



## The Ballad Of Stokes Croft

By William Altoft



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## Prologue

Well, now, so here we sit,  
a-once again a-gathered  
'round the white 'n black 'n grey  
of ash; sofas in tatters.  
Islanders 'twixt the riverrun.  
Run, rivers! Take to Gloucester  
all 'n bring 'em home – sweet, painted,  
street-sung brickwork-lustre!

Strewn ash-side 'n sofadjacent:  
the spread of bags unfurled  
(dog-eared, dog-haired, dog-satupon).  
Soft semblance to a squally world.  
Looking out 'n up 'n on,  
from moments now 'n ancient,  
the sacrifice of other suns  
illumes now ours's not present.

"She's passed well out!" one shouts  
about me, as another stands.  
"She passin' ahn" (his comment comes)  
"ta distan', bettah lans!"  
The muzzle lifts 'n eyes  
are rolled at us few stranded here –  
a few, though, who'll disperse to see  
which stoops yet remain clear.

Each of us beneath our  
varied layers of worn clothes.  
Each of us with tales 'n  
layered lives to be disclosed.  
"Let's speak our stories!" Up  
I sit, from distant lands returned.  
"She rises, den!" "Naah fanks, I'm good."  
*Bark!* By each I'm spurned.

"I'm gon' back out, 'fore de  
night starts a-deepenin'."  
"Hey, brown eyes: let's find summat  
shel'rrd furr sleepin' in."  
Attentive ears lift her;  
she stretches out her body.  
She pads surely but softly,  
keeping, too, her life's story.

"I'm staying." I say, slumped back.  
"Well, yah still got dis kum-pah-nee."  
He points to the wall: a man's  
manifest in graffiti.  
"You got kump'nee furr daze.  
Mate, ask all them furr their stories!"  
As they leave me, I request:  
"Hey, don't slam the door. Please."

Acting out – miming it –  
they, together, leave my home:  
taking coats from off coat hooks;  
ensuring the door's closed.  
Well, now I'm alone here,  
but for painted characters,  
'n I'll tell you what happened, there  
'neath the past light of stars.

I

The day turned only hours old  
in its development as night,  
conceived in the death of dusk-rays  
and purging, ancient light.  
Tomorrow slipped away once more.  
The creak and cry and rush and halt  
of city traffic: now well-stilled.  
The stoops and steps and homes: well-filled.  
Smoke, from fire's grave, did fount.  
Upon the painted wall there stirred  
a golden man and three black birds.

Alone, I watched him mark the wall,  
in stretching out his lanky limbs  
about its black-graffitied bricks,  
which, with fluttering wings  
and scarecrow movements, became void  
of all but that absence of light/  
of all but light fully-absorbed.  
One hand tea-cupped; one hand saucered:  
to ground he did alight.  
Shrinking as he walked (slow) across,  
he gazed out and upon Stokes Croft.

The feather in his scraggy hat  
was near-knocked off by dinosaur-  
descended, diving, perching things:  
shoulder-lodged, flew no more.  
Bandana-clad (around his neck),  
and waistcoated, trousered, and shoed,  
now six-feet tall he placed his cup  
and saucer down, then stood back up.  
Upon straw-grass he chewed  
as hands (on hips) cracked knuckles, flexed  
to fists and loosed back out, relaxed.

Perturbed, the third bird couldn't find  
purchase or space enough on the  
man's shoulders (left nor right) – instead  
it perched on a sofa.  
It looked across at me on mine.  
Indifferently, or seeing not,  
the golden man stepped, crouched, reached to  
the smoke and ash and lit, anew,  
the dance: red-yellow hot.  
That pure expression, going (bright)  
ungently to infinite night.

Fire lit, ash returned to wood,  
the residue of burning fuel  
became full, channelled clouds – not wisps  
but heat residual.

Birds one and two/Birds two and one  
alight on either side of three.

They preened, each, both themselves and it:  
that third bird who had first alit;  
who, alone, seemed to see me.  
Their golden, ragged, wingless friend  
sat at my sofa's other end.

"They better not be late." he said,  
as he lay his head back, slowly.  
"About time we met up and talked."  
The black birds nodded only.  
"We've all been here so long; so short.  
Such different views on common ground.  
Such different sights and scenes witnessed.  
Temporal, spatial perspectives –  
just think what could be found  
if we, as I have planned, regale  
each other with our unique tales!"

Beside our scene, before the wall  
these companions had vacated,  
a billboard 'bove more lettered-brick –  
layered tags collated.  
Storing power, the cupboard stood,  
its metal paper-scarred and -stained:  
messages, events, and protest  
(in yellow, orange, green) attest  
to music, art, and change.  
Bike locks empty. Two leafsome trees.  
The traffic lights let through the breeze;  
a bear walked 'cross the road with ease.

A cream-white-beige (outlined by black –  
itself outlined by white –) teddy  
taking, with its clawless paws, up-  
right steps: casual, steady.  
A bottle in its mitten-hand,  
its flaming top quenched by a breath  
from mouth not visible beneath  
a triangular nose, down-peaked;  
brick-pattern on its chest.  
This way it took those clawless steps;  
bottle, in mitten-hand, it kept.

With brick-pattern in flux about  
its body (whole), it stepped onto  
our island and leaned 'gainst a tree –  
one of those leafsome two.  
“Am I late? I’m not? I am?” it  
asked from a tilting, ear-topped head.  
The response came: “You’ve time to spare!”  
The black birds eyed the teddy bear,  
with arms entwined; folded.  
It de-tilted its head – ear-topped –  
and stepped and hopped and stepped and stopped.

De-flamed bottle placed sofa-side;  
ignoring, or not seeing, me  
the bear lay opposite the man,  
looking up at black birds three.  
“We’ll wait a while for her, I guess?”  
“Yes.” the golden man replied with,  
finally taking off his hat,  
placed upside-down upon his lap,  
as if it might bequeath.  
Birds, narrator, man, and bear; world  
quietly waiting for the girl.

A while, I guess, we waited for  
the girl to come and, by the smoke,  
join our group. Throughout the meantime,  
they lounged and neither spoke.  
The bear, with paws behind its head,  
had its eyes closed to the night sky.  
The man, with hat held by his hands,  
had his eyes closed to the smoke strands –  
split-off, converge, collide.  
If it weren’t for the birds who squawked,  
they’d’ve not known. Silent, she walked.

Subtle and restrained was her smile  
in speechless greeting to the bear  
(who rose to show just eyes and ears  
over the back, and there  
he nodded upward) and to the  
man (who simply lifted his lids  
and nodded downward at the sight  
of her haze-hair, darker than night,  
and tear ducts that emit  
little lilac petal-pieces –  
wing-like framing to her features).

Her dress, as with her hair: a haze,  
of white, of purple, of turquoise,  
blending each into the other  
upon her form, so poised.  
Beneath those lilac-springing ducts:  
small markings both of blue and red  
that precurse or follow on from  
a red/blue symbol etched or drawn  
hair-to-brow on her forehead.  
The white about her black pupils  
lay there, so brief, amongst dark clouds.

“So what is it we’re gathered for?”  
the bear inquired as it made  
space for her to sit beside him.  
“I know I’m kinda late...  
but now I’m here! Yeah, what’s this for?”  
The golden man sat forward, then,  
and placed his hat back on his pate.  
“I thought we should sit ‘round, relate  
our stories, friend to friend.  
We each know something of this place.  
Let’s share it, this night, face to face.”

“But” (bear said) “we’re from the same place.  
How different can they really be?”  
The girl looked at/into the flames.  
“It’s not just what we see...”  
Approvingly, the man nodded.  
“Even you and I, who sit but  
across the road from each other  
and the same patch seem to cover,  
have seen things separate.”  
The black birds only nodded then.  
The girl began to speak again.

“From our walls and their foundations –  
the brick behind, the ground below –  
we’ve gained knowledge beyond our time;  
the trees, too, ‘ve made it so.”  
Across its hairless-brow, pond’rance  
played out on the bear’s face awhile.  
The girl, detached from flame, smiled on;  
the man prepped rhythm-only song;  
the bear’s brows reconciled.  
And there and then, starlight-assailed,  
began the first of sev’ral tales...

### An Islander's Perspective

From rural fields to shores of painted brick,  
by firestorm and civic riotousness,  
with class, stance, background (national, ethnic),  
and generation heterogenous,  
this thoroughfare, connecting north and south,  
can't be explained by one or two or three –  
though we may fare well enough, still I doubt  
this night shall e'en near-encompassing be.  
All the same, however, but, regardless,  
our efforts, each, I'm sure, can contribute  
to an aptly incomplete portrayal  
of this area in which we've been blessed  
and cursed to stay and of to know. Fire fuelled,  
I'll share my thoughts as we're starlight-assailed.

This island's learned centuries from the ground  
that gives it purchase. I, in turn, have heard  
(ethereal) the way the land inured  
eventually to the sights and sounds  
of development: fields into tramways  
and an explosive northward expansion.  
This spot beyond the roundabout transformed,  
seeing businesses, homes, and markets raise.  
But by incendiary-metal-blaze,  
war by sheet-lightning 'cross the city, razed  
and ruined, thrown, torn asunder, with waves  
of blackly-billowed, thund'rous smoke. Heat-haze  
'fore e'en the sun had risen, did hover  
o'er patchwork rubble, left to recover.

Toward our time the world pivoted, then.  
Again, our future home germinated  
anew and, through the past's surface soil, grew  
out into city-life renovated.  
Oh, but the future (to them; to us – past)  
that approached and pieced itself together  
was a mist of the world's complexity  
to cover and, over decades, scatter  
seeds of promise; crops of culture to sow.  
The potential which the mist carried in  
could only by the light of violence grow  
and only by the breath of struggle win  
the chance to (maybe) someday overthrow  
tribes of many groupings and peace begin.

Afro-Caribbean coalescence  
'tween the West Indies and White working-class:  
suspected persons all; heavier fell,  
however, the cease and search, the arrest,  
on those descended from cargo expressed –  
persons paid with, shipped up and off to sell,  
now arrived in spirit and flesh at last,  
in deserved but so unwelcome presence.  
Just beyond these, our so-graffitied walls,  
along and 'round City Road of St. Paul's,  
thousands forming their new community  
savaged, seared, by those wearing uniform  
of Saville Row and of immunity;  
by those clothed in hate/ignorance-adorned.

Damnation decreed on man, woman, child...  
The wretched, miserable, and reviled...  
Suffocation wrought by society  
to never allow people to be free  
from being the hated or the hateful;  
from being the hurt or being the cruel.  
Pitting the failed against the innocent:  
point each to the other – spawn violence.  
Decades, then, of deterioration:  
boycotts of buses; raids induce riots.  
Paucity of housing, education:  
poor city cast-off district set alight.  
A figure comes near, encompassing all  
this, and across the street, now, does she call:

"Take what I'm offering! Take what I sell!  
Of Magdala/Bethany, I'll draw out  
the demons and take them on, take them in;  
I'll buy them off you by trading our sin!  
You're beyond, outside the city walls in  
fields for the frivolous circuses banned  
there in civilisation – the outskirts  
are kept to be forgotten, cast, unheard.  
Don't leave without leaving, somewhere in me,  
your empty indiff'rence – stilled and fulfilled!  
I'll keep to this kerb, crawl by the roadside,  
in squalor provide well for each caller.  
I hate you imperson'ly, as you me.  
We hate each other societally.

Caught by, corralled in, confined to, then bought;  
sold on, relied upon, beat on, and cursed.  
Disparately I'm valuable/worthless.  
I matter not. Us? Irreplaceable.  
Spoken for (even now...). Spoken about.  
Ascribe me agency. Paint me without.  
Riddle and wretched... By nightclub flyers,  
by empty tombs, by windows, and by us  
you're panged through with your concern and your lust.  
Take me in prose and in song and in verse!  
Give me away – bidder highest or first.  
Write, through me, sonnets. See, in me, a girl  
handed inheritance – poverty's pearl.  
I'd rather have your business than your art."

Look, there, she's turning away from us. Off  
amongst the shunned to drugs that'll take her,  
amidst the smell and sound of Jamaica,  
Somal'ya, Pakistan, England: aloft's  
swept the litter with her dying exhale;  
down's the rain, to rejoin from the skyway  
whence it ascended, and onto, it fell  
(and it falls (and it will fall)), disarray  
that is yet drawing together fabric  
of all kinds, of all colours, of all minds,  
of all troubles: the world's strife's compacted  
and – though burnt, torn, scarred – together it binds  
the frayed ends and relentlessly sutures  
that quilt b'yond the walls, now with a future.

A fixture finding some semblance of home  
in dens of sheets, in tents, on furniture;  
in glances, in smiles, in compassion shown;  
in those – with homes and not – familiar.  
Ignominiously ignored, and yet  
oft only due to a bewilderment.  
A comfort-rending common thing begets  
bitter interaction, and both resent.  
Scavenge, seagull, searching through the spilled waste.  
Screech at the pigeon with the broken foot.  
Scan the floor for scraps that can yet be smoked  
and implore for money spare – hope for change.  
Given with naïve conditions, unfair  
demands on its use... Just take it. Here. There.

Waves of ways of making artwork from life.  
Scores of sounds – electronic, acoustic.  
Walls sprayed with all kinds of colours – dark, bright.  
Generations giving new life to it.  
Ruptured yet still along fault lines and cracks,  
riven with/driven by crime and grassroots,  
underground prominence, overground shoots  
emerge through concrete, cardboard, sleeping bags,  
shells of old businesses, neglected walls,  
islands of debris, roundabouts made holes;  
stoops, streets, and doorways; crossroads and junctions;  
places devoid of life and of function.  
A torturous springtime, fought for and earned,  
not to be taken for granted or spurned.

Whither will it, from whence it has thus grown?  
Counter-cultural field of outcasts to  
tram-thoroughfare, annexed at last, only  
to be fire-swept and to need rebuilding  
into molten melting pot of rampant  
riotous and racist communion  
that, somehow, from out the struggle emerged  
a colourful ghetto laced through with hope.  
To sweep away only, and not to solve?  
To gentrify, and any guilt absolve?  
Or to be exception, and to include  
all that which was and all who were here, too?  
I don't see future; I only see past.  
And, to me, the present but moments lasts.

## II

“You got all of all that from bricks?”  
the bear asked the man as it passed  
over the cider-laden cup.  
The bottle’d emptied fast  
of the super-strength, homemade brew  
they’d opened up and shared around  
(skipping, of course, their narrator...  
the birds e’en drank from the saucer!)  
“Tell me: haven’t you found”  
(said the man) “that you’ve learnt far more  
than, from your vantage, what you saw?”

The girl, of course, was cider-less.  
The painted child, crossed-legs in front,  
felt fire the better relaxant  
(green fire, to be... well, blunt).  
As, to the smoke, she added hers,  
the bear replied: “I can’t be sure  
when exactly disparate days,  
nights, and evenings really took place,  
whether they are linked, nor  
if they fall chronologic’ly  
as I see them in memory.”

“Maybe” (as she knocked off the ash  
the girl proffered) “that just might make  
your tale that much more engaging.  
Through it, you’ll recreate  
just what it’s like to live and dream.”  
The man raised his cup – cider spilled –  
to that and smiled and drank and said:  
“And so, let’s hear your story, Ted!”  
The bear its chest it filled.  
“If you don’t call me *Ted* again,  
I suppose I could start mine then.”

Inter-sofa, across was passed,  
at the bear’s gesturing, the cup.  
As they waited, no rain fell nor  
wind blew to flame disrupt.  
Cider drained, audience settled.  
The three, black birds seemed not to care.  
One set itself right beside me;  
another settled in a tree.  
The third forewent the air,  
checking fireside with its beak  
just as the bear began to speak...

## The View From The Mild, Mild West

The carnival was over, and The Canteen was filling up with life.  
The day had handed over to the evening, who would pave the way for night.  
From beyond our street the sound of reggae still rose up,  
intertwined with technodelic-acid-dup-trip-hop.  
As the sunlight stole away, the counter-culture quarter lit the dusk.

Upon the stage – one end, inside – the pedal-beat bass skin shockwaved the air.  
The singing strings were carried too, electrically-amplified and clear.  
The speakers propelled human voice that surfed and swam with ease,  
both at one with music's waves and 'bove them like a breeze.  
Taking on the tidal force, the counter-culture quarter filled the place.

The benches and the bushes on the fencing outside funnelled all on through,  
up the steps and 'tween the rails, via the windows (and the front door, too).  
With stickers on the pillars and with painting on the glass,  
with ash-trays out of plant pots and with plenty being passed,  
drowning in the moment, now, the counter-culture quarter rose: released.

Further up the road, the sound of sirens over violence came and went.  
Spitting on the pavement, a man craned his neck to try to make some sense.  
The woman sat beside him – "Oi!" – whacked him on the knee.  
Scowling up, she said: "That could of landed right on me!"  
He rolled his eyes and looked back on the counter-culture quarter as she sat.

Over on the other side, beneath a tree, two guys were in a bind.  
Tryna lev'rage off its lock a bike, they'd only become entwined.  
With one dirt-blackened hand in pain, caught fast between the spokes,  
one tried to free the other of the handles in his coat.  
A drunken shamble of a job: the counter-culture quarter had its crime.

Meanwhile, on Turbo Island, there was smoke about the Easter Island heads.  
Upon the grass, beside a fire, keeping warm, some people made their beds.  
A bus went by, on down the road, in red, yellow, and blue;  
another passed, the other way, in pink, white, and purple.  
Further down the road (which splits the counter-culture quarter) glass was smashed.

The benches, there below me, brought together people talking politics.  
Collected there to show me – of hair colour, length, and fashion – quite a mix.  
Between the smoke – of brown, of green – and alcohol consumed,  
out there came polemic and opinions were exhumed:  
arguments about the world the counter-culture quarter lay within.

Some discussed the way the world would turn, as towers broke upon the streets.  
Others made their case for rival claims on the west bank of the Dead Sea.  
Another set now pointed to the cops out on patrol,  
saying: "This is what you get for tryna keep local  
the businesses and shops along the counter-culture quarter nowadays!"

In a squat on down the road, petrol bombs were waiting for release.  
A dragon guards the message, in bold colour, from the Croft community.  
Setting up to raid the place, the police coalesced.  
In The Canteen ravers felt the beat within their chests.  
Approaching a turning-point, the counter-culture quarter met midnight.

In the final seconds, ravers counted down to a millennium.  
The squat was busted into, and the campers on the island drank their rum.  
The woman stood beside the man and craned out her neck, too.  
The bicycle thieves cut their loss and left to start anew.  
Tomorrow escaped, once again; the counter-culture quarter passed midnight.

A protest to the breaking-in fell upon the blockaded area.  
The islanders took on the stars, filling (intermittently) their cups.  
The crowd began to stamp their feet; police horses stamped their hooves.  
Ten to one, a hundred cops – outnumbered – didn't move.  
The rave – creative chaos – in the counter-culture quarter spilled outside.

Carrying the music with them, sweeping up the Socratic smokers,  
out onto the road, the island, absorbing the campers and the stars,  
the crowd held boomboxes aloft, lit candles on their phones;  
another crowd hit riot shields with fabric, flesh, and bone.  
A riot and a rave combined: the counter-culture quarter had its fun.

Looking, now, at one another, the man and woman grabbed their sleeping bags.  
They stole away down a side-road, leaving the cardboard mattresses they'd snagged.  
Before long, the cops withdrew – the night just wasn't theirs.  
There'd be windows and relationships to be repaired.  
They'd only tried, to them, to keep the counter-culture quarter somewhat safe.

A craziness/a happiness/an energy suffused the early hours,  
spreading through the area, down to the Arches and up into town.  
Cans and cannisters and smoked-through spliffs – a breadcrumb trail  
for anyone who saw the sea and wanted to set sail  
and ride the waves tsunamied from the counter-culture quarter we call home.

The Canteen, now, was quiet as the litter and the flyers closed-up shop.  
The pages of a Big Issue, turned over by the wind, entertained a pup.  
Her owner slept upon the steps and dreamt of food and warmth.  
The man across was upside-down yet kept his crown of thorns.  
As the sunlight filled the sky, the counter-culture quarter slept at last.

### III

Smiling, both, the other two clapped  
for the standing bard, who now bowed.  
(Increasingly animated  
had it become throughout.)  
Sitting back down on the sofa:  
“So there – the present to your past.”  
The man replied: “And what a gift  
your present was; your present is!”  
The girl blew smoke, dropped ash.  
“Knew” (she said) “you had it in you!  
Time interspersed to make it true!”

A little while of silence now  
(one natural and comfortable)  
settled over us sitting here –  
of it our air was full.  
The bear now reassessed the stars,  
led down with arms behind its head,  
its legs nearly reaching the girl  
who watched the flames furl and unfurl  
‘bout wood on which it fed.  
The man felt the night a success  
and could not wait for what was left.

“Right,” (he said with a gulp, between  
his first and second word, of drink)  
“you’ve something there to follow, girl!”  
The bear scoffed: “Well, I think  
our peak will be both yours and hers.  
Mine? Entertaining interim.”  
“Shush! She glows with something special.  
She’s our scout beyond the threshold,  
calling back with wisdom.”  
As this exchange they swapped and spoke,  
the girl, amused, took one last toke.

“I hope you’re not expecting much...”  
The girl laughed without looking up.  
“I’m not sure what I’m gonna say.”  
The bear looked o’er its gut:  
“That might make it more engaging!”  
At this she grinned, poked out her tongue,  
flicked away what had not been smoked  
(the flames and company were stoked),  
and softly, then, she sung.  
The night reached its early hours;  
framed, she was, by lilac flowers.

Through The Dark, Brown Eyes  
Of A Painted Child

On these fields of rural land  
I heard a trav'lin band play  
for the outcasts b'yond the walls of the city.  
They sang at St. James' fayre  
and, as I listened there,  
I saw our past and future vividly.

As progress surely arrived,  
cultures lived and died, weaving into  
a place that healed itself and, from within,  
it forged community  
of art and dignity,  
nurtured's the roots of grass that grows again.

So,  
oh wash away  
we few who sing today;  
we who sit and, here, the past recall.  
We'll remember what unfolds,  
and, 'til the story's told,  
we'll be watchin' from these auld graffitied walls.

In a hole cut in the ground  
was heard, at times, the sounds, coexisting,  
of the high and low and all between who pass  
through a pit – a picture of  
a way we might, we could,  
live all together, that eternal task.

Though imperfectly it stood,  
it seemed (it dreamed) it could, 'tween underpasses,  
now the bricks were clean and housed plants lush and green,  
give some purpose and a home,  
a place to gather or sit alone,  
not swept away but integrated, known, and seen.

Cleared through and fenced about,  
it shall stand – silent – without life, until  
it becomes just another developed spot.  
Whate'er may soon befall,  
that parting glass, for all  
driven away, we'll fill – such is their lot.

So,  
oh wash away  
we few who sing today;  
we who sit and, here, the past recall.  
We'll remember what unfolds,  
and, 'til the story's told,  
we'll be watchin' from these auld graffitied walls.

Within an office block –  
neglected, vacant, stopped – did enterprise  
grow, afforded change by cheaper rent.  
Not for profit, but value;  
rooms revived and space renewed:  
a beating heart; a house; eternal spring.

A lease, allotted time,  
(as we) can only find that change is e'er  
the only thing there truly is in life.  
Though the moment's mortal soul  
can be caught in amber folds,  
to ensure it lives the present has to pass.

Cleared for space to live,  
years of fight we'll give to save something –  
to coexist, create, to support charity.  
Not for value, but profit...  
e'en so we'll remain lit  
by a spirit passed but present, as the stars.

So,  
oh wash away  
we few who sing today;  
we who sit and, here, the past recall.  
We'll remember what unfolds,  
and, 'til the story's told,  
we'll be watchin' from these auld graffitied walls.

Though only with goodwill,  
sincerity, will fill the rivers 'round  
our island, and the water levels rise.  
Gone shall be our patch,  
our tattered seats and ash,  
replaced by pristine benches, grass, and tiles.

We drown under new layers  
of paint and other cares will now demand  
we accept the grown waters flooding our home.  
Change, then, what's inside  
and what is out (our pride)  
until, p'rhaps, one of us is left, alone.

I look out and see  
time cir'cling about me and you.  
At once, the fields are full; the fields are paved;  
impov'rishd and unsafe;  
vibrant and awake;  
successful, gentrified, and fine'ly made.

We shall ne'er meet no more,  
and so I thank you for this present night.  
Yet, as light reclimbs to hide the times we lived,  
we must part, back to our walls,  
and hope that we're recalled  
by others who to now will life re-give.

So,  
oh wash away  
we few who sing today;  
we who sit and, here, the past recall.  
We'll remember what unfolds,  
and, 'til the story's told,  
we'll be watchin' from these auld graffitied walls.

Watchin' from these auld graffitied walls.

## IV

Her eyes, ever on the fire fixed,  
intensely glowed. Cross-legged she sat,  
her hands a cradle 'tween her knees.  
She straightened up her back.  
Of the night air she made a sigh.  
Released, she then looked across to  
the bear and over at the man;  
onto each knee she placed a hand.  
Her face – marked red and blue –  
implored the others for their thoughts,  
but, from the others, thoughts came not.

Too touched to speak another word,  
the golden man and teddy bear  
were silent, sombre, as they, still,  
were sitting/lying there.  
A while we all were quiet there.  
A while we thought o'er all they'd told,  
o'er all it meant, over the cost  
of progress here in our Stokes Croft,  
so full of heart and soul.  
Inevitably, things move on.  
Inevitably, on comes dawn.

"I guess that only leaves you three."  
The man looked at the black birds who  
shook all their heads, unsynchronised,  
and to a tree branch flew.  
"I'll take that as a *nevermore!*"  
the man said to the other two  
painted characters. Then he stretched  
his feet to flames, his hands direct-  
ly to the sky, where blue  
was spilling up, from east to west,  
stars hiding at the sun's behest.

"Just as I sang: thank you for this."  
To her remark, the bear nodded.  
"We left it late, but seems in time  
our tales we've recorded."  
"Aptly incomplete!" added the  
man, from his spot along from me.  
Eying me, I knew, from the branch  
was that third bird – I threw a glance  
toward it in that tree.  
The rest? They remained unaware  
that, with me, had their tales been shared.

These hours they had spent exchanging  
stories and interpretations  
had been beautiful to hear, here  
where my rest I'd taken.  
But still, I wish I could've heard  
the stories of my companions,  
before we find ourselves moved on  
and can no longer see the dawn  
nor dusk from our island.  
For all these years, through all we've seen,  
though homeless, our home it's been.

"We'd better de-vacate our walls."  
The bear leaned forward as it spoke.  
"All the flames have almost finished  
becoming ash and smoke."  
The girl smiled with true happiness;  
she smiled with mourning, sad and true.  
To each, to all, this they expressed;  
standing, the bear and the girl left,  
Down, the three black birds flew.  
The fire stopped as the birds flew down;  
the man walked across treasured ground.

I watched, then, as he faded up,  
back to the wall he'd left empty.  
Beside the billboard, birds and man  
stretched out, fluttered; did freeze.  
I gazed around – now t'was just I.  
Just I, the sofas, and the ash.  
However, I began to hear  
the day, in gentle force, appear:  
the present, back at last...  
Together, walking up to me,  
my diurnal companions three!

## Epilogue

*Bark!* "Ain't she a sight dere..."  
The third looks without speaking.  
Instead he sits 'n tilts his head,  
wond'ring what I'm dreaming.  
Brown-eyed, the dog she finds  
a spot beside the burnt-out fire,  
sniffs the ash 'n sniffs the air –  
the scent of something by her.

"I'n't she cold" (he now asks)  
"after sittin' 'ere all night?"  
The other, who is standing up,  
comes to check I'm still alive.  
"I'm not dead." I mutter,  
awake/asleep – amphibious.  
"Well, sittup den!" He kicks my foot.  
"Breathe da mahnin air wid us."

He sits along from me;  
the other lays out, resting  
his head upon his upturned palms.  
"It could, actchly, be intrestin'  
ta tell 'n share arr stories."  
As he's looking at the sky  
he offers this on out to us;  
I keep lidded my eyes.

"I bin perfectin' mine  
ahhll night!" the other contributes.  
The dog perks up her head, as if  
her story's ready too.  
Well, now, so here we sit,  
a-once again a-gathered  
'round the white 'n black 'n grey  
of ash; sofas in tatters...