

FUNGAL GRIPPERS

A cyclical play

I

"Do, do: we steal by line and level, an't like your grace." †

It puffed itself into a ball. Being no longer animated on the sly scrounge or mooch around. Fed up now instead, lending a plump weight to this term. If only an old overcoat collar to flick skyward. At least that's what the over-shoulder look suggested. A funny type of cut that would call for. Miniature stitching. Pebble buttons. And the sleeves? No. The streak of blue was beyond comparison. More absorbing, no, repellent, attractive, than an oil slick sheen. A colour equally offering and consuming, fluidly in prisms and glints.

Tough black eye, a bead. A marble containing the cosmos: with less life. Compacted under the accumulation of millennia.

I wonder does it come easy. The perching. A certain level of grip seems to be constantly maintained. Unlike my own slouched posture. Legs can be dangled out in front, lifted from the earth. The metal park bench slats hold gravity at bay.

Clever human!

I can sit here and swing my feet to and fro. Back and forth hinged knees, in the manner we're fond of reminiscing upon; delighted playground swings up and back, daring the crash of a full arc. But I never enjoyed that type of childish escape. The sickness of leaving spongy tarmac, goading the rule of air, would make head swim and tummy turn. Far too soft for those elevations.

Not like that one though. Soaring on updrafts. A white cutout on a pale spring sky; a happy enough blue, neither here nor there.

The gull is nonchalantly revelling in circles and orbs. Slow, round, continuum. Neither eyeing morsels nor negotiating exchanges. Simply gusting. Balancing on invisible props, lengths beyond the nearest stone steeple.

"I shall be pinch'd to death."

Bleak bagpipe wafts, saluting a charitable fun run, bring me back. Blotchy pale legs heaving uphill to the park's highest plateau, the music a rousing accompaniment, appreciated with nods of sweaty smiles.

The notes between the bench and the piper hold a space, squatted by another constructed elevation. A smooth granite plinth – grafted with representations of 'Victory' to the front, 'War' to the rear – is topped by Field Marshall Lord Roberts astride his Arab charger Volonel, the bronze frieze beneath hooves attesting to a march through Afghanistan. A heavy Imperial light, celebrated for his asterisks and hysterics: or at least the management of.

Return to the black and white ball among the twigs. Rifling a beak through feathered layers, cleaning out the grime of city exertions. The clean chest reminded me of the only bird I've ever studied capable of multiple incarnations. There were pauses of time between each life, when I would wonder where our pet had gone. Then a return. A slight difference in appearance, ignored and forgotten before long. Assimilated back into the household, and the general safety of being overlooked.

Snowy.
Always white.

His little shit encrusted, wire framed abode would be cleaned from time to time, when the accumulations became unsightly. The flutter of panic would be enclosed by a gentle human grasp and transplanted to the tumble dryer, while a new sandpaper carpet was installed; water bath washed and refreshed; wooden dowel perches de-pooped; occasionally a new length of chalky cuttlefish clipped to the spherical cage wall, a desiccated surfboard for beak cleaning, claw scraping, dry amorous passes. Snowy looking like a confused astronaut stuck within an airlock, waiting patiently. Sat peering outward, viewed with laughter through the concave window, from our safely pressurised interior.

The corvid streamlined, and flew off.

...

Change to reading an introduction now, and digest a caffeinated pair of aspirin. Some crushed apple juice washing it down. Freshly pressed.

'In both natural resources and climate change, we are facing a physical crisis largely of our own human making. The myth of Pandora has become now a secular symbol of self-destruction. To deal with this physical crisis we are obliged to change both the things we make and how we use them. We will need to become good craftsmen of the environment.

The word sustainable is now used to convey this kind of craftsmanship, and it carries a particular baggage. Sustainable suggests living more at one with nature, as Martin Heidegger imagined in his old age, establishing an equilibrium between ourselves and the resources of the earth - an image of balance and reconciliation. In my view, this is an inadequate, insufficient view of environmental craft; to change both productive procedures and rituals of use requires a more radical self-critique.

A stronger jolt to changing how we have used resources would come in imagining ourselves to be like immigrants thrust by chance or fate onto a territory not our own, foreigners in a place we cannot command as our own.' *

...

*"..You have often
Begun to tell me what I am, but stopped
And left me to a bootless inquisition,
Concluding 'Stay: not yet.' "*

II

Br – Brendan

Bn – Brian

Sound of a deteriorating bicycle clack-clack, curves round from rear left, 'War' side/Volonel's arse end, a sweeping leg to dismount. Graceful despite his frame and the cumbersome, homemade basket and pannier additions. Old milk crates. Miscellaneous strapping. Clever adaptations.

[Br to I:]

[I to Br:]

[Br to Bn:]

[Br to self:]

[Bn to self:]

[Brief introductions]

Br walks his bike past the front of the bench, parading slowly, to gather a full look over me. Mutters of 'mae favourite spot' directed into the opposite bush. Hushed. But audible. Enough to make me feel the unease of a recent squatter, drifting in the tension between communal ownership and a devout, habitual appropriation. Head topped by fake blackened hair – military boot polish – an oily crow smear on his scalp. He parks his bike on the statue's metal crotch-high perimeter fence, mumbles 'this guy's the sort no to talk tae drinkers', yet offers me the first bottle skilfully decapitated on the edge of his handlebars. I decline the offer, with the excuse of a wretched hangover, so he passes the bottle to Bn, materialised silently to the right, wearing a gel-twisted crop of white hair and a Scotland tracksuit top of an unspecified sport.

'The junk bike'; smiling. £6000 a ton for copper. Out of the blue, and a phlegmy laugh at his cryptic witticism of tested mileage.

Bn angled away to right. Talking quietly through his mobile phone. Upside-down. Perhaps to nobody. [Bn to self:]

Settled in now to the middle of our bench, Br glances sideways. Furtively at first, then with regularity. My discomfort growing from the narrowed peepers, boring in now. Head bobbing side-to-side, closing in, then receding. The weight and gravity of his thickset mass humming beside me, making itself felt.

Eyes sweep out to the West, past the University's charred tower towards the docks. Not visible, but certainly palpable.

'Docks of the Queen Mary, Britannia...' ehhhh.

Br could go on with his list but he would have to check his notes.

He works in demolition, reclaims copper, lead, other metals. Building rubble goes into the M1 before they lay the smooth transporting tarmac. Widening of Britain's first motorway,

at its London mouth. Adding girth to commerce above the smashed environs of industry passed.

The steady lurch of progress.

Note how the play reflects our "invention of the human" theme. ∞

[Br to I:] 'Money to be made there!'

Register of eyebrows skyward in response. Aye son.

The 'reclamation' process usually more than doubles the initial contract price. [Head leans in, almost touching. Quivering.] His £500,000 machine that 'crrushes' all the building parts, one spare hand showing the extraction of profit from waste and industrial decay. Broken, fungal fingernails are pincers enforcing the experience. Minutely pulverising the air between our noses.

[Br to I:] 'I'm a multi-millionaire; a self-made man.'

[Bn to self:] Soft shaking of head at the opposite end, hunched down elbows on knees, scrutinising his trainers. Or the ground holding them up.

"I am my own maker." [...] "Hands off the self! Touch it and you make a ruin!" *

I ask Br what his parents do, or did; to which he takes great offence. Am I a social worker? what the fuck does it matter about his parents? sometimes he wishes he'd never been born all slurried together in words, gestures, movements agitated and leaning. The green beer bottle – a bold, capital 4% tattooed on the neck – also squaring up, backing its gripper's disgruntlement. Mumbles of should glash ye for tha'.

'But I wouldnae.'

Br's left chin sports the waxy bubble of a scar; the dormant flow of a past intrusion.

Waves of bowel panic and the urgency of a fully applied bladder press on.

'I didn't mean to offend you.'

[I to self:] "*He receives comfort like cold porridge.*"

Talk of Jesus Christ now, the maker of the world.

'Who wrote the Bible, eh?'

'Men.'

'Aye, sixty-six men. Six Apostles.'

Names begun, but interrupted.

'I'd have tae check ma notes.'

*"..A murrain on your monster,
and the devil take your fingers!"*

Note how the play reflects

'Why are my taxes going toward these refugees an' people coming from other countries?'

[A stuttered half response on the general inclusiveness of the British welfare state.]

[Br to I/self:] British Empire, how this present Britain began, indignant that I presume Victoria's Empire of the past [fungal thumb jabbed over shoulder at Lord Roberts of Kandahar] has anything to do with social and political make-up of our amalgamated states.

'We didn't invade their countries, we civilised them, we taught them about Christianity an' Jesus Christ.'

'Most people have only half developed their single personalities.' °

After the brandished bottle has been suckled and calmed down, a friendly tale of fishing in Wexford, fishing for fishes, fishes for his tea. Accused of robbing the bank of six million Pounds for the IRA, Securicor you know, the vans and tha'.

£2m camera built into his head so that he can survey people and document them for the IRA – fossilising appearances to pass on; incriminating information up here, silent tap-tap at temple – in which he was a Brigadier, 'one below a General, tha's right son.'

[Bn to self:] Soft shaking

*"You are gentlemen of brave metal; you would lift
the moon out of her sphere, if she would continue
in it five weeks without changing."*

Br's Protestant employees spray-paint the half-£m crrrusher with anti-Catholic slander. But nay bother.

He'll decorate it to his Fenian tastes, cos he's the boss and can do what the fuck he likes.

[temple-temple]

Collecting scrap as an art form 'One man's junk, another man's treasure.' He formulates ideas of assemblages, of self-expression, in his head. Taking precious materials – sonorous tap-tap on bench, glass on metal – to make something new.

A man self-made by his own stories, despite having only the vaguest sense of realities. His notes. Always there.

[I to I: (future notes)] 'It is no light undertaking to separate what is original from what is artificial in the present nature of man, and to have a proper understanding of a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never existed, and probably never will exist, and yet about which it is necessary to have accurate notions in order to judge properly our own present state.' ∂

I stand to leave, Bn nodding this time in solidarity,
grimaced smiles all round.

Thumbs up.

Open palms held to the sky,
hailing hasty farewell gestures, unmeaning.

III

*"If thou remember'st aught ere thou camest here,
How thou camest here thou mayst."*

[I to I:] Arsehole.

Note how

need a substantial summary here

'For by living in both the social order and in the state of nature, we are subject to the inconveniences of both without finding security in either.' Ω

I end up sat in a nearby café, beneath a world map pasted to one half of the ceiling, larger than a Persian rug, and many other things. Stucco plaster work, easy Jazz noodling to forgetful eardrums, with Thai chicken soup on the chalkboard. A coconutty indifference. A cup of sugared tea more than enough to stomach. Dipping the lumps in between finger and thumb. Absorbing before the dissolve.

Huddled beneath the flattened globe.

Ruffled.

Fed up.

Gripped.

**FROM THE MANY DISASTERS AND ANGUISES THE CHARACTERS
SUFFER COMES A KIND OF REDEMPTION -- RECALL *MEASURE FOR
MEASURE*. NOTE THE LINES: "...BRAVE NEW WORLD..." ∞**

Do, do

Endnotes:

† *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare. All subsequent italicised quotations taken from *The Tempest*.

* *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett, 2009, Penguin books, London

∞ <http://www.stjohns-chs.org/english/shakespeare/tempest/biog.html>

° Baron Corvo (Frederick William Rolfe, or Fr Rolfe) quoted in *The Quest for Corvo*, A.J.A. Symons, 2001, New York Review Books

∂ *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Jean-Jacque Rousseau quoted in *Hybridity and Ethics in Chateaubriand's Atala*, Claudia Moscovici, 2001, The University of Nebraska Press

Ω *The Social Contract and other later political writings*, Jean-Jacque Rousseau, 2003, Cambridge University Press