



# The Floating Harbour

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## Chapter 7

*This Room, This City, This World*

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## 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 unpristine: 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 carnassialed-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, cloudsome, 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.