



The Floating Harbour

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Chapter 3

The Church Muses To The Mid-Morning

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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."

"Uhmazing."

"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.