



# The Floating Harbour

By William Altoft

## Chapter 11

*With Time Already Passed*

## Epilogue

*A Bird Facing Left By Water*

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## Chapter 11

As I step – slowly, calm – to view a waterfront between me and a spire-less chapel kneeling to the passing Nile, the marsh/the square goes quiet, quelled or silent becomes the riot, and I make my way over to a weathered wall.

I lean into it (Would you like to know upon which shoulder?) and gaze on at the pulsing, peaceful painting.

I am lost, though I know where I am – I've mapped it well. Untethered, without root, a mere mile from the place that I was born. I'm toward the farther end of a time that I didn't want to go through, but again, now, here in the future back-dropped by the past, I just want to go back or skip ahead – off into another time I conjure in my mind, or off travelling through moments that were realised. I would shun the only thing that's real: when then, I want to be now; when now, then – either one.

I lean less lightly, challenging the mass within the wall.

I'm already there in a distant moment, wishing it were this where I wished it were another. I can speak with the present tense, but I may as well have been speaking with the past as I was standing, having wandered, when things were then instead of now. I couldn't make a moment any longer, less mortal, nor keep the day from closing. All I could do was to talk like it were still alive, to try to trick time into ticking differently.

I took my weight back from the wall and walked away, wistsome, not wistless nor wistful, to meet with lines already written, with time already passed, onward, closer to the end with which I started. Already dried upon the page, impossible to edit, from that point on I could not help but speak, again, like I was living in the present.

The church bells told, as I moved away, of what could not be voided: a note repeated until it sounded its eleventh.

The late evening's dark.

I walk along the river,  
led by ancient light.

There is little left  
(though there is a little left)  
of this late evening.

With Queen Square to my right, hid behind a row of buildings, I walk beside the captured tide that makes the floating harbour. The ripples, sloshing softly, spread beyond a boat that travels to a sleeping ship.

I come to the edge and the light of a lantern, where the illumed harbour wall offers steps down to a scene.

Looking leftward, to prove, convince, a lack of interest stands a gull by the river's quiet edge, thinking nothing of the crumbling of a loaf of bread that's being worked through by the hands and taken to the mouth of the man upon his boat, caught up in the reeds.

"Couldn't talk it out of there?"

I call from the highest of the steps of stone, that take you down to the muddy frontier; that take you up to the mapped-out, settled city; that separate the abyss and the void; that bridge between the beauty and the wonder.

"Ah, you. We never sank, though we may be tangled."

He looks up and down again – the comma as the turning point – and he tears off white and kneaded flesh to throw toward the gull who doesn't want some, but as it's offered it won't turn it down. Legs outstretched, one ending on the other, he looks into the world that gives us ours.

“And you? You’re still here. Have you knelt on any other busy streets? Did your child leave you to the chaos, trusting that you’d make it through to join her in embracing life?”

“You asking me, or the river?”

He laughs a quiet laugh at the comment that I make as I sit upon the step.

“I’m not looking for her now. She’ll find me.”

“Who?”

There’s still a boat and still a man, still a seagull, still a river, yet the boat’s of metal and the man’s in jeans, and the seagull plucks out plastic from the water.

“Were you sayin’ that to me?”

“Ah, no. Sorry. Not to you...”

There are no longer steps of stone, between the surface and the boat that’s on the water. They’re separated by the air that my legs, from the knees, hang into as I lean a little back and hit my head against the jet-black bar that tops the railing, continuing its march along the harbour wall, stretching out its arms above the stone with its bursts of green, the moss and grass with their fields of grey, all lit by electricity. Though it makes a sound and it makes an impact, changing the expression on my face, it doesn’t raise me any sympathy – despite the new expression on my face. Working on his long, green riverboat, the man has returned to another story, there among the other boats all tethered to the platform that they share, between the spire and the sleeping giants – two peaks, to the left and to the right.

From Redcliffe runs a row of walls, with not a space that isn’t filled with windows. About the glass? Red, green, and beige; orange, blue, and yellow. The colours come through up above the heads of lamps resting level with the trees. Across the river from this I stand, swapping places with the railing – now it keeps me from the water; now it holds me to the land. There is music from the bowels of the ship that’s docked to my left, but it doesn’t take me. Instead I turn with the narrative, arm-in-arm, and we head off, onward, to the end, to the beginning, longing to be back upon the corner.

The wall still drops sharply, yet through a mistless night, beyond the railing and the edge, down to the water. The air’s electrically-lit between each of the eight trees – their roots breaking the grey and moss-green, late-night, cobbled surface.

The cranes stand guard, the tide’s possessed, and all is rather still.

There is a girl-child, sat softly atop the furthest bench.

I close the time and space between us.

“So:” (she asks) “how was it?”

“Inconclusive.” I sit upon the bench-top and nudge her left shoulder with my right. “But I’m okay with that.”

She hops on off the bench-top, after nudging my right shoulder with her left, and stands over by the man who’s perched upon a small and standing piece of sculpted wood.

“He is fixed upon the distance, outward.” She muses as she’s music to all ears.

“I don’t want to look away. Outward.”

“Some more inward, then?” She smiles.

“Hell no. Let’s go sit over there.”

“Where we can watch him watching.” She leans upon his knee and then she springs away.

Pocketed hands, I had pointed with my gaze, and we make for the bridge to go and sit beneath the cranes, my final thoughts remain behind to keep the corner.

What’s a hundred years to an ancient landscape? A layer to the multitude beneath?

What’s an explored mind to the star remembered by its light as it plays upon a river in the distance?

Nothing.

Everything.

Life, at least, before the lone and level sands.

We sit, her and I, legs over the edge of the present, dangling into the past. And all is rather still.

Sat, backs against the sleeping giant with palms down atop the harbour wall, we look across, over, and see a city built upon a river. Electric light and stillness, a rumbling on the edge of hearing. A padlocked bridge with a branded name holds fast the gateway-strait that takes you to the cascade entrance. Lit up by the blue-light-lined trees standing eight strong before the art house, sits perched a sculpted man on cobbles, gazing over, back across the water. From the past he sees the present, and in his ship, but close beside us, he sees the future – this way, for him, adventure lies.

She pulls up her legs, breaching only just the edge as they were, crossing them with ease, bringing her back from its metal support to stand alone, hands cradling one the other where they meet in the air of the evening. I am staring at a star; she is reading the river's surface. Neither star nor river stir; we smile and do likewise.

Still not one for stillness, she breaks upwards, stands, and steps up the gaps in the structure of the crane. A shift in gaze from star to planet, a raised eyebrow, and a tilted head is all I manage before she has re-placed herself, sitting on the grey-painted shelf between the giant's legs. If she moves as the river, I move as the earth, upward to standing in greater time and with greater trouble. I walk around the crane, and I walk over the resting train tracks. Between the ship and sheds the sleepers begin or end. Now behind it, I look through the relic and beyond her shoulder, and rest my arms upon the shelf.

There will be mist again about the harbour as the church bells ring rounds of five, and six, and seven, carried by the breeze and contested by the birds. But now the air sits clearly and we see the city floating, between the dark blue water and the deep black sky.

## Epilogue

A reed; bread above a mouth; a bird facing left by water.

The hieroglyphs hail from another place upon another river, and from them I at last recall the memory of the meaning of her name. From a reading of that civilisation's rise and fall I know that the symbols read

*Iteru*  
*'The River'*

the flowing, changing blueness of her eyes, essence of settlements and cities – small, ancient, great, and modern.

While they shimmer and flow, reflecting light and history, her eyes see the recognition in mine, the remembrance of the word I know and knew.

"So you know what it means?" is her smile and her question, as she glides to crouching, standing, and swirls across to lean with folded arms against the beam of the harbour crane's chance framing of Bristol.

"Of course I do," is my smile and my answer, and the lighted quiet of the city sees its face within its river; she sees her eyes in mine.

"It means you."

