



The Floating Harbour

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Chapter 6

For All The Syllables, The Words

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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, unfulfilling, 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.*