



The Floating Harbour

By William Altoft



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(Horrendously exaggerated, absolutely fabricated) praise for The Floating Harbour:

"I, thereupon my reading, before my blindness, of this poetry and prose, that which has been brought into a union attain'd by laudable endeavour with such naturall endowments as the Author himselfe is wont to demonstrate elegantly upon each and every page, thus discovr'd, without paucity of length, such divers sentences as I cannot praise with exactnesse enough, hinder'd as I am on such a cours by vertue of an imperfect talent, and thought I should be deny'd the joy of reading by the Imprimatur stamped upon any such work by the vulgar tyranny of our joyless, corrupt, and ignorant prelates."

– John Milton

"Four hundred years, for all that stretch of time,
was I in rev'rence held and recognised
as a writer from whom love, life, and death
came in new depths, new utterance, new words.
Stay as that may for years, four hundred more,
I cannot claim no company with which
to share a place in English as an art.
At once, with one work, am I near surpassed,
I may be somewhat left alone, at last."

– William Shakespeare

"Ther byyng not a doubt yn my mynd, I can seye that not evene I coude claim to have hadde so vast an ynfluence on the language of Engelond aes thies novel certainly shal yn the yeeres to come, and for al tyme."

– Geoffrey Chaucer

“Egypt is the gift of the Nile.”

– Herodotus, Histories

*“My tale becomes even more difficult
because we not only wandered through Space,
but also through Time.”*

– Herman Hesse, The Journey to the East

*“The city, however, does not tell its past,
but contains it like the lines of a hand.”*

– Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities

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Prologue

She rises then, placing a hand on the metal of the frame with such lightness that I believe she would not have moved the structure were it constructed in paper any more than were it constructed in gold, and, while she stands within the frame and upon the horizontal sheet that joins the industrial relic's legs, my arms resting near at the elbows, left hand enclosed in right, being unable to join her standing in the centre formed and framed by the grey-painted metal my feet are planted instead beside the abandoned tracks of the train system laced through the surface of the harbour wall, we look across and over the locked-in tidal waters of the river at the city it passes through and throughout – quiet and lit, the sun fallen gently into the woods that crest the glacial gorge to the immediate west – and though I may, unlike her, see before me only the floating harbour and the city outline as they presently stand and breathe, I can still sense the past it rests upon and see it almost forming in reflection on the languid water's surface, itself reflected clearly in the flowing, bright blueness of her thoughtful eyes.

I give voice to her name again, though I do not shift my gaze.

"Yes?" The way her voice blends with the feel of the slight wind, the shimmer of the calm waters, and the lights of the city creates a sound to match her eyes, which, as with mine, remain toward the river and its city.

"Will you tell me now what it means? Your name?"

Shifting gaze and turning heads, mine now resting on the knuckles of my left hand, the right resting on the metal surface, we look across and over at each other, and she smiles to match her eyes. Crouching to end one of her rarer moments of stillness she proceeds to trace a series of symbols into the slight dirt layer clothing the surface. Then, moving from her crouch and sweeping into a sitting position, she lets her legs dangle restlessly over the edge and looks across her shoulder at her finger-markings, upside down now to her view.

From out of a contented smile moves the sound that is the flowing, deep blueness of her eyes as she assures me:

"You know these symbols."

I do know these symbols; and so I know the meaning of her name.

Chapter 1

Mist on water.

The wall drops sharply down through a mist to water, and the surface cobbles crack grey and moss-green, rising with the roots of each of the eight trees. The cobble bricks – punctuated with dry mud, tarmac – track cigarette stubs and bottle caps beneath the benches and the jet-black railing, out to the edge and to the mist and to the water. The body of blue and silver – resting bright, deep – is still and silent, whilst the air above is billowed through with that shriek and undulation that the gulls consider song.

Hopping, flying, up from the seven others, it lands atop the black bin, exiled from the group activity on the ground of spreading further the city waste already forced out by overflowing. Just as the mist blends and fades into the air above the river's surface, its plumage blends and fades from a youthful grey to white. Plucking plastic, breaking bread, the others ebb and flow along the cobbles, crashing up and breaking upon each other and upon the nearest bench and the nearest railing. The exile tears the air again with its discontent and moves – hopping, flying – above the seven others. Still for a moment and for an age in the sky a few feet above its destination, its feathers flow in flux: grey and white, white and grey. It lands. Perched, now, on a shoulder. The seven others litter the ground with the waste and with their noise and with their presence.

The shoulder is of a man, himself perched upon a small and standing piece of wood, the man's mind so occupied by the distant and the unknown that the shoulder fails to flinch, and his gaze remains unbroken. His left elbow rests on his left thigh, his right on right, and his hands rest together on the knee of his right leg, boots firmly planted on the cobbled ground. His bandana and the hair beneath fail to move in the breeze that now shifts the exile's feathers, though both remain steadfast and facing forward. But for the man, what he looks at is not what he sees. Across the water in his line of sight are diligent harbour denizens just as unflinching and of equal stillness. Four watchful and silent giants line the surface of the facing wall, rising as it is out of water and out of mist; out of past and out of present.

The grey-painted metal skeletons rest, each, on four legs planted beside and around the tracks that lie unused, their legs supporting the bodies that sprout the necks that hold the heads that drape the chains down into the space where the boats would come. Out of time, out of joint, the industrial harbour cranes lower their hooks into a past, and, across from them, John Cabot, sculpture on the cobbled streets, sees a past even deeper still. And I see the present.

The exile re-joins the seven others as, after disturbing land and piercing sky, they flock and shove only to settle respectfully and calm upon the surface in the middle of the water, leaving nought but mild perturbations running gently through the captured tide of the river Avon.

A tide possessed is not a river conquered. The river still spears the distant gorge; the sea still claims its content.

The settlement it gifted,
risen up and closed around it,
floats its claim, well-staked, above it,
while the relics and the past stand guard.

The ex-exile and the seven others now allow and absorb the pushing of the wake and float further out, cutting into the fading mist. The wake drives on, splits, drives on further – drives on beneath the floating yachts and river-boats to crash, caress, the wall beneath the statue upon the cobbles; drives on toward the third wall of the city gateway, where, upon the water, rest a row of more private boats beside a wooden platform, and where, upon the surface, sleep a line of industrial sheds used only now for drink and dining – and a ferry-boat pushes its blue-topped but yellow-

painted nose into the space it leaves behind. With the skeleton cranes atop the wall across the body of water to its rear, the river-ferry, empty but for a human pilot, enters full the strait between and created by the two other walls, setting its sights full and focused onto the Cascade Steps of the approaching city.

Sending its wake still either side, it passes below a bridge and continues on, on down the final stretch. Curving up as it does to a slight, central rise, the silver of the bridge then curves on down to completion, connecting cobbled street and harbour railings with harbour railing and cobbled streets. Along that central rise the side-rails of the bridge – named for a slave – are decorated with a diversity of padlocks, placed to capture and sustain something ephemeral and impossible to trap. Placed in love, sincerity, in cynicism, jest. A symbol, placed by lovers, of possession and of fear of theft, locked tight and holding onto a structure suspended over the space between the solid ground.

And rising up, either side just beyond the halfway point, reaching near as far from the metal of the bridge as does the bridge from the water of the river, are two sculpted horns, widening out as they reach their circular peaks. As the last of the wake fades out with the remaining morning mist, it is past the padlocks and through these horns that a small dog of black and brown slowly trots. She does not judge the gestures of the lovers, nor is she fazed by an eight-strong chorus laughing and screaming intermittently about the harbourside. She is unbuffered by the wake of the ferry-boat. Short-haired, built strong, she pads surely but softly down to the point where Pero's bridge fuses with the cobbles that lay along the strait that runs from the sitting statue to the floating city.

She settles then, lying down on the matt of card on which her owner sleeps with such a lightness that she does not wake him anymore than do the routine sounds that ring out on each new day, and, while she rests her head upon the tops of her front paws and lets close her eyes, his arm shifting down to meet her, a movement made in sleep, being unable to sleep well or to hope to sleep restfully without her company formed and forged by the mutual and wretched situation of the abandonment of homelessness that laces through even the most developed of cities, they face with closed eyes the centre of the city as it shakes off the early morning lethargy to start – traffic and sunlight, the people falling gently into the patterns which mark their immediate past and present and future – and though she may, unlike him, wake each day with undefeatable and renewed hope and love and faith for what they face anon, he can still sense a small security and home that rests upon the companionship that pulses through the bond between them, something reflected clearly in the deep, brown of her now opening eyes.

Eyes opening now as response to the sudden settling of the ten pence piece at the bottom of the paper cup. She looks to her friend; he stirs but a little. His woollen hat and grey-black hair and beard fail to move in the breeze that now shifts the folds of his outsized raincoat, heavy as his hair is with uninterrupted accumulation. And as his eyes now open, the islands in the white as dark as hers, what he looks at is what he sees: beside his knee her resting head and attentive ears; beside the worn in, worn out material of the cheap footwear meant for running the cup tipped onto its side, held to ground by the weight of the coin visible halfway up toward the lip.

Shifting life and shifting leaves, the breeze hurries down the strait as if sent forcefully on its way, ejected by the city's heart. Swaying trees and swaying lampposts, silver bike racks and black-painted metal benches, a grain house turned youth hostel, a building for industry turned hub for creatives and their art: above and beside all this it goes, finally through the corner where sit the statue and the wooden benches. It whips momentarily around me.

The breeze circles in flux for a moment and for an age above the captured tide of the river Avon, whilst the air around it carries the message of the church spire, visible rising above the line of the buildings down-river: a brief and circular reflection in four bars, concluded with a note repeating until it sounds its seventh.

The breeze, as with the song, as with the mist, as with the night time and the present moment, fades out and dies above the harbour.

I, as with the gulls, as with the morning, as with the river and the sleeping past, remain.

And all is rather still.

I watch Cabot watch his ship. Though a reconstruction, it is clear he yearns to board and captain it nonetheless. He could stroll on up beneath the cranes to the end of their row and pause... board and sail until a new land is found – but what to call it?

Yet I know he will,
today, endure
a sight that daily sets itself
in play across
the water for
his impatience and his scorn.

Reflecting bright, in neon yellow, any sun that finds its way, child after child will board, as one party of pirates, The Matthew and will it away from the wall, in a harbour U-turn before his very eyes, and sail it off toward the ocean. But we, he and I, know it will not sail far, and for now it stands and floats: is still.

I have seen him most days of recent months, and in my memory banks I have seen him stoic and deeply restless each year that he has been thusly perched. The seagulls, too: they screech in semi-reliably recorded history. He may not do more than picture his journey, yet I am locked merely in time, never in space, and my boots – who have walked his yet-to-be and long-since discovered continent – can take me over the cobbles and the tracks, if not the river herself.

That way, for him, adventure lies; to me, what lies that way is food. And so worth it is the trip.

There is a bridge across the water constructed primarily as a river lock. Usually under foot and under cyclist, it is currently quiet, and it sleeps its boat-letting potential as it offers to take you on and present you with each and either side. When I return, it will offer me Cabot and cobbles to my left, a river-parallel to my right, and a path straight-on to the central city; as I go now, it lays out the south for me, ahead, and a left-turn to the church and spire. But, with the prospect of food and yet still without, there is pathway more attractive.

I go right, and the narrative goes with me.

As many times and more as I have walked past Cabot staring, I have walked the tracks as a tightrope and passed beneath the sleeping giants. Not only a century but a millennium has passed and become replaced whilst I have been reducing, steadily, the steps I need to wander round the same location.

Each industrial crane's chance framing of Bristol scrolls by me at my walking pace. Skirting the borders of my line of sight, they and their presented city are swallowed by my right-side blind spot, which falls over more of the harbour's water's edge as my attention is drawn leftward.

As with the restaurants and bars along the waterfront strait, here there runs a series of industrial sheds parallel to the edge and to the water. A two-tiered unbroken strip of large and red square doorways, divided, in the horizontal and the vertical, by the whiteness of the outer wall, they once were workshops and storerooms labelled alphabetically. While some retain semblance of that use, I am paused before the shed that fell beneath the letter 'M', looking through clear panes of glass at pristine modernity.

A second incarnation of a museum for the harbour and the city – its slavery, its industry, its art and culture – has sanitised away the near-raw and fully perceptible connection it once held to the spirit of the shell it lives within. Already turned into a presentation of its previous place in the order

of things, my memory of its initial form has it infused with the smell and feel of the recent, distant, dockyard past. A train on tracks through a model town; coal and cold air and steel; leather benches on a deep-green bus, two decks of seats, by all accounts, carved from solid stone.

I could become rooted in daydreaming and sculpted from nostalgia, lamenting over change, but I have a hunger to address. Not a hunger for drawing out and on the layers of the mysteries of the city. A hunger for white bread, contents encased in ketchup in the middle.

Beyond these sheds and cranes, I pass on tracks laid down for trains. With The Matthew now boarded and pirateered by schoolchildren about the morning, its usual spot, across from further sheds turned galleries and cafes, is empty, and between the two the sleepers begin or end.

Wood over gravel, between and under metal bands, half the walkway becomes a place for engines and their coal-filled carriages. Unable to resist an innate urge, were I to even consider resisting it, I do the only sensible thing when confronted with this situation: leaving the parallel path unpedalled, I step down on the mid-dark brown of the first rail sleeper, and continue on my solitary way. The gravel undisturbed this time, the space between the footfalls exactly that of the space between the planks – a feat unmanaged on so many harbour trips in times gone by. Far less daunting, no less satisfying, I follow the tracks as they curve with slightness and open out into more whence the second row of sheds leaves off.

The rails and the water and the edge between continue on my right-hand side. Multiple tracks show deep, rusty red, mid-dark brown, and grey and green where the moss and grass colonise. While my chosen track soon turns back into pathway, these offshoots remain running on as tracks in parallel. They weave and split in still fluidity, and the furthest from me are stood upon by resting trucks and carriages. Bumper to bumper, all but one who's exiled, they range blue and black and red and rust, painted white with words or left unmarked. Ghosts heavy on the tracks, as the sailing ships sitting deep within the water.

"Numburr fore!"

"Numbuh tooo!"

Neither the woman's call nor the man's I heard precede it fit the pure white seagull on the red-tiled roof, though they seem to emanate from nowhere else. It looks to me as I look to it, imploring, or either willing, me to buy some food that I will then not finish, or that I will forget, at some point, to guard.

"Numbuh tooo!"

Order up, Numbuh Tooo. But if so unclaimed it stays, might I take it? The gull cocks its head, surprised by and approving of my unvoiced thoughts. Perhaps I've learnt their ways this morning; perhaps I'll join it on the red-tiled roof.

Because I have restraint – because I am restrained – I join not the life of scavenging about the harbourside, instead walking closer and along, round to the front side of the little sandwich shop. Brunel's Buttery: a hole in a red-brick wall that is source of the numbered cries and the smells of egg and bread and bacon, eponymous engineer depicted above the menu, in his black and tall top hat. As I pass through the gap in the jet-black harbour railing that pens in the riverside seating area, Numbuh Tooo collects, at last, his British food and slowly walks, old man that he is, between the wood cut and placed for seating, his eyes trained on the broken yolk seeping out from between white bread, threatening to waterfall over the plate's edge and run its own river-course between the cobbles. He takes a seat across from whom I can only assume goes by Numbuh Wunn. Free and Fore go unaccounted: come and gone, perhaps, heading now to their starting positions.

I step up to the hole in the wall to converse with its dual-gendered voice, embracing, with my whole being, my inevitable mantle.

The Hole in the Wall: ... ee is lucky, mind, in ee?

Number Five: Mornin'.

The Hole in the Wall: Mawnin'. Any tea or coffee?

Number Five: Uh yeah, please. Black coffee.

The Hole in the Wall: Reg'lurr ore?

Number Five: Regular, please. And to stay here.

The Hole in the Wall: Black coffee... anythin' else?

Number Five: Could I've a sausage an' egg sandwich, please.

The Hole in the Wall: Sausage an' egg...

Number Five: Cheers.

In between handing over money and answering the surely seagull-inspired call that proclaims my food, I stand looking past the red-brick shack on its river-side: the wooden masts, the cranes, the now silent, once singing, spire.

A swan, slow, solitary, sweeps and is swept past by a student, swift, solitary, up early to put in extra time for a rowing club. Sailors of leisure, heading both beyond myself and this café in the direction I had been heading in, toward expensive and expansive flats that stand as development, rising more and more and either river side, as the cliffs that make the distant gorge.

I hear my name...

"Numbuh Five!"

...temporary as it is, and even as I take the food it falls from me, holding no longer than the moment it is void of meaning. Inside the hole in the wall you may find it, hidden between the smells on the air and the sounds within the radio waves, waiting to be re-torn up and out of a notepad and back down into existence.

The food does not last any longer than it took to make; the black coffee lingers on.

Under ghosts and over ghosts, beside them and across the water, I re-take my place beside John Cabot to witness his relief as his ship pulls in. Beside his still being I stand being still, until I place my left hand upon his shoulder and turn between the cobbles and the clear, blue sky to walk the strait toward the central city.

At the end of the stretch, the city has drawn and directed myself and the river both toward its erstwhile gateway, though I joined the journey late, and here at the door are we greeted and sent on separate paths. The floating, wooden platform meets the stone at the bottom of the Cascade Steps, which take you down between the harbour walls to meet the water; which bring you up to the surface to meet the city. On either side lie steps of pale grey and stone, but the cascade comes between them over steps of gold. Of broader size, these steps rest brightly beneath the water that runs down from top to bottom, waterfaling quietly at the city entrance.

It is beneath this platform and beneath these steps that the river runs on without my company, present and close as it remains even out of sight. In our parting, it gently rocks the little blue and yellow ferry-boat that's tethered to the wood. I take a seat on the bench that, with its twin companion, lines the top beyond the final step. Behind me, city centre, with my gaze on where I've so far been, sleeping cranes standing clearly in the distance.

With the distant sun behind the only cloud in the clear, blue sky – collaborating together to misrepresent to all the world the space between them – the early morning begins slowly turning toward another stage, and I am still one of but few characters to strut or fret across the day's first

act. Knowing the city prepares to fill itself around me, I keep my seat, for now alone, my mind as the morning and the city: awake and peacefully awaiting more.

As a stream of light bursts the dam that is the only cloud, it careens into the polished, white sides of the sail boats and breaks upon the standing horns of the slave-named bridge, crashing down on the water's surface. My eyes close before I can give the order, and they absorb and adjust while I await their signal, to let me know they are ready to continue on under the new conditions. I wait behind the curtain for a moment and for an age while the river accepts the sunlight, escorting it along beneath the wooden platform and the Cascade Steps to suffuse the city. The morning turns no slower, no quicker, sending the reanimated breeze on another reconnaissance about the waterfront. The light has settled in.

Okay, ready.

I flicker open my eyes, they make their final adjustments, and I look on at the established morning.

There is a girl-child, wandering free across the wooden platform.

Chapter 2

As if born of the moment the sunlight speared the river and placed upon the platform by the breeze, she is present where no presence was before. She is too young, surely, to be alone. Perhaps not far beyond the border of her parent's kingdom, but into the shadowland, nonetheless, and pushing it. Whether she is to be summoned, reprimanded, or directed by her own self home, she is no doubt safer than worry would have it – and yet the waterfront appears, still, void of any candidates for guardian.

Hands enmeshed and elbows on knees, I keep my seat atop the cascade and my gaze between the girl and the harbour strait ahead. She must have been within the ferry-boat, waiting but with limits on her restful patience. Oblivious or indifferent to my presence, she is either way entranced by the vitality waterfalling down the steps between us, and though the distance is too much for telling it seems clear from her face and poise, so eminently, that the water of the golden steps and the water of the locked-in river can do nothing less than flow more freely as reflections in her restless eyes.

Evidently freed from an unacceptable stillness that lasted forever if it lasted a moment, since her conjuring she has not stood still. Though never frantic, she has gently run a course, without pause, as between a stroll and a full-on dance, indescribably both and neither one nor the other. As she veers toward the boat, I sit up straighter to gaze away and around, and sure enough, having found no more evidence of a family or a school group, I do find that, whilst the sun is still out from behind the cloud and suffusing with light the water, the girl that embodied their meeting is no longer manifest upon the platform. Returned, no doubt, to a restless patience and a stillness state – already an eternity too long.

With her permission granted, her dancing signal across the platform and briefly through the morning, the slow unfolding of its set-up settles out and the day, in gentle force, begins.

My left hand innately moves to the pocket of my jeans to summon my external self, but it finds the pocket phone-less. I had deliberately left without it so I could capture and present not a bit of this day – only live it and then watch it fade. Unable, thus, to trap the solar scene before me, I stand and take in the twin suns: sitting in the clear, bright water and floating in the bright, blue sky.

Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap!

Jesus... fucking Christ...

I turn, exclaim – though only inward – and confront the affront to my painted picture. What looks like nothing more or less than a scaled-up puppet of a make-shift dog out of a child's TV show from the 1960s is sat staring blankly at my being and everything immediately around it, wooden boards-for-mouth falling obscenely together in what cannot be music, sounding out entirely void of any melody or mode or rhythm. A purple sheet dotted with a golden pattern is draped around whomsoever it is that considers this a good idea.

For all its stark and sudden intrusive nature, it has clap-clapped me to attention, and my brain takes in a wave of waves of sound.

A drone of cascading liquid life creates a base for all and envelops and spreads the sound of clapping boards into coherent rhythm.

Clap!

Clap!

Clap!

Clap!

Clap!

Clap!

Clap!

Clap!

Rapidly
and underneath
and up and through.

Score fundamentally set,
a pitch at height,
a shriek and undulation
fades in from left
and fades out to right,
melody answered by a chorus of like instruments
set back and central on the river strait.

Right upon the heels of the moment that the shrieking round settles among the rhythm and atop the drone, a hum rises at a threatening pace, simultaneously from either side.

To the rush of water and the clapping boards, whipped around and buttressed by the seagull song, the creak and cry and rush and halt of city traffic rises up to a moderate point and plays out steady on the borders of the music.

The wind stabs among the players every couple of bars,
a forceful beat formed by the rustle of the trees.

The repeating round enters its final flow,
as the gulls,
individually,
one-by-one,
begin and lift and rise
until their song fades out,
final gull closing final line.

Toward the rhythm and the humming and the drone below,
punctuated with percussion by the wind,
a new melody approaches from beyond all borders,
converging into harmony with apparent ease.

Strings of phrases not afraid to find and form with a frenetic fraction of another, one with which to mingle, pass, combine, and part, to join others and persist or leave.

Quavers of Spanish trill away above Germanic pulse,
hints of Romance tied up tight between them.
Slavic sounds sing out from time to time, finding room
amongst patois phrases of the Caribbean.
Afro-asiatic notes pass on by,
and all above play out,
amongst, around
call and response:
variations on a farmer's,
near a pirate's, dialect,
much posher voice there to fill the air with vowels.

Symphonic.

And that absurd little purple dog, conducting through the whole damn thing.

I walk away to the sounds of the opening bars of the second movement, and the symphony plays on around my fading presence, as if, almost, it was not being performed for me.

I walk on water and no-one stops to stare. Between myself and the river is the ground man-made, created to cover and on which I wander without waiting for an aim to put itself, above any others, for consideration.

Between the two roads the wide promenade stretches out, away from the orchestral hub, decorated down the middle with three shallow fountain pools, laid down in the material style of the Cascade Steps. Their straight edges are bordered by smooth ground of dark-grey brick and dark-grey wood, the left-hand side, as I approach, watched over by a line of trees and gently hemmed-in by flowerbed-backed benches, giving off shade and green and oxygen.

As I walk among this, the first two fountain pools pass me by. In the space of wood and brick that separates the second from the coming third, a solitary pigeon, with its grey, dark grey, and dirt, wanders with apparently much the same day plan as me. We cross paths as we switch promenade sides, both ignoring the little blue and silver metallic hut that serves out coffee and sets out chairs, whilst about us, nearby and further off, move many another pigeon and many another human: some smooth and quick and heads held high, some slow and battered by the city.

Looking to the other sides of each bordering road, I see the building mix of history: from signs of Georgian to the sleek and modern glass-heavy façades. I pass the end of the third and final pool – first and foremost to my cross-pathing pigeon – and here the danger manifests.

Beneath a statue, atop a podium, of the immortal Neptune, fiercely bearded and trident wielding, patrol the bothersome haunts of the city centre, neatly bearded and clipboard claspings, or smooth-faced and flailing insincerely around and in the way whenever triggered by a moment's eye-contact. Neptune scowls down at myself and at the fountain pools – how diminished a domain left to him once ousted from the sea – and I sorrowfully meet his eyes as I wade into the storm...

“HELLO! :) :)”

“Dude... I can see you wanna talk to me.”

“Heeeeeey? xoxo”

“Mate, you look down, let's chat.”

Wristbands, style, and open-arms: I flinch, all but drowned in the guilt and the good news. The kooky girls and the charming guys comprise the shock troops in the drive for charity, and I notice to the side, passive and quiet and leaving all alone but for smiling, two witnesses of God standing by their little watchtower. Perversely, I feel drawn desperately to discourse with them, not for their message, but as escape from the evangelising of the righteous getting paid to pressurise/the sincere tryna make a difference. Alas, the Christians are now hidden from view, as a representative of Amnesty International decides to give an older man no peace.

“Hi there!”

Aaaaaah.

“Hi.”

Goddammit.

“How's the day going?”

I should not have stood still.

“Ah fine.”

It is so much easier if you do not stop walking.

“Only fine?”

She is invested in how your day is going.

“Fine in the positive sense.”

Why can't she stand still?

“Great!”

Nobody needs to move their hands and arms around this constantly.

“Have time for a chat?”

“Ah um.”

"It's for a good cause?"

I have plenty of time.

"I'm afraid I can't really."

I am doing absolutely nothing but wandering through space.

"It won't take too long? And you look like you have all the time in the world!"

I have all the time in the day, at least – perhaps that is all the time in the world – but I have also rediscovered my forward physical momentum.

"Ah, no. Sorry."

As I escape across to the bordering road to Neptune's left and to my right, I pass through, weaving, the traffic unharmed, a small green man showing to me too late when and how. I come now to the base of a V shape on the Bristol map and cross at another crossing – this time holding fast until green permission given to swim upstream through a crowd of people heading the other way.

Safely through, the branches of the V stretch on. Where one goes flat and to my right, the other goes left and up a gradual hill, and this latter route I take, heading up to Corn Street instead of down to Bristol Bridge.

Between a betting shop and a supermarket housed in the lowest floor of an old, grand building, between a bus-named bar and top-hat café, the length and breadth of this street are set out in grey and dark-grey slabs of stone, four-sided and etched in enduringly with gum, chewed-up and spat clean out: signs of life.

Walled-up either side by Georgian and Victorian buildings of the 18th and the 19th century, only occasionally does the street break open, as roads piercing through from either side cross and converge with the road that now splits the tiled pavement and runs up toward the humble tower at my vision's end. As another building – grand, old, and foundationed with the banality of an optician's and a sandwich shop – falls behind me, I step onto the first of these cut-through roads. Before I take up the pavement on the left-hand side that begins with three storeys of red brick, a Gothic elegance roofed with peaks and spikes and edges, I catch a small church with my left peripheral, its gated yard just beyond a line of bikes rigged for the delivering of pizza.

I see ahead, outside a book shop that signals the beginning of historic Corn Street, a group being addressed by an individual. I walk slightly faster, so as to listen in from the outskirts before they dissipate or move away.

"... and the four Corinthian pillars reach two storeys high, and can you see just above them, central? The city coat of arms."

Reversing into the road and to the other side, as if propelled backwards by the approving murmurs shooting out from them, a group of six are taught the histories by their guide of one. As I reach the book shop they begin pulling away, back across to my side of the road and on, up the gradual hill.

"Corn Street was one of the principal streets in historic Bristol. The medieval city was focused on a crossroads between this street and the High Street. Having grown up in Saxon times, Bristol..."

I gaze up at those Corinthian columns she had pointed out, too close to see the coat of arms, but I do see a more modern logo, at far less an elevation. The trio of archways that house two glass windows and a wooden door sit beneath the letters that stretch across the base of the columns, reading *31 Corn Street*, and under these symbols sticks out a sign for the bar and lounge that occupies the place within.

I pass on by.

The five women and the two men; the seven sounding strange; the information and the informees – I haunt the group that walks on slowly along the principal street.

“Yes, exactly. And you can see the sculpture work on and between the pillars of the Old Bank. Here near the lowest floor: heads of firemen, do you see? Bearded, helmeted, even showing two axes either side! And all the way at the top are female figures acting as pillars.”

We all raise and squint at the final row of carvings and window panes, as sunlight rolls over the triangular peak above them.

“One holds fruit, one holds a book, and another is holding a globe – this was the Bristol branch of the Liverpool and London and Globe Insurance Company.”

I knew of the facades and pillars, of the warm-coloured Bath stone and the stone of white, and I knew of the past dead behind the veil of present, but, as we are moved on again to the next exhibit, I realise more the abundance of sculpture and engraving: of trade goods and of men and women, of sphinxes and children. There is much to be missed when beset on all sides by history.

A white van rumbles past us in the direction of the harbour, as a pizza begins its green mile, boxed and hitchhiking on the bike that weaves past van and tourists, turning left with the road as Corn Street becomes pedestrian-only at the slight hill’s crest about the humble tower.

Before we cross that road that way, we look upon four more columns.

“... between 1810 and 1811. It barely reaches half the height of these two buildings either side, but the Grecian style makes it far more impressive. Inside now is a pub, a chain, but originally it housed a club for merchants, businessmen, and traders, and was frequented by local prostitutes. The first president of the Commercial Rooms was a road surveyor who went on to invent tarmac!”

Looks and murmurs, at various pitch and volume. Two doors and two potted plants out front, two free-standing signs to entice with a promoted menu. As our tour guide elucidates on the three female figures, life-size, spaced evenly atop the building – symbolic of Commerce and Navigation either side, with trident-clasping Bristol standing high and centre, oval shield decorated with the coat of arms – I consider that a Grecian exterior signals grand whilst it holds, within, a Wetherspoon’s. Where once, inside, men let plantation sugar fall and crash into their coffee, sharing news of the sea, the world, the country, waiting on the wind vine to signal safety for ships wanting to negotiate the Avon Gorge, now for lager and debate on sport, pausing only to bite into the bread around a burger, and find it taken just a little too early from out the microwave.

The group is distracted momentarily, as it starts to once again move, as one of its members topples to near-capsized after steering unknowingly into the first of eight horseshoe silver-metal bars rising out of and back into the pavement, half-full of locked-on bikes. Yet now things are righted in this little fleet about the city as we sail on forward, the road going left without us.

“Here we have it – the Corn Exchange!”

The building she refers to dominates the area, smaller than the tower in height but less humble, and three storeys of windows grow out either side of a clock face flanked by pillars and above an archway entrance. The windows on the third-storey row, directly in line with the clock face, are smaller squares to the taller rectangles of the windows of the floors below, and those windows closest to the ground have each a hanging basket, hidden by the green and pink and lilac that covers and grows out from within them.

“... covering the courtyard behind this front was built during major works in 1872, the Exchange itself was built from 1741 to 1743, created by an architect from nearby Bath – John Wood. Two of the four columns – Corinthian, of course! – are supporting, and the other two on either side of those columns are known as pilasters, which are ornamental pillars, only giving the appearance of support.”

As the group murmur and trap the building deep within their phones, I, being a few metres behind them, lean my right-hand side against a lamppost that looks as Victorian and Georgian as much of the rest of this street, its bulky head sitting, clouded, twice as high up as mine sits.

“Ah yes: that tower is part of a small, now closed, Anglican church, called the All Saint’s Church. Part of the church survives from the twelfth century, and part from the fifteenth, so it is very old. The tower, however, was added in 1716. In the 1400s, a brotherhood, named the Kalenders, built a library over the church, after a deed of 1464, and gave free access to all who wished to study – the first public library in the Kingdom! Unfortunately, many of the books were destroyed in a fire in 1466. And you see this small, three-storey building between the tower and the edge of the Exchange? This was a Georgian coffee room, at 56 Corn Street. The room known as ‘the great vestry’ was given by All Saint’s to John Cooke, and soon became Cooke’s Coffee House. It was officially given to him in 1718, but it must have existed at least five years before, as there is a will from 1713 that refers to a room occupied by Cooke as a coffee house. By 1723 it was known as the London Coffee House, and was probably the most popular in the city. Less Starbucks for competition in historic Bristol!”

Jolly murmurs. I smile not because of the oh-so-mild humour of the comment, but because of how the men and women of the group seemed so genuinely to enjoy it.

“But there *was* competition from an American coffee shop – the American Coffee House opened on Broad Street, and the place at 56 Corn Street closed down around 1769. But, in October of 1780, the council had a meeting that saved it. It flourished in the twentieth century as the flagship coffee house of the Cawardines, with the smell of freshly roasted on-site coffee in the air, and from 2002 it has been what it is now: Café Revival. Let’s go back to the Exchange, there is plenty more history here! Intended for merchants of all types...”

As she discusses the mercantile past, I survey, from my clouded lamppost, the modern traders of this paved and lively little area.

A small number of stalls have been set up, tables draped in cloth, each covered above with a canvas held up by poles, the deep red of which lacks only in the shapes of letters, white words across the canvas edge, reading: *ST NICHOLAS MARKET Est 1743*.

And so the market beneath the glass arcade thus spills from out the archway entrance. Behind one stall, a woman of silver hair stands almost buried in the folds and piles of cushions, rugs, and carpets, while the next along flanks itself with its own divine imagery: a marijuana leaf across the table from a reggae legend, boxes of records strewn about between them. On another sit plastic baskets holding in a mass mess of plastic toys, beside a collection of films held and stored in a most archaic method of viewing them, while a man of fading hair, standing at a stall apart, keeps alive the market’s original purpose at that establishment of 1743: fruits and vegetables are offered for purchase atop a bright green cloth atop a pair of tables.

The woman of the past is pointing at me.

“... the first of four in total, used for the exchange of money between traders and their customers.”

She had been pointing at the little object about a metre out from where I lean, though now she points to another between the group and the exchange. A little brass pedestal with a rounded top and base which narrow in toward each other, the top at elbow-resting height for some, at waist height for others.

“... referred to as ‘nails’, which is where the phrase ‘paying on the nail’ comes from. Okay, we’re going to walk further along, but first feel free to spend time at these stalls – we will be going into St. Nick’s market a little later, however.”

The group begins to move

“Oh, hold on!”

and then it stops again.

“One last thing on the Exchange! I almost forgot to include it. The clock face up there was installed in 1822, and you see it has two minute hands? This is because it had to show both Bristol

time and London time. In Britain, it was the advent and spreading of the railway that eventually caused the whole country to run on the same time. The scheduling and timetabling of trains necessitated a standardised railway time, which Bristol officially adopted on the fourteenth of September, 1852. The old local time was just over ten minutes behind London's."

We part ways, if they ever knew that we joined them in the first place.

I walk from my post and pedestal along to the second 'nail' that had been pointed out; the group sails on through history. I see the third 'nail' and fourth, placed just as the first and second on the other side of the archway entrance – on which I fix my sights.

The wooden door stands parted amongst the stone. Here ends, from either side, a black-metal railed fence, with two more lampposts standing sentry, heads unclouded, latent light within clear to see. They let me pass, and, with the further permission of the lions, their heads holding rings with which to knock, I step through, away, and in.

Chapter 3

Checkered-chessboard 'neath a chandelier of electric bulbs, four columns reach from the black and the white up to find white petals of red-centred flowers – repeated tiles that decorate the ceiling. A mother in and of black rests alert upon the sofa in the corner of the entrance room, and as I pass beyond the glass within the two faces of the wooden and set-open doors, ushering me into the Exchange Hall, she is left alone but for the baby in the pram beside her to contemplate the steps within the opposite wall, steps bordered heavily by the rugs and sights and scents of a superficial Eastern setting, spilling out from the unique boutique that they offer up and take you down to.

The short, criss-crossing slats of the wooden floor; the pale-green-painted cross-beams that curve up, slight, in and around the square, glass ceiling tiles – this is the land and sky to the market maze that I push my pen strokes through.

Whilst the borders of the sky stand carved with green fruit and the yellow-haired white heads of unnamed ladies, below them bustle stalls and stands in a four-cornered world that I make my way through.

There is music from the heavens via little boxes.

The world's up-propped by silver, makeshift scaffolding that stands in permanence, each segment of the maze a mass of many things, from hats and leather bags to strings of garlic and some cheap umbrellas. One may buy one's woollen scarves or weed-symbolled lighters with one's Bristol Pounds, gazed at and on by another sleeping, metal giant – the neck and head of a giraffe towers tall from across the room.

It sees me see the stalls that sell the uniforms of festival-goers; it sees me see the stalls for jewellery and greetings cards. It watches me watch the windchimes, and the socks and t-shirts writ with Bristol slang. It ponders me as I ponder others who peruse or distribute the goods.

Buddhas and incense across the way from plastic toys and playing cards, across the way from a cycling shop across the way from mugs sold with some famed graffiti, downsized and magnetised.

Stopping short of, but in sight of, the doors that declare their passage through to yet more stalls, I stand amongst gems and fossils, and I stand next to memories. To one side of me are card-framed photographs of Bristol through the many decades past, while swirls naturally set into stone stand displayed beside a prehistoric scene that shows ancient creatures drawn about a changing landscape beside their fate and future selves.

The many decades past.

From this point of fully captured time I continue through, and after café smells and t-shirt colours I take three steps down into a strip that runs between the hall and the covered market, that picks things up again with piles of pages, interpreted and used and yet left unchanged, and music caught and sold in vintage format.

Atop the façade of that second market-half, archways in the stone let in light and breeze, and they let in sky and pigeons, while a metal mesh holds, with bars, it in connection with the hall behind me, meeting metal mesh at a higher point that extends from the Exchange out to meet it in the same endeavour.

The spheres of the lamps hang down and meditate until they're needed. The wind whips momentarily around me.

The food market that is this separating strip now sees me lifted, and I am transformed into the breeze.

I ferry smells atop the waves of sound;
I bring the sound of speech safely through aroma.

Steady English, rapid Spanish,
a joyful jargon journeyed from Jamaica.
Chickpeas and soapy coriander,
making way for the revolting olive:
subjectivity retained.

I take the heat of pies and of cups of tea and
brush it through a fruitful fragrance;
oranges, oranges, lemons, lime,
sit beside a crop of kale.

I fail to move the hair in dreads about the tanned skin –
browned white;

I shift the purple dye and dungarees and
the dresses splashed with multi-colour.

Along I find more that's tropical:
a distant beach that's formed upon a blackboard.
I move along from there to hummus, pickle, pepper,
heaps of purple, orange,
heaps of red and green.

As I wisp, with dying speed, along an offshoot and narrow lane, I rematerialize as the square-paving meets with the tarmac of a quiet road.

The morning mixture of blue and white and green brings bright backing to the plain, stone church. An arch-windowed box that's merged with a tower that tops with a spire for a peak, standing old at the end and corner of the road; standing old between myself and Bristol Bridge.

My head is cocked and my gaze is fixed, and I do not particularly take in the tall, brick blocks of buildings that the church is a starting point or culmination to. The dark and darker patches of pure time paint the age of the church along its body, and below the second window sits a plaque, nearly inconspicuous. Below the numbers one and four and nine and seven, on a base of blue partly fallen off to white, it reads:

IN THIS STREET LIVED
JOHN CABOT
VENTURER & NAVIGATOR

Only arches along, and at equal height, his ship is shaped symbolically in metal, sail suffused with the winds of travel, navigating the Old City.

A dematerialisation, and I am nought but for the wind that moves me. I am that which ferries the message of the bells and carries out the sailors to the ocean.

I stop a leaf that plummets and slipstream out
beyond the stem that's severed, having slipped its anchor,
and we touch as I rise and it falls to the city,
untethered as we are we are not free.

I look down upon the green of grass and tree; I look down upon the grey of road and paving. I see the blitzing of a church and the slighting of a castle grown tranquil about the covered moat: one destroyed by incendiary metal, one brought to ruin by the Good Old Cause. The watery border of the Bristol settlement – beside stone walls; beneath the place-named bridge – approaches from off within the island to traverse its cut from the ruins to the spire to the sheds, and from the sheds on to the bridging of the gorge.

I drop and spiral down, collecting to redistribute the clouds of green born of the breath of the homeless young, sat with resting cycles by the road that flows beneath the traffic. I play percussion with the leaves and lay out, clear, the red cross within the white that wards off dragons who might seek to come and travel up the High Street. And while the people wait on coloured figures, I pass over the markings laid for foot and foot-powered wheel, traverse the edges of the bridge without crossing over, and float above cobbles, old and new, kept from the water by the jet-black railing.

The road is cobbled, too, that runs beside the path; a line of trees puts up canopy for shade.

As I am cycled through, I continue on.

At a break in the canopy I am shot through with sunlight, and I cool those who sit upon the curling metal of the snake-shaped bench that stands by a memory for the Merchant Navy.

Through one last stretch of shade, with the water parallel hidden by a restaurant's form, and I am shot through once again, suffused some more with sunlight.

A materialisation, and I am nought but for the form that makes me.

Offices and flats as a wall along the far side of the river stretch behind me, a boat, moored onto the side where I stand, offers only cider in the place of passage.

Away and forward, into a space for kings, I inspect a battalion of seats, veterans sown between the new recruits. A second set, a little further on, and the army is beset on either side by buildings. In four unequal, temporal parts they stand, two opposite two, each and all at nearly equal height. On one side the dead present is shouldered to the living past; the future dominates the other, unable to push away the coloured walls of auld lang syne.

The future and the present feel too temporary, standing about me now but ripe for change – not dead for long, and living without looking much like lasting. And so I move, on to stand between battalions.

White walls, black stripes and borders, and the glass of many window panes: my left side is taken by a pub that holds a castaway and ghosts among the sailors. It looks across at a coloured duke, singing jazz and blues as it fights off the encroachment.

Between them is not only I.

Upon the end of one side of a wooden bench, its table large between its narrow seats, perches a woman present in her middle-twenties. Just walking out of play into the pub beside us is a young-of-age bartender, clearly having just dropped off at her table her order of a shandy: beer married in a glass to lemonade.

There sits a safety pin through the threaded yellow of her lived-in top, fixing a hole below the right-hand shoulder, which the dark hair fails to reach. Tucked back behind the ears, strands curl steadily forward to rest with lightness against the silver hoops, and with that it frames a face contented. Legs crossed so one boot is off the ground, elbows planted on the brown bench top, her hands and forearms are patchworked with dried paint of white and grey – the left laying down beside a lived-through notebook; the right standing with a pen held in purgatory. Bouts of scribbling between the lines of her paper canvas follow and are followed by her watching of an older woman, who sits near us, feeding pigeons, on an entrance step before a sleeping pub.

I do not know what her notes paint out, be they polished prose, or thoughts broken up and strewn about, graffitied across any remaining empty space in the instant of breaching into consciousness. Perhaps it is a picture of the pigeons through a word-portrait of the woman, city symbiosis of the ostracised captured by a surface dweller, reflected on through the interpretive playing-back of personally created art.

Whatever her story being written, I wish to somehow one day read, born of, as it seemingly is, this time and this place.

Wooden bench over cobble after cobble under wooden bench, I meet the quiet and the tarmacked road that splits the old and kingly street, and I let it take me left so that I now journey parallel to the unseen harbour strait, ushering you in to walk and wander. Were I to continue forward yet ever veering right, I'd soon meet the cobbled Cabot corner where the gulls gather to accost the morning.

As I have continued forward, yet never veering right, I have come nearly to the corner of a queenly square. And as I press on to that point I see a style that stands out strange.

Robust and simple, yet ornate with plain colours curving with the windows set within the red brick made of rock-faced stone: Bristol Byzantine, a warehouse style, manifest in the form of a granary upon the Welsh Back. I hear the Corn Street guide telepathically tout her information, and so I know that it was finished in 1869, soon after obsolete, replaced by the sheds upon the floating harbour. Now it rings out with classic rock, and sells seafood on the banks of the river.

The English garden square contains a king, but sits named for the queen that followed him. Tree-lined – a double layer – and the cobbles give way to a neat, dirt path that surrounds the grass, the gentle green of which it pierces. Eight times it runs through and in, circling the welcome rider from the Low Countries.

The trees hold their leaves, enclosed with the square by the grandeur of the Georgian houses, and as I step to take the path diagonal the air is touched with mob fury on the marsh, molten melted roofs as rain, a fire in the autumn in the distance.

“Wot?”

My gaze wanders but unwelcome to the riders of my own country. I step aside as they cycle past and stand, instead, between a trunk of metal that's a source of light and a post of wood that provides the air. I keep on the grass and walk up, now toward a different corner. Looking to my right, I watch the man on horse on plinth and see that he is crowned, temporarily, by a grey and by a white:

Are you exiled again, my friend, and forced anew to find a place among the statues?

My gaze goes left to re-align with my body; my gaze alights, ahead, on the beacon that sings out the time.

There's a hole in the wall by this crack in the square, and I tread the tiles that trap the grass, an elevated tight-rope that takes me onward, to blue and white and green.

The layers of the sky hit the treetops, and the road is a whirlpool set in tarmac. It could send you down to where I was the wind, or round and on until you see the cranes. It could shoot you out across the water, deeper into my view: balconied flats on the one side, a vacant lot upon the other, where brick buildings and an old, stone wall are grown and lived upon by plants and spray paint.

Cruciform chapel, buttressed and pinnacled, archways for the stained-glass windows: at last I see the body that sprouts the spire. Engendering tremendous personal risk, I lean against a lamppost that yet another gull has picked for peak-side perching.

Just as I begin taking in the body of St. Mary Redcliffe, its beauty and the scene before me is eradicated in a rushing moment, swift, transformed into nothing but a mass of bodies ferried about the world, all while the panic of confined conditions is conditioned to acceptance of a hell that warrants wandering, no matter rain or shine.

The double-decker bus sails on above the river and no-one stops to stare.

Freed from the view provided by its windows, I watch its white and pink and purple dissolve into the traffic that flows across the bridge, bordered by a dull-green rail. The cars of the people and the car of the police do nothing to distort the church, though my view is peppered with sudden flashes of commute, as the flora and graffiti on the brick and stone.

There it rises then, a Gothic masterpiece: most good, most fair, most famous. Upon a cliff of red above the river Avon it has sat eight-hundred years; it has stood atop a red cliff eight centuries long, kneeled to by the passing Nile.

The church muses to the mid-morning: a note repeats until it sounds its ninth.

Silver, red. Silver, red. Light blue, light blue, and white.

Brown and white. Brown and white. White, white, and brown, and brown and white.

Black, in white, on white by silver.

Coffee in a cup that belongs to me sits unsugared by the jar of cubes, spoon unused, as I take in the coloured chairs that surround the two tables, pushed together as one, all as yet mere potential and needing someone to be manifest. An accordion and a clarinet once danced together before a set of drums, and the aural ghost of their exchange is frenzied as it floats around the café room. As it exorcises itself it leaves behind a silence, and, as if queued up to take its turn in recreating an explosive life, the haunt is performed again anew swiftly by a fadeless memory of a set of strings, slow and heavy beneath a female voice. Through a set of varied, intertwined senses and mastered motions, I take in the music, take in the empty table, and – in a parade of multi-layered and astonishing complexity – I take in the coffee too.

I sit at a circular table in the corner of the arthouse café that Cabot forever turns his back to. A somewhat aimless wander has mapped out a heart and gateway the city centres on and has set the start and end adjacent, sewn together seamlessly across the vanishing distinction.

Half-crouched, reluctant to go full-photographer, an older lady – slim and young in style – captures early life atop a mother and a daughter's lap: white-blonde, full-blonde, and too hairless to so far tell, each generation chatters in their personal take on English, an easy morning about the harbourside.

A roar bursts through, lacking depth in voice, from the off-stage reception area and turns all heads. Those privateers, fresh from a voyage on the stolen Matthew, have burst in like uncouth and rowdy sailors, looking for the fun in chaos in reflective jackets. But it drops to quiet. They've been re-ordered, for there is art to appreciate and fill with meaning.

The female-half of a family return to chatter, and to their backs, upon and around an adjacent table, their alternate selves relate family life to their audience of one.

Scarfs and jumpers; buns and beards; pierced lobes and flea market colours.

Hats and glasses; texts, notes, discussions; coffee, cider, and a cup of tea.

From the bar, as drinks are ordered:

"An I was like, it's noe wuhrees, but littruhlee it was sooe bad."

"Uhmaying."

"Littruhlee noe reason, and jus, like, fucking bawlshit."

From the tables, as drinks are emptied:

"I couldn't believe it."

"But we're old, love!"

Family groups and family subsets; students, the married, and retirees; voluntary, paid part-time servants; singular and fascinating note-writers, observing all from the meeting of the walls: café comfort of the café-class.

The ghost wails softly now, muted-trumpet dreams of being human.

What now? And what else might I do but wander? Circling the past to flesh out the present, the stamps of origin are overlaid and fade as they are pointed out, held up to disintegrate in every manner but the physical. All while every setting makes ever false its written form, changed to not reflect the page. Averse to capture, poised for flux, and the described disappears, reshuffles, the

benches no longer stand as stated. To stay so much the same for so many years, only to change as I set it down in ink...

Across the water, where I have these pages been, shortly beyond the Matthew moored, inland past the tracks, there stands the latest development. Blocks of apartments, with the high-price, high-conscience groceries and the coffee outlets as expected, are complimented by two little complexes formed of uniformly painted shipping containers – one set blue, one dull green – each stacked into two levels. Fronted by well-groomed trees interspersed with pillars of electric light, they exemplify. Triangular boards out front proclaim, with white and pink chalk on black, their shipment of hairstyles, good food, and fashion, an assembly line between each station running on a blueprint of the modern metropolitan. Newly assembled, she un-leans her bike and pedals; for routine maintenance returned, he ends his pedalling and puts aside his bike. Leisurely descendants of a battered ancestry stand still across from this, three barrels watching on beside a wooden bench. All standing empty, the one at front sees molasses and rum, sees coal and water, and dreams of purpose playing out while resting restless in the peace of present. Unfilled in the here and now it stands among the others, topped by a menu and a tray of ash.

Soft and silent, in between my café comfort and the shells of sheds and barrels, a cormorant dries her wings atop the platform above the water beneath the bridge that takes you on, and presents you with each and either side.

Chapter 4

She is perched upon the place where my elbows rested, on the wood-slat top that acts as table between the bench's seats, using one to support her placed and left-side foot as the other one hangs suspended. Eyes watching the sculpted man gaze across the water whilst I watch the cascade girl gaze across the cobbles, from the corner of the bench in a copied pose.

Once more entranced, the girl is free again, and her wandering might soon rival mine. And once more concernedly curious, I am piqued to wonder over whether this child of ten or of eleven or twelve is with or without guardian – though seeing she is older than it first appeared upon the mist-less moment of the morning's movement, I leave her to her white-dressed wanderings, and to her playful taking of the form she looks at.

Standing, perched, leaning, looking, the café exit frames me for the passing people, becoming entrance to one that walks toward me. As I re-absorb my weight from the wall that would not notice, surely, either way, and begin to step down so as to let the walking woman pass, for a moment at the limit of perceptibility she is swallowed and the harbour with her.

Convulsion – mud, water, stench, and sails – and now she brushes past, expressing with a glance her uncertainty over whether I am inconsiderate, or just out of sorts.

As she disappears into the Arnolfini, the foot of mine that had escaped the doorway for the harbour floor is back with me, and my weight panics sideways until the black of my jacket sleeve is re-contacted with the wall.

A fleeting feeling of pressing and oppressing down upon me; a heart held within a moderate grip, while a brain darts around the body for escape.

The flush of an attack fades in cold, fresh air that drifts to me with peaceful force. Calmed confusion – mud, water, stench, and sails – whilst I step again, this time succeeding, and walk along the path of the breeze to its seeming source, to where it emanates from an empty bench that stands under tree shade and over cobbles.

I step uncertain and my boot is soaked, stinking, sinking within a stagnant pool of rum, but as I look toward the smell and step toward the side I stumble into and on the wooden barrel that lost a portion of its contents to the mud. A seagull screech as I am perched where sat the cascade girl, boots both dry and clutching to the cobbles.

Flight impetus courses in the place of blood, breath shorter than the eyes are wide. My right hand un-grips the bench and comes up blackened, coal dust stripped from my fingers by the wind that carries, thunderous, iron, steel, and stone as sound in and amongst the sudden heat.

Yet as I wipe upon the tree my blackened hand it's clean, and I grasp it in my left and then place both upon the trunk, forehead – battered and fragile wall concealing chaos – falling slowly to the bark.

The fist that's clutched around the heart is softened by the breeze – again, that cold, fresh air. The curtains of my closed eyes pull up and back, pupils coated as the pre-dawn city in the watery mist. My jacket rises out of place as I slump down along the tree, turning front to side to back as weakened legs yield, release, left-centre of my chest still thumping.

Only the muscles of my face and my beating heart are not drained to lifeless on the ground against the tree beside the bench that neighbours nearby Cabot on his piece of wood. Neither he nor I can see, out to the edge and through the mist and to the water, now that it's reformed as thickest fog, white and grey in flux as the gulls in hidden flight. Periodically they screech – they sing – sounding like an echo from the distant gorge, and like a spirit's wail through nested time.

Visible only are ourselves, the four trees, and the two wooden benches, while the jet-black railing and the ground between us all come, slowly, in and out of view.

The voice of calm and query does not fit the man in sculpture, though it seems to emanate from nowhere else:

“Where do we go from here?”

I scramble back to the clutching of the bench and to the planting of my feet below it.

“Though we might get lost in the layers...”

While my eyes stay wide, they are threatened with cover by the heaviness of the brow above them. I see no café and I see no water, no sleeping giants and no harbour strait. Yet I see the dress that’s white – and it suggests of blue – upon the girl who sits, her back against the unmoving leg of the man I sat beside.

“... still, we can’t stay here.”

Each of her words are spoken out as she gazes at the fog. She speaks more and moves, but in amorphous sound and through half-seen motion, staring, as I am, into the ground, feeling strongly that the mist is concrete. My jaw sits heavy with the clamping tension at either side, whilst I hear more words as if a foreign language.

Eyes shut,
words echo,
I open and she stands before me.

“Fuck! God...”

“Fuck god?”

“No, you... you shouldn’t say...”

As I begin to treat her like a normal child, my rushing heart reminds, and my temples fall against my middle-fingers. Joined promptly by the rest, my fingers fall, all, down along my face, matched in lack of speed by my exhalation.

Her eyes dart up and they pull her head and both slowly sink back down.

The mist, the fog, it feels like air again; her hands are on her hips.

Managing, now, to speak without ellipses,

“Why are you following me?”, I say.

In rebuke as she turns and moves:

“I’m not following you. I’m already here.”

My “What?” is amphibious, alive between thought and speech.

Aware, again, of the force with which my back teeth are touching, I use my thumbs upon either side to massage muscle that is acting out a mental state.

She is closing distance between herself and the bars clothed and stripped, intermittently, of mist, and the fog responds to the closeness of her presence, wisping apart and away, though revealing only more behind it.

“Hey, try this!” she calls as she reaches toward it, her right hand causing echoes in the fragile fabric of the mist and fog, weaving slowly ‘til the elbow passes above and beyond the border of the railing.

As I feel like fleeing from the pressure of the unspoken threat that is solid, once again, behind me, I leave the bench and fight on forward – fighting not to progress, but fighting to keep the progress ordered. I pass through what should be Cabot’s view of his wooden ship, and perhaps he does see through the cloud as freely as his gaze cuts through the layered walls of time.

Her head flirts with turning as I confusedly approach, but instead she adds her left hand to the game.

“I feel a little trapped...”

“Try and grab some.”

“What is it?”

"Mist."

Knowing not what to say I don't say it; knowing not who she is, I still move.

Both her hands pull back, away, and my right goes up, toward, and the mist recloses, round: the space made by the girl is missing. My arm sighs downward as I look intently at the space that failed to meander away in reaction to my movement.

I feel her curious gaze, and I feel it move from me as she strings her words together.

"Not so easy to wander free and aimless anymore."

I do not lift and move my gaze, but keep it where it is, as I put my words in order.

"I like wandering free and aimless."

"Do you?"

Now I lift and move my gaze, but settle it, again, back where it had been.

"You don't think I do?"

"I don't think the wandering is free and aimless."

The railing has not returned from out the mist for many moments, where before it never went for long. As I turn around to ask her things I see the gaps between the cobbles filling, the fog wisping sparsely around my boots and then back to ground.

I am shaken by containing all I feel within my head. As both my palms press temples in, I shudder through my neck and arms; my rows of teeth try to push beyond each other.

I ask: "What the fuck is this?!" from beneath the clutching of my thumbs and fingers. "And don't give me another fucking obvious answer!"

The breath leaves, and my face rests in my palms, supported from where my elbows press into my midriff. The space behind my eyes is clouded.

As her voice flows soft yet strong – "You can't keep circling the surface of things." – I raise my head to find bench, cobbles, trees, and Cabot missing. Only a whiteness, cascade girl in the mist.

She smoothly climbs on top of something that I cannot see, perched in air as if on some boulder, or the edge of the bench that used to be here.

"And I don't see what's so bad about obvious answers, so long as they're the answers."

My mind is desperate to be given no roof or walls but the sky, and my heart beats hard against the lack of control, the uncertainty, the unknown.

"I'm sorry." As I apologise, my eyes long to make out, clear, what lies beyond the whiteness.

On her unseen perch she has her legs crossed, each elbow upon each knee, and each fist meets her at her jawline, her hair looking like the light I'm missing. Her eyes are deep blue one moment, yet a blue so light at others, but now they are settled, stable, at some point softly in-between.

"What are you? And you can be obvious if you want."

Her eyes do all the smiling, betraying, clear, an unmoved face.

"You're a... spirit. Or a stroke..."

"Or a girl."

"Or a Cheshire Cat."

The left half of her mouth lifts, smiling broadly; the right reaches out, but subtle.

I close my eyes with my inhalation and let it all seep back out, but the space between them receives my focus. Within it, I hope to find not even me.

I find her voice.

"There are layers to it."

I return as it's time to inhale again, seeing her now standing atop her unseen perch and facing sideways.

"Layers?" I repeat. "To what? You mean to the wandering around? You said it wasn't free and aimless... and that circling the surface was no good."

She looks at me funny.

"I mean to this mist."

It does not move for her quite as before. She disappears halfway into it, and calls:

"Or maybe it's just coming apart..."

As a musical round – phrases following, offset – the shrieking song fades in intensely, while the mist begins to fall apart. Chunks of fog are lifted by a piercing breeze, and as a gull swoops through at my shoulder-height behind me what remains is shredded, torn, and cast away, wisping off in the wake of its wingbeats.

A marsh across the water sings out green amongst the mud, ships of commerce catch the breeze to forge momentum.

Without railing, Cabot, bench, or tree I keep my corner as I stand amidst the masts and men, dogs and barrels, smell and sounds, the sky and river. It laps against the shore of a field of grass, no longer covered by the cranes, the sheds, the train tracks, and I feel a pull upon my back that takes me full toward the ground, as she saves me from the wood that frames the sails, as rope is thrown to tie the boat to Bristol harbour.

I scramble over cobble – not ghosts, but living – and the mist has risen, torn, to hold up the sky, spread about the blue and out around the sun.

What the fuck is this?!

My body speaks, for I cannot, the panicked prey awakes and writhes beneath my skin.

"It's the harbourside!"

She speaks right through the shouts that see a barrel nearly lost between the vessel and the land. The dark blue of my jeans in places lies beneath wet mud, yet I find my feet, if not my footing. There is no arthouse café but another building in its stead, and that damn girl who keeps me safe and terrified. She beckons and I stumble, but I make it to the wall; here she stands, smiling at the risen.

The church bells keep the time, even as the city fails to keep the year.

There is so much to be said and yet there is nothing I can think to say. The wind is cold and full about me, as I stare out and merely manage:

"Got a name?"

"Iteru."

Iteru... it is a word on the edge of recall, though I am not sure from whence I know it, nor its meaning. It flows.

"It does."

"What?"

"Flow."

"I thought I thought that..."

"I heard you say it..." Self-amused by her mimicry of my tone and raised eyebrow, she lets the imitation fade into a smile as she walks to the edge to look down into the river. Joining her vantage point, I look, instead, across at her.

"What does it mean then?"

"Hmm?"

"Your name?"

"It means me." Content with this, she remains reading the river's surface. Not content with this, I smile and do likewise.

"Of course it does."

Chapter 5

Mud, water, stench, and sails.

The breadth of the sheets that are the wings outstretched fill to generate a motion from the wind, the iron loops let loose the frayed and knotted rope: palpable weight, visceral material. A wooden body works a wake into the water of a river busy with the spires of the naked masts – webbed, awaiting the spreading of the wings – lapping at the shore across the strait; lapping at the slopes of grass and steps of stone, at the muddied boots and paws and hooves.

Through the air of pre-industry, off into the world the ship is led, smaller boats as pilots through the pulsing of the harbour and the perils of the passage of the gorge. The displaced volume moves about its greater self, distorts the clouds as they move about the sun, carries the cargo trailing overboard, and takes away the shore to feed the bed.

Pillars standing in the shifting earth are lifted, set again, immovable, power placed as grace darts about it, swift, leaving but a frequent, shallow trace. Knotted as the rope, heavy as the iron, weathered as the wood, and solid as the stone, a working breed brings up its legs and nailed shoes, pours out its breath, emptied by the muscles. As the pilot boats to the sailing ships, the paws of grace weave ahead, about, behind, ingenuity calls with its strength of voice, its strength of body puts a pull upon the harness.

The call to the companions and the other men drifts off to break upon the tide of other sounds, as they meet and as they blend or drown. Gulls surf the aural peaks and troughs, dive down, shoot up, float over, adding singing – screeching – to the creaks and croaks, the thuds and thumps, the squelch and the splash, the chatter and the clanging, finding rest on the marsh that spreads out at the foot of the cathedral re-ascendant.

The skyline is stolen back by towers no longer straining to be seen.

Across the river from the bulk of the cathedral on its hill, placed about the streets that make the city, church towers clear the height of other roofs and stand topped: by four-peaked squares, by reaching spires. They were standing but diminished in the present – when things were now, instead of then. The chimneys and the tree-tops let them go, climbing skyward on the chance of perfect beauty, as a slight and temporary shower of rain leaps to where it sees it down below. It patters on the burdened wheels of wooden carts, on buckled shoes, tri-corned hats, white socks up to the knee; it glances off the metal rings that bind the wood that holds the merchandise, moves the dirt from off the un-tri-corned-capped face, from off the hardened hands.

Droplets crash through the smell of soot and sweat, dampening the closeness in the air. She is dry beneath a crossbeam for moving goods, playing with the rain at either side, and I stand still, still stunned, by the harbour's edge, soaking up the final fall of water.

Locked together are the pieces of my skull, and so I separate the teeth yet keep the tension.

Let me out.

She steps back from out th

Take me home.

She steps back

LET ME OUT.

She...

There's a silent scream through the muscles of the upper body, from the hands through the forearms to the shoulders and the neck; from the neck down to the clamping palms and digits. A clamouring for air and a tremble that's a howl without the airwaves to release it from the body.

Suddenly it's settled; I am weary. There are strands of hair that lie between my fingers.

I don't know why or when I am,
nor who or why she is,
but I step back from my mind and watch
it falter.

*A frantic, violent weakness surrounds the wellspring 'tween the lungs,
Nostrils flare to fill with strength the source fed by the lungs,
the screaming force it summons begs – demands – the body lifts.
an infinity of space and time; the emptied air's returned.
Howling as it's held at bay, barely, a shutting vice,
Begged of and bargained with, clawed at and closed around,
a frantic, violent weakness surrounds the wellspring 'tween the lungs.
nostrils flare to fill with strength the source fed by the lungs.
A light and heavy restless air, vying to control the mind,
Treading rippled water, the depths beside – within – the tumult,
gasping, pacing, gasping, pacing, crashing at the rippled depths.
a shape fades out and fades back in; the emptied air's returned.
Push and pull and clutch and grasp, the panic to the seeking of serenity,
Nostrils flare to fill with strength the source fed by the lungs,
a light and heavy restless air, vying to control the mind.
treading rippled water, the depths beside – within – the tumult.
Howling as it's held at bay, barely, a shutting vice,
The windows to the soul stay closed, the emptied air's returned,
the screaming, frantic, violent force flushes all about the depths.
a shape fades out and fades back in and drowns and breaks the surface.
Draining, with its dying writhing, the wellspring and the mind,
Nostrils flare to fill with calm the source fed by the lungs,
a weary weight, a weightless fatigue, spreads out and settles.
as weariness spreads out and settles; the emptied air's returned.
Nostrils flare, the bones of the skull
strained by the burden of its muscles.
The windows to the soul stay closed
as I breath out – calm, defeated.*

"You know it's a lie, don't you?"

What...

"That you're falling apart."

I am...

"Not true. I can see within you
that it isn't."

I am tired...

"I didn't get you here just for you
to fall from something fleeting."

*It isn't fleeting,
it's fundamental...*

"No."

My mind...

"There is more in you yet."

My jaw...

"I'd sail you out and sink before
I'd scrap you, anyways."

"... what?"

Clap-clapped to attention, the curtain lifts and the source: revealed. The past upkeeps its coup against the present; a man gives reassurance to his boat.

"Iteru?"

Giving voice to her name, I notice where I kneel near the moored vessel, haggard to my right. At my periphery it sits whilst I stare along the strait that's unfamiliar. And yet, familiar.

I place my fingers on my forehead and my thumb upon my temple; I push and pressure them until they meet.

I hear the voice and I know it isn't her:

"You'll make it through."

A jacket's ruffled sleeve hides a patch of wooden post, a second arm points out its elbow, anchored by the shoulder and the fist upon the hip, one leg as pillar with the other crossed behind. With the hat's brim lying low above the ears, it yet rises to frame more spaciouly the face as it emanates, enrapt, with contemplation.

As I take him in I stand; I am standing as he looks toward me.

"Not sold on you, though."

"Neither am I."

My response adds four to his five, a pause between to complete a line of ten, with my hands on my hips as I speak toward the sky, the cover that contains me.

"Have you seen a girl?"

"You asking me, or the heavens?"

I sigh amidst his raised eyebrow.

"We might have different answers."

The glow of panic grows intense at the horizon where it waits to rise to fill the firmament.

I let it flare.

It dims.

I leave it looming.

"The sky" (I say) "will get back to me, I think."

"Ah." He looks up to from where my gaze has returned. "I think it's busy in the river. I wouldn't hold your breath."

"Generally never a good idea."

"Unless you're in the river."

We look down at the surface of the restless world that gives us ours.

"Was there a girl around, when you got here?"

"You lost your child?"

The child that's lost is me.

As I decide between speaking a yes or a no, he looks beyond me, and it stays left undecided.

"There's a head of hair like yours – only longer, brighter too – moving in the space that's born between those people as they live their lives, together and apart."

In more words than could possibly be needed, he tells me that he sees her.

"Over there."

And now I see his words were needed – every one of them, and all together. He could not have said it otherwise – it would not have been the truth.

She turns, she sees, she waves me over, as if she hadn't just walked away as I pressed my knees and knuckles, hard, into the surface of the busy street.

"Keep keeping it together. If you fall apart, I'll drown."

I turn and see the man aboard his boat, as it moves out as he works about the mast.

"Why do you keep talking, out loud, to your boat?" My arms are crossed by the time my question's asked; arms released by the time response is given.

"Is it better to talk to those who've never been, and share only with the pages of a notebook?"

He slides down the mast, back against the wood, sits at its base, hat shadowing the face, gives a parting wave, that's nearly a salute, and sails off, down into the city.

I watch her and she's wistless as she weaves and waves again. Between us a kind of sled is pulled by the power of a horse, reined and bridled, and my boots and my damp and muddy ends-of-jeans cut across, behind, the way it's going, over toward the bustle by the buildings.

She asks me:

"Who's your friend?"

I tell her:

"Well, not you."

She protests:

"I couldn't help you."

I reassure:

"I know."

Buried in the bustle by the buildings, submerged in the surging by the shops, carried by the current of the current crowd, we float on hard 'r's and drift in dialect of West Country women and men, taking, each, their place at the place at the bridge, living in the fort upon the chasm.

A spider flits across the paving and the mud as I glance groundward as we move along, lifting my gaze back up and on the people.

There's one with a stride, in anger;
there's one with a well-kept waddle;
there's one with purpose paramount;
there's one with a limp and hobble.

There's one with a basket – woven,
held against a dirt-white apron;
there's one with a soft hat – ribboned-
straw – on a head of auburn hair.

There's one with ragged trousers on;
there's one with a red, ragged shirt;
there's one with light blue, one with green:
both dresses, with the ground they flirt.

There's one with cloth-sack hoisted up
across the blades of hunched shoulders;
there's one who, with another, loads
barrels onto a wheeled cart.

A bridle and its breath come close as she pulls me to the side and turns me. She is flowing with the others in a way that I am not and she's pulled me round to look upon a broad, green hill, much higher than the towers re-ascendant. There are clouds, in flux from grey to white, in the blue that

the grassed hill climbs into, some walls of stone and little paths mark it, near the trees, for settlement.

The river keeps me company, uncovered and in sight, drawing and directing yet more ships and pilot boats between the vessel walls – walls that are lined with the glass of panes jutting out from rows of coloured buildings. They stand there white, dark blue, and red, and beige and grey and brown and yellow; their tops are tiled, triangular, or flat and without feature.

“All this was just below the surface.”

As I speak there is barter and confrontation, revelry and conversation. She turns from watching children play and gives me a look of faux-confusion.

“But you’d mapped this all out so well...”

I give her a look of quasi-revelation in return.

“You know, I think that may just have been the surface.”

She leans gently into an unwatched cart and puts her gaze back upon the children; she leans gently into an upright stance, her hands both withheld behind her body.

I step across and sit atop a box of wood and battle the temptation of a hunch; I reach across and take the apple from her hands, and bite into the dulled red.

“The world is all before them.”

One of us thinks it while the other speaks, but its beat-for-beat in cadence and in nuance. The game is going on in many different worlds, using – fusing – each to find its form, as a dream that’s shaped by the ethereal sounds that enter in from waking life. Fountains of learned behaviour siphoned from the sea and loosed about the playscape, the jewel of timelessness shines shameless in the imitation by the younger of the grown – mimicry of motion, of manner, of mood, stealing style and copying concerns; storytellers in the first-person, dressing the imagined with the world.

A new-born baby in the form of a timber block is cradled by a mother merely five, whose patronage is fully pledged to the marketeer beneath the market stalls. His shelves are stocked by gravity and inattentiveness; his wares are bought by merchants, knights, by sailors, thugs, and thieves. Across the map they walk and sail and ride and rush and linger, some never to return, some to come back changed, but to find, forsaken at the edges of the world, a stall abandoned and a piece of wood.

Lives unfold without us, without which there’d be no life within, within a state that’s but to be replaced and longed for irretrievably.

Yet a tree is fruitless if fruit is borne that’s never to drop, unattached. Though far and ravageful, the fall is the first and deepest breath of freedom.

Lacking dulled red and chunks of flesh the core lands before the muzzle, and as I watch it share its purpose I breath upon my hands to rescue them from cold. They retreat from the air into my jacket pockets as my back, at last, gives in to convexation, while, registering on the periphery of sound, a voice is faint – not from the riverside, but inland toward another waterfront.

Making sense of the land, the water threads its way through several ancient cuts, chosen by the river and debated with the earth, the maturation of the spring that shapes itself to order nature and pronounce on history.

Flight flares, fleetingly, leaving warnings within a corner of my skull. The voice from farther off is ferried by the tide that flows, that ebbs, that moves, between the surface and the limits of the sky.

“Where d’you think tha...”

I stop, having started, as I see that I don’t see her by my side. Off again she wanders, between the sky and the contours of the surface, and caught again’s my vision, as the dress and hair define her in the crowd.

My shoulders lead – unsynchronised – the creaking rearrangement of my posture, and my palms now find my knees, and my boots now find the world cannot be pushed, and so I straighten – thus, I stand.

My life condensed in a neural surge... the palm of my left hand hides the closing of my right-side eye. With its fingers and its thumb amidst the strands of hair that rest across, astride, along my forehead, the hand relaxes atop the eye that opens – I bring it down and walk away.

I walk toward the moving dress, inland from the river's cut, and I hear the voice that breaks upon the waves.

Time-warped scraps compiled: the day's a layered, tattered patchwork of hours at a time, an overlapping loop of several years. It's so sunny but so cold, and it's so cold and yet so sunny, cloudless blue's the tautened membrane 'fore the black.

The river gives more peace than the expanses of the sky, but we've moved to where we only, barely, hear it. I find her – there sitting, on the corner of a wall – musing at the opening of a street.

On either side are buildings, tall, that look like blocks in layers with a slight and sloping ridge run 'round the seal at which they meet, their doorways overhung with the jutting-out created by the timber, stone, and panes that make the face of blocks above. A line that's draped upon by sheets and clothes conjoins them high, occasionally; the street between the pavements joins them low, perpetually.

"Not as lively."

"Nor as lifeful." The muscles of her smile try to decide to express or suppress themselves, all while her eyes weather no such struggle. Her hair and dress permeate their movements with their colour, all while her eyes imbue the world and me with theirs.

A laugh that knows is breathed out as my smile picks expression while attention's grabbed – both mine and hers – by preaching.

"I think it's coming from Queen Square..."

"So find out." She tilts her head as it carries her expression, and with an eyebrow raised she indicates the street. I intend to wander through it, to discover, to find out.

But I don't.

Because I can't.

And yet I try to.

My body's still, as if receiving no command.

A sudden comprehension of the distance – vast – in time between what's known to me and all that's here that isn't. The danger and the darkness and the dragon and the dread all nest within a place they shouldn't be. There's no mist this time and still I cannot move.

"It's all in your head." She speaks plainly from her place upon the wall. My fraught exasperation makes response:

"How the fuck does that help?! I know it's in my head! I know it's all in my head – that's the fucking problem! That's exactly where all of me is! The only place I can't not be! I would've said this morning that I'm trapped only in my head and in the present, but it turns out only one's the fucking case."

My elbows meet my midriff as my forehead meets my palms.

"Though you haven't escaped the moment."

"I'm trapped only in my head and in the moment, then."

She is looking at her legs and shoes, suspended in the air.

"This feeling is always there?"

"What? No."

"Then it's only in the future and the past – and you're only in the moment."

I release, in breathing out, what feels like all resolve, but there's something there to welcome breath back in. Hands to hips, eyes closed still, my face is facing forward:

"These are all just tricks. I can't trick my own brain."

Her voice feels disembodied:

"No they aren't, and yes you can – but you don't need to."

Who am I talking to?

Though I've chosen this this moment there's another, altering the future by not filling up with words. I could raid my thoughts, but I've promised them to someone else.

Will I use this?

Am I using you, as I tell you how and where to lead me? And then you vanish, though you are and never were, written to and of, living through the page.

She is gone as I feel alone and walk onward, toward the quaking voice that sails about the city.

Chapter 6

The street's a blurry stretch of glass and air and stone and fabric; I stand there, where the mouth becomes the sea. Carried to the square, somehow, without the river's current, here – now and then – I find myself adrift.

And here's the voice.

And here's the scene from which it summons.

And here's the page on which it speaks.

And here's the chapter where I walk about the past and talk with people who can only take my voice and speak for me.

The trees yet hold their leaves and the shade takes a greater share of grass, as extra rows now line the paths diagonal. The English garden square, still crowned by king and queen, is full of life that looks to pass the time. The harbour garners wealth that lines each side in harmony, where brick façades look grand and out on railed courts, a world away within the smell, but not the sight, of the well from which they draw and the vessels which they send as a challenge and an offering to the sea.

Gathered's the crowd, though sparsely set before the pulpit that's a food crate overturned. The Society of Friends fields a speaker on the crate and another on the grass among the people. She is his punctuation; he is the words she emphasises; they are a voice against the trade. I head toward a bench on the perimeter that's half-taken by another onlooker.

Their sermon is a collage, reassembled words of a pamphlet by the people called the Quakers.

Speaker Oh, scarcely known but as a mart for slaves
is a place so full, is a place so rich!
A scene of violence and barbarities
perpetrated by suppos'd followers
of our Redeemer, of our Righteous Judge!
That the land should tremble, and all therein
who dwelleth must mourn, each and every one,
for the oppressed poor, the crushed needy –
a judgement of the Lord that, though declared
in awful manner, this nation ignores!
To do unto others as we would they
should do unto us, as neighbours, brethren
even among enemies – this we're taught,
a teaching so adapted to promote
temporal and eternal happiness.
Yet under this there exists this traffic...
Shocking to humanity is the mere
recital of violent separation
of the dearest relatives, of the tears
of affection which would pierce the heart of
any – but the beginning of sorrows!
Our religious society in these
kingdoms, and in North America, have
for many years tenderly sympathised
with and endeavoured to procure relief
for this innocent, unhappy people.
Anxiously concerned for the suppression

of this evil are other advocates,
expectantly fixed upon Parliament.
And by the Righteous Judge of all the world
are we chastised as nations for our sins,
and as individuals are we judged!
Can it be expected and be believed
that He'll suffer this to go unpunished,
this great iniquity of humans chained?

At our spot in the stalls we onlookers look on and then we look away – I to the hatted-head and ragged shirt; he to the pigeons at his feet. They are there for the pieces of the bread he throws them, finite as it is as it is torn.

"Do you feed the birds for the sake of your immortal soul?"

Scoffing at my question, he mutters:

"Immor'ul soul..."

"You don't care for the soul?"

"Oh, you'd be right n' all ta say it's precious, but it int precious cos it's everlastin'."

He breaks more bread to throw groundward; I watch it land and disappear.

"Why's it precious, then?"

He shifts in place as if to allow the release of something – be it wind or wisdom.

"Boy, yer soul's the only mor'ul part a you. Yer body'll rot, sherr, but it'll last firever, livin' on piece by little piece. It's yer soul what int gonna make it."

He tilts his head on axis as I look across the bench at him; his eyes stay on the birds.

"Everythin' remains but the essence."

I place my elbow on the top of the wood that's stacked to make the bench-backrest, and my head shares its weight with the cradle formed by my thumb and index finger.

"But then how do you protect the only part of you that's gonna die?"

"Seh it free," (is his response) "leh it out so you ken leh it live."

As the question 'How?' journeys through my mind and face to be articulated, the man gives it early answer, just as breath sets out to give it voice.

"Seh it down somewhere, somewhen, some-ow."

"You mean, like, paint a painting?"

"Well, yeh, but I were thinkin' more like 'av a conversation. It int all a us what ken source them prit-ee colours, let alone know what ta do wiv 'em." He breathes out with a laugh. "Hell, even the black an' the white."

My cradle's formed of more fingers now, yet it gives back, as I speak, the weight it borrowed.

"How would having a conversation count as 'setting your soul down'?"

His eyes lead his face to look at me, beneath a furrowed brow.

"D'you think yer livin, firever or ah all, sittin' quiet at the back a yer 'ed? You struck up talkin' wi' me, dint you? An' now 'ere we are, free an' floatin in the space between us."

Immortality... He leans back into the wood that's stacked.

"An' this paintin' a yers – if that's 'ow you go about it – don't 'av ta be no masterpiece. It ken be simple. It ken be broken. You do it right when you do it wrong."

As he looks ahead it's me, instead, who breathes out with a laugh.

"Sounds like you're saying I should be myself."

"D'you know what that is, yerself?"

I speak, before and after ellipses:

"... no..."

Again, on axis tilts his head, but his gaze comes sideways with it.

“Then ‘ow ken you be it?”

Spurred on by the muscles about my jaw, my rows of teeth seek to escape the gathered clouds someplace beyond each other. He rises like he’s stop-motion and flicks the crumbs from off his person. He doesn’t tip his hat but shifts it up, and speaks before he walks away:

“Geh out yer own way a bit, boy. All you need now’s them prit-ee colours.”

Across the square from the religious, as I gaze left instead of right, there is deepest conversation, expression pure, utterance ancient. There is art that’s simply highest, that’s unfiltered, that’s unleashed. There is something freed of language, something mirroring the flame.

For all the lines on all the pages, for all the syllables, the words, for all the shaping of the formlessness of thought, I cannot summon up the truth and lay it clear. But there it is, as formless as can be and yet lit clearly, given voice and liberty.

It’s there and I can’t show it – instinct inaccessible.

They summon up the truth and lay it clear: three dancers move beyond the written word.

A human moving freely to the music in its mind: there’s not a beauty more than this, this pinnacle. I cannot write a dance, I can only leave the page and leave it blank for you and I to go and join them.

The square, as with the clouds, as with the birds, as with the lined-page and the risen past, sets the scene for the early afternoon.

I, as with the mind, as with the soul, as with the ink stains and the absence of the girl, lend it life.

The source of sound that signals sea by land, two-centuries sitting, now uncertain seems and perches poised to abdicate its place upon a man upon a horse upon a plinth. I cut across the careful grass, my footsteps somewhere 'neath me, heading toward no picked-out voice, not led on by her wanderings, and I find myself approaching, now, the corner kept by Redcliffe, yet expectedly it's differently depicted.

There's no spire set atop the chapel's cruciform and buttressed body as it over-sees a bridgeless, broad, boat-laden Nile. Instead, the tower's without peak above the chimneyed-houses.

Of all nations, rigs, and sizes are the ships that spread their wings or keep them close all while their webs anticipate them. There are men at every level, from the water to the sky, alit on stone, on mud, on plank, on thread, on air. Another waterfront of barrels, dogs, of carts and horses, of birds, of sounds, of dockside smells, of cobbles. To my right a pub – a tavern – stands a-watching on the corner, spying with its walls on who's approaching. Named the Coach and Horses now, it gives out sound from either side to prove its profile as a place of entertainment, and a curious blend of company and solitude is carried in the contours of the smoke that's sparse – clouds beneath the sign, behind the curtains.

Stop.

Turn back.

Go home.

No.

Retreat.

Press on.

Fly.

Move forward.

Run.

Step into it.

Don't go.

Don't stay here.

Please.

I am still and silent for a thousand years, crying for a thousand more, stronger for a moment, weaker for an age, my pulse the coiled texture of a tensed string releasing music to the mouth of a guitar.

Flight.

Fight.

The momentum's as the mist: it fades and gathers.

I am pulled to the now as a gang of men brush past on either side of me, and as the space I made amongst dissolves they reform, huddled, outside the inn, here to gather up the sailors who avoid the seas, drunk, urr-ligh in the afternoon.

They are a press gang, and the hole in the wall of the Coach and Horses knew their approach ere I felt them pass. They may not get their many men to drag off to the Royal Navy, but they'll task the 'tender with laying waste to able-bodies sharing drink this evening.

It gathers – not the mist, but the momentum.

I move on down the sloping side, the slight hill to the river, where a straggler, struggling, wont to waiting, lets slip its dream – recuperation – into the wake that moves it, no longer moved through in return. Larger than an oared pilot boat, it's yet small alongside many others, and it leans into the land and me; we observe up close.

There, where the mast splits, splintering, and the wind wears, weathering the wood, perches a pool of amber made solid as a globe, encasing in a bug and encasing out time – the cascades of a

frozen river. The life, suspended, lives nonetheless inside, its mind in the past, its present; my mind in the present, my past.

The insect's ink and the page is amber; I touch the globe and leave it living.

I head on down the Welsh Back and the traffic on the water is heavy, as the future on the land. Up ahead I was the wind, dematerialised, breezing down this stretch the other way, finding out the face of other chapters and the shape of all the pathways set to pull me, inward, from the edge, onward through the map and through the mind.

Hands worn and strong, frame dressed and aproned, a woman and a girl cross my path in brown that's light, in faded blue and muddied yellow, finding balance with a shoulder sunk by weight and another raised to reach in compensation.

Heavy and light, frame dressed and aproned, a woman and a girl cross my path and exit, pursued by a promise to be kept, unfailing, to line the face and fray the soul, to wear the hands and shape the spirit.

As a dog that's wretched and yet lives in heaven bounds about the legs of those who move like the fire that drew it from the blasted pine, across the open space, that brought it to the scraps that lined the clearing by the trees and bound it to the crouched creature rising in its light, I reach the point where King Street hits the Welsh Back and the water, and between the two there is not only I.

White walls, black stripes and borders, and the glass of many window panes: like an oak the pub still stands, still, as the world transforms around it, looked upon and shouldered by four sibling, gabled houses not yet rubble by the hand of lightning loosed beneath the clouds. They frame, for now and ever, several dogs and several children – muddied feet and paws in air, on street, in air – and a horse – unhitched, de-carted – leaving proof that it's been fed behind a man demanding proof that he's been heeded.

Within the frame a merchant stands addressing sailors.

Within the frame a woman washes stone.

Without the frame, inside the buildings, are more who clean, more who converse, and some who drink and some who serve and some who sell.

Though musty is the air with its wettened smell, I catch in it commanding jets of cheese – I've not eaten since the apple I was gifted, when I'd not eaten since the breakfast I had bought. The dairied-bursts carve out a space for bread to barely register, and my nose allows my eyes to trace the trail unto its spring. It comes from out the food upon the dress about the lap that's of the lady set atop the entrance stone.

The step's beside me and the lady's looking up.

"Hungry for something?

Is it my food or my lap?

Only one's offered."

"I'd like the one not offered."

"Guess I'll make an exception."

With that I sit beside her, and she passes to me bread and cheese.

"How's the food?" "Good, thanks."

"You don't seem like you belong."

"Where?" "Here." "When?" "Now." "No,

I don't feel I do belong."

"What brings you here to King Street?"

"I've been wandering."

"Where?" "Here." "When?" "Now." "With an aim?"

"Would that be wand'ring?"

"Maybe. How'd you describe yours?"

"Aimless. But with a purpose."

"What's the purpose been?"

"Well, it's either avoidance
or confrontation."

"You don't know which one it is?"

"No. I can't tell anymore."

Food finished, step left, we move about the lives being led. We walk across the street and the words exchanged are shared across a cart, passed beneath a horse, are handed over face-to-face, traded through a merchant, weaved within a crowd, and spoken at the last as we stand on the stretch as it slopes away to sink beneath the surface.

"So you're suffering."

"Well, no. Hardly suffering."

"Why 'no'? Why 'hardly'?"

"Cos it's not comparable."

"To what?" "To real suffering."

"You mean, real like this?"

"Yeah. But not even this, though.

Anything that's more...

More than just..." "More than just what?

Your own?" "More than just my own."

"No-one gets to tell
themselves they aren't suffering,
or tell another.
Suffering is suffering.
Pain is pain and life is life."

"So my life's as hard
as yours, then." "Well, steady on..."

"My suffering's less?!"

"Let's just say we're suffering,
here, now, beside each other."

Leaning either side against the back end of a boat, oars limp, having been pulled ashore, her arms are folded frontside, my hands in jacket pockets, our boots part-sunken in and caked with mud. She watches water as I write more words in waves upon the sky.

"I've gone off away
from here so many times and
headed outward, far,
and by myself. But there's more
struggle here, and here is home.

It's not without me.
The dragon's in my muscles,
it's behind my eyes,
within my blood. I'd rather
take a sword, fight a real one."

"I think you might fare
better with the inward one..."
"Dunno about that.
I don't know how to face it."
"Well, you're doing this, aren't you?"
"But I'm in control
of this. And I can't beat it
if I'm in control."
"If you're in control here then
you know two things already."
"What things?" "That you'll need
to relinquish it, and that
I'm about to leave."
"Time's money." "Not much money.
Not much time... But yeah, it is."

Dark hair and darker eyes, she goes to meet with sailors. Painted in the scene, her colours move,
leaving brushstrokes as she looks behind.

My gaze says: *Would you choose it?*

Hers: *I'll tell you when I've had the choice.*

Chapter 7

This is a partially completed notebook, though it's blank, pristine, and filled out to the last through all its coloured pages, resting in its plastic, newly-bought and in my bag, all while it sleeps inside a box at journey's end. I long to be there, to have been but not to go, and though I cannot wait 'til this is over, I think I'll miss this when I'm done.

There's a piece of the city, where the Welsh Back ends, built and bustling as a street across the river, where, from end to end, five storeys high, sit buildings – gabled, chimneyed, peaked – half-on and supported by the arches standing one by one by one by one, half-off and supported by the wooden beams (bow windows reaching out into the air) that overhang the hybrid homes and shops above the water and the boats it carries, floorboards pierced on occasion by a mast that's lifted by the fluctuating tide: this commercial centre is the place of the bridge, the only crossing of the Avon for six miles.

Blocked is any view of the other side by the timber holding high the slated roofs; a tower topped with a spire for a peak stands tall upon a plain, stone church. A congested horde spills in, pours out, as if all except the ships that I've seen thus far had multiplied and coalesced at Bristol Bridge.

Brought up, whipped, by a gust of wind is the leaf that splits my gaze with its textured green which it carries out upon the breeze, rent by the currents of the air and of the water, too fragile to alight the other side. Flitting over cobbles 'neath the on-journeying wind, a ball of brown travels along the other edge. Onto the bridge, and so to Bristol, haltingly it scampers, not unnoticed by the perked-up, prying ears.

Scanning through the aural picture independently, the ears converge and indicate the point the eyes must follow. The head complies and, from its vantage up upon the wall, the watcher slinks along and drops in silence.

Drops in silence to the edges of a muddy maelstrom, maddened movements merge and bring collision, sown about congested creatures – flesh and wood, that would travel to or from the second city. Gracefully contorted – flattened ears, balancing tail – the watcher morphs into the hunter through the spokes within a wheel, rising, falling, as they stutter back and forth. Assaulting all its senses – sensitive, adept, attuned – the bridgely chaos caters pandemonium. Carters caught – confined, confused – contesting clashes crossing; livestock leaning low, lurching listlessly.

The hunter sits.

Sits between the wooden wheels.

Between the wooden wheels that stand gridlocked.

Gridlocked at the gutter down the centre of the bridge, as the sides descend, to meet, from the shopfronts.

A burst, a ball of brown, and two eyes focus on a point and pull the head, the body, out across the mud and between stamping pillars, up and over waves within the air that carry snorts and barks and bellows, dodged or ridden in pursuit.

Closer, closer, closer, to the place it disappeared, forced to skirt around, at speed, the fallen goods and stenching shit, to leap at length and vertically to scale the shopfront to the sill beneath the glass to see the pursued safe inside.

Such keen eyes, such keen resolve.

The hunter morphs into the watcher, sat there up upon the sill, as the ears diverge to better sweep the aural landscape, with the tapping of the twitching tail, its tip over the edge, beating faintly every time it hits the stone; making waves each time it sweeps against the sky.

Follow now the ripples in the air.

Pick a pathway as they're shattered on the wind.

One careens into
the shouting out of wares and prices.
One emerges on
the far side of a whirlpool, impact-born.

Two are tangled
in a mass of muttered words and uttered phrases.
Still more are
lifted to escape the sonic storm.

What happens next?

The hunter reappears, sprung by reflex as the shop door moves, guided by its hinges, loosing out unto the street a flurry, flitting through the muddied heels, and leaps and lands and launches to balletic sprinting, matching twists and torques and turns, and, lastly, lunges for the trailing tail that takes it only ever onward into bedlam and about the city's fully-laden, fraught with frenzy, arch-suspended street, and they tumble, 'twined together, passing hoof and boot and wheel, to fall within the crowd and out of written view.

I pass the offshoots of the mass of people. I've approached the bridge and stand, and stand intrigued, repulsed, enticed, on the verge of venturing, ceding control and passing into the unknown.

Chaos to get into.

The tattered tethers of the known to leave behind.

I turn around. My back is to the bridge and I look upon the church that hasn't changed at all today. In front of me's another bustling street.

There's a motion, low, beside my leg, and my eyes turn my head to the right and down to watch a cat sit to tap its tail against my boot – once, twice – then rest it softly on the ground.

I raise my head; we watch the bustling street. Only one of us will turn back to the bridge.

I tell myself I'm indifferent to adventure lost and walk on to the steps beyond the church.

The grooves within the stone that's placed to offer you a passage from one level to another lay out shallow, though they'll deepen over time, sculpted in and borne/worn out collectively by masses in materials that differ with each period and placing of the weight of one foot, then another, up and down the steps beyond the church that hasn't changed at all today. I'll contribute to carving contours, imperceptible, just as I've done before, two hundred years from now.

The steps are vast and blanketed with solitude but for the plateau, halfway up. There's a scene and I can't see a way around it.

About a crate about the size of mem'ry held about a moment, there are, sat and standing (one and two), three metaphors for

"Haven't we covered this?"

"(We have.)"

"And we're going to again!"

A line from each in (one, two, three) turn interrupts my decelerating ascent – I stop a few steps from the peopled plateau. With little to no mind for me, they argue on direction. One is past the crate's end to one side, standing with arms folded, opposite one yet to be placated at the other limit. Presently the only one who's seated occupies the first step of the next flight, the last step of the first, gazing out, forearms on knees, at the locus of contention.

"We are going to the port!"

"(We aren't going anywhere.)"

"We are coming
from the port!"

"(We're doing neither.)"

"We are coming from
the Exchange!"

With some to little mind for me, they're aware of my presence as I stand, at last, on the final and first step, and lean my jacket – light – upon the wall.

"He can help us."

"(That seems unlikely.)"

"Good idea.
Which direction are we going?"

"(Don't expect to
influence either of them.)"

"Yes, which direction
are we going *in*?"

The one corrects the other, while the other disregards it; the caution comes from the step without eye-contact.

"Surely that depends on what's in the crate, and where it's s'posed to go?"

"It's trade for export."

"(...)"

"It's trade for import!"

"I thought *you* were arguing that you guys were going to the port? Wouldn't that be export?"

"..."

"(...)"

"Ha!"

"But *you* also said the opposite of what you argued for."

"..."

"(...)"

"Hmm!"

"(You'll have to
tune them out.)"

"Pff!"

Again, the caution's without contact, the gaze still on the crate in a perfect blend of fed up and serene.

"How can you not know which direction you came from? Or are going to?"

"I know which
way we're going!"

"(We know where we are, but
that doesn't seem to matter.)"

"I know which direction
we are coming from!"

The crate's unmoved by all the dialogue thrown around on its behalf. The one in the middle, sat upon the step, breaks the rules and looks right at me.

And there's no-one, and nothing, but for narration.

"Curious..."

I walk onto and across the plateau, gazing all around me, heading for the flight that takes me upward, the flight that takes me on.

As I take a step I'm on the other flight; I lean my jacket – light – upon the wall.

"He can help us."

"(That seems unlikely.)"

"Good idea.

Which direction are we going?"

"(Don't expect to
influence either of them.)"

"Yes, which direction
are we going *in*?"

The one corrects the other, while the other disregards it; the caution comes from the steps without eye-contact.

"And yet more curious..."

"What?"

"(...)"

"What?"

The one, the other, and the one upon the step are there about the crate about the size of moments placed about a mem'ry on the plateau that I only just traversed.

"Bad idea.

He clearly can't help us."

"(And you can't help him.)"

"I say we take this crate
to where it needs to go."

"(Perhaps that's here.)"

"Agreed."

Again, they vanish.

Sitting at the top, where the incline levels out, a black cat taps its tail against the stone. Its eyes are on me, though ears elsewhere, scanning, independently, the aural picture.

I cross the plateau, once again, and gaze, again, around me, pausing as my boot-heel, in its wandering, takes the step...

There is no backward jump through space, no sudden leap in time, no light and repeat leaning of my jacket, whereupon I walk up to the street to stand beside the cat whose tail is still and, still, whose ears keep up their scanning.

I crouch as if around primordial fire with a feline somewhat less domesticated, my knee joints barely able to perform such a deeply human stance (much less return me out of it). I place my right hand, gently, between those scanning ears and share a moment, act out life, do all that matters.

From me, a wistsome sigh; from him or her or her or him, contented purring. From my knee joints, a sharp, resounding message politely put before my brain requesting that whatever's going on outside be stopped.

The digits of my left hand spread against the cobble so that the muscles of my left-side palm and arm and shoulder can provide a little push to offset a small part of the weight that wants to be bipedal, nevermind the creaks of protest.

The black cat saunters off, in strenuousless movement, flicking the tip of its infallible tail.

Can you recreate the street in that landscape that your mind will use as canvas to portray vision bereft the eyes? Place upon it cobbles, and about them gabled houses, with some wet mud and some that's dry, and patches where it isn't there at all. Go back to other chapters and pick out all the words that are the palette to that canvas. Throw them down or place them, deliberate or free, and you'll find the street that I now walk across. Fill it up half-way with people and a smattering of objects; set your own scene out and let me wander through it.

I wonder who or what I'm walking past, who or what I'm bumping into – either way, I've now made it to the Exchange.

Pale, Bath stone in planned-out piles is placed: layers out of line that break on arches over half-way up – half-circles trading sound for sight, exchanging dust for daytime. At this rounded corner, where the wall walls out the street and stretches up the gentle incline that they both are forced to follow, an arch extends its portal down, hewing neatly through the pale, Bath stone, vomiting a boy onto a hand cart.

"And do it quick!" it belches at the boy who brings the hand cart back up with his bruised self before he rushes off, pushing it before him.

Orders being given, the portal seals back up, re-placing, as it closes, planned-out piles.

Nowise dissuaded from approaching (for a change) I take some steps.

I take them from the space between my person and the wall.

I put them all behind me, 'tween my person and your street.

I go to touch the stone and flinch back, startled.

Hewing smoothly through, with no debris that's generated, the portal extends down and lays an entrance at my boot-fronts; a loaded hand cart digs into my heels.

The boy – dusty, ragged, two-thirds emaciated – skirts around me; I lift and grab and nurse a stinging back-foot. Somewhere in that moment – be it beginning, middle, end – I find my way in from the outside, with the wall re-placed behind me.

In moted dustlight, the handcart's wheeled off around a corner to the right and out of sight. Intrigued by the labouring of specks of dust, as they settle and unsettle, settle and unsettle, I walk along to that very corner. Crates and boxes, bales and crumbling tiles, produce unpriestly: these, stacked and stored, I walk amongst, slow and writing out a novel in the landed matter.

A rat about a foot (if measured in my own) bursts from where the corner leads: its tail is seven-eighths; its fur is patchwork; its ears are torn and bitten.

Almost upon it bursts a carnassial-canine, leading with its open jaws. Ragged as the boy, less beaten than the rat, claws scraping on the stone, body torqued in several places, running out of view, killing in the distance, jogging back the way it came, a rat's body – with a tail of seven-eighths – nestled in the closed and smiling jaws.

I follow – ratless and not as proud – and the light beats the sound but they both increase the more I pass on through the cold, dust-smitten storehouse.

Open to the old age of the afternoon, with its clear-ish, cloudsomely cold, blue sky, a courtyard and its colonnade of columns caters to the traders busy trading on the cobbles and conversing on the broader slabs of the perimeter on which trots a canine to a spot beside a bench. Having stopped

whence the courtyard spills out of and into the covered corridors and spaces I have walked through, leaning – like I often do – a shoulder on a wall I look on – like I often do – at people.

“What is he doing?”

“Who?”

“Him.”

“He?”

“Yes: what is he doing?”

“Leaning. Looking.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean *Why*?”

“I mean: Why? Why watch from the edge of it? Why stop and not just walk on through?”

“I imagine he will, after watching from the edge of it.”

“Just watching all the sellers and all the buyers...”

“He looks relaxed in posture, but angry in face.”

“Furrowed, for sure. That was interesting...”

“What was?”

“He came away from the wall like it was time.”

“Like the wall was time?”

“No! As if that were the planned moment this whole time.”

“Moment for what?”

“For coming away from the wall and walking forward.”

“He is very interested in everything.”

“But he isn’t stopping.”

“No, he’s over halfway through the courtyard already.”

“He’s heading for the covered entrance area.”

“And out of view again.”

“I wonder if he’ll stop.”

“Where?”

“Where the courtyard begins.”

“Where the courtyard ends.”

“He might turn and lean and look some more.”

“We shall see.”

“We shall see now.”

“He seems set to carry on.”

“He didn’t look back.”

“And yet he is.”

“He is?”

“Yes: can’t you feel the lingering of thoughts?”

Tavern to my left; coffee house to my right; cast-iron bolts sunk into a heavy, wooden door (that let me enter in the morning) there before me: a choice of three, and the word-count wonders which way't'll turn out.

Were I to enter the tavern I could, of course, declare:

I'll have a tea.

Leave the teapot.

But I'll go to where I'll fit in slightly better. I'll do the thing I do, whether future, past, or present.

Plantation sugar blocks blend into the black sea, dropped in with unconcern.

Coffee in a cup that belongs to me sits unsugared – don't ask me how I got it.

Ale-absent, the atmosphere's a semi-serious, polite, and civil sharing 'round of gossip. Tri-corned hats still upon wigged heads, long jackets (green, maroon, and blue): gentlemanly gentlemen gently gentrifying, generously generating general class.

The pouring out from silver jugs and
perusing through of papers;
the copper coffee pots on wooden shelves;
the standing 'round and sitting at
the square and oblong tables:
I overhear two talking close behind me.

"Ah, this damn place won't stop changing."

"The coffee house?"

"This room, this city, this world."

"Change is the only thing. It's the only thing there is."

"When will that change?"

There is a pause in the conversation. Or is the silence part of it?

Perhaps one drinks, one contemplates; perhaps both look upon the people who are leaving; perhaps one runs a silver spoon between the fingers of a hand while the other scans the wall and begins speaking.

"How did this place used to look? I've already forgotten..."

"I don't remember, either. I see an image, hazed, clear in colour with its edges lost, the form of each and every aspect alive yet irretrievable, the sense of it secure and safe and over. Gone, but unassailable for being so."

"The moment cedes its place, continues on to its destination. People talk of the future, but it isn't the direction that we travel in. We emerge from tomorrow to illumine today, then journey on to take our place in times gone by."

"Our demarcations, those lines we trace out over entropy: I know they are not based on nothing... but it seems so arbitrary."

"Any sense we make of life is arbitrary."

Beyond the back of my head, and only pictured in your mind, these two (who might be bleak; might be indifferent) exit out the story.

There's a song being sung across the skyway, pulling patrons and their hatted-wigs o'er to the door and through it – heading outside, they seem all giddy with some odd anticipation. I let the black, diminished sea sink/settle as I place my cup back down and nearly spill it as my knee slams 'gainst the table. I try again and make it out the door.

Through the open entrance/exit there's a pause in the paying on the nails. A crowd of traders 'bout the paving stand, down from the archway entrance, in the view of the Corinthian pillars. I step down steps and walk along the edge, passing the pleased and vindicated.

Church bells – how sweet the sound – celebrate a bill's defeat at Parliament. Hope for empire and a return to the seas sees off the phantom of moral interference. More rhetorical attack and plantation riots of revenge are to unfold now as the West awakens – not the first, not the last – for to rise to grow or tear itself apart.

I leave the top of Corn Street – the Nails and the Exchange; the All Saint's church and the Café Revival – turning leftward, down the broad street of the crossroads.

With each footfall finding – as a stream of consciousness – the street in its graduated gradient on down, I begin winding [Where to?] as a too-compounded sentence bleeding out all its coherence why? and confidence of multi-meaning lost amongst the lattice-lace of layers undemarcated as a mass of time body of water integrated field of vision and as I make it further all but one point starts to blur and blend becomingunbecoming gaining through its dance of loss a prism-split beam's worth of colour incoherently coordinated with that one and only point in focus: a medieval gate, old entry-point and exit-point to the settlement I'm built around, its spire on its tower peaking up from the worn wall extract, with a clock face (Roman-numeraled) before the window and the crest, where the Lion and the Unicorn look set to disagree, and the red and black-scarred wall-placed bricks meet the pale bricks of the tower at the top and tip of the central archway tunnel, flanked on either side by smaller versions of itself, besetbesotted by that all but all-encompassing undemarcated colour cloud not imposing yet unnerving as it seems to set itself onto the path of finding form from out its brilliance within it all I'm by the gate, approaching, now, the archway on the left side of the central tunnel as I take my hand [The left? The right?] and touch the stone to find some semblance of something clear and certain – there I stand and breathe and lean and look and stop.

Chapter 8

–No será difícil encontrar graffitis increíbles que decoran las paredes de la ciudad.

–¡Ah, mira esto!

–¡Te lo dije! En los callejones, calles laterales, incluso en puentes...

–¡Oye, ven aquí!

–¿Hmm? Pff no me gusta esto.

–¿Qué? ¿Por qué?

–La variedad es maravillosa porque eso significa que hay algo para todos.

The clash of sharpened blades over tiles of black, of white, and the crest come alive about me, I reorient myself in space;

–¿Todos ellos son Banksy?

–No, no. Estos no son.

I reorient myself in time. Standing there, across the road, on the pave before a bus stop (where no bus stops) are admirers of the art upon the walls. I walk along, squinting, for the sun's admiring too, beneath workers on a beam of steel,

–Ten cuidado si estás echando fotos en la carretera.

sat below the wisps of black and red that birth the looming can of orange paint, held steady, upside down, by a bowler-hatted man. Beyond the green leaves of a woody plant a mother holds her baby child who looks off, away, to the north-east; she to the north-west.

I move from the colour-laden to the opened-out, cross the creak and cry and rush and halt in its present movement to traverse an island etched out by the rivering-road where the ground(man-made)'s pristine around a bulk of stone, wreathed and etched and crossed, red-petalled 'membrane reaching from the remnants of the children in the European mud, and I pass, though I wear it on my shirt at times – not for nations but for boys, swept off and away from many places, all toward the same old end – and behind, between me and the relic gate, it continues, wreathed and etched and crossed, something beside remains, travelling through hist'ry to the past.

I hear heated talking, not far ahead along the way in which I'm walking.

There's a man who's poised and pondering, still and silent above our heads. Beneath him, fuelled by his legacy, a fire flickers and rises, out of which emanate the voices.

"It's an empty gesture, to skip the hard work of true reflection!"

"We can't unbuild the city – it's gestures like these that show a commitment to making things right!"

"You cannot sweep away the ugliness whence was born the beauty you wish to guiltlessly enjoy!"

"Who even talks like that?! At least we're able to confront the past!"

"Are you?!"

They meet on edges, those crimson flames
and flare about the base,
encircling the history they would tackle or erase.
The heat of it exhausts in me the urge to join in too.

"And who's this even for?!" is screamed.

"It's for them!"

"It's for you!"

I leave it to the learned, as green tells me I can ford the road.

With his back to me that ousted god comes closer, wearing beard and wielding trident, his current seas – those shallow pools – torn temporarily by children.

The breeze ferries meaning through the city, and I'm pulled toward the words it carries. The down-stroke on strings resounds until replacement; a flurry follows, up and down in pitch.

Here is where I felt the sun meet with the river to create the morning, a summoned symphony surrounded me. Now there is but one instrument, soft beneath a single voice. Its poem laments the empty hate of hate, the romance of life that's black and white, the certain wisdom of the newly weaned now worn and beaten back by life and time.

As I place myself upon the bench that, with its twin companion, lines the top beyond the final step, the busker's aged brow portrays the meaning of the lyrics that she did not write. The copper-plated pence within the guitar case contrast and hold in place a five-pound note, on purple velvet within a hard, black shell.

And as she gently screams,
and as she deeply grieves,
she buries surety on
the terms of good and bad,
packs her things, and walks away.

With the soul-sighing of the lament in its writer's voice drifting bright between the borders of my mind, I watch the creases of my palms as they nest in the air between my knees, before lifting my head, so that my eyes may seek to light upon the sleeping giants.

My eyes do not make it there to meet them.

There is a girl-child, wandering free across the wooden platform.

"You left me in the past. Abandoned me within my own mind."

"Aren't you safe there? Safer than the present, safer than the world?"

We together wander, along the cobbles that can take you from the cascade and leave you at the corner to wait upon the mist.

I had walked beside as the water fell, step by step, at last to join her on the platform, and we left behind the erstwhile gateway to reverse the course I took upon the morning, when the sun sat hidden, ready to suffuse.

And then we spoke, as we made our way slowly on to Pero's bridge.

"Is it over now? Though I guess you're not gonna give me a proper ans..."

"No, it isn't."

Dread and want – I am torn apart between the calling and the panic. Inward I baulk and break, all falls but for the shell and for its motions. It's paralysis, the prospect of it. To be between worlds.

"When will there be more? And what is..." – *breathe* – "when will it..."

"You are not in control of this. And nor can you be."

"Are you?"

She does not respond, for the insight is upstaged by the scar of time.

Open anew it lays across the harbour strait ahead of us, as today rises up to break upon its borders. The setting that I saw so full about me as I stood in place and exited the mist is now but a strip across the setting of the present, a revelation as a window or a mirror in a wall.

Our silent gaze is stolen by the appearance of a boat – in part, in part, in full – as it drifts along before us in a direction that we share, having joined us out of nowhen, out of nowhere.

Warped wood winds wide – I realise the drift is the work of a pull, as the larger boat is guided by an off-board crew of pilots. Into today they and their smaller vessel vanish, and the boat they lead, too, meets temporal oblivion.

It disappears – in part, in part, in full – and could I not see clear the exit of the other side I would not heed her as she calls me to the boundary, where she moves between a wander and a dance. She steps away from me to cross the line, and as she does this I feel helpless and compelled. I am terrified of leaving, and I am terrified of being left.

She is now within the mist-less past,
and I within the mast-less present,
and she steps among the ropes
that lie and rest upon the stone,
and points toward a man across the water.

“He looks as though he is coming to converse with the river.”

As I will my body through, my heart wills back my hand across the border, to feel that there exists a way out. All the while I watch the man; she turns around to me and smiles.

The slight heels of the buckled shoes had carried him from paving to ragged path, and the black and the gold meet the green and the brown as he moves from it toward the water. He sways, though his footing’s sure, and one hand clutches closer the jacket and the wig removed, the other reaches, stretches, hits no surface but brings the balance.

He drops the blue with its golden buttons,
he drops the wig of white;
he drops, controlled, his stolen person, up-
on a mound of grass,
lapped at by the tide.

White cotton to the knee, yellow breeches, and a golden waistcoat; dark hands hang heavy, head holds for to implore the Avon.

We arrive upon the spot where the bridge no longer stands, as it will within the time-scar of the future, its sculpted horns and futile padlocks suspended with the silver of the slight and central rise.

At a barrel that lays and at a barrel that stands I stop and sit, taking the circle as seat that tops the one who’s upright and at attention. Its wood creaks, its contents heavy, and she steps atop the sleeping side of the one who, but for the lid, would have emptied to the cobble.

The wind picks up, and the man yet sits as stated, his mouth still and silent, his eyes still and singing.

“Can you hear his story? He is telling it.”

I watch the man as I shake my head, and she recounts the thought-narrative that he shares only with the river and the girl.

.....

His name is Pero, and, together with three others, two younger sisters and an older woman, he is worth one hundred and fifteen pounds on the fourth of July, 1765, on an island of eight by six miles, sitting small and lucrative along one edge of the trade-triangle that pierces the land and sea of the West Indies.

The three siblings did not muse over exactly how much of the quartet’s worth they counted toward, but between their potential and the several years seasoning forced upon the twenty-five-year-old Harriot – stolen, sold, sold again – the sum had been settled, and the money formerly possessed by John Pinney of the south-west of England, now come to Nevis, was replaced in kind by four minds and four bodies – no less tradable, no less his.

Pero, now twelve, held the hands of his sister Nancy, now eight, and their sister Sheela, now six. Neither to the Nevis-born siblings nor the North African Harriot was the event of sale and purchase unusual. It was a common thing, whether one knew a life before it all or had been conceived a

possession and born sellable. Conceived free and born unshackled, John Pinney had inherited the Mountravers plantation, among others on Nevis, two years before. Born close in time yet worlds apart, he was now the quarter of a century shared by the oldest of his purchase, and though they stood there four slaves to one master, the island ratio of powerful to powerless stood at a more striking one thousand whites to eight times that in blacks.

Pero and his female companions; Harriot and her young and unprotectable charges; Nancy and Sheela and their two older, wiser watchers. The quartet had been bought, the money handed, and the sugarcane, its fields already releasing sugar at the hands of the chattel slaves, looked on as the merchant led four more peacefully forward.

Pero was made servant-slave soon after, his time torn between the wooden plantation house and the self-built homes, thatched and gardened, of his family and community. The sugar fields received his sister's lives similarly indirectly: Nancy and Sheela entered the servant-slave ancillary. It was only the older Harriot, seasoned as she had been through several years' adjustment to plantation work, who found the fields, found the boiling and distilling houses. T'was only she who found herself amongst the sickness, suicide, and overwork-induced death of forty like her over the first five years on that Mountravers plantation on Nevis. The molasses filled the hogsheads, England-bound, as lives and sugarcane were replenished.

Pero and Nancy Jones he and his first sister became, favoured by Pinney under a regime rare in its placidity – though its less oppressive standing ever merely relative. From the gardens of their own on Sundays, they absorbed the peace of community and tending to fruit and fowl, while food allowances from the higher house – of rice and corn, potatoes and yams, of salted herrings – were given. Of relative placidity but of indifferent practicality, too: from Pinney's house there also came neck-locks and the silver Negro branders – the land's border with the sea not enough to dissuade regular intra-island runaways, transient though these escaped-to freedoms were.

He is remembering a woman... she is returned, and of her own accord. His memory is the sound, the sound that speaks out against leaving again. Her branded skin and his owned psyche sketched further with the marks of flogging.

The servant-slaves were overseen by servants; a white servant, from Dorset in England, became overseer. Nancy Jones learned to darn while her brother acquired the skill to shave and dress hair from a Creole barber. Pero, now nineteen, and his sister, Nancy, now fifteen, entrenched and established under Pinney on the island of Nevis, welcomed in the year 1772 by watching the Nevis lighters shooting out from the land to off-shore ships seeking sugar; by watching ancient light shooting out from other suns to darkened worlds waiting on heat and life.

It was a Nevis planter's daughter and a sailing honeymoon which first took the favoured two of the purchased four beyond the island and out: out to a city and its harbour entrance, its cobbled streets and their growing voice of abolition.

He is remembering the free voices of the Quakers on the streets of Philadelphia... He has Nancy's hand once again, eight years on from sale. Their minds had hitherto been soothed on what could so readily have been worse, but that sleepwalk-state now perturbed and fissured, by what could so obviously have been better.

For two months, before a return to the West Indies and its persecution of abolitionists, Pero and Nancy accompanied Pinney and his bride through the continental streets. The report of hurricane damage at home blew through the Quaker cries of freedom and carried them prematurely back to Nevis, cutting short a honeymoon; an enlightenment. But not before a final and free Philadelphian evening, in which she and he were permitted a limited liberty to walk, and so they did. Stepping out of the lodging at Widow Graydon's on Walnut Street, they travelled along an October evening, weaving within the centre of a youthful city, sitting deep within an aging century.

Upon the air, upon the night, upon the ending Autumn and its wintry breeze, a song found the servant-slaves and drew them to the back and quiet streets. And on a store-front step way down a winding street...

“...in middle of the night, people gonna rise up an’ set things right...”

...from which a black man played, with whom a black girl preached...

“...oh an’ won’ be long, you’ll call out by name for me an’ I’ll be gon’...”

...through song, a hope-gilded lament:

“...Oh Mary, don’ you weep.

An’ if I could, I surely would,

Stan’ on tha’ rock where Moses stood,

Pharaoh’s army got drown-ed,

Oh Mary, don’ you weep.”

The percussion of hand thrown up against hand coated the strings and the waves of their vibration with the force of a physical sound. A night-time gathering, the street distance between the servant-siblings and the crowd of nothing less than life in the vibrant form of human beings was enough for them to not be noticed. Yet the distance in the mind and heart and soul engendered by the different lives that started out the same caused Pero and Nancy to be drawn toward but to turn away, fearful that, through their life’s better fortune, they simply had no right to join. What connection may have been made collapsed undetected in the street as they walked away, a connection under threat of death but passed-over by the song that followed through the air to where they, together, had stood and faltered.

“Oh Mary, don’ you weep, don’ mourn,

Oh Mary, don’ weep, don’ you mourn,

Pharaoh’s army got drown-ed,

Oh Mary, don’ you weep.”

Sea battles in the Caribbean crashed their island peace as a new nation compelled itself into being. The hurricane had brought them home. As the West Indies possessions of the French and British tore at and through each other, Pinney’s plantation beachhead became fort and defensive battery, watched nightly by sentinels become field hands once again at daybreak. And with the accompanying disruption of the supply line of food, Nevis exhausted to permanent departure four hundred of its slaves in just a few, short years.

He is seeing himself now, standing on the French flagship fourteen days into the new year of 1782. Standing among the masters... surrendering the island.

He is seeing himself now, atop the island hills only eight days further on... standing among his island’s residents, clustered at the highpoints to watch the sea battle: the stand of the British, and the French withdrawal.

He is seeing himself now, one further and final Nevis year on from battle and surrender... standing between the wooden plantation house and the self-built homes, thatched and gardened, of his family and community. Eighteen years and a day since they held hands – one twelve, one eight, one six, one twenty-five – and were bought, and were sold. He is remembering a memory not shared with his sisters, shared not with those others like him but with the products of their labours.

He is remembering leaving for good.

.....

"And they brought him here to Bristol?"

"Eventually. Not directly. Though he has been here many years by now, bookended by this spot."

Atop the barrel, balanced still, she catches the wind in her hand without breaking her gaze. Only the softest of hand movements, and as she opens her other his closed eyes and spent expression settle into a peace, head held by the breeze instead of battered by the wind. As backdrop spread behind him, the sky is blurring blue and orange of light and dark, beginning to betray behind us the ever-presence of the stars. The harbour still holds out its past, even as the horizon turns from the sun to look further back through time.

Many years in Bristol now, bookended by this spot.

.....

He stood where he now sits, beside the freed-woman maid of Mrs Pinney. Fanny Coker and Pero Jones graced the harbour but a short walk downhill from their Park Street home, upon the opening chapter of the sixteenth day of March, 1784. Through the dirtier air of the country's capital they had come, half a year before upon a Dover entrance, the London smog not mature enough to hide from their sight the black and job-holding men and women, matching in number, with but one hue in one city, the population of Nevis. Resentment burned bright in the fog as clear and steady as the prospects of the freed, those jobs considered stolen and that hue considered brash, speakers and the written word decried a less unequal situation, and the Pinney clan – mother and child, head of house, and the culture-shocked help – left for rural Dorset, just as a wide-eyed winter began to test its wings.

Just as an aged winter began its final flight, so Pinney chose Bristol and the settled hill above its city port. The cleaner air, the cheaper life, the prospect of business: Pinney set up a sugar factory with another from Nevis, and took back up the trade, stationed, now, upon another place along its expanse. Pero Jones and Fanny Coker walked along the strait toward the establishing centre, amidst the endgame of their life's purpose.

He is remembering the form and ceremony of the household, and the greetings of reception at the entrance. He is seeing his white wig and fine cloth reflected between the inscribed names of owners and their coats of arms in the metal of the collars of copper, and silver, and brass upon the necks of the few unfreed present in Bristol. Slaves upon the streets they embellished, a parade of torment...

He is remembering his pangs of guilt and hope, relief, unease, appreciation.

As the years of a new still-servile life came in, one by one, from the future and presented themselves with confidence, Pero and Fanny integrated into the black servant community in Bristol. With frequent food and visitors from the plantations of the Caribbean, elements of Nevis were not confined to the past. She became a longstanding member of the Broadmead Baptist Church; he fell slowly, yet surely, toward drink and new disposition.

.....

"He will travel soon to the West Indies, sailing despite and through the war with France, and he will pay a short visit to that island of his sale and purchase. Once back in Bristol, he will work less and drink more, he will bleed dependability, and he will spend his time with fugitive slaves and abolitionists. He will witness deals of trade in people in the parlours of the Georgian house, even as he becomes aware of revolts abroad and increasingly serious debates in Parliament."

"Never a free man, but tortured by the thought of being freer than others." I raise from my barrel with my first few words (and offer (not neccess'ry) my arm) as she moves to jump down from hers as I finish making thought manifest. She takes my arm and she keeps it, even once she has passed through air to ground.

We turn and walk and fade; he sits and stares and waits. She talks more to me as I look back at him as we disappear into the present, sitting there where his namesake bridge will curve up to a slight and central rise.

"After thirty-two years of ownership, his master will write to the plantation manager on Nevis: 'I am very sorry to inform you of the death of Pero, though it was a great relief to himself and us.'"

.....

He is remembering the refrain riding upon the late-night air of the back and quiet streets of Philadelphia. Sister-less at the triangle's distant point, he is found again, a final time, by the black girl's voice, hearing its steady presence in his mind as it floats above the water before his eyes: lacing in, out, along, and beneath, the melody flows through the times as the river through its city.

"Pharaoh's army got drown-ed,

Oh Mary, don' you weep.

Oh Mary, don' you weep..."

Chapter 9

"The fountain-pool's been covered since this morning."

"This morning? That was years ago."

Her silent laugh, her soundless smile: they bring her head and body 'round to sit back in her chair. While my legs do reach the ground, hers settle for the sky before it, though it won't be long 'til she hops back up and off and off she'll go.

As she was standing with a foot on either side of the gap between the quadrilaterals – slabs (varying size) to pave the waterfront – she had gazed across, beyond the rail, to where the wooden boards (more uniform) make a space to further set back Neptune, as I ate and ate (and still eat now) a bowl of food – vegan, spiritual.

Swinging as her legs are, she knocks the metal frame that holds up the table-top, with the transfer of the impact manifesting in the movement of the liquid (of the pale ale) in my glass.

"Oop! Sorry..."

I say it's alright with a look instead of words. "You didn't spill any, anyway."

She says she's glad, not with words but with a look, as I pick it up to drink some more.

Out of somewhere, I feel my heart is broken.

Out of somewhere, I have to start again.

Out of somewhere, a passage takes new context.

Out of somewhere, I lose someone to somewhen.

"And what" (says she) "ll you do now?" Our blue eyes hold the river that no longer holds the sun. Through tears and sighs, I give her a reply that only she and I can hear.

The night's now nearer; evening will evanesce.

Across the water, across the roads, a cross-section beckons – a time-scar, manifesting mist.

There's a point to reach, and only one way to truly reach it.

"It's almost time."

"It's always time, really. It's just that I've decided when to stop putting it off."

I don't finish my drink. From her standing stance by the table's edge, she goes to run her finger through the candle-flame but finds she can't: I blow it out before her finger gets there.

An insincere seriousness tries to convince in her look of disappointment. Her hands play the drums and the white 'n black keys upon the table: percussion ever-present, here and there in spirit to engage your energy.

"I'm sure that sounds lovely in your head..."

And now I hear what it accompanies.

"I'm sure it sounds lovely in your head, too."

With a flourish, even fidgeting through music has its end-point and she's calmly standing, watching wax change state, as I finish off my drink and draw a breath.

"Shall" (I say) "we wander more?"

"Let's" (she says) "meander."

"You" (I say) "meander, then."

"I'll, as" (she says) "you wander."

Is one way really rushing to be done with it?

Is the other way avoidance and delay?

If I walk over the water and across the road, I'll be merged with the final paragraphs.

"What will you call it all?" She speaks into my thoughts, as I noisily put chair back under table.

"Um... 'One Summer's Day'?"

"I like it."

"No promises."

"None taken."

We pass on through arch-topped space between a pillar and the wall it branches from, joined about the pale-stone arch in red-brick strips, based by black-bricked hooves that fall behind us.

Crêpe-catered open space: here are further seats and tables. The tuneful rhythms of a solitary bass are amplified around the centre, here in town, here where the world takes increasing notice.

I won't become the breeze or wind, but the scent of food floods, carried by the bassline. As we take small steps on broad steps we find ourselves looking at a market on the new and wooden boards that cover up the first/last fountain pool.

As much as the mix within the market up on Corn Street, around the crowded seats there's food from 'round the world. Canvassing the canvass-covered caterer's collected wares – their individual tentish-huts of colours – of all, of none – – the crowd sits, stands, moves, and stays, its components boasting lives their own, a miracle of indifference to strangers.

Falling water water-falling to the river as it goes beneath the city; I feel a pull upon my back that takes me half a step through space as she stops me standing where I'd stop a cyclist.

"What would – or will (or did) – I do without you?"

"Talk to yourself?"

"Let's" (I say, after smiling, after laughter) "not stop here."

"No?"

"No. I don't wanna lose momentum. I'm afraid I'll never make it if I don't go now."

"Then let's go now. If you're certain?"

"I'm not certain. But if I wait for that I'll be here, still, through sunrise."

"Then let's slip beyond the cycle path, the bus stops, and the road, and let's stand before the time-scarred mist at King Street."

A Georgian house, already blitzed in twain,
is cut across and split again.
Pennant stone and sloping roofs:
part pink-paint-covered, rooms clean and couth;
part exposed brick, sailors – convalescent,
fevered, blind: all evanescent –
housed within, til putting out to sea
on vessels, unequivocal, of entropy:
an ultimate voyage back to eternity.

The Merchant's Almshouse is wisped by mist and held in two moments passed: the now that's then, that no longer present moment, and, through the window of the time-scar that rends the air like heat, the 1800s, with its raucous gabled houses.

"Imagine seeing the world this way. A picture of the world in your mind generated by two eyes that perceive two different moments."

The mist is coalescing as I speak, and soon we are enveloped once again. I don't feel that ancient light burst on, that command to flee or freeze or fight, or perish.

She is standing to my right, holding my hand.

"There's little left, but it could take minutes, months, or years. I have to write it. I have to live it, too."

"Don't run from it. If you run it will take the space you were standing in and, though you'll return, you'll return to a shorter road, a path more covered, and a darker night. You're not a wall for it to die against and it's not a danger you can flee. Know it, and let it know you back."

"Is it safe?"

"No."

"Is it necessary?"

"Yes."

"Will I make it?"

"I'll find you at the end," (she says, softly, as she ebbs away) "where we circled the beginning."

I feel the looming desperation of a lonely child becoming frantic at the edge of the unknown. An edge that, like a shadow, can't be run from. An unknown that's spilling out, reclaiming ground.

She and the mist are gone.

I have circled 'round and inward and backed away, I've even written out the end, but all that's left, as I am left here on my own in my own head, is to confront the only chapter that remains, to cede control and meet with what it has to say.

Chapter 10

And so it speaks to me, and I to it.

To avoid is, now, to leave the book unfinished.

Barrel staves and sea dog timber; oak-studding on the Georgian frontage. Haunted gabled rows – unincinerated – on a street knighted for a restored crown: reheated, then, 's the father by the son.

No looming clouds of deep grey gather. This nocturne's backdropped with a starry sky; framed by the starry night.

My jacket's black's pushed against me and my hair is lifted by the current – strong, weak, strong again – of the cold night wind that's blowing. I've still not stepped, so steeped in apprehension, stopped at standing, studied by a staunch believer in the baseness of sobriety.

"Arr yew cawlin me uh drunk?"

From green and narrow eyes set in a somewhat tilted head: a stare above a dirt-dark disarray covering all beneath the cheekbones but the mouth. The flux of the shattering lightdark green drains me of resolve, drags me low, even as I still stay standing; rips the bond between my muscles and my mind.

"You..." (the word's move glacial) "... I don't understand you at all. So why are you much more bearable?"

He corks the bottle's end – grubby glass and calloused skin – so the rum's rendered unspillable.

Kuhlahing-kuhlianging in a steady cycle on the stone, rum-rolling waves mix their momentum side-to-side 'til I grab the bottle by the bottleneck, crouching down.

I try to write that I now stand back up, but the ink that soaks the page brings me streetward. It sets me sitting with my forearms across my knees: the bottle in my right hand; my right wrist in my left; 'blades apart beneath hunched shoulders.

"Let me up."

He seethes with adamant refusal, somehow calm in all his body language but, only, for the incensed eyes – not even furrowed is the brow above them; the jading-glow prostrates and enervates.

"Let me up."

He calmly seethes; the jading-glow debilitates.

"Let me up..."

He seethes – still calm; more strong. The jading-glow so o'erwhelms and paralyses.

"Let me up..."

He seethes adamantine tyranny; the jading-glow yet gorgonises.

Tears wept whence the words would be.

He seethes.

Weeping whence the words should be.

The jading-glow still disenables.

Silence.

Seething.

Stupefied.

Were I stronger, the bottleneck'd've dissembled violently by now, and my right-wrist'd be pierced and shattered; burned down to ash.

Do not ask it for permission.

Still still, yet he erupts with, in his stare, command.

Let it sit there. Let it stay.

Get up. Do not ask it for permission.

A bull's breathed-bellow blazes incandescent as his green-eyes dim. I stand and walk on past him, the bottle kept within my grip; within my grasp.

Such sudden change; a moment of momentum.

Though I pace away afraid to slow averse to calm near all of me is weighted back and wrenched down – the Moon, free of the Earth, trying to escape the Sun – des'prate if not frantic to move onward 'til it's safe to linger I weave between pickpockets and pickpocketee – causing cover and confusion and success – into and out of a muddy-sewage stench that wafts in waves with irregularity as petty smugglers and thieves with their glassware and their sugar and their rum that which they've stolen from the hogsheads envelope me and de-envelope on their stampede across the street now where, falling into me, near onto me, a man who reeks of all accumulation rips the bottle out, with ease, from my weak hand, puts his other – black – against my chest and forms a fist around my jacket, pulls me in and slurs: “Noche oscura de la mente!”

Together he both lets me go and downs the rum that's left. He hurls the bottle at a dog – thank chance, he misses.

Standing, now, beside an avenue that goes off to the right, I nurse my sternum – mast to pectoral sails – where sits a psychological contusion, if not a fleshly bruise.

Named for the king who's in
the square named for the queen,
a public house sings out fiddle-music
from the windows of an upstairs room.

Gin with peppermint, rum, and port
carry on the breath (that carries on the wind)
from the dancing Bristol girls and Irish sailors,
passing by the windows of that upstairs room.

At the exit from the outside, the
entrance to the street, painted foreign sailors –
more than seven, less than nine – pour on and in,
heading for the hedonism of the upstairs room.

Shoving, shouts (“Outlandish men!”;
“You won't touch that girl while I'm about!”):
a brawl beyond chest-beating behind
the windows of that upstairs room.

Separated men – Iberian from Gaelic –
and the painted sailors pour on and out.
The dancing – discontinued – lives again, seen
through the windows of the upstairs room.

Out, eventually, the domestic sailors come,
confronted by a dozen, drawing knives.
Heads against the cobblestone; pierced limbs and sides;
death and dispersal 'neath the windows of an upstairs room.

Two soldiers, with their weapons recently re-covered, brush brusquely past my left and right – too late to do ought but drag some bloodied, man-shaped matter off officially, 'fore it's dumped into the river and its mud. I try to follow close behind but anew I'm weighted back: this time by hands upon both biceps, assaying to escort me to the magdalenium that's meting out from out the pub's back-street and taking in within its walls.

Released – she’s claimed by other men – I pass brick stacks ‘tween the jettied floors along the front of the vorstelijk ale house, keeping poltergeists as patrons in its timber. She’ll lay in her room with the smell of the sea, nameless, down beside another.

Through a pocket of rare and clear and open space, I pace,

Don’t rush through it.

slowing to a walk by Cooper’s Hall.

Its Palladian façade – arched; Venetian; columned – fronts a fluctuating space: from assembly room to Baptist chapel; from warehouse for wine to fruit.

Rolling thunder arises from behind it, hidden is the source (a secret without foundations). That thunder – like cannonballs rolling through a gutter – haunts an auditorium in concert with a spectral tragedienne: so recently the Queen, my lord, is dead.

Enter three players from stage left, mid-conversation. One is leading, with the other two following.

Leader: Here.

Follower One: Here?

Leader: Through the yard of Mister Foote.

Follower One: [*Confused*] What?

Leader: [*Impatient*] Through his yard!

Follower Two: [*Sceptical*] We go... through someone’s yard?

Leader: Yes – knock on his door.

Follower Two: How can the entrance to a theatre...

Leader snaps his hand over the mouth of Follower Two.

Leader: Not a theatre!

Follower Two: [*Muffled*] What?

Follower One: What do you mean?

Leader: We are not a theatre.

Follower Two takes Leader’s hand from off his face.

Follower Two: But we are going to see a puh...

Leader snaps his hand back over the mouth of Follower Two.

Leader: Ssh!

Follower Two: ...

Follower One: [*Hesitant*] But...

Leader: [*Defiant*] We produce and put on no plays.

Follower One: Okaaay... then what...

Leader: [*Proud*] We hold concerts, with a specimen of rhetoric.

Follower One takes Leader’s hand from off the mouth of Follower Two.

Leader: The house of Mister Foote, then.

Follower One: And if we knock on his door, he will take us through his backyard, from which we will enter the...

Leader: Yes. Now please.

Leader gestures impatiently to stage right, to a nearby gabled house.

Follower Two: [*Aghast*] A concert with a specimen of rhetoric is exactly what a puh...

Follower One snaps his hand over the mouth of Follower Two. Followers exchange glances and exit stage right.

Playwright: [Inquisitive] Why do you have to pretend you aren't...

Leader exits through trapdoor.

Playwright: ... a theatre.

Playwright watches as paper scraps, blown by the wind, fix against a nearby window.

Narrator: We done here?

Playwright: I believe so.

Narrator: Those scraps on the unclean glass of that wonky window...

Playwright: Yeah?

Narrator: Me or you?

Playwright: [Indifferent] You go.

Narrator: Cool.

Stage and playwright exit, pursued by a bare, lined page.

I stand outside a gabled house, as the air lifts the gathered paper. There's a letter from the future, from a painter, from the past, a scrap, a quote, of which lands – wind-placed – penned-letters-up against the pane: the pain unopague; convulsive progress. Before it's torn away and taken back beyond the northern sea, I transform it into a voice within my head:

*Oh, brother, why should I change? I used to be very passive
and very gentle and quiet. I'm that no longer, but then I'm no
longer a child either now... sometimes I feel my own man.*

Whipped away from there, am I, to here; from here to there. I stand, now, upon a road that cuts across the narrative, a line that lies lateral over King Street. Wet and dry the mud sits, holding my boot-soles fast, as I see – for the third time, from a third time, and with a second space-perspective – a point where the water meets the land and the world transforms above them.

Three houses stretch (you know damn well how they look) on both sides of a well-used space, and the only one in focus, on the right side to my mind, is the stillalready old Llandoger Trow.

In the closeby distance:
portent of panic.

Faintly-traced and -coloured stand the others, in blurred activity; the menace of the push and pull I ache with emanating from each sediment and splinter of the pub-front: that hantered, haunting haunt of shades and pirates.

Quickly: go now.

I walk up to the steps and through the doorway.

Hazed, smoke-smattered.

KKOFFF_{FF}

"H e l l o ?"

KUHRREEEEEEEKKK

Floorboards found – unseen – by footstep.
Muffled sight and

KRRASH_{SHSH}

bleary sound. I move

KKOFF_{FF}

I move forward.
As if passed

KUHLINK_{UHLINK}

from wall to wall to

BUSSSSSULL

floor to door to ceiling: chatter, barter, banter, cursing – sweeping, swooping murmurations
flit and flock and fly.
Haze-heavy. Smoke-screened.

KLAPPP

KUHRREEEEEEEEKKKK

THUDDD

Furrowed, searching, reaching, flailing, furrowed, searching, fraught...
A hole is punched into the haze, the smoke; now another's hammered through the smoke, the
haze. One's shaped just like the sound of ivory keys; one's shaped just like the ebony between them.
Dissipating

E flat

about those hammered-holes, the smoke, the haze:

E flat minor

spreading thin in lines now staved.

F minor

Noting, now, the man at the piano in the corner

F minor 7th

I hear and see – am soothed by – the serenade's picked-out

B flat

and moonlit melody.

Welling up a little more with every chord-wrapped note or few, my eyes prepare as if expected to
accompany a phrase.

This window in the opaque mist has a small crowd at their tables, capped and lager-ed after
factory and farm have freed their hands.

Happiness in harder times.

Another bar begins; I play my part.

They dance until they disappear.

I sit before the keys, only me within the mist, picking out the tune to see him off.

Pianissimo.

“H e l l o ?”

I turn around to a pebbled-beach, water trickling from beneath an English grove. Towers, tall and bridging, in the grey and grizzled distance see me step along and throw a pebble far into the mud that makes the water wait, inaccessible.

I sit – sink – down and lean my back against a locked, unswinging gate of metal (painted red) between brick walls. Towers, tall and bridging, in the grey and grizzled distance see me holding, in two frightened hands, a shire-horse of precious porcelain.

“H e l l o ?”

My right white-gloved, my left glove-free, a shapen-mesh that hides my focused eyes; a spot of spreading red unwhitens where a breaking blade comes at and from my angered arm; electric colour.

A flush of frantic phobia finds my mask and tears it off to see how far from home I’ve flung myself before I could fight to stay.

“H e l l o ?”

Cavernous space and time are yet finite around the firepit. Rings of red brick, southern stars: I have my guitar with me. As voiceful as my mouth is mute, the steady alternation of the low and lowest open strings keeps the high-end tethered and prevents an early heat-death from its frenzy.

As the Southern Cross rings out with the barks of baboon troops, I am head-rubbed by an ancient adversary.

By her I’m blessed: a lion cub stands and, as her paws take her from the edges to the middle, she is months old; she’s maturing; she’s a hunter.

Guitar-less, now, I reach out to make contact, to remember. Forgetting, I unfurl my fingers to caress her ere she leaves, and I find two of them held between carnassials.

She keeps them, gently pressing, then releases me to go. A turtle dove proclaims we should work harder.

You’re alone

“H e l l o ?”

again.

Beneath – beside – an apple tree in a sloping, unkempt garden sits a formless, faceless child upon a swing. A stony path winds down, around, becoming wooded-hills of magpies, running streams, and families of foxes.

A fire’s lit, around which sit a leopard and a stag; I am bowled over by drunken, singing sailors.

Smack-crashed into the solid edge of the wood between the booths; caught-carried-lifted to my feet by a man my size.

“Ffffuck...”

In the evening – late – of the year I entered, up the steps and through the doorway, there’s no haze/smoke/mist as I see the peopled room: broad, bar-tended, busy. I slip – sit (slide [sink]) – down onto the bench-end of a booth. Memory-laden, bruised, upset: I feel a weighted bloodstream bind my body.

'Tween the rafters and the floorboards rolls the raving crowd, maddened/maddening: men and girls; the drunk, the sober; boys and women.

Impending pandemonium... my blood receives a message, an urgent alarm, violent, vying to control the mind.

"No..."

A ragged boy-child surges in and climbs atop a table

"Not you..."

and somehow thunders:

"RIOT ON THE MARSH!"

"No no I came in here to deal with..."

That boy's proclaiming thunder begets peals, exponentially, of more.

"...to deal with the other..."

Quake does the Earth and pulse in plasmic-channels does the Sky; a howling, writhing mobbish-mass rises/spreads between them.

"NO!"

I lose all hope of self-control now that I'm taken up and over, through the open door, and out onto the street again. The mass mob relents not; they sweep and I am swept along. I see King Street recede through shoulders, elbows, heads, as we shock-wave down the intersecting road.

I cannot freeze or fight or fly; I can't refuse to go.

Pockets

pPPRRRHHHKKKKRRRR

of scorching air and a sky that glazes over with the true and torrid terror of the screaming colour of the surface of the stars:

Conjure up the square within your mind.

Generate its trees, its grass,

line it 'round with Georgian buildings.

Paint it with a starsome sky, whose aura's

merging with the spreading glow of lamplight.

Now riddle it with chaos:

muddied fury lit by mob-borne flame.

Crashing cries have havoc wreaked 'round wrought-iron grass and stone in glass-smashed rubbled ruin burning churning earth up fighting leaving bloodied muddied clubbed consciousness figures under foot and boot and heel hell-levelled fences posts post-waveofbrawlingmass caught marked by seething screaming heaving howling harriers whom flame's surrounding sending inandoutof buildings along pathways over each eighth-segment lightning bolts that tear through all but tallest toughest trees and man on horse on plinth within the safer central circle seeking which I run past fall and crawl up running slip now knocked down nearly crushed and kept there fighting forward faster falter finding faster footing for the final fettered grappling loosed few paces half on grass and half on pathway purging everything a voice stills all but it and I.

Two syllables eradicate all else, just for a moment. And in the age within that moment, echoing their heartbeat pattern, they are all I truly ever longed to hear.

One beat, up/down; a call, a cry, a question. The voice that searched my memories utters a different word.

I don't know if you can hear it through the riots.

A bolt of lightning or its thunderous peal propels me forward 'til I crawl up to sitting with my back against the central statue's base.

The scenes and sounds of the riot only threaten in an echo from afar.
 "About..."
 My knuckles bleed.
 "... fucking..."
 Teeth clamped; knees torn.
 "...time."
 I see me as I look over at myself and I look back at who I am and was and will be.
 "You've been ignoring me."
 I place (careful) upon the surface of the plinth the back of my head and close my eyelids.
 "Yep," (I say) "with increasing fucking difficulty."
 Standing merely metres off to my right and looking outward, I roll my eyes and keep my hands in pockets.
 Sitting, I state the obvious:
 "You've been trying to tell me something."
 Standing, I tilt/turn my head.
 "Yes," (I say, as I turn around) "with increasing fucking difficulty."
 I step toward me; I shuffle over; I sit beside myself with burnout.
 "Clever."
 "Thanks."
 "So: what now?"
 "I don't know. I mean, I'm here now. I'm now now. At least for now. At least while I'm here. I know what happens next. Later, I mean, after this."
 "Yeah, well that's not what I asked. This is it."
 "Fuck."
 "Yep."
 "Well... can't you go first?"
 "I've been trying to go first this whole damn time!"
 "Well, go now then..."
 "You keep switching it back over!"
 There's a pause, but a brief one. I am able – at long, long last – to speak.
 "Now that there's nowhere else you can go, nowhen else you can be, no other parts or pages you can move on to without this one: stop and meditate."
 "But I didn't get this fa..."
 "Just fucking do it."
 I close my eyes to un-avert my gaze from whence it needs to fall.
 All goes a starless dark, as the heat and the thunder and the contours of the chaos intensify, searing through the limbs.
 Paroxysms try to prise open the channels to the spirit of a chased creature, list'ning for the ground beneath slow-paced, placed paws; watching for a tapestry – bright – lighting up two points that focus, searing through the tall and blending grass.
 Turning gulps and gasps of air into slow, unbroken streams, I make the swelling of the lungs into the diaphragm beneath the only thing that is, that counts, that matters.
 The only thing that is, that counts, that matters.
 The only thing that is, that counts, that matters.
 The only thing that is, that counts, that matters.
 The only thing.
 Is.

Counts.

Matters.

"Now: what are you afraid of?"

"What? But you're the one who's afraid, the one who sirens danger. The one who needs to tell me something. I should be asking you."

I am.

Now:

What are you afraid of?

I might be trapped.

And what if you are?

Then... then I can't get out.

Out to where? Away from what? Why must you get out?

Well I... I need to...

What is the danger?

I might be left.

And if you are? Why is that bad?

I would be alone.

Why can't you be alone?

Because... what if... I'll... I'll be forgotten.

By whom?

Anyone. No-one will hear me.

Do they need to? Do you need them to?

I need... them... I...

The only thing that... need... them... to... that counts is Why? that counts The only afraid of?
the thing And what'll you do now? The You're the one that is, that matters The one who
sirens Trapped Alone Away from what

Fire and starlight.

I look across at me as I sit sighing slowly, unchanged.

"What, you thought it would all be resolved in one brief moment of sustained, belated
introspection? This is the beginning."

Through tearsome eyes:

"It's taken me all day just to get to the beginning."

Through tearful eyes and a brief, breathed laugh:

"But it's a start."

"Clever."

"Thanks."

I stand; I stand; we walk around the statue and to the circle's edge, where a path connects that
leads to Redcliffe corner. Though echoing out from afar, the chaos on the royal marsh has kept and I
know I cannot go but one step forward.

"I can't face it. So I can't deal with it. I'm stuck here."

I present something to myself in my own hand.

"It's only one letter away from 'meditation'. A needed helping hand; a chance; a blessing."

It sinks into my skin and courses through unto the wellspring: reinvigorating; vitalising; guiding.

There's only me among the re-immediated riot wreaking raw, relentless ruin – yet the path
ahead is clear. Beset by bolts of brawling at its borders, but untouched beyond those edges, it is
trepidatory.

Fearfully, not trusting safety's sudden apparition, I walk out – by step, by step – along, decreasingly distraught and growing less anticipatory: imperilled not, un-preyed upon by fang or claw or talon; hand or stone.

There are just several strides until the final chapter.

I take them slowly, calm, observing all around me.

Chapter 11

As I step – slowly, calm – to view a waterfront between me and a spire-less chapel kneeling to the passing Nile, the marsh/the square goes quiet, quelled or silent becomes the riot, and I make my way over to a weathered wall.

I lean into it (Would you like to know upon which shoulder?) and gaze on at the pulsing, peaceful painting.

I am lost, though I know where I am – I’ve mapped it well. Untethered, without root, a mere mile from the place that I was born. I’m toward the farther end of a time that I didn’t want to go through, but again, now, here in the future back-dropped by the past, I just want to go back or skip ahead – off into another time I conjure in my mind, or off travelling through moments that were realised. I would shun the only thing that’s real: when then, I want to be now; when now, then – either one.

I lean less lightly, challenging the mass within the wall.

I’m already there in a distant moment, wishing it were this where I wished it were another. I can speak with the present tense, but I may as well have been speaking with the past as I was standing, having wandered, when things were then instead of now. I couldn’t make a moment any longer, less mortal, nor keep the day from closing. All I could do was to talk like it were still alive, to try to trick time into ticking differently.

I took my weight back from the wall and walked away, wistsome, not wistless nor wistful, to meet with lines already written, with time already passed, onward, closer to the end with which I started. Already dried upon the page, impossible to edit, from that point on I could not help but speak, again, like I was living in the present.

The church bells told, as I moved away, of what could not be voided: a note repeated until it sounded its eleventh.

The late evening’s dark.

I walk along the river,
led by ancient light.

There is little left
(though there is a little left)
of this late evening.

With Queen Square to my right, hid behind a row of buildings, I walk beside the captured tide that makes the floating harbour. The ripples, sloshing softly, spread beyond a boat that travels to a sleeping ship.

I come to the edge and the light of a lantern, where the illumed harbour wall offers steps down to a scene.

Looking leftward, to prove, convince, a lack of interest stands a gull by the river’s quiet edge, thinking nothing of the crumbling of a loaf of bread that’s being worked through by the hands and taken to the mouth of the man upon his boat, caught up in the reeds.

“Couldn’t talk it out of there?”

I call from the highest of the steps of stone, that take you down to the muddy frontier; that take you up to the mapped-out, settled city; that separate the abyss and the void; that bridge between the beauty and the wonder.

“Ah, you. We never sank, though we may be tangled.”

He looks up and down again – the comma as the turning point – and he tears off white and kneaded flesh to throw toward the gull who doesn’t want some, but as it’s offered it won’t turn it down. Legs outstretched, one ending on the other, he looks into the world that gives us ours.

"And you? You're still here. Have you knelt on any other busy streets? Did your child leave you to the chaos, trusting that you'd make it through to join her in embracing life?"

"You asking me, or the river?"

He laughs a quiet laugh at the comment that I make as I sit upon the step.

"I'm not looking for her now. She'll find me."

"Who?"

There's still a boat and still a man, still a seagull, still a river, yet the boat's of metal and the man's in jeans, and the seagull plucks out plastic from the water.

"Were you sayin' that to me?"

"Ah, no. Sorry. Not to you..."

There are no longer steps of stone, between the surface and the boat that's on the water. They're separated by the air that my legs, from the knees, hang into as I lean a little back and hit my head against the jet-black bar that tops the railing, continuing its march along the harbour wall, stretching out its arms above the stone with its bursts of green, the moss and grass with their fields of grey, all lit by electricity. Though it makes a sound and it makes an impact, changing the expression on my face, it doesn't raise me any sympathy – despite the new expression on my face. Working on his long, green riverboat, the man has returned to another story, there among the other boats all tethered to the platform that they share, between the spire and the sleeping giants – two peaks, to the left and to the right.

From Redcliffe runs a row of walls, with not a space that isn't filled with windows. About the glass? Red, green, and beige; orange, blue, and yellow. The colours come through up above the heads of lamps resting level with the trees. Across the river from this I stand, swapping places with the railing – now it keeps me from the water; now it holds me to the land. There is music from the bowels of the ship that's docked to my left, but it doesn't take me. Instead I turn with the narrative, arm-in-arm, and we head off, onward, to the end, to the beginning, longing to be back upon the corner.

The wall still drops sharply, yet through a mistless night, beyond the railing and the edge, down to the water. The air's electrically-lit between each of the eight trees – their roots breaking the grey and moss-green, late-night, cobbled surface.

The cranes stand guard, the tide's possessed, and all is rather still.

There is a girl-child, sat softly atop the furthest bench.

I close the time and space between us.

"So:" (she asks) "how was it?"

"Inconclusive." I sit upon the bench-top and nudge her left shoulder with my right. "But I'm okay with that."

She hops on off the bench-top, after nudging my right shoulder with her left, and stands over by the man who's perched upon a small and standing piece of sculpted wood.

"He is fixed upon the distance, outward." She muses as she's music to all ears.

"I don't want to look away. Outward."

"Some more inward, then?" She smiles.

"Hell no. Let's go sit over there."

"Where we can watch him watching." She leans upon his knee and then she springs away.

Pocketed hands, I had pointed with my gaze, and we make for the bridge to go and sit beneath the cranes, my final thoughts remain behind to keep the corner.

What's a hundred years to an ancient landscape? A layer to the multitude beneath?

What's an explored mind to the star remembered by its light as it plays upon a river in the distance?

Nothing.

Everything.

Life, at least, before the lone and level sands.

We sit, her and I, legs over the edge of the present, dangling into the past. And all is rather still.

Sat, backs against the sleeping giant with palms down atop the harbour wall, we look across, over, and see a city built upon a river. Electric light and stillness, a rumbling on the edge of hearing. A padlocked bridge with a branded name holds fast the gateway-strait that takes you to the cascade entrance. Lit up by the blue-light-lined trees standing eight strong before the art house, sits perched a sculpted man on cobbles, gazing over, back across the water. From the past he sees the present, and in his ship, but close beside us, he sees the future – this way, for him, adventure lies.

She pulls up her legs, breaching only just the edge as they were, crossing them with ease, bringing her back from its metal support to stand alone, hands cradling one the other where they meet in the air of the evening. I am staring at a star; she is reading the river's surface. Neither star nor river stir; we smile and do likewise.

Still not one for stillness, she breaks upwards, stands, and steps up the gaps in the structure of the crane. A shift in gaze from star to planet, a raised eyebrow, and a tilted head is all I manage before she has re-placed herself, sitting on the grey-painted shelf between the giant's legs. If she moves as the river, I move as the earth, upward to standing in greater time and with greater trouble. I walk around the crane, and I walk over the resting train tracks. Between the ship and sheds the sleepers begin or end. Now behind it, I look through the relic and beyond her shoulder, and rest my arms upon the shelf.

There will be mist again about the harbour as the church bells ring rounds of five, and six, and seven, carried by the breeze and contested by the birds. But now the air sits clearly and we see the city floating, between the dark blue water and the deep black sky.

Epilogue

A reed; bread above a mouth; a bird facing left by water.

The hieroglyphs hail from another place upon another river, and from them I at last recall the memory of the meaning of her name. From a reading of that civilisation's rise and fall I know that the symbols read

Iteru
'The River'

the flowing, changing blueness of her eyes, essence of settlements and cities – small, ancient, great, and modern.

While they shimmer and flow, reflecting light and history, her eyes see the recognition in mine, the remembrance of the word I know and knew.

"So you know what it means?" is her smile and her question, as she glides to crouching, standing, and swirls across to lean with folded arms against the beam of the harbour crane's chance framing of Bristol.

"Of course I do," is my smile and my answer, and the lighted quiet of the city sees its face within its river; she sees her eyes in mine.

"It means you."

