

The Season Finale

Previously on DARK CANADEE...

'Dax, your poem's not good, not true, and not right. Apart from that it rocks.' *'Say there are three real women! Canadee will burn if he says that.'* *'Night was falling when we arrived and now it isn't, something's changed...'* *'If you want Dax to read his poem at midnight you ought to tell the townsfolk to leave us alone!'* *'Why is the sky still light?'* *'The three women are still there, just below the roof where the bird is...'* *'I know whose ship it is. McCloud said her mother would fix the soldiers...'* *'Dark Canadee is being engulfed in a cloud of white space...'* *'Cry Prince George and Harry Kane and let the dogs out! Hoo! Hoo!'* *'McCloud is that you?'* *'We're going to get to the three women while no one can see us...'* *'When the air clears the townsfolk will burn the Dockhouse down and kill us all!'* *'Where'd you get your ideas, Dax?'*



Upon The Ides of August

They called it Dark Canadee. Not because it was dark, it wasn't. It was a flame-lit crimson port in a storm which you could see for miles from out on the Bay. I mean at night-time you could, and it was always night-time there.

There. There? I mean *here, here*, I am standing right here beneath my antique lamppost on the old wharf, I am a statue of myself and I am waiting to spot the boat that will bring the six Plague-Timers into the harbour.

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The night was clear and starry with a crescent moon and little rags of cloud. They called it Dark because it was free, lawless and unclaimed, did not belong to any realm, neither ministers nor monarchs, no one ever knew why. It just – *escaped attention* and long would it do so, *long may it do so I am looking at it right now* for it is Dark Canadee, it is, it is and it was Dark Canadee, people came to buy or sell, to do or die, they brought their hopes to the pebble shore, it was so free it was *plague-free* in a world of plague *I know this*.

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I will collect myself, possess myself, I do so, I did so. I can't help it, I look at what's in front of me, the port-dark water, the moonlit clouds, the bright and baffling flickering market and I know it is now, is now, but the whole scene seems to be holding back a sob of being gone, becoming past, like my world is a child trying so hard to be consoled when you know the sob will overcome, overwhelm and have its way.

I cling to my lamppost on the wharf, I sift my powdery green paper in my hand. Without looking I remember and it recomposes: *Chang, Dexter, Echeverri, Hall, Harrison, Robic*, the faces drift and elongate and shine too bright to see for long. So I watched the still black sea with its sprinkling of glitter, I watched the whirlpool circle out there in the water, wider than ever, I watched for the boat that would bring the Plague-Timers.

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I will find myself one autumn where it is always Thursday and the great poets I mean to teach will come by while I am teaching. It will feel like only yesterday, for when I go to sleep on Thursdays in that village I will always wake up on this wild Friday night in Dark Canadee.

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'Look at the whirlpool,' says McCloud, 'it's widening.'

'The falcon cannot hear the falconer,' I hear myself observing. For looking at the whirlpool has restored me to the present. It silently funnelling down elsewhere forever makes me fragile and mortal and grasping *Right Now*. Now is my island, I dwell here, and I need to recall *where we are in this*:

'Are we good, my friend McCloud, are we good?'

‘We’re good, Young’n’old,’ she nods, and her movement reveals one standing next to her on the far side, a pale soldier smartened up in his scarlet.

‘You’re good aren’t you Private Lane,’ she pushes him, and though he doesn’t say a word but just gazes out to the whirlpool taking wheezy breaths, she adds: ‘his voice is coming back. It’s a funny little voice no offence,’ she asserts and chuckles to the sea.

‘The white,’ I remember: ‘there was nothing.’

‘I didn’t ask her to come, she’s my mother, she couldn’t help it.’

‘Your mother makes white space.’

‘We all make white space. My mother wields it.’

‘Oh wait. My commission. Am I in trouble?’

She pats me on the shoulder and the water seethes in the pebbles below.

‘Your poem was a smash, Young’n’old. A riot. We did a few edits, your Dockhouse friends and me, you didn’t seem to notice. Doesn’t it feel good to have told the truth and nothing but the truth? Poets should try it.’

‘We do try it.’

‘Try harder. They’re bringing in someone,’ she says, ‘look there’s the scribble-boat,’ and soon she’s readying her ropes and knots for the work.

‘What do you mean bringing in someone.’

‘An enquiry,’ she goes, ‘could you two bystanders stand by do you think?’

Me and the soldier give her some space at the edge of the jetty and I ask: ‘What enquiry?’

‘They’re bringing in Chris Prior.’

‘What? No one has a name like that round here.’

‘Don’t ask me. He’s some official English Land have shipped in, he’s expected later, they want to know what’s happening here.’

‘No one knows what’s happening here.’

‘Not so, Pirate Max. Just because you’re always a month behind, doesn’t mean we are. Lots is happening.’

‘The three women in the roof!’

‘What three women in the roof. Let’s leave it to Chris Prior. To the gods and Chris Prior.’

*

I remember more as I watch the boat approaching. I remember we’re supposed to wear cloaks and hoods these days, like the Deal Porters, we’re supposed to look like the Porters for our protection, but when I raise this McCloud says no, the folks of Canadee are in a mood to celebrate, they think the Plague came and went with the Great Whiteout, and many stories have sprouted up, all of which show the locals in the best of possible lights.

Some say the brightness was a *gift from beyond*, others rummaged through rotting old texts in **The Rack of Beyond**, said *see, they saw it coming*, and a growing majority said it never even happened. A popular theory has formed around the idea that the Plague on its mysterious arrival became aware of the general grace and virtue of the population, their sharp wit and mercantile vigour, and decided to let them be. The Dark Canadeens, who had thrown themselves to the ground in fear of there being no air to breathe at all, rose up to find the air black and crystal clear, the stars out, the band of blinding white receding to the horizon's edge, and decided to resume business as usual.

'So we're safe?' I conclude, turning to the soldier, for perhaps he'll agree, but he only has eyes that are whirling for the whirlpool, till McCloud beckons him down the stone steps to help her with the boat and he obeys the order.

*

The six Plague-Timers take their leave of the helmsman, as he and McCloud sign various flapping things and exchange old letters. I peer over the jetty to figure out who's who. All who sail here sail in a small sweet cloud of rumour.

Hall is two metres tall and has dreadlocks.

'My inky skin stores starlight,' he calls and he winks and I can see it. Hall is waiting for the women to disembark first, and keeping his balance on the boat while strumming a dark gleaming lyre or mandolin. It seems that's how he balances. I remember beloved Pirate Michael and what can *only by moving balance, only by balancing move*.

Harrison is very small, and only just visible between her two whippets, one gold and one silver, the pair go bounding up like lightning into Canadee, while Harrison and Dexter, propping each other up cheerfully, are looking down at their bare feet on the stone as if truly to know the turbulent voyage is behind them.

'The size of a child's,' Harrison remarks, and the very large Dexter, who has also voyaged barefoot, points out that she has only nine toes:

'A sign of the healer,' she says, 'so I lay my hands on all sorts, but as of yet no miracles.'

'There's that,' says Chang, nodding over at the whirlpool.

'We get those at Macondo,' says Echeverri, and on hearing this I call down, a book lover: 'One hundred years of solitude!'

'And counting,' Echeverri sighs, making her careful way up the steps.

Chang has stopped on the railing to look back at the hole in the water: 'I've seen that before,' she says so I ask her where.

'In an ancient lost city I found beneath the sea.'

‘If you found it it’s not lost any more,’ Robic points out genially, coming up behind her.

‘Oh it’s lost again,’ Chang says, ‘but I’ll find it.’

I noticed Robic briefly turned into a seal to swim ashore, but I didn’t think I’d draw attention. She knows I saw and looks pleased I didn’t say.

‘What do you think is causing that?’ I ask Chang about the whirlpool, since nobody here can figure it out and as she passes me at the top of the steps I catch her eyes: one is a brown so dark it’s almost black, the other a blue so light it’s almost white, and that’s all I’ll get for an answer.

‘Sometimes it’s sharkwater,’ I explain as if that’s that explained.

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The market is as loud and as full as I’ve ever seen it. Somehow every stall that ever was is here, but the whole thing doesn’t take up more room than before. Perhaps the stalls are narrower, some are definitely taller and they widen as they rise, some are multi-storied, some look like they’ll topple over, the units at the very top have neon signs too small to make out. The sky is smoky orange between them, the stars have no chance here.

Our whole group sticks together tonight, no one has a problem with us. The place seems in a frenzy.

When one of us stops to look we all stop, the PTs make blaring conversation or frantic hand signals over the tumult, and McCloud and Lane look at one another. Or rather Lane looks at her and she looks away, or she looks at Lane and when he notices she looks away.

Between **Fig-Roll Fantazia** and **Bush Ratatouille** there’s an old place where youngsters go to sing, it’s called **Perfect Pitch** and I’m sad to find it’s not there anymore. There’s a new stall doing good business in its place. At first I think it’s kind of a gardening emporium, they have lots of tools and outdoor equipment, then I realise it’s somewhat specialised. Their green neon’s trying to flicker on, it’s their opening night and they’re smoothing out some glitches, and when it finally thumps into view it’s called **Perfect PitchFork** and many eager men, young and old, rich and poor, are paying good doubloons for these fearsome items of red and green and black and blue iron.

‘There’s a run on pitchforks look,’ says Robic.

‘Why pitchforks,’ I wonder to McCloud who always tells me, but she’s busy ignoring Lane again, and how would any of the PTs know? Helpfully some burly farmers in the queue for pitchforks answer my queries:

‘We’ll be ready next time,’ says one.

‘Ready for what next time,’ I try.

‘Just you wait,’ says another.

'Wait for what,' I try again.

'That would be telling,' mutters a third.

'Telling what.'

'Stop answering them, Max,' says McCloud, 'they never end.'

'But why would all these men suddenly need pitchforks?' I ask anyone.

'And stop asking too, while you're at it,' she sighs.

'Look, there's a fire sale!' Dexter shrieks on seeing a sign and so there is, to the east of the market, not far from the Belly of Lead.

A FIRE SALE!!!

They're selling **Fire** to all and sundry, **Fire**'s all the rage, **Fire** is walking off the shelves, men and women and children crave it, they all come glowing and grinning to the braziers with their great tapers from **Tapurchase** and they chase off into the market with their sparking and spattering and shuddering purchases.

'**Tapurchase**? Don't get any better, do they,' I hear myself say but nobody is listening. Some of the customers at **The Fire Sale** have pitchforks already. A flaming torch in one hand, a pitchfork in the other, nowhere to put their shopping lists.

'It's in my top pocket,' a terrifying bearded ogre of a man needs a hand.

Hall and Echeverri reach high to help him out and the ogre looks at the crumpled paper in disbelief.

'Milk. Always bloody milk.'

But there does look to be a theme to the market tonight, I can't quite work out what it is. I sit on a wall in a row with the PTs, we're drinking Ruby and Tawny and White and Vintage from **Any Port In A Storm**.

'What's that building over there?' I am asked by Harrison, who can see Beulah and Hebe, her gold and silver whippets, already sniffing out the place in mostly disdain. A large throng of drunken youngsters is shoving and barging and blocking the entrance.

'It's the Library,' I say, 'nice to see folks wanting to take out books again.'

'What are you crazy?' Hall grins, 'that's not a library.'

'It's a job centre,' says Robic, 'well it's good that they've got one.'

It does indeed say **The Job Centre**, or it did when Robic said that, but now it says **The ob Centre**, as some jester's snapped the **J** off to great acclaim and a crowd of cheering young menfolk carry an enormous **M** along the side of the market from **You Only Have To MAsk**. To cascading approval they nail it to the wall.

'Not so good they've got *that*,' Robic observes, who'd turned briefly into a petrel to get a better view.

We can only agree with her, bird or plane or superwoman, and now it seems the crowd is swarming into the place.

The old library building leans and looms over the market square, it's like all the market stalls learned to make that move themselves, a dark skyline of diagonals, perilous, haphazard, dotted with lamps and now dim light is going on up in the windows of the library - **The Mob Centre** - from the ground to the first to the second to the third of the storeys, you see the silhouettes capering and posing and charging past the windows. Three levels remain dark below the roof and now another one goes on.

'Run, pirate,' McCloud says beside me, 'right *now*, get these people to the Dockhouse.'

I look at her and see she's gone, she's going through the alleys after Private Lane, who is going through the alleys to a whistle we all hear, a piercing whistle above and beyond all the other noise.

'Follow me!' I bellow, 'McCloud says get to the Dockhouse now!'

Out of the market, hard by the deserted Junction, past the darkened chained-up realm of the Walled Garden, to the green lantern of the Dockhouse tower we had to get, we have to get, we will get, we would get, we're there now!

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'Nu este timp
nu există baladă
nu există nicio fantomă albastră...'

'Sunt trei femei am mai auzit
când ultimul vagon a plecat la miezul nopții
când a sunat clopitul...'

'O femeie plângea
o femeie tipa
o femeie se ruga...'

'Pentru că soții și bebelușii lor au plecat în acel vagon
deci nu știu unde cei dragi sunt.'

*

We heard them from upstairs, and in any case all the Dockhouse folks I knew sat quietly in the upper chamber lit by oil-lamps. Sal Bonny only briefly looked up from her writing to say 'ssh' so softly no one heard a sound but her

turning back a page. Even the commotions of the market were stilled by the closing of the Dockhouse doors. Someone bolted them too, three times, which was the last sound of all before we heard the poem above. Coming from below.

The three young women had been brought out of the Library in the whiteout. I never would know how but they'd been living here for days. Two had long black hair, one pinned up, one let down and the third had spiky hair dyed green. They were all cross-legged on the floor by the fire, holding hands, in jeans and bright old tops I remember hanging in the market, orange, purple, powder-blue, and a fourth person, a big man with his back to us and his boots up on the table, was listening to them read and by now he was applauding gaily.

'Beautiful stuff! So tonal.'

'You don't know what they're saying, Kemp.'

I'd stopped in the doorway with the Timers waiting behind me on the stairs, subsiding as the women's brief recital ended. Kemp beamed at all of us:

'In this here field I'm Slater, Slater the Translator.'

'You don't know any Romanian ffs.'

'No Max the Fax but I do know Plankwalk, I fed your little poem into the software and the digits did the rest.'

'That was my poem they were reading? About the Blue Banshee?'

'Welcome, welcome!' Kemp called past me to the six Plague-Timers as they filed enchanted into the chamber. Soon I was shaking the warm pale-brown hands of Alina, Mirabela, Szilia whose nails were the bluest pink I'd ever seen and everyone met everyone.

Harrison and Hall, Chang and Dexter, Echeverri and Robic all sat down around the table with the shy young women among them, and all in the firelight tried out the words they thought might help the most. Kemp took me aside.

'You seen my *Cloud* go by, Max?'

'She's with the soldier. Sorry, all's fair.'

'Always playing with my heart, as they say the angels do!'

'Do they, where's the rum.'

'The Land boys will be here soon. They're searching the Library and not for the latest potboiler!'

'We know, Kemp, we saw them. The Mob Centre.'

'Ooh, I see what they done there.'

'How did they know the women were rescued, I suppose *you* told them.'

'These angels are my friends,' Kemp beams, 'but yes, I might have spilled them haricots! Couldn't bear to see them stuck up there forever. Now they're sitting by that cosy fire.'

'All Canadee knows they're here.'

'The more the merrier!'

‘And the mob will think they’re witches or have the plague because English Land will say so.’

‘Witches? Nay sir! I *won’t* have that!’

‘So they’ll never get away from here and they’ll never find their families.’

‘Max you drama queen, let’s not spoil it, not tonight,’ and he pats my shoulder and playing his air keyboards, one to his right, one behind him to his left, he adjusts a knob and stomps away upstairs. I hear him cry ‘To the battlements, Dockfolks – for Queen and Zulu and Prince Harry Kane!’

As I turn I see my six poets and the three young women are sitting delighted and murmuring in the firelight of their world. All know the names of all. I had better do something timeless, quick.

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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: *Echeverri, Hall, Harrison, Dexter, Chang and Robic*. Alina, Mirabela and Szilia want to listen and stay, and I want that too, so do we all, so they stay throughout and listen and make notes, and not a thing on earth can stop this.

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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It seemed we needed a new tune and dimensions

Beatriz Echeverri

It seemed we needed a new tune and dimensions

You were there when the music started.
You were always there when I heard that song. The strings
longing for times gone. The piano with some melancholy
trying a bit of hope. But the percussion like you
insisting all was in the past. I’ll write another song. One
that will loop around the universe.

I'd written somewhere
that I'd applied for another life. A new one to become a
scientist to follow the stars. Like the one currently spinning
away thousand miles per second. It'll take her a hundred
million years to break loose. It'll wander for ever beyond the
Milky Way. Its twin seems to have been the culprit.

We found it
the day we walked along the shore to get rid of the grit
that was irritating our life. A dark-grey stone polished by
the comings and goings of the tide. A flattish oval shape
that when held would get your fingers turning it round
and round.

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'Let's start in the mist as always, before any meanings have elbowed their way into market. Echeverri brings to light an intriguing, contradictory form, where the alignment, paragraphing, spacing and punctuation are all playing different instruments.

'I am reminded of a gemlike thing in Arthur C. Clarke's *1978: A Space Odyssey* - or when the hell it was I read it, one of those futures in the past - when astronaut Bowman, the last survivor of the mission, out on the unimaginable fringes of the Universe, finds himself in a hotel room in a city on earth. Everything in the room and out through the window is as he would expect if he were home, except when he opens a familiar cereal packet and finds inside some kind of foamy blue sludge. So these deities or aliens did want him to feel at home and had done their best but kind of couldn't be bothered with the fine details. Unlike most sci-fi I'd read, this chuckled and shone with humanity, albeit alien humanity. That's quite a sense of a cosmic authority to have stumbled on in childhood, that it might be caring but lazy, all-knowing but a bit of a chancer.

'Why am I telling you this? Because this elegant form of Echeverri's is having a similar effect, which is very well suited to the pitch of its discourse. The form, to the misted revelatory eye, is a *simulacrum* of regular form but with certain details poignantly awry. I'm going to call this governing spirit *It*. It knows paragraphs, knows you're meant to indent but doesn't know where. It knows you

have to stop at the right margin, but doesn't know you don't have to make a straight line. And it knows you put spaces between the words but not quite how.

'Of course poet *Echeverri* knows this, and you can replace *know* in the above paragraph with the words *mind* or *care*, but it's the spirit of her chosen form that doesn't know or mind or care, and whichever one of those you pick, what grows from it is a human, *creaturely* – I sound my word again in case we're never here again – quality of voice: *a new tune and dimensions* indeed.

'So what *are* the effects? Manifold, and we can all draw from this, whatever tunes we play. Contradictory form, resemblances of form, a negotiation between the familiar and the out of whack. The paragramming, the near-regularity of length in the three of them, intensifies the text, as anything gets intensified when it knows *when* the end is coming. The alignment hints at a ceding of control from the voice (black) to the rest (white) – one cannot end the line where meaning or cadence or whimsy want to, it ends when you bump the side – and suggests a slightly obsessive-compulsive sense of danger, a shudder at letting irregularities nibble the lines as they end. That is, control and fear of uncontrol. A sense of something else determining where things stop. I guess we all feel that tonight.

'The spaces between sentences observe constant rules, a tab of about a centimetre, but the spaces *within* sentences don't. Mostly these play along, guiding us into the poem with some unthreatening melodies –

*You were there when the music started.
You were always there when I heard that song.*

'So of course effects are amplified when they don't play along –

*The piano with some melancholy
trying a bit of hope.*

'These motions really work. The *piano* is the second concrete object, I mean touchable thing – *music* and *song* don't count, I'm afraid *You* don't either – and the first concrete object is *strings*. But *Echeverri* is softly dismissing *strings*, with their predictable *longing for times gone* – think of D. H. Lawrence banging the heartstrings in 'Piano':

*cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.*

‘When Echeverri’s *piano* comes, she is enacting its attempt to change the story, in this forlorn approximation: *trying a bit of hope*. The same moves with the *percussion* aren’t quite as sharp, but you see the thing function again here:

*I’d written somewhere
that I’d applied for another life*

‘where the tentative reaching for memory gives way to the retrieval in full, and what follows sends its rings spreading into the sky, animating the childlike literal ambition:

*A new one to become a
scientist to follow the stars*

‘Along with the formal experimentation there is structural power here, a thorough architecture. Music governs the first part, and culminates in a statement of such Orphean overreach – *I’ll write another song. One/that will loop around the universe* – the thing just has to stop. Wait. Return at a level of quiet humility: *I’d written somewhere...*

‘This equation of infinite space followed by bounded-in-a-nutshell is performed again at the end of the second part: *It’ll wander for ever beyond the Milky Way* (note the confident chatter of no spacing) followed by the thoughtful *Its twin seems to have been the culprit*. From outside this building, on the lane if it were safe, we could see the lines on our hands and in the same breath the galaxies.

‘That musing tone of *seems to have been the culprit* both causes and bridges the space, and gives us the intimate earthbound journaling of the third part: *We found it/the day we walked along the shore* (why did you? breathes the beholding space) *to get rid of the grit/that was irritating our life*.

‘Grit and *irritating* fuse nicely, nastily, and the sentence of the *dark-grey stone* is given its natural timeless shoreline spacing. (Nice to hear someone bringing shades back to shades of grey.) The spaces return in the catching breaths and fractured glimpses of the ending. There is a fine and delicate hand at work here. Yes we need a new tune, and yea to new dimensions, but poets have been dully mishandling that impulse for too long a century. The tunes have to play on what was, and new dimensions cannot *be* without old ones. If the tunes or dimensions mean nothing to me at my age, and you if you’re mine or more, that’s cos they probably do mean nothing. But they mean a good deal here.’

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We work hard in our workshop. We are aware of the world outside, as I said to McCloud we are trying to tell the truth here, but we still emerge from our dealings blinking like fools at new states of things. In this case people – the Dockhouse folks? – have nailed wire mesh and boarding over the little window, so nearly all natural light is stemmed. We feel more subterranean than ever in our chamber, and the great fire crackles away. The Romanians murmur to one another as we pause, and the six Plague-Timers do the deathless hand-jive of *Do I Have That Poem?* You always do, in my experience, you're just not looking hard enough.

'When the night is still, I hear my birthplace call to me,' Hall speaks as he gets ready. This makes me listen out for mine and there it is, a little semi-detached house on Parkway in November, I hear a car go by, and an ice-cream van.

Listen out for yours, if you've got one.

*

Gone Fishing

Elontra Hall

My father writes poems.

He says I'm better than he is but I find that hard to believe
Because without his poems mine wouldn't exist
Would they?

Today, my father read me a clutch of poems.

Hearing them it felt like sucking warm egg yolk through a straw.
So thick and nutritious

Each new line, unfurls another layer:

full-moon afro orbits dance floor circuitously.
Razor cut of his mauve suit, and sundrop boutonniere
draw eyes to him. And why not?
both his dates mingle and smile
on opposite side of the dancehall,
pleased he chose them
till he announces the court.
They reach him simultaneously. He disassembles,
but leaves prom alone.

doctors flit from his wife to the incubator.
he refuses to leave the room, stops them
to query his son's condition, between
reading the infant Kipling and Baldwin,
telling the boy stories of ma' dear and poppa
to dam worry welling at his eyelids

I listen, stunned at how his words
burn away the sepia of time,
churn forgotten gears in his head,
bring him back to me as he was -
before the stroke.

He demurs when I tell him his poems are good.
I stop him cold, share what I think
and he, feeling encouraged, reads me more:

the anniversary he and mum almost split up,
how I danced at my uncle's wedding
before I could walk.

Now, he sifts through them. Wakes up early to fish through
a river of paper like mining for gold
or fragment of time caught in amber
to send to me for cleaning, refinement
and care of all that he's wrought.

I only hope I don't let him down.

*

'How to part. We don't know how to part. We don't know why we have
to, and when we do know why we still don't. To frame this in the spluttering
indignation of my childhood voice is merely to reckon with its *still feeling true*. We
don't know how to part.

'But why not part at a bedside, since Bedside witnessed most of our moves?
As Pirate Murray called the Bed itself the *shield that carries us to the fight/and bears
us from it*. Hall fights here, fights grief, battles time, consoles and unconsole.
There is a restless stop-start nature to the stanzas - let's try it this way, no maybe

this – as the son shifts through the small talk, pauses, silences. The first attempt, *My father writes poems*, with its ardent present tense, is proclamatory and proud, but soon collapses into the child’s ungainsayable logic:

without his poems mine wouldn’t exist
Would they?

‘Which closes off that route. What this poem does so well, whatever the stanzas are attempting, is to enact how the gravity of the situation acts like, well, gravity, its efforts crumbling to silence in the face of the vigil.

‘After the first lacuna, the voice concedes to *Today*, retreats from the passionate overview, the cheery familiar, the thing said any old week – *He says I’m better than he is* – to what is happening right now: *Today, my father read me a clutch of poems*. The comma there, which isn’t needed grammatically, plays the impact of returning to and settling in one’s bedside seat in sorrowful *Today*, and let us also praise *clutch* to the skies, which lets the visual verb, the elderly fist, burst shaking from the noun.

‘The new shift of bedside position is to elevate the father’s poems, but the terms are odd: *Hearing them it felt like* is usefully tautologous, and the simile is strange, muffled, vaguely infantile, with its echo of teaching grandmothers, the queasiness of *warm* and *yolk*, and then *straw*, both childlike and medical, which obviously fits this bill. *So thick and nutritious* is quite a distant, staring-into-space way of receiving the poems, as if what the son is honouring is the act, the fact, of the father reading, not the lines themselves. And this sense is amplified by what happens next, *thick and nutritious* has nowhere to go, would be spoiled by a full-stop – I mean a *period*, Hall, for I believe you’ve sailed a wide ocean – so the difficult thought simply fades out as the son shifts position again:

Each new line, unfurls another layer...

‘I double-took on this a while, thought at first what was coming was direct quotation from the poems the son is extolling – that colon and indent didn’t help in my confusion, as it suggests the father’s actual lines will follow – but, much more interestingly and deeper emotionally, these lines seem to me the son’s imaginings formed in the wake of hearing the father’s voice as he reads. (If I have this interpretation wrong, Hall, I apologize, but the honest least I am doing is flagging up a doubt!)

‘Anyway I think I’m right and this evocation is beautiful. How? The way it starts with the elisions, which gives you the glide of the fellow on the dance-floor, *full-moon afro orbits dance floor circuitously...* I would end that with a comma, and smooth onward to *razor cut of his mauve suit*, keep the whole stanza moving like that, jiving, moonwalking before its time! The flashed precision of *sundrop boutonnière* simply radiates character, so that the reader’s eyes are drawn like all eyes in that long-ago dancehall. More character – dammit a whole short story to rival Hemingway’s apocryphal *For Sale: child’s shoes, never worn* – is conjured by these glorious three words: *both his dates*.

‘As I say, keep the periods and capitals out of this denouement: you’ll call it *sepia* later, Hall, so let it have the real fogging of *sepia*, the punctuation wiped in the dark-room process. We leave this memory with a comic take on an awkward moment, *He disassembles, /but leaves prom alone* and again, let that die away without the period, because you have the further tabbing across the page, embodying a lurch into darker recollection:

doctors flit from his wife to the incubator...

‘Again, this feels like the son’s account of the father’s lines, as if grief is putting up fences to cope. I love the concision of *Kipling and Baldwin*, a fascinating conjunction of texts which paints history as well as character. But once more the angle of view is emotionally unsustainable for long, as each of the others has been, so the son’s voice tumbles down to the nub of it all: *bring him back to me as he was – /before the stroke...* Period, space.

‘Now the son returns to envisioning the technicolor life behind the *sepia* lines. I think the sloping indents are too showy here – one shouldn’t make such a formal move only *once* in a poem – but the psychological move feels right. His father and mother almost parted once, and how he, the son, danced before he could walk – what an unearthing thought that is – *to have danced before your memory knows* – now there’s a brave shot across the bows of departure.

‘The last or next-to-last of the positions taken in the bedside chair is the most lyrical and elegiac. It plays the melody of father and son meeting in the timeless work of paper, poem, simile: *Wakes up early to fish through /a river of paper like mining for gold*, a beginning of acceptance that here is where the meeting ends, here is where parting leaves us, caught in the amber of what we or he or she or they wrote, wrought, all sent to the son for safekeeping. I wonder if the last line is essential, if it hasn’t been voiced already, but what it does have is *aloneness* in a frantically fought-for, fragile present, while the whole poem sobs with *past*.

‘The heart of the poem is that the father doesn’t speak. What he does – write poems, says the son is the better poet, reads poems, is remembered happy, is remembered afraid, is listened to, demurs, reads more – is reported from the bedside. None of it is sounded, all is filtered by memory or imagination. This allows his presence to build so strongly without ever being voiced. Into that silence flow the various streams of the son’s resistance. We hear nothing straight from the bed. We hear the best of the bedside. Now there’s a name for poetry.’

*

All nine of them go to the sides for refreshments, pouring drinks for each other, cutting cake and passing plates with a smile, or fussing over the whippets. The silver one’s as gold as the gold one in the fireglow. I go to the window and crane my sore neck to see what I can see but there is nothing but a sliver of light up on the lane. Shadows move across it, shouts are muffled by the dirty glass.

‘I’m going up to check on things,’ I say, unnoticed, interrupting no one, and leave the glad scene behind me like I leave glad scenes behind me.

*

The first person I encounter up there is Sharp Practice in his dark suit, underlining items on a clipboard. Everything is happening in the lamplit room.

‘The Porters have come,’ he says without looking up, ‘they’ve formed some kind of cordon round the building.’

‘Cordon for what?’ I bleat, if I hear it I’ll believe it.

The Jazz Lady calls over from one of the shuttered windows: ‘Us. Cordon for us so we don’t get slaughtered!’

‘More or less,’ says Sharp.

‘I think the whale came ashore!’ the Jazz Lady cries, ‘I said it would.’

‘That’s slightly more less than more,’ Sharp notes to me.

Sal comes through the crowded place carrying an oil-lamp so people gather round: ‘Everyone, right, there’s a mob out there, they’ve got torches and pitchforks, if you build it they will come. And they want to force their way in here because they think we have the three women. Which we do but they’re not having them. We’re going to get them to a wagon and get them out of here.’

‘How?’ the Dockhouse folk cry beside their desks and then they all turn to me at once: ‘Okay that *was* a chorus.’

Sal Bonny grimaces: ‘We’re working on that. Aren’t we Chris?’

‘We are,’ says a short slim fellow next to Sal, he’s wearing a blouse and skirt and has a low but quite womanly voice.

Actually he's a woman, he's a woman called Chris and I'm damned if I don't know her from somewhere.

'Ms Prior has been brought in by English Land to find out what's going on, haven't you Chris.'

'I don't know what's going on.'

'So that's going well,' says Sal.

'And I don't work for English Land I might add,' says Chris, 'this is a short-term contract.'

'Thanks for the update, Chris. How are the women doing, Max.'

'They're being well looked after,' I respond to Sal while staring at this *Chris*, like were we at school together? By the Well-in-the-Garden? Did she come to the Heavenly Village Hall?

'Good, good,' says Sal, 'keep teaching what you teach, because that is what we do here. Right: Sharp, Jazz, we're going to talk with the Porters, try and cut some kind of deal. Anyone see what I did there?'

'Porters, Deal,' goes a man.

'Give the man an escudo,' goes Sal. 'Right, everyone else get things into boxes, we don't know how this night will end.'

The impromptu meeting collapses into brouhaha, and the only two people not moving or speaking are me and this sweet irritated woman I spent some nights with once.

'Maxwell. Had to be.'

'Chris... *Tina*. I don't think your name was Prior.'

'It wasn't.'

'That was - last week, no?'

'Oh Maxwell.'

'Why did you leave the village *Tina*. You didn't say goodbye.'

'Goodbye. You know why I left the village. Anyway what village. Go teach, why not, here's another world of yours that's ending.'

*

Magnolia tree

Candida Dexter

There always seems a part of me that is waiting
until I've noticed this particular bent old magnolia tree
show off once a year her multiple pink gasps of intoxication
sprouting slowly until ripe from her twisted old branches
the pinked coned blossoms as she bends down
over her own patch of earth beneath

it's her fecund punctuation of the year that tells me again that time has crept in
and crept again out
and almost I want to put one gently in my mouth
wonder to taste her and swallow this prettier form of life
instead I hold it to feel her cooler flesh warm inside mine
feeling the promise of her closed petals before they spread
and inevitably fall into a fallen ballerina skirt
beneath to what they were exactly once not long before
that I stared up at
in all their common brilliance against an always blue sky
taking the same photograph every year to mark the times I've noticed.

*

'Angels can jive on the head of a pin all they like, but I can discuss the placing of a comma or the use of the word *the* till those angels have called it a night and gone home. Now, as night falls and the mob closes in, and I sit where I am happiest, with old friends and new by firelight, I draw attention to Dexter's title: why *Magnolia tree*? Why not *Magnolia*? Well, hoist those beauteous floral words into view and they might mean women, or colours, or magazines or perfumes, but append the humble *tree* to it and that all falls away: the one sprouted life is suddenly there on the landscape.

'I only know what a magnolia looks like because I wrote my first play with one blooming at the window, otherwise I'm a city boy – a *garden* city boy – who knows little of the flora and fauna above and beyond, who's getting interested in that app that can tell you species if you point it at them. As I stroll through the local woods I have Edward Thomas, shy rustic deity, rolling his eyes to the heavenly high branches. But Thomas matters here because he knows when to deploy *unknowing*, awareness of unknowing. He registers the distance between himself and a named thing. He does this most blindingly in *Old Man*, where he is trying to tell *us* what the scent of a herb is telling *him*:

*Old Man, or Lad's-love, – in the name there's nothing
To one that knows not Lad's-love, or Old Man.*

'Two grey baffled lines that take you nowhere, as poetry too rarely does. Life is standing there, arms folded, frowning at clever Poetry, saying: you know, mate, sometimes, *there's nothing*. Thomas will know the name of everything he is seeing, but often what he sounds is a generalized haze of delight: he registers the yards between himself and petals, blooms, creatures. Most nature poets don't do

that, they want you to know what you don't know, bless 'em. No really, bless them. But Edward Thomas reads the air, the human moving unaware, breathing, towards. So with Dexter:

*There always seems a part of me that is waiting
until I've noticed*

'We have the honest *seems*, the vague *part of me*, the shorthand elision in *I've...* Dexter enacts the approach to the loved object, and pays out detail as the ground is covered. Soon the colours come, and the anthropomorphic affection, and this ignites the lyrical. Appreciation of natural beauty is really about humans being dumbfounded by time passing at manifold speeds: our minds can do it – see poetry – but our bodies can't – see death – so nothing seems strange about Dexter's exclamatory notes: *show off once a year* is annual, *pink gasps of intoxication* is momentary, *sprouting slowly* weekly or monthly and so on.

'The poem seems scattershot from a distance – the eccentric line-lengths, the stop-start syntax – but it's all working to express this giddy beholding of lives, years, months and moments passing in harmony at the very same time. There's a little flash of Hughes in the *pink gasps of intoxication*, that synesthetic swapping-around Hughes does at his height: the blooms aren't gasping or intoxicated, *you are*. It's the pressure of the moment making actuality, metaphor and language smash together – poetry's own Hadron colliding.

'The *pinked coned blossoms as she bends down* is, again, a running of times impossibly together. Repeating *pink* so soon is fine by me – it's always fine by D. H. Lawrence – what she sees was pink and is still pink. I don't need to point out how sexual this all is, but again: old woman young, young woman old, Dexter's mind's eye gives her the magnolia as old lady tending to her *patch of earth*, and this weird long line works too – with the exception of *fecund punctuation*, which is unspeakable in both senses – but this works with the human bystander, marooned in the one time, babbling in wonder:

*that tells me again that time has crept in
and crept again out*

'*Crept again out?* The drumbeat of time, heightened in sight of beauty, forces that line to end at *out* instead of *again* – because the drumbeat needs its offbeat of nothing. What follows has strengths and faults, but both stem from – I think – rapidity of beholding. It feels written fast – free writing by the unfree writer, the only true kind – and again I think it works best when the magnolia's

deeper magic, to hold all tempos of time in its hand, meets the splutter of the stranded mortal.

‘That risky ballet metaphor – metaphors, my friends, always take us from the place and had better be worth the jaunt – serves to mark the moment of exhaustion. Because what follows is a line of enchantment – as in, nymph turned by a spell to babbling brook forever – *beneath to what they were exactly once not long before...* Language giving out like a heart. Let’s rejoin Thomas, seven lines into *Old Man*. Here’s where he’s up to in his understanding:

*At least what that is clings not to the names
In spite of time. And yet I like the names.*

‘He’s utterly, gloriously, nowhere. I like to point out that *Old Man* is written in blank verse: that is, unrhymed over a soft pentameter, but good luck imposing prosody on that seventh line – *At least what that is clings not to the names* – you’ll hear the world-turning of Shakespeare’s pentameter below, but authentic garbled bewilderment above:

*At least what that is clings not to the names...
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest...*

‘Sorry Signor Pound you dear old fash, but *healing* the pentameter, that was the next heave.)

‘Dexter’s *beneath to what they were exactly once not long before* is more like a lost hexameter, it has a caesura, a pause for thought, but all in all it carries that same sense of language gibbering in the face of beauty.

‘Last lines sometimes fail because the poet doesn’t grasp how much power she’s wielded – I include everyone in this – and this one is too much of a rounding off. It reads like an elegant caption in a photo album. I would end with the *always blue sky*, unpunctuated, because this poem is your photograph, Dexter, you’ve marked, you’ve noticed, and what are photograph albums, after all, but stiff gleaming pages of moments lost by humans, when all around outside swirl the living centuries, weeks, seconds, years?’

*

In the short break I notice a group of little toy cowboys, princesses, farmhands, knights-of-old on a shelf where the drinks are. They come from an old basket we keep under the table where we keep the Book of Wicky. Sal says they're not Dockhouse so I must have brought them with me. I don't remember doing that, but I do remember them. They've been placed in a strange tableau and Robic sees me looking.

'The girls were telling us their story. Using those. When you went upstairs.'
I nod gravely, 'I know their story.'

'I don't think you know their story,' says Chang from by the fire.

*

Podding the beans – Home preserves

Barbara Harrison

The day after my birthday I was podding the beans,
Slipping them from their velvet jackets
Like pale green opalescent embryos
Eau de Nil in colour, the funicle like a hinge, like a toe nail.
I remember removing the hinges from the beans for my mother, for our dinner,
Leaving the hilum, the scar of that attachment.
I didn't like broad beans when I was little,
I didn't like the way they turned your fingers black when you podded them.

I was freezing the beans –
Home preserves – a pledge to the future.
I was wondering about the future,
I was thinking about attachment.
I was hoping the home could be preserved,
And if there was an expectation of some further harvest.

It was a cool summer day,
The back door open.
And outside a blackbird sang
In pure exaltation of the moment.

*

*'The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows, sighs Frost, great poet of work
if not a great worker – farmers get up earlier than that, old lad – and any good*

Poem of Task will always send me to the pre-dawn hymn of Robert Hayden remembering his father on *Those Winter Sundays*:

*What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?*

'Why does love never seem far from the lonely task? Eden, I suppose. Adam delves, Eve spins, Frost picks apples, Harrison pods beans. Sometimes I think tasks like these are the only human actions visible to the heavens. Poems of Task resemble the writing of a poem itself, but with the innate prideful gesture of the poetic task – it's not a task, no one asked us, old lads, young ladies – removed. The humility and dignity of physical work undertaken in the spotlight of a poem is sort of exculpatory – I mean, don't we all feel a little guilty for loving this precious writing thing? Night has fallen, the mob is right outside, our lives at this moment are safeguarded by weird hooded strangers, and we do *this*? Yes, we do this.'

'Da,' says Szilia softly and her friends say it with her, 'facem asta,' and the same words rise from the Plague-Timers too. Are the three young women poets? Are they becoming poets? I breathe deep in the conviction that we all belong in this room right now. I cannot think of leaving it.

'But here is a Poem of Task, and a fascinating one. If you stand near me for long enough you will hear me say all poems that have survived or will survive time have a creaturely coherence, that their first, middle, final, *any* lines sound *sounded* from the same heart/mind/brain/soul. They do. Period. I'm too old to argue. So, let's spark a retort to my laziness, and voice the class smartass who says something like:

'At the start of this poem, *Professor*, the poet describes podding beans as *Slipping them from their velvet jackets/Like pale green opalescent embryos/Eau de Nil in colour* etc etc yet this lyrical intensity soon vanishes totally! The voice becomes like totally austere. Huh? Huh? Say what?

'To which I would say this: it is *absolutely* the same voice, *Student*, and its transmuting from erotic relish to flat repetition, *I was wondering, I was thinking, I was hoping*, is thought-through, felt-through, and most organically connected to the love and silence that dance around the lonely tasks of creatures.

('By the way I love the class smartass, I've befriended him, been him. Teacher Walcott would always go into lung-shredding spasms of laughter

remembering a student who looked at Auden's *The Fall Of Rome* and said *I wouldn't have done it like that*. I can still hear them both. But my teacher never forgot the guy, and laughter is long life.)

'Thought-through, felt-through, let's be guided through. The title is humble, domestic, *Podding the beans* and soon we're *podding the beans*, but blink and you'll miss that glint of birthday gold. *The day after my birthday I was podding the beans*. Well, we might say, taking our cue from the limits of the language, that Harrison was doing this the day after she was born – and lo, it feels metaphorically true, in the sense that a new poem on a page at least *appears* to be born from nothing. Any poet is always *also* saying as any poem begins: *Hello, I was born and now I'm writing this*. There is literally no back-story.

'Aside from that I also think the passing fact of the birthday helps to form the glamorous giddy register in which the work begins: *their velvet jackets...pale green opalescent...Eau de Nil in colour*, well *someone's* birthday party isn't over yet! Then along with that a soft echo of birth in *embryos...*

'But that can't be kept up, those tones are too rich to hold sway for long. The exotics sweep gaily off to some other party in their velvet and their Eau de Nil, and the work mutates from novel joy to boring plenty, her fingers start to discolour, and the weird facts take hold: *the funicle like a hinge, like a toe nail*. In *After Apple-Picking* Farmer Frost nails this dazed mental tumble of labour into dream-state:

*and I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.
Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end...*

'Harrison doesn't sleep though, and as the work goes on, the noting of odd shapes gives way to memory, *removing the hinges from the beans for my mother*, the Anglo-Saxon tangs of *toe nail* and *scar* give way to the alien, look-it-up figures of *funicle*, *hilum*, and now the world dissolves to *I* and the things at hand: *I didn't like broad beans when I was little,/I didn't like the way they turned your fingers black when you podded them*.

'This in eight lines is a readable, sensible (as in feelable, not as in well-behaved) progress from cheerful labour to recollecting sigh. The metaphors are left behind, the similes shed, the colours drained, the sense of lyric reach is gone, and nobody needs dictionary dot com any more. In the space after the eight lines,

the viewpoint draws away from its focus, with the memory of the child's stained fingers – they age and here we are, *I was freezing the beans*. This is another past, recent and still trembling, as *freezing* harks back to *embryos* and *birthday*.

'I don't *love* – as we say in workshops – but don't *mind*, the pun on *Home preserves* and *hoping the home could be preserved*, it's a plausible prod from the language, but I'd lose it from the title, Harrison, I think that's overplaying it. I *do* like this descent from the oasis of labour to the wilderness around all things:

*I was wondering about the future,
I was thinking about attachment.
I was hoping the home could be preserved,
And if there was an expectation of some further harvest.*

'I like it so much I think it's the ending. Honestly I do, with the honesty of my labour that, unlike me, is visible from the heavens. I like it because it pulls up short, its plain speaking sags with doubt as it's spoken – *as if there was... expectation... some...* which makes the response of the silence implacable, stern. If you bring in the bird now, whether it's Thomas Hardy's *turdus philomenos* or Paul McCartney's *turdus merula*, you're prison-breaking us out of this poem and starting anew.

'I think don't. It hasn't felt like a cool day or a summer one, it hasn't felt like the back door is open, and you don't know why the uncaged bird is singing. (Hardy admits he doesn't, McCartney presumes he does.) The hard meditation the speaker has gone through – that you have put us through – is too potent to earn the easy consolation poets draw from bird-talk. This poem is a sensitive writing of not an exalted moment but a difficult, dogged, staring-through-space-into-the-past one. There, for the time being, Harrison, lies some further harvest.'

*

I don't want to go upstairs again and see night speeding to its end. I have found a place where it has gone quite still. The Romanian women are cross-legged by the fire again, stroking the whippets who expect no less, and I listen to the lives of the Plague Timers.

Hall is sitting on the table, strumming a lute, with his feet on his chair. When he starts on *Hallelujah*, *the minor chord*, *the major lift*, *the baffled king composing*, Robic says she once shared joss-sticks with Pirate Leonard. Chang went on a date with Einstein's great-grandson. Dexter has four children, three boys and a girl, and Harrison is married to Captain Birdseye. I feel like we're covering most

of Creation, we have art, we have science, birth, love and marriage, we have scent and smoke and refrigeration, I feel we deserve to make it through the night. The only thing that's missing is what will follow us on this earth when we're gone, but Echeverri's got that covered:

'My PhD was on the immortality of the cockroach.'

*

Life having vouched for itself and handed on the baton, I have just enough strength left in my legs to creep upstairs for news. It's quieter and gloomier in the upper room, there is muted conversation and most people seem to be eating old varieties of cake left behind by past voyagers. Sal and Sharp and Jazz are by the bolted oaken door, pushing out a fume of paper through the crack beneath it.

'It's the last of Seguimi's plum vellum finish,' Jazz says as she sees me, she has a slice of panettone, 'it brings peace to the reader.'

'I don't know,' says Sharp, contemplating his sliver of New York cheesecake, 'they're still out there beyond the Porters, you can see the smoke and the tines of the pitchforks.'

'We just need to ride it out,' says Sal, finishing off her madeleine, 'mobs forget why they came, mobs get bored, mobs need to do their hair.'

'We could do with your pirate sister right now,' the Jazz Lady whistles to Sal Bonny.

'*But we've never seen Annie and Sal in the same room!*' is called out in unison from all dark corners.

Sal is expressionless. Jazz continues:

'At least she'd know what to do about the whale.'

'There is no whale,' says Sal.

'Hmm,' says her young friend, 'the greatest trick the whale ever pulled was convincing people he doesn't exist.'

There's quite a long pause.

*

'Battenberg?' says someone.

'I believe it was Baudelaire,' say I, and there's an even longer pause. I think I shall long remember this night.

*

There is a collection of china, in a tall glass cabinet
in a high-ceilinged house, where dusty chandeliers
wait always for Christmas.

Turned so you cannot see its cracks, chips are hidden
at the back – *turn the broken parts away, darling,*
don't show the shit bits to the neighbours.

Thin lips take sliver thin sips from delicate cups,
impossibly patterned, disciplined decoration, as white
as skin, porcelain bones, no pulse within.

I pile myself, like the fragile plates, round eyed, ionic
without columns, nothing to prop up this peculiar facade
that swirls so neatly into the centre of itself.

Enamel chipped, my teeth grind to the crash of plates,
hands, slender, ornate, cannot catch the smash, bleed
as I try to pick up shattered splinters of me.

*

‘We’ve all done it, and those who haven’t have done it too, they just can’t remember it, that I AM HERE moment which starts at the desk you’re sitting at, goes through street, town, country, continent and ends up with the Universe. You did it on a schoolbook, you did it in your daydreams, Pirate Simon did it in a poem, it’s where cosmic awareness starts, it’s a civilizing milestone. It trumpets your handhold on Creation while subtly exploring the concept of nothing meaning anything much unless you say it does.

‘Anyway Chang is playing that tune where she starts, and underwrites it with both the child’s voice being loomed over by the tall, the high, the dusty, and the absence of human presence: no pronoun, no position, no opinion. It’s a haunting stanza, we all know what she means, or we folks do in the social strata that include china and cabinets and chandeliers, and the cultures that do Christmas. Within those parameters this is socially exact. I will sail home one day to the house of my mother, and it will look pretty much like Chang says:

*where dusty chandeliers
wait always for Christmas*

‘The observation is that this Best Stuff in a middle-class house only gets taken out or eaten off or hung with candles for two or three of the Twelve Days, but it’s subtler than that. For one thing, they *wait*, because not all of it gets used, and some of it never will be. We all know the drawers and chests and cabinets of our parents are dark Dickensian cellars without end, or as Auden sings on his evening walk:

*the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.*

‘There’s also a brushstroke of child’s-play here. At the far far end of the rainbow which begins with the word *wait* there’s the cartoon *Beauty and the Beast*, the candle and the clock singing *Be My Guest!* Well Disney’s not so dumb – what is life but a candle and a clock? *We shall meet where the light and the clock are askew/ and the language has scrambled to say what that’s like*, as the poet said.

‘Anyway, Chang’s silent house is becalmed, it isn’t Christmas, maybe never will be, there’s no Aslan expected, and this lovely opening stanza would be even better with *only* in the place of *always*, no? Just for the long O, the longing, the not knowing when. The not knowing if. *Always* is too hopeful.

‘In the second stanza Chang sends in the ghosts. *Turned so you cannot see its cracks*. It’s already been turned, there’s no one here, and we don’t see the cracks, except that in poetry (unlike life) if you say *you cannot see the cracks* you do see the cracks you’re not seeing.

‘There’s a risky move comes next, that parental or spousal voice *turn the broken parts away*, but I don’t want it here. The poem has set up a spooky absence misted with inference, against which the italic voice feels a little intrusive, a little costumed. I think the sentiment voiced there is entirely covered by *Turned so you cannot see its cracks, chips are hidden/at the back* – in fact it’s covered twice, either phrase would do – and *shit bits* is certainly readable as character, but I don’t want character as sharp as that, I want what the first stanza gave me, a sense of inanimate objects experiencing time. The zenith of that work is in Larkin, where he imagines how the stone medieval couple on *An Arundel Tomb* register time passing:

Snow fell, undated. Light
Each summer thronged the glass. A bright
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same
Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths
The endless altered people came,

Washing at their identity...

‘Returning to Chang, the italic quote done with, we’re back where the ghosts are: *Thin lips take sliver thin sips from delicate cups* – I think the little i-vowel hypnotizes you a bit, and you could shake a couple of them off, but stay with the sweet rhyme, it’s as much Eliot as it’s Seuss and it animates the ghosts, say like this:

*Thin lips take sips from delicate cups, impossibly
patterned, disciplined decoration, as white
as skin, as porcelain bones...*

‘Well, you can see I’m trying to pull the lines in a bit, but I did want to retain the two latinate formulations *impossibly patterned* and *disciplined decoration*. These phrases keep the spectral outlines of parents and grandparents and ancestors present, Time’s version of the Game of Space where we started, Time barreling backwards into the mist.

‘In passing, I need to record my deep affection for this stanza-shape. Two long lines and a short one, a perfect way for the poet to try out the essential balance of saying and not-saying, as the third line comes up short, finds a force in the white space that is saying *hold it there*. The short line amplifies the silence, means the poet has to strain towards utterance. Ghosts can form into people in those spaces, which is how this poem mostly uses them, and after the third bright space we have the entrance of *I*.

‘Chang is right on top of the vowel-work here, for the self-hugging trepidation of *I*, this intruder in the empty house, is suggested by its cluster with *pile myself*, and beyond the fraternal fragile plates comes *eyed* and *ionic*. I lose my way a little at *ionic/without columns*, merely because to me an ionic column *does* suggest some abstract female figure, and without *columns* I’m not sure what I see.

‘We’ve talked about endings a lot tonight. Funny that. I’m not saying end after the fourth, I just want to be surer about the strategy. If the denouement is violent destruction of all this oppressive handed-down junk – with the antiques as

stand-ins for what your forebears left you psychologically, which *deepens like a coastal shelf*, Larkin hasn't left the room – then perhaps it could be clearer, more crashing and bleeding, the metaphor being brought to life so as to be smashed to pieces?

'The *shattered splinters of me* is clearly the heart of the matter, but I wonder if, as with Dexter's magnolia tree, you've already played that long deep chord, and we feel it with you. In fact we feel it so much we want to find that empty house in the world and smash the same things you do. If Christmas never comes for the poor plates, their death by smithereens is the only life they'll ever know.'

*

I say smithereens and I hear a window smashing. That doesn't always happen but it often does and it did there. It wasn't our precious tiny window which is boarded up, I don't know where it came from, we can certainly hear the muffled shouts from outside and it's very hot in here.

Because we can hear the whole thing closing in on us, Robic is quickly handing out her poem, the sheaf is passed round the table, diminishing in size as it gifts its lights of curiosity, to Harrison, to Dexter, to Szilia, Alina, to Chang and round to Echeverri, Hall, Mirabela and to me.

I wonder when I'll next be in a room with poets reading. I want to slow the moment down if I can, oh that's always worked so well for me, so I say to Robic as she's about to start, I didn't plan to at all: 'Can you tell us a little about it?'

She looks up faintly alarmed and says 'No, but I can say I was born in India and live partly underwater.'

We're all pretty happy with that, but the intense young woman Mirabela pokes my arm with her forefinger:

'Nu cântati finalul, profesor.'

And her friend Alina, smoking in the wake of that, is grinning as she whispers: '*Do not – sing – the ending.*'

*

I creep out of the phosphorescent waves,
up the beach to the headland where Penitents gather
in shadow, singing and chanting dispiritedly.

To avoid contagion, I move along the sand
until I hear the thump of jazz. I slither to the dark edge
of light, peer in at clinging bodies, dancers, listeners.

Gesturing fingers conjure up volumes of liquor,
wet reflections pool the bar, hooded eyes, wrinkles;
throats and mouths swallow and smack.

Couples in clinches limp dreamily towards the dunes
unaware of my presence, or any of the mutations
wrapped in night's invisibility, spreading.

*[Creaking palms – breaking sea-grape – growls
of lust – match-flare – snarls of disgust –
whimpers – slap and suck of compromised flesh.]*

A kind of limb thuds at my feet. I flicker and turn away
to the jazz club's glow. Blurred vision boosts it to glory,
dazzles over the perturbations. This is the only direction.

Brightness aureoles the sax, drums, ivories, fretworks.
Music works round the corners of air, bends blue notes,
makes sense of syncopations, the off-ness of things.

The nightly ritual tapers, hissing surf calls me back
among the Luminescents, we swim to the reef wall.
Sunlight seeps into the corals. Edge-gilded, we sleep.

*

'You can learn a lot about a poem by colouring in vowel-clusters, to see which ones are *live*, contributing (sometimes they all are) and which dormant (they don't all have to, they don't in life). Those effects are made subconsciously, like internal rhymes and assonance, they are after all motions of the body (throat,

tongue, lips, saliva, teeth, palate) for which we must presume physiological causes. If you don't know what I mean, mouth Opens when shocked. Start there.

'But for once let's look away from vowels, my eyes are blitzed by the little gems and to my ear they're dancing skilfully here – let's do our crayoning with *pronouns*. The I that is rife in the first two stanzas, punning away with *eye* as it can't help doing, soon vanishes and makes only one reappearance in the remaining six stanzas. The poem then fills with the implicit Theys of *Gesturing fingers*, *Couples in clinches* and so on, and recomposes at the end around a disappearing *We*. Any triptych of pronouns tells an existential story.

'The lone voice arrives on land like our species, evades the plague and Penitents, is thrilled by music, dodges sex and violence, returns to swim among whomsoever the Luminescents are, and lastly senses the onset of daylight as it succumbs to sleep. That's a fine night's work for a properly functioning creature. It both is and isn't *homo sapiens* we're hearing from but everything's resounding metaphorically, it's both a great night out and a good old bop on the shores of the Inferno, either way it's a believably *lived* structure, and the pronouns guide us through.

'The *Penitents* and *Luminescents* book-end the poem with alluring strangeness, as if we've washed up somewhere ritual, symbolic, and what are the tercets up to? Honest tercet work – three deep breaths then a held breath, the stanza-break, to see what's going to happen now. Tercets relinquish the steady footfall of the English couplet, which trots through the space with a badge of tradition. Tercets are challenged, and their beauty is tense. They are long enough and short enough to have issues.

'See how every stanza is end-stopped, watchful and contained. The creature in this poem – that creeps from water, avoids contagion, slithers, flickers, swims and sleeps – keeps itself to itself, will not expose itself to the dangers of the perilous air between stanzas, rooms, or in this case Eliot's *chambers of the sea*...

'Hey, my friends, if you make it out of Canadee here's your next exercise! What are the favourite stanza-forms of creatures? Lizards, lions, larks, lemurs. And why! Go! No stealing from Pirate Murray. But a serious idea. If line-breaks are body-language, which someone said and it was me, then stanza-forms are the *corpus* itself. Find animal behaviour in the bristling edges where crying and nothing gape at one another. Then do plants, like magnolia trees, then do things, like china plates. (Or do nothing, like I did in my book and nothing told me *You're done*.)

‘Near the end of the poem the speaker calls this *The nightly ritual*. This sense of something perpetually undergone is fastened by the present tense and by certain clues in the phrasing, hinting that this dark and thrilling track has no forks or junctions, is paved with prior knowledge: *To avoid contagion, until I hear, unaware of my presence, the only direction*, and, not least the baleful circularity implied in the title: *At dark of the moon*.

‘The atmosphere is lurid, unstable, bodies are apprehended in shreds and patches: *Gesturing fingers, hooded eyes, wrinkles*, then *mutations* and *A kind of limb*. The bargain with the thrill of the jazz feels Faustian, but Robic’s creature, observant and addictive – it can’t seem to stop undertaking this – slides through it all as if exonerated by its role as witness, unable ever to affect, but ever knowing better:

*Couples in clinches limp dreamily towards the dunes
unaware of my presence...*

‘Now, if it is a witness, and the recurring experience described is not unlike the careful retelling of a dream, then that effect feels undermined by the fifth stanza. The square brackets, dashes, italics are strange to encounter and hard to interpret: neither feels like this creature’s natural song, which is elongating, trailing, vigilant, aware. This stanza daubs its distinct hues onto the canvas, sexual revelry and violence and cost, but I feel that could be accomplished in the measures of the poem before and after. The witness is not ambushed by this stanza, and nor are we as we creep along beside, so I would fold it into the same perspective.

‘The one general cautionary note to sound here, for everyone but with reference to Robic’s beguiling nocturne, relates to the light. We begin with *phosphorescent* – perhaps the Phosphorescents too formed their own society on these phantasmal shores? – we have *shadow, dark edge/of light, reflections, night’s invisibility, match-flare, flicker, glow, blurred, Brightness aureoles, blue* and finally *Luminescents, Sunlight* and *gilded*. I think this group needs a shade more coherence, a more general consistency of *How the light is When*. Because light and dark are undoubtedly the prime revellers here. And one way to affect light is simply to reduce words, on the principle that where it’s dark you see less, you are told less, you know less. I think *dispiritedly* in the third line knows too much, or takes too long to say what it knows. Try pencil where there’s pastel, or charcoal where there’s oil, lift the implements of night until dawn comes with her palette.

'For light arrives winningly at the end, from *the off-ness of things* suggesting the small-hour exhaustion of words, to the deft soundscape of *hissing surf calls me back*, to the gracefully unexplained *among the Luminescents*, to the exquisitely lit *seeps into the corals*. And sometimes I love a poem that ends because it has to:

Edge-gilded, we sleep.

'There is an ancient power and politesse to explaining why, with regret, the poem has to end now. That might be Owen's ghost of a German soldier in the trenches murmuring *Let us sleep now...* or Randall Jarrell's less lyrical combatant: *When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose*. Or Dickinson's enactment of oblivion rolling in: *I could not see – to see –* and let's hear it, since it's happening all around us now, for the end of Vachel Lindsay's *Factory Windows Are Always Broken*:

*Factory windows are always broken.
Something or other is going wrong.
Something is rotten – I think, in Denmark.
End of the factory window song.*

'In all cases that's all folks. Nowhere to be, nothing to see, nohow to see it. But on the subject of poems ending I think I'll let Teacher Walcott have the last word tonight, from *Miramar*, an old port town which I believe is twinned with Dark Canadee:

*Clench, hold
on to what you have. After a while, this whole
slow grinding circus doesn't give a fuck.
There is nowhere to go. You'd better go.*

Perhaps I shall meet him there.'

*

O we're done, we're done. But we don't leave, we watch the crimson embers breathing in the hearth, we let the sleeping dogs lie, we are here because we are here, and we wait for what is happening now, heavy footsteps thundering at the top of the stairs and down them.

*

The Deal Porters had a weakness. Sharp Practice knew it, Sal knew it, but they hoped the time would never come. They knew that deep in the past of the Porters persisted their original function, the carrying of heavy wood through the port. The muscle memory of this meant that their hands were always stretched forward, palms upward, waiting for this forgotten burden. It was why they liked clipboards, sheaves of paper, piles as large as possible. So Sharp had given them contracts on thick paper in octuplicate, nonuplicate, decuplicate, in iridescent colours sent from overseas, from Seguimi or Mother McCloud, until this night, that night, tonight, when certain officials of English Land, watching the siege of the Dockhouse from a safe distance, got into conversation with a chap they knew.

‘Logs!’ said Kemp breezily, looking up from his logbook, ‘light-bulb going *bing!* You should give the Porters logs to carry, they’ll all mosey down to the wharf in no time.’

The officials looked at him, and then at one another.

‘*Bing!*’ he went again.

So this was duly performed by various redcoats, and the Deal Porters, mystified at a sudden new sense of deep fulfilment, started walking away from the Dockhouse bearing logs to nowhere in particular.

I heard this from the horse’s mouth about an hour later when the siege was over. As usual I asked Kemp what had possessed him to strip the threatened Dockhouse of its only protection from the Mob – no one messed with the Deal Porters so without them we were doomed – and he put his fingers to his chin and looked thoughtful.

‘I don’t know, Max Factor, it’s just, when you get a good idea you need to spread it around, no, share the light? I was dwelling on logs in my mind at that moment, and the poor English fellows were so puzzled at how to proceed, and there’s me putting nine and eight together, seventeen! and I saw how they’d come in handy. Logs! I mean, you don’t want to waste a top-notch notion.’

‘We could have all been killed.’

‘Let’s not get political, Factor. Where do *you* get your ideas?’

*

We were not all killed, nobody was. The Siege of the Dockhouse had emptied the wharf and the market and the Belly of Lead. There was us inside the building, the Deal Porters in a ring of cloaks around it, then the folks of the Mob getting slightly bored of waiting and beyond those the English gents who sent them. When the hooded Porters started to walk away with their pointless heavy burdens, the Mob saw their chance to set fire to the Dockhouse and get whatever they wanted, whatever it was, they’d need reminding, but they’d no sooner seen their chance come when it was most thoroughly gone.

*

No one had seen Ann Bonny's black ship come in to harbour, or heard her fearsome forty women thundering through the deserted market in their leather boots. No one knew the Pirates were there at all till there were stilettos and cutlasses trembling at the throats of the mostly pissed besiegers, and their pitchforks were roughly taken from their hands and broken over the thighs of the roaring girls as the sputtering fires were doused with seawater. By then the redcoats and English Land officials had melted away into the trees, and the heavy footsteps thundering down the stairs to where me and my nine poets recited everything we knew and waited for the end were the footsteps of Pirate Ann herself. The door slammed open.

'What does a lady have to do get a dark-and-stormy?'

*

We drank with Ann Bonny, and her pirate crew came down to escort us out through the upper chamber, and soon we would set eyes on Annie and Sal, the Sisters Bonny, standing on a table side by side and not an eyepatch between them, quaffing at the same huge flagon of ale.

'This the same enough room for ya?' one of them yelled.

Chris Prior got involved, though I know her name is Tina, she said she'd like to share the Findings of her Enquiry. Since no one knew what any of that meant, she was free to go ahead, and she did that for ages in her low impatient voice while Sal and Sharp and Jazz were planning and everyone else was hugging or high-fiving.

Jazz would take the Plague-Timers to the Belly to drink and wait for the boat home. Sharp and Sal would find a wagon and a driver to take Alina, Mirabela and Szilia into the interior to begin the search for their families. Tina overheard this and said in her view the three women were innocent of any wrongdoing. Everyone shrugged, we knew they were, but Tina then surprised us all by saying she would take them in her wagon, she had a driver of her own.

'In fact you know her, Maxwell.'

'What.'

'It's only a short-term contract,' she said, 'now let's get moving.'

More plans were made in no time at all. Ann Bonny said the chamber below would be her sister's room for a certain term.

'So she can finish her damn book and come sail the seven with us!'

'What about the poetry school?' said Sal.

‘Under new management,’ her pirate sister cackled and pointed to the red neon sign they’d already hoisted outside:

The Piracy School

‘What about the workforce?’ Sal wondered, though you could see she was not that unhappy with the change. After all, Sharp Practice and the Jazz Lady and all of the Dockfolks were already dressed in pirate gear and trying out phrases.

‘*Many’s the night I’ve dreamed of cheese,*’ said Sharp Practice, ‘*toasted, mostly.*’

‘*If it comes to a-swinging, swing all, say I,*’ said the Jazz Lady.

‘They’re hired, you’re on leave, Sal,’ said Ann, and the sisters toasted to the future, then drained their flagon down in one.

Goodbyes were being said now, between Harrison and Alina, and Dexter, Hall and Chang and Mirabela, Szilia, Robic and Echeverri, and the pirate women gave the Plague-Timers an escort towards the Belly of Lead, I saw them stroll off down the lane, silhouetted waving against the blue glow of the market, while Tina and the Dockhouse folks helped the three young women prepare for their long and perilous journey.

*

‘I don’t know, Max Factor, it’s just, when you get a good idea you need to spread it around, no, share the light? I was dwelling on logs in my mind at that moment, and the poor English fellows were so puzzled at how to proceed, and there’s me putting nine and eight together, seventeen! and I saw how they’d come in handy. Logs! I mean, you don’t want to waste a top-notch notion.’

‘We could have all been killed,’ I say, I can still feel my heart thumping.

‘Let’s not get political, Factor. Where do *you* get your ideas?’

‘I don’t have any ideas, Kemp, I just – wait. Where’s McCloud.’

I don’t know what to do with myself and I think she might know best, but come to think of it, I haven’t seen her since she ran off through the market with the soldier in her wake, when the Mob found the women had been rescued and the alarm was sounded.

‘I don’t know where she is,’ Kemp is saying thickly, ‘I don’t know *who* she is any more,’ and we’re walking quickly through the market to the wharf where a crowd has gathered and are shouting and pointing at things in the moonlit water.

*

We will notice at once that the whirlpool out there is wider than ever, faster and darker, and you can’t even see what it comes to any more. A young

man next to us will point out Private Lane, who in his full dress uniform will be marching into the sea, white smoke pouring downwards out of his mouth. He will be staring straight ahead, transfixed, at the whirlpool, and others calling down to the water, because they see McCloud there in the darkness of the narrow shore, pushing her coracle out into the currents.

And Lane will keep on walking and then wading and stumbling, until the depths lift him from his feet like a child and he begins to be slowly moved in wide circles by the water, gradually twisting and floundering further in towards the heart of the thing, and McCloud's little boat will begin to do the same, begin to veer from her ancient control, and all of us who watch this will howl at her to turn back.

Kemp is tying a thick black rope around my lamppost on the wharf, the post I find myself beside when I come here of a Friday, and he hauls and heaves at it till he knows it will hold.

'That's a figure-eight follow-through, Max, note well,' he says with pride, then he turns and takes a running jump in the black and golden water, the rope still with him all the way as he's splashing up into view, and he's swimming with the rope, swimming after the hapless craft my white-haired friend cannot handle now, for the quickening whirlpool has the soldier, a shape of creature going round, soon it will have the coracle the girl jumped from to save her boy, and we, I don't know who we are, watch the black rope suddenly go taut as the horizon.

And I'm the man who'd stumbled backwards to cling to my old lamppost I clung to for dear life when the force of the great phenomenon wrenched it with its rocks from the ground beneath my feet and I was flying into the sea and through the waves towards the vortex. The knot had held, the post had not.

I did try it all in the tense-to-come, I was still trying it then, but I am running back through the market now, I am stumbling past the Dockhouse, I see the wagon is gone and the building dark, I am staggering to the vast black woods with what I had to see, trying to bring the three of them backwards with me, Kemp who the lamppost pulls onward, plunging, writhing to the hole, the soldier spinning away far down and smoke still coming out of him, and the white-haired harbour girl with her arms out and her wild eyes open, letting the water whirl her on its course. The shortest time I have known in the world was the time I took to let the lamppost go, throw up my hands, swallow and tread water, and kick back for the shore.

* * *

Dark Canadee will return in the winter.