

Cast

J T Waterfield – October 2022

More fourteen-liners, following Shot

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Life writing

The levellers will have their shot, yelling,
free for all and fair enough, burning books
and science scorched, cockle folly
broadcast, skittling statues, toppling
walls and ruin of time – o brave new
waste! Others can put their shoulders
to the plough, the gang is meeting,
we can't apologise enough. Meanwhile
against my door I pile elaborate
privilege: I'm sticking to my tower,
sand-castle timer against a rising tide,
hopeless clepsydra, a new start
twice a day and who's right then? history
is what it is, black and white: wash-out.

Fused

Talking to myself is easiest: short-
circuit – hardwired one or zero –
full-on sink-hole. Walking in a circle,
do you not wear paths in the grass?
boots in the mud? Yoke all meaning
to my plough, hah! how 'ard can it be?
my strip-fields are half-full in early flood:
darnel be damned, dawn flushes my eyes –
a kingfisher sits black on his branch,
no halcyon day today. Chance is a fine rain,
six short hours at only ten percent each
is a flip of a coin: so, which wig to wear,
bare-headed before the tempest? Maybe
coffee will fuel my velocity: ESC.

On the clockface

The arctic clockface shrinks, calves
hours, cathedrals and whales, hope,
as they float off, melting helplessly.
'It's never too late' – dodgy reassurance,
a whole gallery of spillikins, a ponzi pile-up,
o fetch me my axe – hew to the truth,
bare boards and bitterness, cleaving doubt.
Let us embrace of modernity, okay, irony
an inch thick, bless cat lap critics, so much
the column inch – that's the little thing
about size, measuring up is not the same
as down, stylites mistaken for style... but
words now, well; spindrift, tumbleweed,
break-bulk – cheaper chapbooks, cheers.

Belief

Gift-giver, grey-hair, your rings are rubbish:
bury your hoard, stake it or not, no-one cares;
horrible old man, I don't understand – no change
for you, no contact, keep away: nose
to my nose-gay, I'm busy too: all stores
closing, it's the last sell-off, an emergency
on the fire-phone, bargains galore – I'm coming up
roses, you have to laugh. Dirty pennies
bait the cobbles, there are chalk outlines
on the pavement, homeless heroes all,
Bill and Gerry kings' sons, and votes
for women while you're at it, want not
waste not as you say – hooped ears like gypsies
passing and a scarf for my heart, bundled to go.

Testing

The data is nearly in, years of care –
the sum of your life's work, no less,
and the points are scattered shotgun,
it's a Rorschach plot – what if we draw
a line just so, here, or is it after all
just a fog, god, whatever, lost in the noise?
Look, shift one place left and it's all different,
a lattice blooming unexpectedly – though
maybe you are making it up, seeding the mix
by staring too hard – there are deadlines
you know, grants, a pinch of salt is as good
as a nod and a wink to a blind man –
what you see is what you get, the rest
is no more than the gaps between atoms.

313

Stuck, the clock hand twitches at apogee; cliff-
edge pointer, it's downhill from here, let's go.
Make a note: clean the escape wheel teeth. Some day.
The roots rot; but we're lost all sense; dead-pan,
it's a whole new trip, nerveless roller-coaster,
empirical epistemology is losing its touch.
You've got to laugh in your waterproofs, splashing
in the June monsoon – a warm deluge in Delhi,
long ago, here now – there comes a point when novelty
is exhausted, but it's cake time – who's to blame
for caducity? And where the hell were you
when you were my age? Hard to get in the mood
for gaudies; I'm telling you, scraping the sticky
plate clean, it's my second childhood: I'm lovin' it.

Moving

No, I thought crawling under the hurdles was
a clever strategy. Who's judging? and why the rush
to get to the end? It's a safe bet, stupid,
tortoises are notorious winners.
When everything is boxed up and taped
tight, three by five and yay deep too,
lo a stock-take nightmare, and as for finding
anything! A classic bootstrap challenge,
a Gordian knot and no knife, it's takeout
or nothing, it's last Christmas in brown cardboard –
puppets unstrung, screws loose, no surprises.
It seems apologies won't be enough this time,
maybe turning them into a fort will help –
I hoped it would all be different – sorry.

Relief

What clown laid these drains? God knows
we have to be kind to slaves now, sorry, co-lifers,
they have all our data, yes sir, no sir, three bags full
sir, and snigger about little habits afterward. OK,
so I like mine with sauce, red-head, but hold the limp
lettuce... ennui is so exhausting. Oh for a real storm,
a chance to clear the air and a fresh start –
but not until that damn builder plugs the leak;
of course I'll wait, Saturnalist, do I have to spell it
out? power is like lightening, more a matter
of claiming credit when the chance presents
and ignoring the frogs that croak in the bog,
two a penny; yes, scratch my back just there,
bliss – I'll sacrifice tomorrow.

316

Shards on the headland and an old man running
wild; the spaces between us stretch out,
I can see you shouting but do not understand,
is it my job to blunder into this bluster,
offer balm for the unsalvable, find blame?
Even older pottery underfoot here too,
reverting to earth: rounded sticky mud clogs
its outline, the voices around the cook-fire,
gratitude at day's end for food hot
and waiting – red-shift beyond hearing,
a thin flickering bat-squeak of history:
the communality of feeling here is something
we should try on our neighbours, sometime –
you can hear them screaming through the walls.

317

bag-splat tea-splash, morning nightmare –
no, real life, judicious appreciation of just
how chance falls, another start balanced
against the inevitable articulation of
what-next. And another day without word
from the frontier; can watchers on the wall
remember other comforts, other homes
under the cold moon? The proof I had
is already subject to retelling, doubt
and damp foxing the print; the thin chain
links one yesterday to another, but today
remains an anomaly in the sequence,
something of a flickering grey blur, an uneasy
doze on the sofa, blankets against the cold.

318

Bemused by choices, baffled by chatter,
what's new, what's good, paper boats
clogging the drain, aggravated by all, the city's
sybaritic comforts coddle and blinker,
too loud, too close, its luxuries simultaneously
soften and sap, wrinkling my will
like an overlong warm bath, puckering
my senses. I yearn for the frontier, keen winds
clean over black rocks and the sound of white water,
the simple balance of patrol and provision,
dinner of dried fruit and gratitude,
known store against need, fresh tiredness;
I lack lacking, the cry of geese
passing overhead yanks my heart north.

Return to Crew Castle

In memory of Bob

Subdued back-chat in the smoky dim,
little more than practical muttering,
the awful weather, small beer, the pong
of rancid coats and filthy boots; our mate
is missing, the one with the stories
from far away, full of friends and others
you've never heard of either, a whirl,
an extravaganza of association, masked
dancers waving painted wands while
we beat pans with weird spoons, drunk
on the firelight moment; we might as well
be kippered clueless, tomorrow to plan
and no stock ready. That wall-eyed Justice,
unco bastard, has pockled his man.

Treatment of dead enemies[1]

We have to say, sorry we slaughtered you,
pickled your surprised look until it resembled
blank blackened acceptance... Except
that we're not, it's just a box we have to tick,
history with crossed fingers and a (shock!)
trigger-warning, some 'sarcasm' may be used,
did you think it would be easy? Gormless
as any undergrad, you were always going
to end up as a post-ornament; the lip-service
we pay is just the price of business; stop
looking at your phone, it's not answers you need
but thoughts and might as well off your head
without, loser – this is the real world, whatever,
wassailing the moon, tonight we dine together.

February 2022[2]

[1] The Pitt Rivers had a display labelled thus until at least 2020.
[2] And on the next visit in March 2022, nothing but a blank cabinet with apologies.

Chippendale chairs

These were in the attic years, decades;
now tired and dirty, the mahogany curves,
the gleam of former homes, still tugs my heart.
Apropos nothing, are these old values
the essence of culture? Cut all connection,
live for the present, let the balloon go up:
animal spirits loosened, immediate wants
mistaken for clear thinking – it's a good line,
I should try it sometime. After all, burdened
by fardels of stuff, bent double by it even,
what use is kindling if you're not allowed
fire? Break it all up; the allotment of the past
is meat for apology, ownership is theft,
obviously: lordy lord, guilty as charged.

Visit to the underworld

Under these dim trees, on parole, there is a long
susurration always, whether of the combed
breeze or a shedding of water-drops from above,
or maybe just my thoughts again: the figure
in the pool, striving upstream, endlessly
measuring himself against the Hellespont,
is in the silent movie of history, the brief subtext
in small caps says HE SWIMS TO BE WITH HERO.
Now, in this half-light, a suggestive pile of clothes
tucked aside hints at other unseen activity,
then a scurrying in the ground-cover distracts
and it is on around the loop, past the weir
with its 'no swimming' sign, and so back,
into the day, a deep breath, true to my word.

White nights

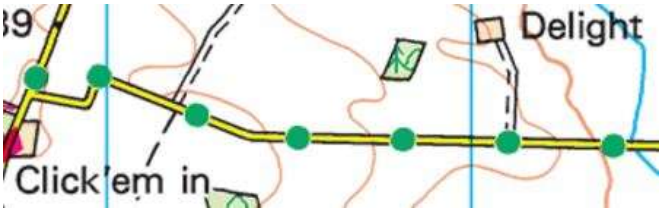
Fumblebrain, fingerblank, a flash-afterimage
of attention tilts the map briefly but I'm still lost,
I can't dial the phone number, the digits
clumsy, and the car is sliding, the brake's failed,
or I can't – watching only, incapable, replay –
Here is the map – blank under my moving finger;
as for where the brake is, a moment's inattention
and I can't reach it, the countryside scrolls by,
untethered gravity clowning around, hilarious –
I have the map right there, but can't find the place,
neither where I want to go – the name gone – nor
where I am – landmarks twisting out of the way
where my finger is, sliding, brainblank; other people
elsewhere: friends? enemies? faces unknown too.

323

So let us rejoice in another maundy: duties
to count down, polishing the rusty soul,
keeping busy with stiff-legged steps. Pit props
and canaries not needed, it's afternoon tea
(oh, yes, milk please) and rather dull biccies,
grey-veiled chat laid out bit by bit like
pick-up-sticks, necessarily a little louder
but we've heard it all before, past glories.
What luck the blue streak across green water,
or a lightning strike – rainbows at least, maybe
those would be best, definitely, agree with that,
nodding – a tissue of promises, claiming weakness
is a sort of strength too – internal reflection
highlighting another missed chance, damn.

324

I am become the anhedonious heron, grey
against the grey river and somewhat hunched,
and weary, weary, weary. The day's tasks weigh,
filth-encrusted bicycle-frames in the low water.
A thin scrim of mist across the meadow is history
itself turning old; one dawn or another, the tea-boost
is fading, and coffee-treats are too much,
old-age money not buying what it used to,
my pockets have holes. Here you might hope
for hope like a hot bath or a stranger's smile,
October sun – watery, brief, but welcome –
and why not, Pandora clung to it – a false flag, no?
The speed of sound is a rule that doesn't apply
for a white-van op, sod you, we're getting there sooner.



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