

Word from the Far Bank

“Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song” – Edmund Spenser (?1552-1599)

Near Hammersmith

High tide
this misty
February afternoon.

A small duck
shoulders hunched
indefinite
on river's bend

permits
the great currents
to pour
between its feet.

May I
not waver

as my sweet song
rushes
to its end.

On past Bermondsey

Already by Tower Bridge things more interesting -
even the boat guide
cheering up :

“Ladies and Gents, we’re about to enter
the old industrial reach of the Thames -
part of the trip that thrills me, even now.

My dad worked here
on the boats, you know,
the Pool of London

thick with shipping
from all over the world -
can you imagine ?

Still some nights I see him
pacing the new restaurant patios.
I’d wish him to be at peace.

And if you look to your left, over there,
that’s where they drowned convicted pirates, see ?
right there beside that famous pub of old Docklands...”

Above Westminster

In praise of sky-diving

I have raced the Earth as it curves
into the dark.

I have made light

of Eternity. Suddenly *cut* -
and all the Earth can be
now is breaker of my fall.

So too the Greeks of saga
died in their youth
from marvellous height.

By the White Tower

The cobble-stones alongside
the Conqueror's White Tower

have become landmarks
for thousands.

It's twenty-one miles
five still to go

and each pace here is excruciating
the uneven footing an extended outrage

to bruised muscle
raw nerve-end.

Dear old Frank was caught on camera
hobbling at this point

and had no joke to spare
for the viewers back home.

At rest

The English church bell
comes to rest in all its housings
mouth uppermost -
poised on the point of its crown.

To negotiate each bell
to that fragile station -
weight skyward in defiance of gravity -
the bell-ringer applies a force
to the dangling rope
just so -
exact and delicate -
not too much
not too little.

Get it wrong
and the great bell rolls over
and becomes something new -
a mass of stampeding pig metal -
as the rope streaks upwards
out of hand
and hell takes over
flooding the quiet horizons.

The attainment of perfect rest
is when chaos is held on a point ;
and poised
just so -
the moment cups you.

Here in the waiting room
I am cupped.
I am held aloft.
My poise is perfect here.
I am almost flying.

Off Putney

The ducks, geese, swans
omnipotent sea-gulls and even
occasional wader bird these days

seem not to mind the flotsam
they sit in ; that sonorous eight
hitting the foul water

like a line of church-bells
all the same note ;
those sculls like quavery hyphens

skimming the scum -
all ride easy.
They are poetry, regardless.

Morgan's Parish

When I hear the church clock strike
I know at that moment
Morgan, somewhere in torment,

has just begun to inhale.
For this is Morgan's parish.
St Mary's sounds the quarters

around Morgan's soul.
Time hangs heavy on him.
It forces flesh on him.

Beneath the haggard white line
of that anchorite cheek-bone,
four old clocks

on blackened lengths of string
ride him everywhere he travels.
Should one get stolen, or just plain stop,

he reasons, three ought to do
to fly him like a wounded Jumbo
home for a crash landing.

Home is all *oeuvre*, a live sculpture
formed from within.
For years the parish has supplied him

with his materials
and as the supply
has continued unchecked

so Morgan's room to breathe
has slowly diminished. Meticulous
and fragile collections of litter

now fill each room like library shelves.
Only his narrow bed
remains clear for him.

In the dense darkness
radios hang like bats from the ceiling
each tuned to a different world station

each turned full on.
All night and from all quarters
the world engages him. Babel-Lord,

Morgan gathers round his bed
whatever is waste
whatever discord.

The sweetness in his smile
is incomprehensible.
But that melodious voice,

those fastidious
semantic games we engage in,
do sometimes seem to carry pleasure.

The bruised eyes sparkle,
harbouring gaiety.
We make much of him.

We sit with him,
tolerating the smell,
the innumerable tatters,

the festooning plastic bags,
those brutal clocks.
Perhaps after all it is permissible

to clear pain away
from an instant or two of each day
here in Morgan's parish.

The space between your eyebrows

I didn't know that sound
was in you –

that bass growl
beyond all wording.

Your head never left the pillow.

You watched my spoon of water
approach your lips,
but never looked at me.

I didn't know such moments
were possible.

We learnt quickly.
We hardly spilled a drop.

I stroked your forehead
between your eyebrows
silently
silently.

Your eyes closed.

Beneath the bridges

Blade
to throat -
lowest
note.

Sweet Thames
beneath the bridges
run softly
pay no heed.

Off Battersea

It's years on
and still the Peace Pagoda
at Battersea

seems at odds -
a visionary posting
to an alien station.

Joggers scrunch past
along the bank.
Silent cyclists

race home
under the age-old
closed eyes.

What possessed
that priest
from far away

to bring the Buddha
to the GLC ?
Would he approve

of our careless familiarity,
these soft years
of ignorant habituation ?

A chubby gold shoulder
flashes
as the sun sinks into Hammersmith.

*Rogan Wolf
December 2004*

Footnote

"In Praise of Skydiving" refers to the death of Clare Barnes in February 2004 at the age of 24. She was sky-diving high over Melbourne when her parachute failed to open. At that time her father, Denis Macshane, worked as Minister for Europe near the river in Westminster.

"Dear old Frank" ("The White Tower") is Frank Bruno who once took part in the London Marathon. When some while later he was admitted to psychiatric hospital for Depression, "The Sun" newspaper waded in with some horrendous headlines. There was a public outcry against the terms the paper used to describe mental distress.

The Bell-Ringing poem is dedicated to a mental health "carer" with whom I have worked. There have been times in her life when the waiting room has been her only refuge.

Morgan is not the true name of the person described in "Morgan's Parish." However this man exists in reality and lives close to St Mary's Church. He is supported in his situation by CNWL Mental Health NHS Trust. The Trust covers the part of central London that borders on the north bank of the Thames.

The eye-brows belong to my mother, far gone with Alzheimer's in 2004 ("The space between your eye-brows")

Parts of the poem were written at a time when hostages were being beheaded in Iraq, on video ("Beneath the Bridges").

*Rogan Wolf
January 2005*