

**Extracts from *Unplugged at Café Atlantic - Waterloo Samplers No.10*
John McCullough**

The Cloud Makers

They competed for space,
played aerial chess, Zeus and Marduk moving
cirri like pawns; Frigg massing her flocks to trap
the boys in checkmate. Down below
you simply followed one side,
could only guess at the larger game.
A raindancer's honour was dashed
or saved on a whim, the giant hands loitering
before harvest or drought.

Then men flew to heaven.
Balloonists passed out from lack of oxygen,
were felled by gravity. Cloud names shifted
the sky closer, condensed the gods
into ice and water. Only the pieces remained –
Odin's cumulus castles or great herds
of white horses bursting free from their reins.

Now satellites draw nimbi on computer screens.
We use radar to gauge the heart
of a thunderstorm's plan yet we still dream
of makers, some architects behind
these islands or oceans above us
with their promise of change –
Wet prophets saying rebuild, rebuild again.

On Galileo's Birthday

I asked and whoops you bought a universe
from B & Q. A bowl of cacti, each one a fat galaxy
of spiny stars. Or are they more specific zodiacs?
Unyielding trio, do they steer our lives like Fates?
I can't remember life without them, imagine if we sifted –
or tried to sift – their sea of granite chips we'd find
only a puzzle of abstract roots, no graspable trace
of what keeps us awake on cold moonless nights,
plotting outer and earthly and inner space.

Being Professor Czermak

It's the ultimate peep show.
These smudges of black
on scientists' snapshots
bared DNA's double helix,
made cholesterol say cheese.

It can't have agreed with them,
the molecules concerned,
having their atomic integrity assaulted
by an x-ray beam,
the most unlikely of terrors.

And such a final loss of privacy.
Professor Czermak, in a similar case,
was so appalled at the photograph
of his nineteenth century skull
he could not sleep.

So when I blast you after work
with a stare fierce enough
to keep each curve of your cheekbones
and God-knows-what
locked inside me for years

you have, I admit,
every right to feel ambivalent.
For you're history now, another portrait
stamped as useful in a museum
that won't send you a penny.

No, not even a dazzling postcard.

Agathon

What do I remember?
That hangover from the festival,
a shared couch with the satyr –
sliding back from the argument
of his wandering eyes.

*The underlying motive of eros
is the permanent possession of goodness.*

Ah Socrates, but what happens
when the ladder to absolute beauty
snaps underfoot?
When you've reached the top rung
in what ways can you fall?

Poor shoeless philosopher –
they tell me you lie dead in Athens.
You leave behind no writing,
distrusting its distance
from the texture of speech.

All truth occurs in dialogue.

I agree but still maintain my lover
was the better orator that night.
More concise anyway.
I'm getting old but can't forget
waking the next day.

To find an arm on my ribs;
not sex but, in your terms, education,
a conference of touch –
two locutors with love stuck
somewhere between them.

In Plato's Symposium, the poet Agathon and his lover Pausanias both give speeches on eros.

The Lunar Society

Their modest plan was to haul the future closer,
for knowledge to spark the fuse of change
and spread the miracle conjured in their chain.
Democracy cooked up in flasks: bold, sonorous men
who argued but returned to what they shared,
stroking jasper amid the thud of pistons,
hiss of gases, tick of clocks. Not demons or saints,
they raised the lid on buried seas of fire, saw kingdoms
in a grain of quartz, their unfinished epics
blueprints for steering winds, towing icebergs
to cool the tropics and tame their winters.

They are real to me now as the oxygen I breathe,
the trains I ride past factories and canals, inventing
my own unmatched, like-minded friends,
the ones I'll tint the century with after peanuts
and whisky, our lives rushing furiously
towards mountainous heights, the last audacious experiment.