

The Floating Harbour

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Chapter 10

Fire And Starlight

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Chapter 10

And so it speaks to me, and I to it.

To avoid is, now, to leave the book unfinished.

Barrel staves and sea dog timber; oak-studding on the Georgian frontage. Haunted gabled rows – unincinerated – on a street knighted for a restored crown: reheaded, then, 's the father by the son.

No looming clouds of deep grey gather. This nocturne's backdropped with a starry sky; framed by the starry night.

My jacket's black's pushed against me and my hair is lifted by the current – strong, weak, strong again – of the cold night wind that's blowing. I've still not stepped, so steeped in apprehension, stopped at standing, studied by a staunch believer in the baseness of sobriety.

"Arr yew cawlin me uh drunk?"

From green and narrow eyes set in a somewhat tilted head: a stare above a dirt-dark disarray covering all beneath the cheekbones but the mouth. The flux of the shattering lightdark green drains me of resolve, drags me low, even as I still stay standing; rips the bond between my muscles and my mind.

"You..." (the word's move glacial) "... I don't understand you at all. So why are you much more bearable?"

He corks the bottle's end – grubby glass and calloused skin – so the rum's rendered unspillable.

Kuhlaling-kuhlianging in a steady cycle on the stone, rum-rolling waves mix their momentum side-to-side 'til I grab the bottle by the bottleneck, crouching down.

I try to write that I now stand back up, but the ink that soaks the page brings me streetward. It sets me sitting with my forearms across my knees: the bottle in my right hand; my right wrist in my left; 'blades apart beneath hunched shoulders.

"Let me up."

He seethes with adamant refusal, somehow calm in all his body language but, only, for the incensed eyes – not even furrowed is the brow above them; the jading-glow prostrates and enervates.

"Let me up."

He calmly seethes; the jading-glow debilitates.

"Let me up..."

He seethes – still calm; more strong. The jading-glow so o'erwhelms and paralyses.

"Let me up..."

He seethes adamantine tyranny; the jading-glow yet gorgonises.

Tears wept whence the words would be.

He seethes.

Weeping whence the words should be.

The jading-glow still disenables.

Silence.

Seething.

Stupefied.

Were I stronger, the bottleneck'd've dissembled violently by now, and my right-wrist'd be pierced and shattered; burned down to ash.

Do not ask it for permission.

Still still, yet he erupts with, in his stare, command.

Let it sit there. Let it stay.

Get up. Do not ask it for permission.

A bull's breathed-bellow blazes incandescent as his green-eyes dim. I stand and walk on past him, the bottle kept within my grip; within my grasp.

Such sudden change; a moment of momentum.

Though I pace away afraid to slow averse to calm near all of me is weighted back and wrenched down – the Moon, free of the Earth, trying to escape the Sun – des'prate if not frantic to move onward 'til it's safe to linger I weave between pickpockets and pickpocketee – causing cover and confusion and success – into and outof a muddy-sewage stench that wafts in waves with irregularity as petty smugglers and thieves with their glassware and their sugar and their rum that which they've stolen from the hogsheads envelope me and de-envelope on their stampede across the street now where, falling into me, near onto me, a man who reeks of all accumulation rips the bottle out, with ease, from my weak hand, puts his other – black – against my chest and forms a fist around my jacket, pulls me in and slurs: “Noche oscura de la mente!”

Together he both lets me go and downs the rum that's left. He hurls the bottle at a dog – thank chance, he misses.

Standing, now, beside an avenue that goes off to the right, I nurse my sternum – mast to pectoral sails – where sits a psychological contusion, if not a fleshly bruise.

Named for the king who's in
the square named for the queen,
a public house sings out fiddle-music
from the windows of an upstairs room.

Gin with peppermint, rum, and port
carry on the breath (that carries on the wind)
from the dancing Bristol girls and Irish sailors,
passing by the windows of that upstairs room.

At the exit from the outside, the
entrance to the street, painted foreign sailors –
more than seven, less than nine – pour on and in,
heading for the hedonism of the upstairs room.

Shoving, shouts (“Outlandish men!”;
“You won't touch that girl while I'm about!”):
a brawl beyond chest-beating behind
the windows of that upstairs room.

Separated men – Iberian from Gaelic –
and the painted sailors pour on and out.
The dancing – discontinued – lives again, seen
through the windows of the upstairs room.

Out, eventually, the domestic sailors come,
confronted by a dozen, drawing knives.
Heads against the cobblestone; pierced limbs and sides;
death and dispersal 'neath the windows of an upstairs room.

Two soldiers, with their weapons recently re-covered, brush brusquely past my left and right – too late to do ought but drag some bloodied, man-shaped matter off officially, 'fore it's dumped into the river and its mud. I try to follow close behind but anew I'm weighted back: this time by hands upon both biceps, assaying to escort me to the magdalenium that's meting out from out the pub's back-street and taking in within its walls.

Released – she’s claimed by other men – I pass brick stacks ‘tween the jettied floors along the front of the vorstelijk ale house, keeping poltergeists as patrons in its timber. She’ll lay in her room with the smell of the sea, nameless, down beside another.

Through a pocket of rare and clear and open space, I pace,

Don’t rush through it.

slowing to a walk by Cooper’s Hall.

Its Palladian façade – arched; Venetian; columned – fronts a fluctuating space: from assembly room to Baptist chapel; from warehouse for wine to fruit.

Rolling thunder arises from behind it, hidden is the source (a secret without foundations). That thunder – like cannonballs rolling through a gutter – haunts an auditorium in concert with a spectral tragedienne: so recently the Queen, my lord, is dead.

Enter three players from stage left, mid-conversation. One is leading, with the other two following.

Leader: Here.

Follower One: Here?

Leader: Through the yard of Mister Foote.

Follower One: [*Confused*] What?

Leader: [*Impatient*] Through his yard!

Follower Two: [*Sceptical*] We go... through someone’s yard?

Leader: Yes – knock on his door.

Follower Two: How can the entrance to a theatre...

Leader snaps his hand over the mouth of Follower Two.

Leader: Not a theatre!

Follower Two: [*Muffled*] What?

Follower One: What do you mean?

Leader: We are not a theatre.

Follower Two takes Leader’s hand from off his face.

Follower Two: But we are going to see a puh...

Leader snaps his hand back over the mouth of Follower Two.

Leader: Ssh!

Follower Two: ...

Follower One: [*Hesitant*] But...

Leader: [*Defiant*] We produce and put on no plays.

Follower One: Okaaay... then what...

Leader: [*Proud*] We hold concerts, with a specimen of rhetoric.

Follower One takes Leader’s hand from off the mouth of Follower Two.

Leader: The house of Mister Foote, then.

Follower One: And if we knock on his door, he will take us through his backyard, from which we will enter the...

Leader: Yes. Now please.

Leader gestures impatiently to stage right, to a nearby gabled house.

Follower Two: [*Aghast*] A concert with a specimen of rhetoric is exactly what a puh...

Follower One snaps his hand over the mouth of Follower Two. Followers exchange glances and exit stage right.

Playwright: [Inquisitive] Why do you have to pretend you aren't...

Leader exits through trapdoor.

Playwright: ... a theatre.

Playwright watches as paper scraps, blown by the wind, fix against a nearby window.

Narrator: We done here?

Playwright: I believe so.

Narrator: Those scraps on the unclean glass of that wonky window...

Playwright: Yeah?

Narrator: Me or you?

Playwright: [Indifferent] You go.

Narrator: Cool.

Stage and playwright exit, pursued by a bare, lined page.

I stand outside a gabled house, as the air lifts the gathered paper. There's a letter from the future, from a painter, from the past, a scrap, a quote, of which lands – wind-placed – penned-letters-up against the pane: the pain unopague; convulsive progress. Before it's torn away and taken back beyond the northern sea, I transform it into a voice within my head:

Oh, brother, why should I change? I used to be very passive and very gentle and quiet. I'm that no longer, but then I'm no longer a child either now... sometimes I feel my own man.

Whipped away from there, am I, to here; from here to there. I stand, now, upon a road that cuts across the narrative, a line that lies lateral over King Street. Wet and dry the mud sits, holding my boot-soles fast, as I see – for the third time, from a third time, and with a second space-perspective – a point where the water meets the land and the world transforms above them.

Three houses stretch (you know damn well how they look) on both sides of a well-used space, and the only one in focus, on the right side to my mind, is the stillalready old Llandoger Trow.

In the closeby distance:
portent of panic.

Faintly-traced and -coloured stand the others, in blurred activity; the menace of the push and pull I ache with emanating from each sediment and splinter of the pub-front: that hantered, haunting haunt of shades and pirates.

Quickly: go now.

I walk up to the steps and through the doorway.

Hazed, smoke-smattered.

KKOFFF_{FF}

"H e l l o ?"

KUHRREEEEEEEK_{KK}

Floorboards found – unseen – by footstep.

Muffled sight and

KRRASHSHSHSH

bleary sound. I move

KKOFFFFFF

I move forward.

As if passed

KUHLINKUHLINK

from wall to wall to

BUSSSSSULL

floor to door to ceiling: chatter, barter, banter, cursing – sweeping, swooping murmurations
flit and flock and fly.

Haze-heavy. Smoke-screened.

KLAPPP

KUHRRREEEEEEEKKKK

THUDDDD

Furrowed, searching, reaching, flailing, furrowed, searching, fraught...

A hole is punched into the haze, the smoke; now another's hammered through the smoke, the
haze. One's shaped just like the sound of ivory keys; one's shaped just like the ebony between them.

Dissipating

E flat

about those hammered-holes, the smoke, the haze:

E flat minor

spreading thin in lines now staved.

F minor

Noting, now, the man at the piano in the corner

F minor 7th

I hear and see – am soothed by – the serenade's picked-out

B flat

and moonlit melody.

Welling up a little more with every chord-wrapped note or few, my eyes prepare as if expected to
accompany a phrase.

This window in the opaque mist has a small crowd at their tables, capped and lager-ed after
factory and farm have freed their hands.

Happiness in harder times.

Another bar begins; I play my part.

They dance until they disappear.

I sit before the keys, only me within the mist, picking out the tune to see him off.

Pianissimo.

“H e l l o ?”

I turn around to a pebbled-beach, water trickling from beneath an English grove. Towers, tall and bridging, in the grey and grizzled distance see me step along and throw a pebble far into the mud that makes the water wait, inaccessible.

I sit – sink – down and lean my back against a locked, unswinging gate of metal (painted red) between brick walls. Towers, tall and bridging, in the grey and grizzled distance see me holding, in two frightened hands, a shire-horse of precious porcelain.

“H e l l o ?”

My right white-gloved, my left glove-free, a shapen-mesh that hides my focused eyes; a spot of spreading red unwhitens where a breaking blade comes at and from my angered arm; electric colour.

A flush of frantic phobia finds my mask and tears it off to see how far from home I’ve flung myself before I could fight to stay.

“H e l l o ?”

Cavernous space and time are yet finite around the firepit. Rings of red brick, southern stars: I have my guitar with me. As voiceful as my mouth is mute, the steady alternation of the low and lowest open strings keeps the high-end tethered and prevents an early heat-death from its frenzy.

As the Southern Cross rings out with the barks of baboon troops, I am head-rubbed by an ancient adversary.

By her I’m blessed: a lion cub stands and, as her paws take her from the edges to the middle, she is months old; she’s maturing; she’s a hunter.

Guitar-less, now, I reach out to make contact, to remember. Forgetting, I unfurl my fingers to caress her ere she leaves, and I find two of them held between carnassials.

She keeps them, gently pressing, then releases me to go. A turtle dove proclaims we should work harder.

You’re alone

“H e l l o ?”

again.

Beneath – beside – an apple tree in a sloping, unkempt garden sits a formless, faceless child upon a swing. A stony path winds down, around, becoming wooded-hills of magpies, running streams, and families of foxes.

A fire’s lit, around which sit a leopard and a stag; I am bowled over by drunken, singing sailors.

Smack-crashed into the solid edge of the wood between the booths; caught-carried-lifted to my feet by a man my size.

“Ffffuck...”

In the evening – late – of the year I entered, up the steps and through the doorway, there’s no haze/smoke/mist as I see the peopled room: broad, bar-tended, busy. I slip – sit (slide [sink]) – down onto the bench-end of a booth. Memory-laden, bruised, upset: I feel a weighted bloodstream bind my body.

'Tween the rafters and the floorboards rolls the raving crowd, maddened/maddening: men and girls; the drunk, the sober; boys and women.

Impending pandemonium... my blood receives a message, an urgent alarm, violent, vying to control the mind.

"No..."

A ragged boy-child surges in and climbs atop a table

"Not you..."

and somehow thunders:

"RIOT ON THE MARSH!"

"No no I came in here to deal with..."

That boy's proclaiming thunder begets peals, exponentially, of more.

"...to deal with the other..."

Quake does the Earth and pulse in plasmic-channels does the Sky; a howling, writhing mobbish-mass rises/spreads between them.

"NO!"

I lose all hope of self-control now that I'm taken up and over, through the open door, and out onto the street again. The mass mob relents not; they sweep and I am swept along. I see King Street recede through shoulders, elbows, heads, as we shock-wave down the intersecting road.

I cannot freeze or fight or fly; I can't refuse to go.

Pockets

pPPRRRHHHKKKKRRRR

of scorching air and a sky that glazes over with the true and torrid terror of the screaming colour of the surface of the stars:

Conjure up the square within your mind.

Generate its trees, its grass,

line it 'round with Georgian buildings.

Paint it with a starsome sky, whose aura's

merging with the spreading glow of lamplight.

Now riddle it with chaos:

muddied fury lit by mob-borne flame.

Crashing cries have havoc wreaked 'round wrought-iron grass and stone in glass-smashed rubble ruin burning churning earth up fighting leaving bloodied muddied clubbed consciousness figures under foot and boot and heel hell-levelled fences posts post-waveofbrawlingmass caught marked by seething screaming heaving howling harriers whom flame's surrounding sending inandoutof buildings along pathways over each eighth-segment lightning bolts that tear through all but tallest toughest trees and man on horse on plinth within the safer central circle seeking which I run past fall and crawl up running slip now knocked down nearly crushed and kept there fighting forward faster falter finding faster footing for the final fettered grappling loosed few paces half on grass and half on pathway purging everything a voice stills all but it and I.

Two syllables eradicate all else, just for a moment. And in the age within that moment, echoing their heartbeat pattern, they are all I truly ever longed to hear.

One beat, up/down; a call, a cry, a question. The voice that searched my memories utters a different word.

I don't know if you can hear it through the riots.

A bolt of lightning or its thunderous peal propels me forward 'til I crawl up to sitting with my back against the central statue's base.

The scenes and sounds of the riot only threaten in an echo from afar.

"About..."

My knuckles bleed.

"... fucking..."

Teeth clamped; knees torn.

"...time."

I see me as I look over at myself and I look back at who I am and was and will be.

"You've been ignoring me."

I place (careful) upon the surface of the plinth the back of my head and close my eyelids.

"Yep," (I say) "with increasing fucking difficulty."

Standing merely metres off to my right and looking outward, I roll my eyes and keep my hands in pockets.

Sitting, I state the obvious:

"You've been trying to tell me something."

Standing, I tilt/turn my head.

"Yes," (I say, as I turn around) "with increasing fucking difficulty."

I step toward me; I shuffle over; I sit beside myself with burnout.

"Clever."

"Thanks."

"So: what now?"

"I don't know. I mean, I'm here now. I'm now now. At least for now. At least while I'm here. I know what happens next. Later, I mean, after this."

"Yeah, well that's not what I asked. This is it."

"Fuck."

"Yep."

"Well... can't you go first?"

"I've been trying to go first this whole damn time!"

"Well, go now then..."

"You keep switching it back over!"

There's a pause, but a brief one. I am able – at long, long last – to speak.

"Now that there's nowhere else you can go, nowhen else you can be, no other parts or pages you can move on to without this one: stop and meditate."

"But I didn't get this fa..."

"Just fucking do it."

I close my eyes to un-avert my gaze from whence it needs to fall.

All goes a starless dark, as the heat and the thunder and the contours of the chaos intensify, searing through the limbs.

Paroxysms try to prise open the channels to the spirit of a chased creature, list'ning for the ground beneath slow-paced, placed paws; watching for a tapestry – bright – lighting up two points that focus, searing through the tall and blending grass.

Turning gulps and gasps of air into slow, unbroken streams, I make the swelling of the lungs into the diaphragm beneath the only thing that is, that counts, that matters.

The only thing that is, that counts, that matters.

The only thing that is, that counts, that matters.

The only thing that is, that counts, that matters.

The only thing.

Is.

Counts.

Matters.

“Now: what are you afraid of?”

“What? But you’re the one who’s afraid, the one who sirens danger. The one who needs to tell me something. I should be asking you.”

I am.

Now:

What are you afraid of?

I might be trapped.

And what if you are?

Then... then I can’t get out.

Out to where? Away from what? Why must you get out?

Well I... I need to...

What is the danger?

I might be left.

And if you are? Why is that bad?

I would be alone.

Why can’t you be alone?

Because... what if... I’ll... I’ll be forgotten.

By whom?

Anyone. No-one will hear me.

Do they need to? Do you need them to?

I need... them... I...

The only thing that... need... them... to... that counts is Why? that counts The only afraid of?
the thing And what’ll you do now? The You’re the one that is, that matters The one who
sirens Trapped Alone Away from what

Fire and starlight.

I look across at me as I sit sighing slowly, unchanged.

“What, you thought it would all be resolved in one brief moment of sustained, belated introspection? This is the beginning.”

Through tearsome eyes:

“It’s taken me all day just to get to the beginning.”

Through tearful eyes and a brief, breathed laugh:

“But it’s a start.”

“Clever.”

“Thanks.”

I stand; I stand; we walk around the statue and to the circle’s edge, where a path connects that leads to Redcliffe corner. Though echoing out from afar, the chaos on the royal marsh has kept and I know I cannot go but one step forward.

“I can’t face it. So I can’t deal with it. I’m stuck here.”

I present something to myself in my own hand.

“It’s only one letter away from ‘meditation’. A needed helping hand; a chance; a blessing.”

It sinks into my skin and courses through unto the wellspring: reinvigorating; vitalising; guiding.

There’s only me among the re-immediated riot wreaking raw, relentless ruination – yet the path ahead is clear. Beset by bolts of brawling at its borders, but untouched beyond those edges, it is trepidatory.

Fearfully, not trusting safety's sudden apparition, I walk out – by step, by step – along, decreasingly distraught and growing less anticipatory: imperilled not, un-preyed upon by fang or claw or talon; hand or stone.

There are just several strides until the final chapter.

I take them slowly, calm, observing all around me.