

Extracts from *A Tapestry of Absent Sitters* by Alan Morrison

Rainbow Road

'Routine is a beast to be slain' – *Vachel Lindsay*

1. *Burnt Orange*

Day unpeels.

The defunct department store drapes laundry
of burnt orange SALE signs out to dry.

Last flags of trade before scaffolding

abseils up to refurbish Co-Op

kitsch with IKEA-kitted flats –

ONLY THREE DAYS LEFT reflects

a brutal eschatology.

From carved Scandinavian chic

to oaky dark Slovakian café,

cave for singed light-sensitives

killing their cravings with slaking lattes,

cracked cadavers gnarled coarsely as

roughshod grooves on the chestnut counter.

2. *Khaki Green*

This thrift-road flares occasionally
with black and sea-green rainbows
on radical Saturdays.

Protestors parade second-hand placards

of lobotomised monkeys

to 'WHEN DO WE WANT IT?' *NOW* –

uncompromisingly grubby,

captured by the rustic crackle

of The Cowley Club's flaking khaki,

sanctuary for spliffing fringes,

wormwood door emphatically latched

like an anarchist tract – wood-rimmed display

of agitprop throwing pamphlet-thin shouts

at ear-phoned browsers mobbed by mimes

of muted porchway-sitters, dayevicted

tenants of the YMCA's

epic peeling pilasters.

3. *Deep Red*

Hope holds out at the squatters' pitch
abrading the land grab by
reclaiming lath and plaster empties:
the deserted cream and red Methodist hall
now sloganeers GOD HATES YOU THAT'S WHY
HE'S LETTING YOU DIE – STOP CORPORATE
SELL OFFS, Diggers with whorled dreadlocks
uphold the tracts of Winstanley,
and I, an unsocial socialist,
thank God for their ragged crop.

4. *Seagull Grey*

Cash-confirmands consult their souls'
overdrafts, genuflect to
chrome gods, hoping to gain Salvation
at 0% APR –
sins' atoning pins tapped in,
plastic transubstantiates
into tonguing notes; unleavened paper,
franked with false idols. Sudden rush
of endorphins: any purchase appears
possible from tilted views
afforded by giants' shoulders.

Rental potential shored in the moulded
shop-tops' seagull-shit grey.

5. *Acid Yellow*

Each day, the nicotine-stained same,
acid yellow as a stamp-licker's tongue:
Eternal Return at first hand
in daily routine, strait-jacketing
the spirit's intensity. Scraping
coppers only deemed tender when
dished out by cloudy shop-keepers,
but seldom exchanged by postal workers
of sub-contracted consciences:
sorting-office Protestants.

Trapped in rented versions of life;
crippled by credit; ambered in arrears;
bowed to standing orders; pinned-down
by debits. No traceable point to determine
the rights of life's short-hold. Small print:
a Braille that bribes our lives, along
with the Bank's pulped peppermint.

*Nights scrape perfection. The asthmatic tap
splutters on the basin's flannel tramp.*

6. *Cheapside Blue*

From sophomoric morning
wrecking-balls holler gun-shots
dismantling the bric-a-brac
of this rainbow-terraced town.
Carcinogens prove schismatic:
smoking bans abound while cars
are sacrosanct as the middle class.
Carbon claws our way to the stars.
Sirens remix the curfew chimes.
By the Council Board divided:
fly-tipping circuses of flea routines.
A nation of tenants and landlords
and sofa-surfers on ironing-boards.
Astute graffiti states: *Burning Times*.
*Who's to give the nostalgia-tagged
paraphernalia shops a quote?
Not the pencilled cheapside sky
smudging like a suicide note
in the dripping awning of the eye.*

Seeing the Night Entirely

i.

On the train from Norrköping to Stockholm
I trundle from Sweden's unadulterated sun
back to England's vaguer skies
and watery countryside. As I
leave this sprawling, laky kingdom
I'm already returning, struck sights snagging
on pines, spires, standing stones poised in
smooth postures amid a wood-carved carriage,
carpentered to share while travelling.
An absence of classed compartments; a view
afforded everyone, not just a kept few.

Sweden is shared: you see this in its vast
rambling green, un-hedged, unfenced – perhaps
how England once was before the land grab
chequered it – sprawling boundlessly, verged
only by polite interruptions of trees,
pine forests sprung in orderly numbers
knowing the pastures need space to breathe
and garner their luminous green.

ii.

Norrköping, no in-grown provincial town,
but blossoming post-industrial
with flowering warehouses, trickling wharfs,
paper mills, factories transformed
into old-world curiosities:
the custard-yellow Museum of Labour,
shaped like a steam iron, stands miraculous
on a canal; a tall brick chimney
sprouts from the calm waters; nearby
a man-made falls rustles its applause.

A stone-grey building mumbling a sign
Rättvisa Solidaritet Socialism
levels the eye on a pavement corner,
a provincial feature – polls apart
from every drawn-curtained English town's
backstreet-crouched Conservative Club:
Sweden has ever held the evener view,
politics and skies of a very different blue.

iii.

I've come to see through the neighbourly
ease of fey Sweden – its yellow, blue, green
and russet wood hobbit-houses, white-decked
verandas; friendlier, un-forbidding forests
soft-carpeted in moss; its wakeful nature's
summer insomnia, burring crickets
in the salmon-pink twilight of small
enchanted hours – that in vaguer England,
our blinkered eyes have invented night:
a dreamless stupor rinsed of ancestral
magic, fairies, trolls and elves – all still
alive in Sweden's shadow-dappled woods
where elks antlers crack like moving branches
through the trees – our own folkloric roots
ploughed to cloddish logic and chronic clocks...

in Sweden, this summer, there was no starless
darkness, I saw the night entirely there,
and now I wonder whether dark is just another
form of light our eyes haven't adjusted to.

Now Barabbas...

What did you have for lunch today?

- I don't know

You had roast chicken, didn't you?
And treacle pudding and custard.
What's the day today?

- I don't know

It's the same as any other day.
What did you do yesterday?

- I... saw my sons

No, that was the day before, wasn't it?
What did you eat yesterday?

- I don't know

We had salad.
Who was Jesus crucified in place of?

- Barabbas..

Mister Aspidistra
i.m. Harold Monro (1879-1932)

Hobo of broadsides, goblin contradiction
Among sunning Georgians. Absence-in-
Residence. Poet and shopkeeper. An
Obiter dictum in the blasting storm; gloom-
Lyrics aslant the lightning rain. Foxed and
Dog-eared, my copy of his orange volume.

Moderns scoffed at this sot in lapels, a matured
Oakly vintage with a hint of manila and
Nicotine on his tongue's bitter sanctuary.
Reclusive chaperone of shop-curtains, smiling
Out with stiff soldierly bows, a slight wave.

The Ghosts of Haworth

'Let's see if one tree won't grow as crooked as another, with the same wind to twist it'. – Heathcliff, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë

i.

Storming thoughts
no stones unturned
mice-feet pace
the ringing table
tossing minutescripted
stories
to Lilliputians
enraptured in the wainscoting –
rustle of hems
shingle of hemp
hissing the parsonage floor –
Banshees of Haworth
casting small shadows
green to pen spells
wrecking fraternal
quarry upstairs
in sheets' sweat and writhing.

ii.

Anne: We once had a brother called Branwell, I'm sure.

Emily: Our variable brother Branwell.

Charlotte: Variable even down to his hands,
each gifted its own prehensile will:

Anne: ...to draw with the right, and write with left

Emily: ...the scratch of the pencil, the crack of the quill

Charlotte: ...our ambidextrous brother...

Emily: ...a double-tasking marmoset...

Anne: ...a triple-headed prodigy...

Charlotte: In his place now seethes a ramshackle ghost
trapped between limbo and this cold shattered place.

Anne: We warned him not to fall between four stalls.

Emily: But he showed not the same fleet-feet as when
he'd scamp over the gravestones.

Charlotte: His sweat's all a-chill beading the rims
of his wire eyes

Anne: – hush! He might catch
our whispers upstairs and think them Banshees'
wassailing hushabyes...

Charlotte: He doesn't know whether
he haunts or is haunted...

Emily: ...as the wind knows not
if it blows or is blown.

Charlotte: The word infernal
is branded on his brow, its letters
patterned from the pox.

Anne: He who is no longer who he was born.

Emily: Thrown back to thunder from where he was torn.

Anne: Poor, poor Branwell.

Charlotte: Infernal...

Emily: Eternal...

All: tangled in bracken like a stag snagged by darkness
Emily: on the whistling moor...
[*Nine 'o' clock rap on the door:*]
Patrick: Good night my children –
Don't stay up too late...

iii.

Taciturn Patrick
paternal jackdaw
breaks the silence of his beak
with habitual caw
muffled behind his neckerchief,
its inching swaddling of his chin
the tidal mark his miniature daughters
use to tell the shored-up years
moaning through the dolls' house rafters...
Haloed in candle-glow
up the wooden hill
the myopic Parson follows the shadow
of a giant crow.

The ragged stairs creak,
the banisters groan –
boughs of a dark wood.

Don't stay up too late –
incantation to grate
at the insatiable chirruping
of paper creations.

iv.

Too late for the family's Chatterton
cliffed* upstairs, impatient for
failure – the artist's thrall –
knowing his shadow will cast no further
than the lamp-dabbed wall,
no trace of his gifts to out-trace him,
he paints himself out for the last time,
a ghost in the cracks on the canvas.

Charlotte: Trampled by scattering talent
Emily: ...too wilful, too firey, too green
Anne: ...nerves too rickety, under-ripe,
to take the strain of waiting –
Charlotte: scampering over the blunted causeway
of Parsonage headstones
Anne: ...his stepping stones
Emily: ...fire-feet knowing off by heart
All: ...each dip and rise and mumbling gap
Emily: ...between the leaning graves...

Satanic chapel-goer, fox-haired
disciple of Byron, de Quincy,
opium-puffed, burnt out to cinders

in the hot squall of sweat, needling,
burning sweat clumping his curls
to knotted thorns – soon he'll gulp
his bellyful from Lethe's dark bowl
a full tot of broth from the Ferryman's hands
bleached bone-white as his marble brow
thirst-causing soup for insuperable soul.

v.

In no time his sisters will follow.

First Emily; her paling dress-rehearsal
at Branwell's chapping funeral
swift as a swallow, stubborn, granitewilled
till the end, staggering downstairs
the day she slips with the sprig of heather
from her limp hand on the tattered chaise lounge,
dog by her side (the one she loved
so much she beat him) – crutching her lungs
till the moment she'd known would always come
soft, effortless as the harebells' thrum
on the winnowing moor.

Anne, only a season on
abroad at Scarborough's sighing sands.

Charlotte, even stalwart Charlotte,
gifted alone a taste of her own
immortality, would fly the nest...

...before the antique Parson passed,
ringed as a tree, a furniture part,
a hollow-sounding heirloom, now
snowy-plumed as an old barn owl
mummified in neckerchief...

Won't stay up too late...

vi.

The raised grave of the Parsonage
stares out the bitter wuthering,
the crooked headstones of the crags,
the darkening brow of tumbled moor.

Four stunted furs battered and bowed
by bashing winds, bark Atlases,
ballast the sky with tensing boughs –
as in seclusion's servitude
their minds, besieged, withstood the storms
and wore them on embattled brows.

[*cliffed: a Cornish expression for 'cast aside' or 'thrown away']