clothes, waving to the friends they made in the famous port. I can make out Lockton with her cats beside her and her tote-bag over her shoulder, next to McNerney, whose cat is a long black shape in her arms. That must be Reid and Hilberg on the port side, pointing at something - what - oh they have spotted the little spiral pool nobody understands. So that must be Sharyshova at the stern looking up at any of a thousand stars, and it's easy to see it's Weiss at the prow with the pilot hidden behind her, she is watching the great blue heron soaring to and fro, high over the boat.

My eyes draw in to the wharf itself, and there are the three redcoats, Privates Ward, Field and Lane, unsteady on their feet, barging each other like baffled drunks at a reunion. Everyone else I know in Dark Canadee is looking out to the horizon, as the last of the bright line vanishes at the world's edge.

The only soul here I don't know is a white-haired old man with a lined and mischievous face, he is proclaiming with a grin,

*They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?*

* * *