

Retrospective

Chris Armstrong, Mostly Welsh, Y Lolfa, 2019

i

Innocent

he met a force

Untried

it held him

... and wonder drained the world of substance

re-arranged the pages of his book to give more radiant a reading.

The light of new possibilities

pressed down on time.

The girl sang to him "You can hear the boats go by". He

learned her mystery

and destiny understood his loss.

She read "Man is condemned to be free". And he

knew his responsibilities

but flew with her wings

Newborn

... he spoke of peace and joy; saw the wonder

of his destiny

and dreamed.

The Daemons frowned on them

and, remembering meaning,

sought to divide

... wiser, she saw another future; tasted their bitter gall

but soared

and vanquished all.

Time...

Peace came with distance. Fal smiled on them.

A lull

when senses knew only a single silent bell
He remembered
"Worship is transcendent wonder"
and as they rose above the surf
the gulls, and time itself, stilled: mute and 'mazed at
the clear karma of their love.
He devoured her mind; she drank his soul.
The river becomes the sea
the tide welcomes its waters,
and it is content.

She drank at his well; was intoxicated by his spirit
her gaze danced to his will
his future was written in her eyes.
Later, the dark sands kept their secret:
she wrote her love on his soul
he read her script and was lost
The night sea whispered

When you see such passion in her eyes
it's time to leave port
the old sailor said

ii

Then
he became the high candle around which she flew
the tabernacle in which she dwelt:
she was the centre of his being
and all that he knew. The cedars whispered,
the unicorns knelt and bowed their heads
and Albina - she of the dawn, protector of ill-fated lovers -
watched over them.

"Your body travels with me; your blood flows in my veins"
For the sway of his calling held him
and on many days small partings disturbed them;
briefly.

He did not leave her: only his body was absent awhile.

She held his mind in thrall to her love

Life spun:

to the west the profane skills of the sea held him;

at each easting his very being was uplifted by her:

she was his guru

his sun.

It was as if eternity was theirs among the southern cedars

But even heaven knows a world beyond.

He knew.

He could only guess

at her strength.

For Llŷr called from the West, Eingana beckoned

He was a thing of the sea and parting was ordained:

he must forever navigate old horizons

She - for all her vision - could not see beyond the shore

He knows

the possibility of an orbit

where umbral time is released by light

long days on that higher plane eclipse longer darker time

in earthly solitude

her body calls out for understanding

and cries out...

He is torn

but his odyssey is decreed:

His ship awaits - the very seas wait to welcome him back.

His earthly gods demand their due.

The ghost of blind Teiresias prophesied, "... you ask about your sweet homecoming, but the god will make it a bitter journey. I think you will not escape Poseidon, the Earth Shaker, who is angered at heart against you... Even so, though you shall suffer you and your friends may yet reach home...

when you have escaped the dark blue sea...think only of your homeward
course"

But Teiresias - for all his vision - could not see beyond the shore
or divine the suffering visited on this mortal man's Penelope.

iii

The night that has passed can never return:

the sea quenches all.

Cruel parting after such passion

O woman left behind!

O ship

Of steel, rivets: deck, bridge, hull and keel:

Fore and aft, moored tight to her

Cargo holds: soon filled

Cabins! One cabin she knows so well!

Bearing him away

O man

Of charts and night watches

Scanning horizons: navigating so many seas

Do you dream of her? Pine?

Touch her in your dreams?

O woman left behind

You can only pray...

and wait:

It is easier to sail away than be left at home!

She could not hear his voice

Time stands still while his letters speak only from the past:

write to the future and read of the past

how do you talk when every penned sentence and its answer

must crawl so far?

you in me in you

they wrote

Memories!

Time is dammed in its hourglass: the stubborn sand
will not fall

she sees him drifting never nearer: a world away
but she sees nothing!

she cannot touch his body
she cannot feel his soul
she cannot sense his mind

On long southern seas beside the slow gliding albatross,
it seems he too is burdened to drift these cold waters eternally;
time passes, but in passing still leaves its stubborn sands behind.

Home has never seemed so far.

Without

he sees her face in everything, at every turn
her voice whispers

Calls.

Time passes.

And - because it is so ordained - once again

the great ship slides gently up her river

the lovers are joined and... again... the cedars bow over them.

But then, but then

Must he, a sea-bound Sisyphus for ever reach with her the height

- so brief a crest - again to drift down in the spume

to sea to crest sea's surge again, again; nor

back to the pebbled shore

beneath the pier?

Can either he or she withstand the tide's eternal wash?

iv

As to the watch a distant mast glint in the empty sea

As on the empty horizon an island speck appears

As in the night a breath touches his skin

So he became aware.

the waves stretched out towards her and cirrus painted the way

in his mind he held her

her arms enfolded his being, her body welcomed and

his late compass calmed their seas:

Their union had always been inevitable

And as again the land held him, she shared his joy...

the very land - each simplest sight: meadow, grove and stream

seemed dressed in brighter light

the flinty shore, the chalky downs sang with them

Old Ælle rejoiced

Time and the world was theirs alone.

The Daemons still frowned:

sensing a different division,

their power diminishing

Lace dressed she came to him

The waxy blooms she held seemed eternal

Her body is the ocean and every wave returns

an echo of the vow. The churchyard trees hold the sound

and the wind carries it forever:

on its breath their love will always sing

They are alone!

So short a time is left,

her arms held him her body rejoiced she blessed his body

his arms warmed her his eyes wept for her love

he held her like a raft she held them afloat

So few days joined and they - who might then have then been rent

apart - saw a further heaven ope:

his lonely watch, her desolate vigil conjoined

to cross the seas companioned

his lonely cabin cell now lighted, soul lifted

his time now speeds - the sands not held

Above day's depthless deep unbounded sea
and under many a star at night
she sees the distant blue the faint horizon round
the dolphin cleft wave at the bow the still albatross on station
sea-changing fog and mighty storms, Eingana's distant shores
and understands their siren call

Tasting the sea brine, knowing the ship's noise
Swept by passing airs, dampened by blind fog
she travels
Stranger to the southern stars, guest of warmer seas
Lost to all she has known, hull cloistered
she travels

By day, by night he keeps his watch
and marks their time
else, he wonders at their bounty, revels in their bliss
embraces their time

But now his ship has voyaged too soon (would he had restrained its
course): one long year is ended
three departures and three homecomings mark the time
all things pass, her seat of learning calls
He cannot bear to leave

He knows she will struggle to write. Alone, he sees her weep
she yearns for his arms; her books no longer talk to her -
he is her text she reads his body repeatedly but
finds no sense. Alone, bereft,
she knows no shore

Where both had sailed, he sails alone. Adrift, his mind can only see
the currents of her sea: her body is his ocean
her mind his distant shore. He plots his course on her flesh
navigates his watch on her skin. He
is lost

When will he - pilot of the seas; helmsman of his destiny - return
his heart to homely Hestia's domain?

cross limen: see parlor, range and crib again?

oceans crossed, is he securely docked within the cove, or
can tide's ebb drag him hence?

Only the Moirai know

v

He will remember his summer homecoming:

The joy, the uncharted waters of surprise

The warm sun on the door, the bees in the honeysuckle.

She held him close and at arm's length, examined his smile

Understood his passion:

he would never leave; the sea had let him go.

And now their life was compassed by a closer horizon

Hid from the old world, the larch watched over them.

Behind cattle sheds lost to sight

Walled with borrowed summer stone

bounded by alder, beech and thorn

Their new haven held their hearts

at ease:

no pilot would ease a seaward passage from this land

this Elysian field where life is good to man

Ceredig's land became their home...

Arianrhod seemed to smile on them:

And the home became fruitful

Their time was blessed

Their home, the cottage, the old farm
surrounded them

by day its land fed them

at night its old roof creaked and rustled

as if the mice were busy too

vi

Through tens of years their roots sank deep
Seasons passed...

Winter's bitter winds and Summer's softer edge
Strengthened their kinship with the land
The peace of its earth and space held them
its embrace enclosed them

the only place they wished to know
But in that Spring
some tree, a field seemed somehow less
the hint of something passing
She read "It is not now as it hath been of yore"
and he learned a new mystery
and the Moirai knew his loss.

From that first love, that light which overcame the shades
is left the warmth of memory
These lines are legacy of
that heat which seared his mind and etched his soul
that love's dominion which held him
worshiping

In the ashes of the fire there is a memory of the flame.

When we meet, I thought that I would take 1 or 2 themes and follow them through some of my poems in the published collections taking in, as well, my prose writings. Retrospective - in Mostly Welsh - is autobiographical and was perhaps the beginning of my 'sea writings'.

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