

The Waters of Brygstow

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The Waters of Brygston is a narrative poem exploring the juxtaposition between the past and the present, examining the things left behind, the ghosts that linger in the depths and the memories which saturate our modern lives.

Set in Bristol's City Docks, the story flits between the modern day and the 1800s through the lens of two characters: the son of a docker and a Gypsum Dutch barge called Beachley. Through 5 parts, we progress through the lives, decline and situations of these individuals, set amongst the backdrop of the growth of the Avonmouth docks which would eventually engulf the trade of the Floating Harbour.

With this project, Steve and I wanted to ask questions of class, home and family, and particularly what happens when the lifelong habitat of one class is uprooted and displaced by another in favour of money. What a place used to be, and what it's become now are incredibly interesting parallels to dig into, and one we found to be ever-present when walking around the pits of Beachley Bristol, now a home available to buy, sitting dormant in the decorative waters it once worked in.

I sit on his knee eating corn. I'm eleven.
Breath polluted in Guinness. Imported.
He says: *if you int gettin' there quick boy,*
you int gettin' none at all,

and tells me the story of a bloke,
very first day on the job it were,
he trips, falls, dumps a whole barrel of the nectar
into the water when unloadin' it. Hundreds of eyes glarin'.
The one moment every docker worked for
at the end of a workin' week
drowned in murky water.

We sit on his boss's barge. Beachley,
transports somethin' called Gypsum, apparently.
Mum's kicked him out again,
and he nicks me off out the door,
under his arm like a stowaway,
woken up in the inky darkness
for another midnight adventure.

This is the centre of the world, he tells me,
as we sit lookin' out from a porthole
caught in-between the horizon.
Always has been, always will be.

I hear the echoes of tides brushing against their lovers // in a dock of new dawns they're now
calling home // Avonmouth // As a twin of mine did its final venture out of this land, they
conjured up thoughts of how to ethically slaughter us // Scrap us // Burn us // Drown us

The gulls creak overhead // The sails whistle lazily, hungry for bed // The sailors sing from
down the road, a different melody from usual // A heavy lament // I lie dormant in this dry
dock // thinking of that which hums in the wind.

Four years down the coast
and we're back in the pits of Beachley. I'm fifteen.
Most days he'd come back through the fog; a lamplit shadow,
shakin' his head: *no bloody work*.

This Floating Harbour.
The waters heavy with voices trembling on the surface:
some saturated in the Earth's salt (the *British pride*),
some in vodka, others in whisperings of the future.
Tongues painted with corners of the globe old pa claimed he'd seen.

Me and Jonjo would play in the bustle,
our favourite game was Sailors:
copying their words, lifting empty crates and,
if we were lucky, getting a sip or two from a friendly one
or instead chased down Welsh Back.

I always pretended to be my Dad.
I think everyone does in some way.

Into the midsummer melodies of Wednesday morning birdsong,
he'd come back singing ones old John Teller had taught,
or fluent in Spanish melodies from Luis Havaroz.
Teeth crooked from Prince's Street nights, The Welfare Club
where men fought fairly but never too nice,
and only every now and then.
The man I'd become one day.
And on this night, I step closer to a shade of him.

*Make us some more money for the real livin' ways, aye?
But don't tell yer Mother. She asks, yer in school,
Don't let it be no bother, understood?*

As a bribe, he offers a first sacred taste of Guinness.
Nearly retching, spitting, I hold it back
with a grin laced in grimace,
as he laughs at me, and I laugh at him
in the secrets shared in that boat's fibres.

They'd stripped me bare // left me for dead // fetal position // dry land // when another white-faced man from London came to look round // liked what he saw // and paid a fair price to call me home.

if only they could see me now // the ones who forged my veins and arteries // the ones who fostered me Beachley, from the Dutch name I bore before // what would they say to that man // what would they say to the world which surrounds?

these waters are the centre of the Earth // if that Earth is office blocks, stocks and whiskey on the rocks served in the bars which line this harbour now // gutted like the fish that used to coddle my body // ready for a homeowner // or holidaymaker // to wash away the everyday monotony // scrubbed into their skin.

I am a vessel of two hearts: one of birthright, one of farce // who will I belong to in these years ahead // and what will I be in the next phase // Will they ever lay me bare // knock me dead // I'm not the one to decide // I'm just the one it happens to // I'm just the one with the nice views // porthole // deck-side // covered in tattoos of "solar panels" // bird shite // portable heaters // the rest-seekers respite.

Where's it all gone // the things I were before? // Have they drowned in the deepest depths of the harbour // or been washed up, dried up, chucked up on some faraway, distant shore?

This next part happened further down the line,
As I live and breathe here, now.
Twenty years gone by.
A surname still shared.
A workplace passed down generations.
A voice lingering in the shallows.

He died today.

And Beachley sits still
back from an easy trip to Gloucester.
With a Guinness below deck,
a cracked voice sings in the heart of Bristol:

This is the centre of the world!

Was for the man who grew up on Joy Hill,
was for the man who ran away from his Dad
and whistled the whole of his life.
was for the man who watched me, as a boy,
mimic his movements as an old duffer docker,
was for the man who rested with me
every other eve, eating corn.
Telling stories of the glory days,
the ones before I were born.

Here's a sip for you, old man,
in the depths of the vessel that carved you.
though it's changing, pa... it's all changing.
And the fights aren't as far and few.

This is home, this barge.
This has to be home, this barge.
This will always be, till the day I die, my home,

this barge // this home