



The Floating Harbour

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Prologue

She Rises Then

Chapter 1

Mist On Water

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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.