

John Pass / SEVEN POEMS

INVOCATION TO THE CHARACTER OF WATER

As today, past fate or motive
it falls

first light in the air
then accumulating weight, authority

I implore
for thinking, and the writing hand

snow's impartial emphasis, expansive restraint.
What to do short of shovelling?

Though friends brave the driveway for my party
and arrive!

And the laden firs, masters
of what, in one place, is attainable, strain
in their resins and sinews, their elastic greenery

to reply: a limb sporadically unsprung, waving . . .

Just so come spring my clumsy paddle stirs, missing the J
stroke. Somehow afloat, dissolute as a Long Sloe Screw
in the sauna (ice-dregs over the coals)
I seek admission at the membrane, agency
in every cell. Let the roofs shed

what they must in my hearing and the molds
be under my nose. Let me through

with the native women in the first canoe
into the Stikine's hole into the glacier.

And let me carry what comes to me
with equanimity, easily

with as smooth a countenance the coffins
sucked by the North Sea from cliff-face graves near Cromer
from *The Garden Of Heavenly Sleep*

as the up-river biffys floods in the fifties delivered
to Winnipeg on the Assiniboine.

Permit me the ancient, relentless return
of what has been taken deep and hidden.

I won't deny it. Nor the brackish bouquet
habitually acquired, particular
to where one wallows. A sip

or two of essentials is sufficient.
Certainly cataracts, be they directly

grief or pleasure. And the jocular creek
to knock the fisherman off his feet.

That swimming moonlight the night she showed me
our bodies' phosphorescence where we woke the water.

For my signature, your many inks.

I want to work and shape my way, but partially
I ascend and adhere to particles. Forgive me.
The disembodied babbling.

The bank collapsing and the silted flume.
The emissions stain on the marble lip.
The clear-cut bruise on the Naiad's hip.
The harbour's sheen that is not just pretty.

And the bathtub ring.
And the angle askew to the eye to things

plunged into you. That seem not to stand
on certainty. That waver.

THE LOST RIVERS OF LONDON

Imperial pavements
and the hard tack to trackless passage and power
over water. The antique lust for it. Its instruments

rusting in the shallows, their shadows (irony, nostalgia)
reaching still. Each advance sequestered
in its romance (horse latitude or elfin grot)

the tortuous recourse upstream
to Paradise, New World.
Somewhere spilling forth, perpetual.

Somewhere divided and apportioned
directions, moral purpose . . .
improbable real geographies emerging

Serpentine. That duckpond somewhen
an arm of the Westbourne, a finger
of the Thames. Lamented, oh

too easily. Hugo's sewers and Love
Canal one backwater backwash in the flush

steam-whistled in
of freedom's sweet facility. Fair sailing
down West's labyrinthine one-note whine, scream

of the coin-op social turbine.
Deep fluencies spun off toward

excesses in the air, element
all space and signal, hugely static

sexless and invisible.

KLEANZA CREEK

How will we get up Kleanza Creek
who deserve it least, road-dozy, teeth afloat
on liters of coffee? We gotta stop somewhere

and this is it, exquisite twist
of water from the miniature gorge, a sheen
of pool behind the boulder, a riffle across

this pristine gravel
back-filled and levelled for picnic tables, grass —
the facilities operator even now sweeping
the parking area.

Its beauty is a pang, a duty
we get free. *Fish me*, it burbles.
Take the trail. But ours is a serious

recreation, the camping with kids denouement:
motel-hopping home. Re-load the camera
and back of that, let poetry do it.

Poetry goes where no-one follows anyway . . .

me and that utterly mythical beast, the reader
dreaming a way up Kleanza Creek
for our arcane two-step . . .

last-ditch landscape sleazes wheedling
Show us, you'll be famous, really.
Open the cliff's cleft, the spigot

in the bedrock. Let's taste the salt-
lick in the alpine meadow

from the highway, the *open road*
before that delusion swung off at every exit
shopping

the next (some chalk-blue pot-hole
of the disappearing pick-up, the cast-off
gear, some well-bucket for the soul)

scoops me weeks later on a lake on *lack of*
a cutthroat sudden on my line, a catch, a whine

in my voice at, *what grinds me*
down is the lack of

get the trout in the boat and come
back to it: gracious, humbling

in-your-face reflection . . . *attention.*

CATCH AND RELEASE

You're not supposed to watch a tree fall. You have to turn your back to allow the spirit to escape. Trees have spirits. Everything has a spirit. – Mary Hayes, Clayoquot Band

A calm attends October's drowsy creek
suspended in the alder canopy
over the pooled, residual water.

In the bird noise, the sporadic rattling
down of a brittle leaf, you can stand long enough
for crayfish to emerge and proceed, experiencing

every inch of the streambed beneath —
their progress so deliberate and complete

to seem always destination. A shift
of weight to the other foot and there

we are too, self-aware not a second too long
for a view just wide of the minnow. What is it

causes that imperceptible
break in rhythm on the stair, the precautionary
countermanded half-step/almost-stumble

in my mental gait?
Here is thinking gone under bewareness

that nonetheless confesses to intrusion
of its shadow, and a stick's probe

near the reflex. Speedy in retreat
those antennae for trout-rise, the protruding

snout of the turtle, dimple of rain,
exorcise the dry spell, swing back

to the snagged fir in the roped-off area, anticipate
the night of wind and rain it will crash

through our sleep, the morning of splash
and hustle beneath the bridge we wake

with relief in the next world, the only one
alive to itself and our longing.

OWL CLOVER

for Solveigh Harrison

First anecdotal evidence, and the taxidermist's
ratty specimen, an outstretched wing, the hooks
of claw-needle extended, unblinking eyes,

a wood. We make a wood of the alder bush
back of the Lions' park coming into it quiet
in the dark with school children
to call owls.

We convene a seance in a no-ghost world, listening
to the tape-deck looping aloft
the hoots and whistles of the likely species:
pygmy, barn, saw-whet, great-horned and barred.

Our mesmerizing beams criss-cross in the tree-tops.

I don't believe an owl will come. They are not
deer in headlights to be stunned by our clumsy attention
who can hear a mouse run on packed earth
at a hundred yards, who wing at astonishing speed
through the densest cover, who must disdain
their static likenesses on ear-rings, brass
miniatures, Greek money . . .

our pathetic mimicry. Only the barred has spoken to me
in February fog or August starlight.
I like to think he knows the pun

in his name, chooses for amusement
to get me hooting. *Who-who who-ooo*

Who-who who-who-ooo. Who indeed? To fancy beyond
the wood, a moon, a salt-marsh meadow upland,
fields of the fodder my field guide tacks owl to
but doesn't explain. One panic-free, talon-less eve
for the rodent? A vegetarian moment, owlets

and elders silly as cats with catnip, rolling
and fattening like foals, in clover?
Some mollifying foolishness

in the unsheathed, soundless swoop
of disappointment, predatory sentiment
prattling after the cruel enchantment:

*Well, we didn't see one but it was fun
walking around in the bush at night.
Spooky, sort of. Magical.*

NOZZLE

Directed force is pleasure in effect
or promises, promises . . .

such that men cast massive
iron and brass hydraulics in pieces
mule-carted arid distances into gold country.

Every inch of Williams' Creek streambed
already worked down by hand to bedrock
the townsite risen fourteen feet
over tilled gravel

they rode the nozzles like battleship gunners
to smash to rubble the Barkerville hillsides
for more bright fleck in the sluices.

Directed force is a primary pleasure
though tethered to myths of effort, profit
and leisure for exercise, and slave

to subtler energies and engines, buffalo clouds adrift
in herds of slow migration from the coast
overlooked valleys greening
under the rhythmic swivel and kick of sprinkler systems.
Reaches of mist and rainbow above the timothy.

*The human metabolic scale
from panic to despond
is earthy only in middle registers*

*in the hands-on company of things
in campaigns of physicality
or that companionable delusion*

*of a place among them, our feet
on the ground, or our backs
to the warm barn shingle*

*the clouds a spacious reverie, a consolation
of release, and not the shapeless terror
of wild dissociation, vertigo*

*letting go
its trap-door, floor shadow . . .*

Here, take this pressure-washer spatula
of sheeting spray to the mud-cake on your trailer.
In build-up, hold-back, manipulation
of the tip, willed water cuts

to, caresses, the finish.
Re-molds wild status-flow.

SEA BLUSH

No poem in May
so late in our love affair
with the earth, that battered marriage

can be entirely shameless, fearless
to do her justice, presuming to extol again
redundant beauty. Quickening even so

in the sudden names, seasonally
forgotten, spoken afresh, it whispers *speedwell*
to the miniscule blue-white sparks on the path

or leans in with a sliding touch
to the long cool muscle of arbutus
(a steadying hold, crouching lower)

to see up close the mauve-pink flower
awash in masses over the moss bluff
meadows near the water.

Tongue in her name for each sundering first time
at sundown her look caught the sea's deep colour

in a held breath recklessly lingers.

