



The Floating Harbour

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Chapter 5

The River Keeps Me Company

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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 upkeep 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.