

Ben Ray

What I heard on the Last
Cassette Player in the
World



Indigo Dreams Publishing

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in the World

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It's a grand thing to get leave to live.

– *Nan Shepherd*

Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;

Breath's a ware that will not keep

Up, lad: when the journey's over

There'll be time enough to sleep.

– *from A Shropshire Lad, A.E. Housman*

(1919)

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'The day they decimalised the words' received 'highly commended' in the Torbay Open Poetry Competition, and 'The gift' received third place in the There Is No Planet B Stafford Green Arts Festival poetry competition and will also appear in *For The Silent* anthology, IDP, 2019.

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Also by Ben Ray:

After the Poet, the Bar (2016, *Indigo Dreams Publishing*)

For more information on Ben's work, visit www.benray.co.uk or follow him on Twitter at [@BenRayThePoet](https://twitter.com/BenRayThePoet)

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What I heard on the Last
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World

The day they decimalised the words

Yes, I remember the day they decimalised the words:
library queues that echoed of soup kitchens
as they curled around the street corners
everyone waiting to exchange their old, jaded letters
for fresh syllables, crisp and hot off the dictionary.
I remember how they tasted of newness and possibility
as I tucked them neatly into the back of my throat.
The older generation, they didn't understand –
they cried when they opened their mouths
and their old, familiar sounds wouldn't work.
Even years after, embedded in my new tongue
I'd still come across ones I'd forgotten all about
fossilised – tucked in between the leaves of books
or carefully hidden on stained shopping lists
for shops that no longer existed.
And whenever I found one, I'd hold it up to the light
see how those now-strange symbols danced
and feel a nagging, empty sadness
for everything that had been left unsaid.

The gift

Often, after the tide had been good
and when my father had visited the homes
of those who could not afford to pay
I would lie awake into the dying evening
my eyes pressed tight shut, as if in prayer –
waiting for the gentle doctors' hand on my shoulder,
before pretending to yawn and stretch from sleep
as he led me outside to the lemon tree by the gate.
They would be hung in plastic bags, shapes throwing
crazy silhouettes onto the lawn in a moonlit puppet show
or tied by tails on low branches – a surreal fruit
shells shining in rusted red, claws bumping softly together
like wind-chimes in the soft Mediterranean night.
And only the waving poplars saw us, but promised not to tell
each time as we reeled in our catch, laying them carefully
onto the Renault 4CV's old unsprung back seats
our fingers coarse from rough string and dry saltwater.
I'd watch as their antenna twitched and flicked with life.
No one on the island but us knew of their unnatural migration
back to the ocean, slipping along moonlit roads until –
at last! – my father would haul them out onto the sand
and he would let me pick them up, one by one
hold them under the breakers long enough to wake up
and then slowly let them wriggle free, passing them back
to the ocean

The kindness of the eel

You opened your mouth
and an eel came out –
sliding from between your lips
gasping into the air.

Take this, you said
these are my best words
my midnight flights
my early morning distillations.

Eels, you said, do not stutter
look, they flow like liquid
they do not take more than they need
they are the best of us.

I watched it swim away
out of the bedroom window.
But often, when I least expect it
it returns, a slow swagger through the air:

brushing past the curtains when I sleep
curling into the nest of my inner ear.

**Meditation on three wooden barrels from a shipwreck found
in Gdansk harbour, dated to the early 15th century**

To him they carry the vain dream of another morning
but in truth they contain copper ingot, meant for coins
to rival the silver cobs belched into Europe
from the unimaginable Potosi in the New World.
They have travelled further than he ever will,
Lübeck to Oslo to Madrid to London, a cobweb of pathways
sketched by minds a thousand miles away onto the ocean
that pump life into the markets of the world
and that push the present forward into the future.
It does not occur to him if this is all worth dying for: instead
his coldness ebbs away, and he has, all of a sudden
a sense of beautiful and overriding melancholy
of the sort that one sometimes feels
when grey light falls on grey surfaces

Greenpeace's final strategy

We have to plan not only for our children, but for our children's children.

- Greenpeace activist interviewed on the BBC

When all the ancient ruins in Rome have been destroyed
when Eastern Europe crumbles, and the soldiers are deployed
when the Med's sea waters are poisoned and over-fished
and the rainforests all go the way the corporations wished
when Australia's fully eaten up in raging rogue bush fires
and all that's left of Venice are tips of lone piazza spires
when China plucks up courage and finally nukes the West
and reduces all our governments to puppet states at best
when America walls its borders to create a living tomb
when the population rises and we die from lack of room –
then where the fuck are we going to go on holiday?

The Landsker Line

The Landsker Line is a term used for the distinct linguistic and cultural boundary between the Welsh-speaking areas of northern Pembrokeshire and the English-speaking areas of southern Pembrokeshire, an area known as 'Little England beyond Wales'.

Tread softly. The Landsker Line runs through this place,
cutting you straight down the tongue
plucking vocal chords to different rhythms.

This is war on a geographical scale. Watch-tower words
crouch in map folds, consonants drawn –
and underneath, language forces earth together
in a border crossing of flint-filled, igneous Cymraeg
pushed up against English's softer sedimentary curves.

Put the dictionary down, there is no escape.

In Newgale the frontier carves a village in half,

Brandy Brook an anglicised battle line

the next beach north a fighting statement: Pen-y-Cwm.

To trace it you will need a phrasebook

and the voice of your grandfather – time clots

and cloys in the breaths between sentences.

Norman castles are scattered here like leftover thoughts

Roch, Llawhaden, Narberth, as if thrown up in haste

to hold back these strange beasts of burden

two voices that speak from the same body.

Tomorrow, as you ebb and wash on inland waves

memories of dissonant echoes will still ring in the ears –

thin line drawn over the voice of your mother tongue

Little England beyond Wales, Sir Benfro Saesneg.

Burn the evidence

for the piper, composer and refuse collector Gordon Duncan

He'd scribble them on the backs of fag packets, the notes that he saw on the edges of his vision - emerging from behind the rubbish bins, underneath the weeds that pushed around the paving stones like lost children, music to make the whole of Scotland vibrate, to echo around the corners of every village hall from Galashiels to Oban on the regular Friday Evening Ceilidhs, cramming themselves into the ears of women clutching headphones in music stores and men turning the radio up in the living room. Pure bloody twenty-four carat Scottish gold sewn from the black bin bags of Pitlochry waste (from numbers 24 through 56 Gallows Street on Camel *The Famous Baravan*, from the 5am shift round the Invercarey Housing Estate *Wing Commander Donald Mackenzie* on Blue Stripe) look quick out the window there he goes with our old fridge, rewriting the history and heart of a nation and a people again and again with every careless pencil stroke then gloriously

just smoking it away

The knee plays: Act I

Knee plays were short, often comic scenes interspersed throughout theatrical performances in the Tudor period, usually with little relation to the overall plot of the play and containing buffoons or side characters. These scenes would occur in front of the drop curtain and would not require large sets or crowds, thus allowing time for larger costume and scene changes.

Sc. I: Gormley and the Angel

Out in the impossibly vast wastes of the empty beaches
this is where he buries her castoff clothes:
imperfect limbs that did not make the cut, stunted ideas
that clawed themselves halfway from thought to reality
and that now sink languorously into the sand

Sc. II: The fall of Icarus

A friend once told me that Icarus is falling
as we sipped our _____ coffee, picked
at our _____ order delivered by _____. Did you know,
she said, that due to the growth of _____ (they have an outlet
in every front room in Britain now), we have shifted
our reference points, our connections, our thoughts
and so _____ and _____ and _____ and _____
have finally pushed the old myths away
and now Icarus is falling, is falling, Icarus is falling
out of consciousness

Sc. III: Divorce rates in Greater Germany in 1935

*'7.5 per 10,000 inhabitants were divorced –
an increase from the low rates of the 1920s.'*
Myself, I only feel sorry for that poor 0.5:
it must to so hard, losing your other half.

Morning after

Rome seems oppressively sad... the abundance of fragments of the past (on which a tiny present nourishes itself) that have been fetched out of the ground and laboriously maintained... are basically nothing more than accidental vestiges of another age and a life that is not our own and is not meant to be.

– from Letters to a Young Poet (Rainer Maria Rilke)

But look, how the ageless city has aged
plaster cracking on sunken cheeks.
Your foundation does not blend
with your complexion, my darling
the smile that won't quite cover broken teeth
unable to hide the finger nails that dropped off
your delicate digits of Corinthian and Doric.
And if all roads still lead to you, my dear
is this the welcome that you will give them?
Time, the great undresser, long ago
got wise to your amphitheatrics
and confiscated your frescoed chic –
left with residual mosaic rashes, like old tattoos
you tend to pull shirtsleeves over.
I fear surgery cannot save your ribcage gaps
the space where your Senate was meant to beat
now tell me, please, how is it
that the bones of this place
this city of light we built together, darling
the bones of this place, look, tell me please
quick, are they showing beneath the silk, these
veins under each other's skin, this paper-feel
lethargy seeps into limbs that touch and twine
under winding, all too transparent sheets

Winter at the Sands Café, Newgale

It is winter at the Sands Café, and people sit in silence
sipping coffee from polystyrene cups
wondering when to venture into the rain.

The wind is up, and the beach, in fear
has steadily backed away from the shoreline
retreating under the door, nestling by chair legs –
look, surfers have followed it in, shivering
consoled by almond slices and warmth.

In the summer this place is fed by multitudes
a crash and swell of bus-brought backpackers
that draws a lazy zigzag line up the cliffs
nosing in at beaches, skirting the edges of bays.
But now winter has closed its storm-filled fist,
the clientele has shrunk like the shoreline at high tide
and only the diehards remain here.

It is winter at the Sands Café, and the sea rebels against the land
lunging at Solva harbour, lapping hungrily at St. Davids
but here, inside, there is cake at fifty pence a slice
and the tea flows until 5pm. A camper's paradise
where each rare visitor imagines themselves a lone adventurer
as they settle into plastic chairs to survey the storms outside.

It is winter at the Sands Café, and the tea is only a pound a pot
as we revel in hibernation and dream of the spring tide.

February 1974

Dad didn't want to go at first, reluctant to venture out.
"It's bastard cold, boy," he said –
back then everything was bastard something,
bastard cold, bastard hot. Or just bastard.
Eventually I won, of course. We skidded and slipped
in that car that coughed like a personal premonition
all the way up the deserted road to Pen y Fan.
The snow was already waist high in the drifts.
Once there – a miracle answered – we were alone,
just dad, me, a million miles of blue sky
and the frozen waterfall.
The mountain, held close in ice, had been paused
in the action of shaking the stream off,
buried deep under snow like a hibernating thing.
I remember we both just sat and watched it in silence
the two of us. And through everything that came afterwards
I still come back to it – back to that water plunging down, away
a moment frozen solid in time.

Geese at night

On the Thames, the geese all float
a thousand silent beak-tipped boats
an ochre-painted motley crew
asleep upon the drifts, where you
can count them, one by two, by rote –
those weathered, feathered geese afloat.
On sopping, brackish, grass-crowned crests
is where they choose to build their nests
and those of a more patient mind
will sit and wait, and hope to find
one day a squawk, a telling squeak
of life anew – but now, all sleep.
And they seem to know they're in the right
these landed, candid bulks of flight
for when all is done and heard and said
why are we too not both abed
wrapped up tightly, between the pillows
as they all are, amongst the willows.
So let us go, and find our place
remainder of the human race
awake at such ungodly hour
and, if it is within our power
in slumber, find an inner peace –
to be, in short, more like the geese.

A short guide to Sengoku period Japanese pottery

The Imjin, or Ceramic, Wars between Japan and Korea (1592-1598) led to the abduction of over 20,000 Korean craftsmen and artisans, including skilled potters, by Japanese invaders. These potters soon assimilated into Japanese culture, melding Korean and Japanese influences to create bold, signature Japanese styles and eventually leading to the creation of porcelain.

1. Throwing

When first placed on the wheel of Korea
I was thrown most delicately –
I remember mother calling me in
under the larches and spruces
drinking Ginseng from rough, familiar teapots.
Clay ran like love in my family's veins
or was it the other way around –
we lived, cradled in the nips and tucks
surrounding the edges of this peninsula
and didn't sense the disruptions,
the pebbles running under our fingers in the mixture
we had unearthed from the riverbed of the Han
our arms clothed in water that tasted of home.
We were instead focused on the fragile bird
fluttering between our hands
as we shaped its wings on the potter's wheel.

2. Centring

I learnt early on as a boy
that when a storm builds out at sea
it is as unstoppable as the next breath.
I heard they reached Pyongyang by July.
The people shattered – soldiers
wading through shards of villages.
When you make a bowl
and you are briefly distracted

by, say, a dog in the workshop
or the murder of one's mother
the centre of the piece does not ring true –
and the whole folds up, shrinks
as if the very clay beneath your feet
has succumbed.

3. Opening up

But since the creation of the waters
all know that the tide eventually turns.
When a pot is overstretched under fingertips
it snaps – tendons too tight
body too stretched
on the wheel of the world
but when they retreated across the waves
a lynx to the mountains, drawn back
by hostility, starvation and homeland
we lay between their jaws.

4. Firing

The placing of a pot, the landscape teaches us,
is as important as the placing of the potter –
crucial. We echo the ground beneath us.
Twenty thousand pieces taken from their home
is a rape, a murder.
We were taken
to help build their houses
we were taken
to please their men
we were taken
just because we were there:
in the hope that some of us could be reshaped
and learn to echo the contours of this strange new island.

5. Glazing

The longer a pot is dipped in the glaze
the more the colour settles,
melting into grooves now familiar.
After the tears, the deaths
the only way we knew how to live
was by breathing life into pottery.
We searched the land, found kaolin
a pure, white clay
and in return for this new sky
we gave them porcelain.
If our work travels the waters
to rest on unfamiliar surfaces
why should we not too.

6. The finish

And now, here we are
not quite Kintsugi but nearly there –
the shine on us has set hard
Satsuma and Hagi and Karatsu
telling of how we were recast. Our birds
soar from Osaka to London to Rotterdam
and, adrift on this island, I like to think
that they were not born of Korea or of Japan
but of us. Just look –
they overflow with it.

The knee plays: Act II

Sc. I: A dendrological reaction to National Socialism

As the Tirpitz moves along the Norwegian coast
it sprays chlorosulphuric acid to create a concealing fog.
The chemicals will stunt tree growth in these fjords
and spectral dendrologists of the future
will be able to track the ship's secretive route.
If there is a metaphor here, it will somehow be lost to history
hidden amongst twisted pines on the shoreline
lost between the spaces of their rings

Sc. II: Reasons to embrace the rising sea levels

Eventually, ITV screened 'Quick, Build My Ark!',
beating the BBC to the prime-time evening slot.
I guess the world really is coming to an end.
It was hosted by Ben Fogle, pulling a serious face
whilst telling a bland family from Doncaster
how to beat the ever-rising sea levels
with just these Ten Simple Steps.
It makes you want to walk into the sea, you say.
No need, I reply, letting the remote fall from the sofa
into the water.

Sc. III: Discussing the Guggenheim

it is not like elsewhere in New York / uncontaminated by its
sheer, terrifying monumentality: / in truth, I think it is its own
exhibition / staircase hugging the inside of its hollow eggshell
self, / pressed by the centrifugal force of architecture. / Look, if I
had to describe it to you / I would say it is an American neo-
liberalist metaphor / where the steps wind upwards to nothing:
/ but from the very top, looking down / somehow it makes the
very air beautiful

Concertos in the dark

In the 17th century the Bishop Ussher used the Bible to calculate the exact date for the creation of Earth – around 6pm on October 22nd, 4004 BC.

The theologian arrives at the concert hall
around late afternoon, Ussher time.
The receptionist informs him he's very, very late.
Having missed the performance by several millennia
the theologian climbs the stage, seats himself at the piano
and enthusiastically flexes his fingers.
He is not much of a pianist –
he has not, as such, ever played one –
but he has heard the cadences of the pulpit
and has seen the music of hymns on morning air.
Confident, he leans into his masterpiece.
And though we laugh at the hubristic collapse of chords
at this novice navigating in boxing gloves
is there not in truth something beautiful
at an attempt to draw notes from nothing,
to perform when the score is so far away.

Holy Island

In Lindisfarne
we simply existed.
There is a strange lack of time
when you are surrounded
by its silent stone markers:
we tossed every done day
behind us into the mist
as if they were empty oyster shells
and tide-turned into the next.
In spring we popped flower heads
revealing inner petals like secrets
and hollowed out beaches
with the spaces in between words.
And sometimes, in early mornings
we'd wake up basking
in an epiphany of birdsong
lapping at our hazy, sleepy shores
floating in the sunken cellars
of our just-conscious minds –
chatting of midges out on the mud
buzzing of nettles and long grass
singing of the day we'd spread our wings
and fly

Some other England

For Rob Elliott

You take me to a genteel English pub
to see the remnants of some Shakespearean oddity:
but in the courtyard, the beast is risen
this is Morris with a darker touch,
faces that interchange like birds in flight
moving together in murmuration
breathing with the lungs of something deeper.
Together, we pause, sniff the air: this is unknown.
We retreat to the bar.

 Inside the pub, the session is alive and well
 seeming to have lurched from some unknown point
 buried deep in the past of previous bodies
 into this evening's riotous rabble. In the corner
 a comatose man suddenly lurches to life
 Lazarus-like, and produces a virtuoso spoon solo.
 A modern miracle. This is what the word
 shenanigans was invented for, you mutter
 as our feet respond to the command of the accordion.

When we re-emerge, blinking like moles
the Green Men have dissipated –
in their place, architects, retirees,
schoolteachers released for weekends
their coloured tatters stapled to sleeves
pewter tankards clipped securely to belts.
How did they do that, I want to ask.
How did they fit a person's whole lifespan
between their fevered, mirrored movements
how did they connect a separate current,
some circuit completed when sticks meet
and belled ankles whirl away from each other
how did they solve this internal conflict
and reach into some other England

Meeting John Cleese

Today I saw John Cleese
speak at an exclusive dinner
he said
that he was still best mates
with Terry Jones
and all the other Pythons
he told us
an anecdote about the celeb party
where he met Paul McCartney
he waxed lyrical
about the brilliant time
he snubbed Theresa May
he wrapped up
with a hilarious line told to him
by his old mucker the Dalai Lama
I saw John Cleese
give a speech at an exclusive dinner
arrogant git
massive namedropper

The Great Jigsaw Puzzle Panic

The Great Depression of the 1930s coincided with the introduction of mass-produced, die-cut jigsaw puzzles, meaning that in a time of poverty more people than ever could afford them.

It began, I think, back in September '32
one of us brought home 'Jigsaw of the Week' –
we spent all morning slotted around the kitchen table
piecing together Monet's Bridge Over Pond Lilies.
It became a bit of a tradition, I guess.
Now he was home all day, father would go pick it up
and if we had breakfast, we wouldn't start eating
until we had the sections safely under our fingers:
shards of stained glass in a dulled room.
The Great Lakes, the Eiffel Tower,
we saw them all in our pokey kitchen –
and after the ceremonial breaking
the pieces would be carefully swept up
poured into pre-labelled jam jars.
We talked a lot over those puzzles, I remember
but what we never told each other
was that it was good to fit these small worlds together
when everything else was falling apart.

Yoga, early afternoon

for Simran

Oxford sunlight slips through half open windows,
loosens the knots of this tight-bound body
just think of the chest as a balloon:

ending with a breath.

Eye level with a teacup cluttered carpet
whose echoes of incense reminds of earlier times
remember, your shoulders aren't earrings:

ending with a lion's laugh.

Less a salutation, perhaps, and more a welcoming
to a world that blossoms around our flexing forms
as we arc, Cretan bull dancers, looking for the sky:

ending with a prayer

the spaces between your words burn bright in my body

this ends with a prayer

with silence

peace

Dear Simran

these are some of the things that I have learnt
since you taught me to knot my body
in that dusty, teacup-filled room together:

1. loud rock music enhances yoga immeasurably
2. I'm really not as flexible as I thought I was
3. a gift can be given in many forms –

I only realised this long after you had shown me
how to arch my back towards the sun
that streamed in through open windows,
already rose tinted in the amber of my mind.

And I often think of you as I glide gracefully
like a visually-impaired elephant from asana to asana.

I try to find the serenity you seem to hold
whilst the cats wander round my legs –

I wonder, have you ever been interrupted by a Hoover
whilst struggling to hold the downward dog?

And though I end, not with a prayer

or with the silence that once stretched between us two
the peace you showed me is still there
resting softly between my shoulder blades.

The knee plays: Act III

Sc. I: **Dark side of Japan**

Did it ever occur to anyone
that the exporters of bonsai
know the location of Lilliput
but are just keeping really quiet

Sc. II: **Where do all the forests belong**

Because the trees were of no nation
we wrapped them all in flags
so they could finally belong somewhere –
though some foolish people said
we were only claiming them as our own

Sc. III: **Power Off**

I love my job.
I watch online societies die for a living,
whole worlds crumbling in a single click –
and then observe how players react.
An anthropologist for a new age.
Some just sigh. Some cry. Some mourn.
Officially I am impartial. Secretly
I like this last group best.
I will study what they say, how they look
when I finally press ctrl alt del.
Don't worry. You won't feel a thing.

Metamorphoses

"Those buggers are just amazing."
The fisherman catches your sleeve,
ancient mariner of the marina
rod angled hopefully into the water.
"Did you know, contrary to popular opinion
salmon move in careful formation in open waters?"
I bestow a rictus grin. Tighten our handhold.
"And they return to the spot they hatched from to spawn.
Do you know where their name comes from?"
I step back. You wriggle from my grip.
"From the Latin 'salmo'," you say,
"which may have come from 'salire', meaning 'to leap'."
I shoot you a surprised look, but you are away
locked in a slow, hypnotic dance.
"Salmon hatch in fresh water, but migrate to the sea,"
he leans in, and you respond in echo
"but they return to fresh water to reproduce."
And as you move in synchronicity, circling, twisting
I can only watch you interpret each other
an intimate game, up on tiptoes, turning
until finally he slides off the harbour edge into the sea
and I know I should say something
but before I manage to, you follow
and I can only think to watch
as you both move away
bodies flicking, as if in formation

Hearing things

*... within ye hear / No sound so loud as when on curtain'd bier / The death
watch tick is stifled...*

– *from* Endymion (John Keats)

When days were younger
and the moon was distant
relatives of the dying huddled
whilst Death knelt on the roof
drumming fingers on the walls

when tides were still a mystery
as the thoughts of another
in silence, around the bed
leaning on chimney pots
in the silence of departure.

But this is the 21st century, with space travel and toasters and blood transfusions and suitcases with wheels on, and if you google it then Wikipedia will tell you pretty quickly that it's only the Deathwatch (or Woodboring) Beetle, tapping out a love-song to attract a mate.¹ Fully explanatory, of course – but still you doubt those fingers drumming against the walls of your consciousness at night

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deathwatch_beetle

Hay Bluff

This is where he likes to come
when he finds he is lost again:
up to this point where trees don't dare tread
and the rock liquidates into wind.
He has a job – somewhere
where there's so much glass he can't fathom
in which direction he's meant to be looking
and the coffee and the smiles and the handshakes
are lukewarm and dry out the tongue.
But that doesn't matter now.
He's driven through the night and most of the morning
to join this rupture of geological impropriety
where red sandstone bursts out from millennia
in eternal attempts to become airborne
Penybegwn. *Massif in all meanings*, he'd said
and she had chuckled, leaned into him –
two figures on the edge of the Black Mountains
surveying a kingdom of possibility.
Just watching the river Wye curl lazily below them.

Tongue tied

“Bonjour madame, pouvez-vous m’aider.”²

It is hard not to sound like a liar

rolling these strange peaches³ out of my mouth –

poetry doesn’t diminish their ring of inauthenticity

their plain whitewash over delicate French reds

and ringing of airport phrasebook lessons still green.⁴

And I wish I could tell this girl looking at me over the counter⁵

that I could give her anything other than broken apologies⁶

and not be struck dumb, naked in my mother tongue⁷

and cold northern nerves. Absurd⁸.

I would tell her this poem is a heartfelt regret⁹

that I can only sing in one key

that I can only laugh in one colour

and that I cannot pull out my familiar voice box¹⁰

and splash my words on the walls of this unfamiliar city.

² Did I memorise this correctly?

³ A soft, round, slightly furry fruit with sweet yellow flesh and reddish skin

⁴ সবুজ , luhlaza , lufuuᳵ

⁵ How do you pronounce the name? Bolangery ? Boulongurie?

⁶ Desole, lo siento, przepraszam

⁷ Safe haven now redundant

⁸ According to a recent study, fewer than 12% of Britons can speak another language fluently

⁹ Sadness, repentance, disappointment

¹⁰ This monoglot mouth, this one reeded tongue

View from the public gallery

Walk this outline of cliff, stark meeting place
where land finally gives out to air:
here the puffins gather in conference.
Fratercula Arctica, landing at Skomer and Skokholm
nestled in the cliffs, burrowed snugly in soil.
See, they do not look like they are built for flight
shrunken wings working in furious overdrive
to hold their tuxedoed beings airborne –
in this way they can travel thousands of miles
but tonight they have sectioned up the coastline,
sentinels marking where land slips into water.
Beyond them, out in the far-flung fathoms of the Irish Sea
each wave builds with the certainty that comes
of geological memory, arcing towards the shoreline.
Tomorrow they will chase the swell, dive for herring
but for now, they huddle on the rocks at Cemaes Head
to gossip and sigh and chatter, talking of sand eels
of crisp packets and spray and
rocks slick with salt water
of sea trawlers and tourist boats and crab shells
of south-westerlies and roof tops and rock pools

Stepping off the Silk Road

Alexander the Great never came to these shores
but if he had, he'd have been surprised.
There is nothing here – all quiet, empty cliffs.
In 330AD, Byzantine was re-founded
as New Rome, the centre of the world,
the Silk Road snaked its gluttonous body
through the heart of the continent
and the Baltic states were drained of life
to dress the east in gold and consequence.
When Alexander cried salt tears at the Indus
after he had conquered the whole earth
he sent us spinning into nonexistence,
sleeping in the wake of his countless ships.
Augustine told us not to think, but to do
and we have listened devoutly, carving out
our own image from our own image
without our lips ever touching the Indus:
and as Alexander again lowers his head at its banks
and Singapore, Taiwan, Iran grow strong
we do not step out of our own echoes
and notice, for perhaps the first time
how small our shadow really is.

Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal

1. Brecon to Pencelli

Here, young and energised
the canal is upended into life,
poured out of the Brecon basin
in a feisty swirling shaking liquid rush
eager to shake off the pleasure boaters
the quaint tea shops the car parks
to race the Usk down to the sea.
Come, dash, run, jump, follow it
ignore the limekilns at Watton
they aren't important – all that matters
is this, a new, vital adventure
on towards Llangynidr and then Golivon
past Abergavenny and on to Penperlleni
on on on on on

2. Talybont-on-Usk to Llangattock

And suddenly it is summer and the world is slower,
a year lost like a coin dropped into the silty depths
as time seems to amble along the water's edge.
When sunlight lies down on the rippled surface
the roach and trout flick and shimmer
under the spotlight – sliding down to the cooler bottom
on the dim, dusky floor of the canal.
The best place to catch them is Brynich Lock, they say.
On hot days, whilst hikers sweat, defeated, on benches
the midges make the canal their private kingdom –
darting up and down with the urgency
that comes to those with only a summer left to live.
Each August there's a music festival in Crickhowell
and the distant guitar riffs nudge birds from the trees,
attempting to penetrate the recesses of brick banks.
The midges don't mind it much. They're too busy
carving the air up in infinite mosaics.

3. Gilwern to Golivon

Here the towpath lowers its eyes bashfully
each time it creeps under a bridge
perhaps it is because of the certainty
with which impatient bricks thrust themselves
over the gurgling void – or perhaps
it is afraid of falling masonry.

Later on, near Llanover, it skirts respectfully away
as the water steps gracefully into another lock:
an elderly statesman waiting for some bellboy
to lower its regal bulk into the earth.

Always an accomplice, a sidekick
chasing after the plough of brick and cement
that carves through the limestone of the Brecons –
rushing round corners, sidling up to tunnels
its tail between its legs, because it knows
it can never truly catch the water up.

4. Llanfoist to Goytre Wharf

Here the canal sighs and sags as it takes bends.

It has seen lifetimes of effort and muscle –
can you see where the bricks are weary
from the feet and hooves that have polished it.

A hard day's work lasting over one hundred years
bringing coal, iron ore, limestone from tramroads
down to Blaenavon, the forges at Garnddyrys.

On bright, spring mornings here
it feels like the coal dust has only just settled
and the air at last breathes deeply in relief.

5. Pontnewynydd Basin to Pontymoile

“We helped restore this section, see,
got it up in time for the Waterways Festival:
it was just grand to see it back in good nick.
After the best of a year we got those stones off the bed,
took Deborah months to clear that bloody bracken –
it was nice for us, now she and I’ve retired.
Gives you a focus, you know.
Used to bring down the thermos, go on well into dusk.
I always joke – since Bill went to the US
we adopted this canal, Deborah and me.
Next year we’re hoping to move it on
get it running down to Crumlin, maybe even to Newport –
there’s a marina going up there, you know.
We’ll keep going as long as it does, Deborah says.
That’s what she says, anyway.”

6. Mill Street lock to Arbercarn and beyond

But like all empires, the canal does not lead to glory
it leads to obscurity and silence and rubble.
Past the renovations and retirees of Pontymoile
the slow seaward march was long ago usurped
by the promise of industry less arduous –
at Cwmcarn the M4 runs through the canal’s drained bed
and when the ghosts finally reach the Cefn Flight
fourteen locks lie unlocked to the open air
Pontywaun was filled in for a railway embankment
at Newbridge lock doors and navigation rods
lie on banks like fish gutted and left to dry
Potter Street, Llanarth Wharf, Barrack Hill Tunnel
these places where water once flowed through men’s hands
and does not any more

The knee plays: Act IV

Sc. I: **Test 745: failed**

We gave the last dog in the world to a computer
what on earth were we thinking, watching
in clinical horror from behind frosted glass
as the skin was peeled back like an orange
ribs cracked open with perfect precision
the final butterfly emerging from its cocoon
probed with circuit-board curiosity, metal limbs
that could understand everything there
but could not manage to comprehend
what had been lost

Sc. II: **Listening to Hitler's speeches whilst exploring Warsaw** *after Wendy Cope*

It is tonight
and I'm blindfolding my way around the city
aimless as a moonbeam,
fingers outstretched, mole-nosing
from one bar to the next.
The BBC History podcast has the feel
of a slow but insistent weather front.
And it really isn't much of a poem, I know
but you have to admit
it's a fucking good title.

Sc. III: Lament of the Irish Lighthouse Keepers

Out on the West Coast

our beams burst in clear, precise

mathematical intervals.

Four months out, then

one month ashore. We live by

mathematical intervals.

We play chess via radio

move by move, considered, in

mathematical intervals.

Here we stay lonely. We

ward off sea-bound friends in

mathematical intervals.

Gurnos Roberts (1915-1997), recorded 1980

with thanks to the Forest of Dean Heritage Centre

*Me? Well, I worked in the woods
tushing and barking and felling the trees.
All hand tools then – and the horses, of course.
Oh, life was cruel to them back then. But remember
they was dangerous too – often break free, they would,
go charging down Cinderford street mad as mice.
Same clothes for wet and for dry, day after day
we were all weather prophets then.
Pigs? Yus, we all had two pigs, fowls, no sheep –
why would we? We already had bacon and eggs.
Yus, the gypsies would pass by. Good people,
hard working, tough as oak. With us in winter,
on to Herefordshire for hop picking come summer.
What's that? Oh, we thought we had it hard at the time,
we all did – grass is greener, and all that.
But now the world is changing so much –
no, looking back I wouldn't change anything at all.*

Intruders trapped in this wire-tap of intimacy
we lean in as the voice fades back
into the distance of his present.
But pushing past the crackle of cassette
to catch the final splinters of his words
we make out faint birdsong
echoing through a window long closed
and the deft flick of a match as,
somewhere across the distance of forty years,
a fag is lit.

Egypt bans sales of 'gilets jaunes' yellow vests in fear of copycat protests

headline from The Guardian, 11th October 2018

How do you stop France's violent uprisings
from spreading to your oppressive regime?

Easy, Egypt said:

you must strike at the very heart
of the people's social consciousness.

It's obvious to anyone
who stops and sphynx about it:
fashion.

Who would want to go marching
without that sexy trademark yellow,
a must-have for the next protest pinup
the racy Robespierre, the Gucci Guevara.

Well, that and a long, bloody history
of brutally oppressing any state opposition.
But mostly fashion. Honestly.

The historian lights up

This smoke will go down in history.

A nod, a tilted head: some secret sign
and the game begins.

Into the pocket, out with the hallowed packet
held aloft in a showman's flourish
my friend, in years to come

people will be singing about this, its wisps
passing into legend. They will tell in hushed tones
of the subtle way your fingers danced,

 spooling out the waiting rolling paper
 gently scattering flecks of tobacco
 the satisfying slot of the filter.

Know this: the firelight will flicker in the eyes of storytellers
as though reliving that first, virgin flick of the lighter.

Up to the lips now, breathe in, slow, slow...

that first draw is the best, always, you say
the devil's divine blend tongue-wrapping around
loosening the mouth, the muscles, the mind
it has the taste of good conversation.

My friend, this smoke will go down in history
but for now, it is just us and we are here, together
so let me have a pull, will you?

And now we are inside the mind of Nicolae Ceaușescu

The recent UN climate change talks in Poland ended last night with a rough agreement, but a move to put the trickiest issues on a back burner to deal with at a later date.

– from The Times, 16th December 2018

And now we are inside the mind of Nicolae Ceaușescu
or Pol Pot, or Idi Amin, or Robert Mugabe
not for the taste of blood in our mouth
the thousand thousand reflections staring back at us
from billboards and posters and shop windows
the slight tremble in the hands we shake. No: it is for the
certainty
that after autumn, there will be a winter
that our worldview need not be worldwide

4. without knowing
about the jagged
breathing of a world
larger than we are

and our fears only have to be human
rebellious students, struggling economy

3. to not have to think
about the sea levels
which rise to meet us
2. that when we wake up
tomorrow there may be
1. no birds to sing

Something beautiful in Café Nero

for Claud

In the antiquated palace of my memories
the frescoes are all in primary colours
and there are doors that I fear to look behind
for fear of structural collapse.
So when you strode back into my present
and pushed aside the walls to finally let in light
I was so utterly grateful that you were still You.
Glasses on, bag slung back, a smile in corporeal form.
We sat down and opened up the dam
swapped our pasts, our love lives and love of life
and found, with relief, that the waters hadn't ebbed
that our shorelines were still recognisable.
And I'm left thinking, thank god you're here –
there is too much tea and too much talk in this world
for you not to exist in mine.

Ulysses returns to Europe

I came home by another path
and everything was somehow different –
the buildings were taller
the people smiled oddly
and the sky was a foreign shape,
countries I thought I knew
echoed with imperceptible difference
when I called their names
and the water tasted funny.
It is ghostly and strange, after years
of wandering under a burning sun
to find your shadow has changed.
And each time you leave, you say, it is like this
a familiar face scarred and crossed
with a thousand unknown boot-prints;
the shop signs are in a strange language.
It is like the moon, you tell me
the same because it is never the same.
And a tired mouth opens to ask why
but at the last moment, thinks better of it:
perhaps it is just the way the world turns
perhaps it is worth leaving
just to return.

What I heard on the Last Cassette Player in the World

When I dug out the spools of tape
they were lying in a reptilian nest of noises
twisted in nakedness
locked in hibernation.

I fished them out, softly, oh so slowly
but still they woke up, disturbed –
I watched them slip and spool around my fingers
like creeping things.

In the unflattering truth of kitchen bulbs
they hissed and flicked, bending the light
eager to wriggle back into the earth
but I caught them before they escaped –
threaded them round a pencil
put their flexing forms in my coat pocket
and took them to the Last Cassette Player in the World.

I found it lying, slumped in its cage
a bird in a world that had no sky to spare
mouth open for a dead language.

Its curator and I fed the worms in one by one,
wiping the dust from analogue lips
finding film-coated buttons with a firm touch.
Then we stepped back. And softly, oh so slowly
it began to sing.

It sang	of Maoris	of engines thrumming
cockle-pickers	out on empty sands	I don't understand
what are	fish in the cracked	colour-seeped deep
sandpaper rust	voices long gone	hear this
men in shallow	graves buildings	so tall the sky is
pierced the sky	is too bright what	so many gone
so many we	did not think	here fingers on skin
clawing	holding knowing	listen
hhsss	hhsss	hhsss

click

The curator and I exchanged glances.
He nodded
and I collected up the strands of tape
that fell dead at our feet.
They did not move.
I placed them in my pocket
and took them home – to the garden
where I laid them in the cold earth
so slowly, so softly
oh so slowly

Praise for Ben Ray's previous work *After the poet, the bar*

These poems reveal a canny understanding of life and language – and the landscapes that give rise to them, from northern no-man's-lands to the circuitous paths of the Pacific island exile. In this engaging first collection, Ben Ray has built a fascinating 'future library of shades' which will haunt the reader long after the book has been closed.

- *Nancy Campbell, 2018 Canal Poet Laureate*

Ben Ray is a poet who is closely in touch with the landscape, and is particularly powerful in poems where he writes to a loved one, enhancing the natural tenderness of his work. Here is a wide-ranging and distinctive poet who has already marked out his territory – a writer to watch.

- *Jonathan Edwards, winner of the 2014 Costa Book Award for Poetry*

Touching and heartfelt, disarming; Ben Ray's poetry rings like music, chimes of place, quavers in passing time – and lets one feel the world anew.

- *Rory MacLean, historian and travel writer*

Praise for What I heard on the Last Cassette Player in the World

'Pure, bloody twenty-four carat gold' poetry of substance and huge variety ranging from words crafted like beautiful pieces of porcelain to laugh out loud punchlines. Wonderful stuff full of imagination and insight, tenderness and wit. – *Elvis Mcgonagall, poet & comedian*

Ben Ray's poetry has a finger on the landscape's pulse. Here are poplars that keep your best secrets, meanings that leap like salmon, and 'watch-tower words' that stand guard over familiar terrain. It's a gift to write about what's always there with such persuasive urgency: read this book, let its words transport you. – *Theophilus Kwek, poet & editor of Oxford Poetry*

Playful but profound, poignant yet humorous, vibrantly experimental and singing with lyricism, Ben's new collection is intoxicating. A joy of a book throughout that made me gasp and lose a breath or two – with startlingly original ideas and luminous language. – *Anna Saunders, poet, author & director of the Cheltenham Poetry Festival*

With poems inspired by pottery and places, history and holy isles, language, conversation, and current events, this is a collection with great breadth, width, depth, and height! The sheer range of subject matter is reflected in the forms of the poems, which are sometimes more solid, and other times less so, with pieces splitting, or seeming to spool, across the page, as if from a tape in that imaginary Last Cassette Player. Always clever, and consistently insightful, this is a cool as well as brilliant book. Ben Ray is a writer with time on his side, yet already with talent to spare. You should read this! – *Mab Jones, poet & presenter*

These poems are elegant as if hewn from marble, delicate and refined, cut by a master of his craft. – *Z.D. Dicks, poet, founder & director of Gloucester Poetry Society & Gloucester Poetry Festival*

Ben Ray uses modern events, in this case decimalisation, to develop parallels in modern poetry, especially within the second stanza when he harks back to the old coinage/sounds. Yet the new 'decimalised' generation of poets, with their crisp and new words, often find older poems did have a symbolic naturalness. When re-read, they often produce a nagging nostalgia when looked at now in this Brexit era. – *Torbay Poetry Festival, on Ben's award-winning poem 'The day they decimalised the words'*

I heartily agree with the writer himself and cannot enthusiastically praise his work enough! Let me say that his ability to communicate through his poetry is so incredibly effective for readers of any age that I use his book to teach poetry to my students, ages 12 to 18. I read his work to inspire me in my writing, as well! – *Bill Stevenson, teacher*



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