



The Floating Harbour

By William Altoft

Chapter 8

Can You Hear His Story? He Is Telling It

<https://williamaltoft.blog/>

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Chapter 8

–No será difícil encontrar graffitis increíbles que decoran las paredes de la ciudad.

–¡Ah, mira esto!

–¡Te lo dije! En los callejones, calles laterales, incluso en puentes...

–¡Oye, ven aquí!

–¿Hmm? Pff no me gusta esto.

–¿Qué? ¿Por qué?

–La variedad es maravillosa porque eso significa que hay algo para todos.

The clash of sharpened blades over tiles of black, of white, and the crest come alive about me, I reorient myself in space;

–¿Todos ellos son Banksy?

–No, no. Estos no son.

I reorient myself in time. Standing there, across the road, on the pave before a bus stop (where no bus stops) are admirers of the art upon the walls. I walk along, squinting, for the sun's admiring too, beneath workers on a beam of steel,

–Ten cuidado si estás echando fotos en la carretera.

sat below the wisps of black and red that birth the looming can of orange paint, held steady, upside down, by a bowler-hatted man. Beyond the green leaves of a woody plant a mother holds her baby child who looks off, away, to the north-east; she to the north-west.

I move from the colour-laden to the opened-out, cross the creak and cry and rush and halt in its present movement to traverse an island etched out by the rivering-road where the ground(man-made)'s pristine around a bulk of stone, wreathed and etched and crossed, red-petalled 'membrane reaching from the remnants of the children in the European mud, and I pass, though I wear it on my shirt at times – not for nations but for boys, swept off and away from many places, all toward the same old end – and behind, between me and the relic gate, it continues, wreathed and etched and crossed, something beside remains, travelling through hist'ry to the past.

I hear heated talking, not far ahead along the way in which I'm walking.

There's a man who's poised and pondering, still and silent above our heads. Beneath him, fuelled by his legacy, a fire flickers and rises, out of which emanate the voices.

"It's an empty gesture, to skip the hard work of true reflection!"

"We can't unbuild the city – it's gestures like these that show a commitment to making things right!"

"You cannot sweep away the ugliness whence was born the beauty you wish to guiltlessly enjoy!"

"Who even talks like that?! At least we're able to confront the past!"

"Are you?!"

They meet on edges, those crimson flames
and flare about the base,
encircling the history they would tackle or erase.
The heat of it exhausts in me the urge to join in too.

"And who's this even for?!" is screamed.

"It's for them!"

"It's for you!"

I leave it to the learned, as green tells me I can ford the road.

With his back to me that ousted god comes closer, wearing beard and wielding trident, his current seas – those shallow pools – torn temporarily by children.

The breeze ferries meaning through the city, and I'm pulled toward the words it carries. The down-stroke on strings resounds until replacement; a flurry follows, up and down in pitch.

Here is where I felt the sun meet with the river to create the morning, a summoned symphony surrounded me. Now there is but one instrument, soft beneath a single voice. Its poem laments the empty hate of hate, the romance of life that's black and white, the certain wisdom of the newly weaned now worn and beaten back by life and time.

As I place myself upon the bench that, with its twin companion, lines the top beyond the final step, the busker's aged brow portrays the meaning of the lyrics that she did not write. The copper-plated pence within the guitar case contrast and hold in place a five-pound note, on purple velvet within a hard, black shell.

And as she gently screams,
and as she deeply grieves,
she buries surety on
the terms of good and bad,
packs her things, and walks away.

With the soul-sighing of the lament in its writer's voice drifting bright between the borders of my mind, I watch the creases of my palms as they nest in the air between my knees, before lifting my head, so that my eyes may seek to light upon the sleeping giants.

My eyes do not make it there to meet them.

There is a girl-child, wandering free across the wooden platform.

"You left me in the past. Abandoned me within my own mind."

"Aren't you safe there? Safer than the present, safer than the world?"

We together wander, along the cobbles that can take you from the cascade and leave you at the corner to wait upon the mist.

I had walked beside as the water fell, step by step, at last to join her on the platform, and we left behind the erstwhile gateway to reverse the course I took upon the morning, when the sun sat hidden, ready to suffuse.

And then we spoke, as we made our way slowly on to Pero's bridge.

"Is it over now? Though I guess you're not gonna give me a proper ans..."

"No, it isn't."

Dread and want – I am torn apart between the calling and the panic. Inward I baulk and break, all falls but for the shell and for its motions. It's paralysis, the prospect of it. To be between worlds.

"When will there be more? And what is..." – *breathe* – "when will it..."

"You are not in control of this. And nor can you be."

"Are you?"

She does not respond, for the insight is upstaged by the scar of time.

Open anew it lays across the harbour strait ahead of us, as today rises up to break upon its borders. The setting that I saw so full about me as I stood in place and exited the mist is now but a strip across the setting of the present, a revelation as a window or a mirror in a wall.

Our silent gaze is stolen by the appearance of a boat – in part, in part, in full – as it drifts along before us in a direction that we share, having joined us out of nowhen, out of nowhere.

Warped wood winds wide – I realise the drift is the work of a pull, as the larger boat is guided by an off-board crew of pilots. Into today they and their smaller vessel vanish, and the boat they lead, too, meets temporal oblivion.

It disappears – in part, in part, in full – and could I not see clear the exit of the other side I would not heed her as she calls me to the boundary, where she moves between a wander and a dance. She steps away from me to cross the line, and as she does this I feel helpless and compelled. I am terrified of leaving, and I am terrified of being left.

She is now within the mist-less past,
and I within the mast-less present,
and she steps among the ropes
that lie and rest upon the stone,
and points toward a man across the water.

“He looks as though he is coming to converse with the river.”

As I will my body through, my heart wills back my hand across the border, to feel that there exists a way out. All the while I watch the man; she turns around to me and smiles.

The slight heels of the buckled shoes had carried him from paving to ragged path, and the black and the gold meet the green and the brown as he moves from it toward the water. He sways, though his footing’s sure, and one hand clutches closer the jacket and the wig removed, the other reaches, stretches, hits no surface but brings the balance.

He drops the blue with its golden buttons,
he drops the wig of white;
he drops, controlled, his stolen person, up-
on a mound of grass,
lapped at by the tide.

White cotton to the knee, yellow breeches, and a golden waistcoat; dark hands hang heavy, head holds for to implore the Avon.

We arrive upon the spot where the bridge no longer stands, as it will within the time-scar of the future, its sculpted horns and futile padlocks suspended with the silver of the slight and central rise.

At a barrel that lays and at a barrel that stands I stop and sit, taking the circle as seat that tops the one who’s upright and at attention. Its wood creaks, its contents heavy, and she steps atop the sleeping side of the one who, but for the lid, would have emptied to the cobble.

The wind picks up, and the man yet sits as stated, his mouth still and silent, his eyes still and singing.

“Can you hear his story? He is telling it.”

I watch the man as I shake my head, and she recounts the thought-narrative that he shares only with the river and the girl.

.....

His name is Pero, and, together with three others, two younger sisters and an older woman, he is worth one hundred and fifteen pounds on the fourth of July, 1765, on an island of eight by six miles, sitting small and lucrative along one edge of the trade-triangle that pierces the land and sea of the West Indies.

The three siblings did not muse over exactly how much of the quartet’s worth they counted toward, but between their potential and the several years seasoning forced upon the twenty-five-year-old Harriot – stolen, sold, sold again – the sum had been settled, and the money formerly possessed by John Pinney of the south-west of England, now come to Nevis, was replaced in kind by four minds and four bodies – no less tradable, no less his.

Pero, now twelve, held the hands of his sister Nancy, now eight, and their sister Sheela, now six. Neither to the Nevis-born siblings nor the North African Harriot was the event of sale and purchase unusual. It was a common thing, whether one knew a life before it all or had been conceived a

possession and born sellable. Conceived free and born unshackled, John Pinney had inherited the Mountravers plantation, among others on Nevis, two years before. Born close in time yet worlds apart, he was now the quarter of a century shared by the oldest of his purchase, and though they stood there four slaves to one master, the island ratio of powerful to powerless stood at a more striking one thousand whites to eight times that in blacks.

Pero and his female companions; Harriot and her young and unprotectable charges; Nancy and Sheela and their two older, wiser watchers. The quartet had been bought, the money handed, and the sugarcane, its fields already releasing sugar at the hands of the chattel slaves, looked on as the merchant led four more peacefully forward.

Pero was made servant-slave soon after, his time torn between the wooden plantation house and the self-built homes, thatched and gardened, of his family and community. The sugar fields received his sister's lives similarly indirectly: Nancy and Sheela entered the servant-slave ancillary. It was only the older Harriot, seasoned as she had been through several years' adjustment to plantation work, who found the fields, found the boiling and distilling houses. T'was only she who found herself amongst the sickness, suicide, and overwork-induced death of forty like her over the first five years on that Mountravers plantation on Nevis. The molasses filled the hogsheads, England-bound, as lives and sugarcane were replenished.

Pero and Nancy Jones he and his first sister became, favoured by Pinney under a regime rare in its placidity – though its less oppressive standing ever merely relative. From the gardens of their own on Sundays, they absorbed the peace of community and tending to fruit and fowl, while food allowances from the higher house – of rice and corn, potatoes and yams, of salted herrings – were given. Of relative placidity but of indifferent practicality, too: from Pinney's house there also came neck-locks and the silver Negro branders – the land's border with the sea not enough to dissuade regular intra-island runaways, transient though these escaped-to freedoms were.

He is remembering a woman... she is returned, and of her own accord. His memory is the sound, the sound that speaks out against leaving again. Her branded skin and his owned psyche sketched further with the marks of flogging.

The servant-slaves were overseen by servants; a white servant, from Dorset in England, became overseer. Nancy Jones learned to darn while her brother acquired the skill to shave and dress hair from a Creole barber. Pero, now nineteen, and his sister, Nancy, now fifteen, entrenched and established under Pinney on the island of Nevis, welcomed in the year 1772 by watching the Nevis lighters shooting out from the land to off-shore ships seeking sugar; by watching ancient light shooting out from other suns to darkened worlds waiting on heat and life.

It was a Nevis planter's daughter and a sailing honeymoon which first took the favoured two of the purchased four beyond the island and out: out to a city and its harbour entrance, its cobbled streets and their growing voice of abolition.

He is remembering the free voices of the Quakers on the streets of Philadelphia... He has Nancy's hand once again, eight years on from sale. Their minds had hitherto been soothed on what could so readily have been worse, but that sleepwalk-state now perturbed and fissured, by what could so obviously have been better.

For two months, before a return to the West Indies and its persecution of abolitionists, Pero and Nancy accompanied Pinney and his bride through the continental streets. The report of hurricane damage at home blew through the Quaker cries of freedom and carried them prematurely back to Nevis, cutting short a honeymoon; an enlightenment. But not before a final and free Philadelphian evening, in which she and he were permitted a limited liberty to walk, and so they did. Stepping out of the lodging at Widow Graydon's on Walnut Street, they travelled along an October evening, weaving within the centre of a youthful city, sitting deep within an aging century.

Upon the air, upon the night, upon the ending Autumn and its wintry breeze, a song found the servant-slaves and drew them to the back and quiet streets. And on a store-front step way down a winding street...

“...in middle of the night, people gonna rise up an’ set things right...”

...from which a black man played, with whom a black girl preached...

“...oh an’ won’ be long, you’ll call out by name for me an’ I’ll be gon’...”

...through song, a hope-gilded lament:

“...Oh Mary, don’ you weep.

An’ if I could, I surely would,

Stan’ on tha’ rock where Moses stood,

Pharaoh’s army got drown-ed,

Oh Mary, don’ you weep.”

The percussion of hand thrown up against hand coated the strings and the waves of their vibration with the force of a physical sound. A night-time gathering, the street distance between the servant-siblings and the crowd of nothing less than life in the vibrant form of human beings was enough for them to not be noticed. Yet the distance in the mind and heart and soul engendered by the different lives that started out the same caused Pero and Nancy to be drawn toward but to turn away, fearful that, through their life’s better fortune, they simply had no right to join. What connection may have been made collapsed undetected in the street as they walked away, a connection under threat of death but passed-over by the song that followed through the air to where they, together, had stood and faltered.

“Oh Mary, don’ you weep, don’ mourn,

Oh Mary, don’ weep, don’ you mourn,

Pharaoh’s army got drown-ed,

Oh Mary, don’ you weep.”

Sea battles in the Caribbean crashed their island peace as a new nation compelled itself into being. The hurricane had brought them home. As the West Indies possessions of the French and British tore at and through each other, Pinney’s plantation beachhead became fort and defensive battery, watched nightly by sentinels become field hands once again at daybreak. And with the accompanying disruption of the supply line of food, Nevis exhausted to permanent departure four hundred of its slaves in just a few, short years.

He is seeing himself now, standing on the French flagship fourteen days into the new year of 1782. Standing among the masters... surrendering the island.

He is seeing himself now, atop the island hills only eight days further on... standing among his island’s residents, clustered at the highpoints to watch the sea battle: the stand of the British, and the French withdrawal.

He is seeing himself now, one further and final Nevis year on from battle and surrender... standing between the wooden plantation house and the self-built homes, thatched and gardened, of his family and community. Eighteen years and a day since they held hands – one twelve, one eight, one six, one twenty-five – and were bought, and were sold. He is remembering a memory not shared with his sisters, shared not with those others like him but with the products of their labours.

He is remembering leaving for good.

.....

“And they brought him here to Bristol?”

“Eventually. Not directly. Though he has been here many years by now, bookended by this spot.”

Atop the barrel, balanced still, she catches the wind in her hand without breaking her gaze. Only the softest of hand movements, and as she opens her other his closed eyes and spent expression settle into a peace, head held by the breeze instead of battered by the wind. As backdrop spread behind him, the sky is blurring blue and orange of light and dark, beginning to betray behind us the ever-presence of the stars. The harbour still holds out its past, even as the horizon turns from the sun to look further back through time.

Many years in Bristol now, bookended by this spot.

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He stood where he now sits, beside the freed-woman maid of Mrs Pinney. Fanny Coker and Pero Jones graced the harbour but a short walk downhill from their Park Street home, upon the opening chapter of the sixteenth day of March, 1784. Through the dirtier air of the country's capital they had come, half a year before upon a Dover entrance, the London smog not mature enough to hide from their sight the black and job-holding men and women, matching in number, with but one hue in one city, the population of Nevis. Resentment burned bright in the fog as clear and steady as the prospects of the freed, those jobs considered stolen and that hue considered brash, speakers and the written word decried a less unequal situation, and the Pinney clan – mother and child, head of house, and the culture-shocked help – left for rural Dorset, just as a wide-eyed winter began to test its wings.

Just as an aged winter began its final flight, so Pinney chose Bristol and the settled hill above its city port. The cleaner air, the cheaper life, the prospect of business: Pinney set up a sugar factory with another from Nevis, and took back up the trade, stationed, now, upon another place along its expanse. Pero Jones and Fanny Coker walked along the strait toward the establishing centre, amidst the endgame of their life's purpose.

He is remembering the form and ceremony of the household, and the greetings of reception at the entrance. He is seeing his white wig and fine cloth reflected between the inscribed names of owners and their coats of arms in the metal of the collars of copper, and silver, and brass upon the necks of the few unfreed present in Bristol. Slaves upon the streets they embellished, a parade of torment...

He is remembering his pangs of guilt and hope, relief, unease, appreciation.

As the years of a new still-servile life came in, one by one, from the future and presented themselves with confidence, Pero and Fanny integrated into the black servant community in Bristol. With frequent food and visitors from the plantations of the Caribbean, elements of Nevis were not confined to the past. She became a longstanding member of the Broadmead Baptist Church; he fell slowly, yet surely, toward drink and new disposition.

.....

“He will travel soon to the West Indies, sailing despite and through the war with France, and he will pay a short visit to that island of his sale and purchase. Once back in Bristol, he will work less and drink more, he will bleed dependability, and he will spend his time with fugitive slaves and abolitionists. He will witness deals of trade in people in the parlours of the Georgian house, even as he becomes aware of revolts abroad and increasingly serious debates in Parliament.”

“Never a free man, but tortured by the thought of being freer than others.” I raise from my barrel with my first few words (and offer (not neccess'ry) my arm) as she moves to jump down from hers as I finish making thought manifest. She takes my arm and she keeps it, even once she has passed through air to ground.

We turn and walk and fade; he sits and stares and waits. She talks more to me as I look back at him as we disappear into the present, sitting there where his namesake bridge will curve up to a slight and central rise.

“After thirty-two years of ownership, his master will write to the plantation manager on Nevis: ‘I am very sorry to inform you of the death of Pero, though it was a great relief to himself and us.’”

.....

He is remembering the refrain riding upon the late-night air of the back and quiet streets of Philadelphia. Sister-less at the triangle’s distant point, he is found again, a final time, by the black girl’s voice, hearing its steady presence in his mind as it floats above the water before his eyes: lacing in, out, along, and beneath, the melody flows through the times as the river through its city.

“Pharaoh’s army got drown-ed,

Oh Mary, don’ you weep.

Oh Mary, don’ you weep...”