

Michael Crummey / DISCOVERING DARKNESS

*For we are men of yesterday; we know nothing; our days upon
the earth are as shadows.*

The Book of Job

All knowing darkens as it builds.

Tim Lilburn

'*Magic Lantern.*' (April, 1889)

Bound for Great Britain and
beset by evening calm,
sails sheeted slack and lifeless;
the likeness of stars on the water,
hard yellow berries not ripe enough
to be gathered
Passengers and crew above decks
avoiding the breathless heat of their berths,
everyone wanting to be
anywhere but here

Brought out the magic lantern
and slides bought when I was last
in England, set it aboard a table
on the foredeck —
every head turning to
the breadth of the topmast
when the kerosene flame was lit
behind the lens,
the Tower of London standing
on the yellow canvas as if
we had dreamed it there
together

Flashed up the Crystal Palace,
Piccadilly, the National Gallery,
then London Bridge,
the length of it shaken by
a rare gust of wind;
and the nearly-full moon rose
above the topyard,
the *Doune Castle* lying stilled
in its light like a photograph
projected on the water

LEARNING THE PRICE OF FISH 1876 - 1887

*'And now to make a start as a boy of
very little understanding.'* (1876)

After a single season jigging cod
I gave up on the ocean,
boarded a steamship bound
for Little Bay Mines where
I secured a position
picking for copper;
kept at it through the winter,
a long shadow working
effortlessly beside me
while my back was shaken crooked
by the jabber of pickhead on rock,
my hands too numb
at the end of a shift
to properly hold a spoon

In June I jacked up and went
back to fishing, shipping out
with a crew headed to the French Shore,
happy just to be on the water
after seven months discovering darkness
in the mine

Salt air like a handful of brine
held to the face of an unconscious man
coming slowly to his senses

~

'A hard toil and worry for nothing.' (1879)

Left Twillingate on April 15th after seals,
steering off NE through open water, arriving
in Quirpon a day past the Grey Islands April 21st.
Sailed from there to Green's Pond, then to Gramper's Cove,
dickering through slack ice until White Bay
where we came on a gale of wind and got raftered
between pans, the boat brought up solid
like an axe in a knot of birch.

Lay there a week getting short of provisions
and patience till the Captain decided some
would have to leave the vessel or starve,
sending six overboard with 2 boats and what food
could be spared. We marched south toward
Twillingate, hauling boats and supplies till
we came on a run of open water in Lobster Harbour,
rowing on to Handy Island before giving up for darkness.
Set out for a long day's launching and pulling
to Flourdelu at first light, the ice slobby and
treacherous, taking us through to the waist on times.
Next day on to Lacie, chewing handfuls of old snow
when the fresh water ran dry.

Our fourth day out we passed Cape St. John and
Cull Island where the schooner *Queen* ran ashore,
all hands but one coming across on a line
before the wind took her over. The papers reported
how they perished there, and published Dr Dowsley's
letter to his wife dated December 18th, 1867 —
*my dear Margaret, I have been out to see if there is
any chance of rescue but no such thing I would give
the world for one drink of water but I shall never
get it now We are all wet and frozen may God pity
and have mercy . . .*

I was sixteen years old, my first
time to the ice and I stared at the island as
we slogged past it, a bald crown of rock and
no sign of life to be made out there but shadows.

It was three days more past the Cape, trimming
the shore all the way through Green Bay nearly
blocked with ice; we didn't get clear of it
until Lading Tickle when a SW wind took it off
the land, we hung up our rugs for sails on the oars
and straightened them out for home.
Arrived in Twillingate on June 17th, our boots
sliced through with the rough walking
and blood still in our mouths from the snow.
And on the 18th our schooner sailed into the harbour
behind us, all hands rested and well fed, we had
a hard toil and worry for nothing.

~

'*The price of fish.*' (September, 1887)

I have had a fair trial on the fishing line now,
being 3 summers out from home, 2 summers on
the French Shore, 4 down on the Labrador,
and three trips this year to the Banks of Newfoundland,
and this is what I have learned to be the price of fish

Shem Yates and Harry Brown lost with the *Abyssinia*,
making through slack ice 60 miles NE of the Grey Islands
when the wind turned and she struck hard on a block,
the vessel split like a stick of frozen kindling —
May, 1886

Tom Viven out of Crow Head, his boat running
loaded down through heavy seas that opened her up forward,
going down just off Kettle Cove and a good trip of fish lost besides —
August, 1884

My last trip to the French Shore, Luke Brumley and Fred Strong
sent out to take in a trap set loose in a gale,
the rough weather filling their skiff with water
when they hauled up the span line, the two men
pitched under only a good shout from the *Traveller*
but neither one could swim a stroke —
June, 1882

Show me a map and I'll name you a dead man for
every cove between home and Battle Harbour

I am twenty four years old,
there is no guarantee I will ever see twenty five

~

EXPECTING TO BE CHANGED 1887 - 1894

*'On the broad Atlantic for the first time
to cross the pond.'* (November, 1887)

When I signed on the *Konigsburg*
bound for Italy with
a load of dry cod
I had expectations,
but I could not rightly say
what they were

We hove up the anchor,
sheeted our topsails
and my family waved me out
of the harbour
as if they knew they had
seen me for the last time

I expected to be changed
and I thought a change
would not do me
any harm

~

'Crossing the equator. Arrived in Rio Grande.' (1888)

Set sail from Spain April 24th,
arrived in Rio Grande after sixty nights at sea.
Discharged our cargo and proceeded up
the Port de Lego River for a load of horn,
hides and tallow, arriving July 10th.

In Pelotas fresh meat went for 3 cents a pound,
apples could be had for a good song
or a chew of hard tobacco and
we drew water over the side for all purposes.
Once our cargo was secured, the Port de Lego
carried us back to Rio Grande, groves of
green trees on the shore bowed so low
you could pick fruit from the branches
as we sailed beneath them; ripe oranges
went ungathered, dropping straight into the water
and floating downstream beside the ship.

When I was a boy I went aboard every boat
that sailed into Twillingate just to hear
the sailors talk; there was a man from Devonshire
claiming sight of countries where fruit is
as plentiful as cod on a Grand Bank shoal,
it seemed too fanciful a notion to put much faith in.
We stood on deck with buckets and nets
and we dipped them from the river by the hundred,
eating till we were sick of sweetness, stowing
the rest below for the voyage back to London.

~

*'Arrived in Hong Kong November 9
The histories of China.'* (1888)

Sailed into the harbour early morning
and made our ship fast to the old stone quay,
the Chinese coming down in hundreds to greet us —
a queer lot to look at I guess,
the men wearing braided pigtails
and the women stepping as if
they were walking on glass,
their stunted feet bound tight as a reefed sail

Went ashore after tea and received some peculiar looks
though I was turned out as well as a sailor can manage;
stopped into a bar where I checked myself
in the glass and found no fault to speak of,
perhaps it was my ears
they were staring at . . .

Dusk when I found my way back to the waterfront
and three parts drunk by then,
14000 miles from Newfoundland
to the east and west
and can get no further from my home if I wanted —
2000 years before the birth of Christ
the Emperor Yu divided this empire
into 9 provinces and etched
their borders on 9 copper vessels . . .

The stars came out over the Pacific then
and they came out over me,
only 26 years old and all the histories
of China at my back

~

*'Arrived in Odessa, Russia
Bonaparte at Moscow.'* (1889)

Winter defeated Napoleon.
Moscow razed by Russia's defenders
to deprive the advancing army
of food and shelter,
not enough wood left among
the ash of the city
to make a proper fire.

November fell like a building
hollowed by flame.

Hands and feet of the retreating soldiers
scorched by frostbite,
exposed skin of their faces
dead to the touch.
300 thousand men fell to
the cold and to hunger
on the long march out of Russia,
their frozen bodies on
the roadside like a knotted string
being unravelled all the way
back to France.

And Moscow standing again now,
spired and magnificent,
as if Napoleon had never lived.

~

'Observatory on Mount Pleasant' (1890)

Paid off a ship in St John, New Brunswick
and no work to be had until I got word
of a building going up in Mount Pleasant.
The foundation already down
when I arrived and the foreman
took me on as soon as I mentioned
being several years on the tall ships.
It was twenty stories high when we finished,
and I was sent up the pole to hook the block
and hoist the framing for each floor.
Each time up I could see more of
Lily Lake at the foot of the mountain,
the crooked arms of the apple trees
laid out in orchard rows,
and there was always a handful of nuns
saying the Rosary outside the convent below.
I waved in their direction from every story
but they went on praying as if they hadn't seen me,
perhaps it was my safety
they were bringing to God's attention.
Stayed on until the place opened in October
and the night before I shipped out
they sat me in the chair beneath
a telescope the size of a humpback —
for the first time I saw constellations
the way a saint perceives the divine,
almost clear of darkness.
When I carted my tools down the hill
those stars came with me, a branch of
ripe fruit almost close enough to touch.

'A hard looking sight but not lost.' (1890)

Now I have been on board some hard ships
but this one takes the lead of them all.
They say there was six men killed on her last voyage,
the Captain changed her name and still
could not entice a soul aboard before
my chum and me took a chance and signed on.
We sailed into Bath Bay and took on
a load of ice, leaving again October 22nd.
The following day a wind came up with rain and thunder
so we clewed up the foremain and mizzen topsails
and had two reefs in the mainsail when a squall
blew up and carried the works off in strips.
The Captain stood to the wheel shouting orders,
we let go the halyards to lower the foresail
and take in reefs but the ropes burst or
jammed around the peak block and the foresail
blew away in ribbons, along with the three jibs.
Only the spanker managed to stay up and
the Captain hove to, keeping her underway in
the storm so as to not be drifting for shore.
The sea came across the decks and took the rail,
the bulwarks and part of the upper bridge,
all hands were engaged at the pumps to keep
her afloat; there was no food or sleep to be had,
the galley and forecastle were saturated and
the fresh water spoiled, the men getting laid up
one after another with sprains and exhaustion
as we lay in that condition 74 hours and it would
try the nerve of a mule to endure so long without rest.
When the wind moderated we got her fitted up
as best we could, mustering some old sails
stored below, bending a mainsail for a foresail

and making way for Boston, swearing we'd never set foot
on a boat again if we were able to gain the harbour.
By the time the weather ceased there was only the Chief Mate,
myself and the Captain left sound to manage the ship
and we shimmied her safe up to the pier at last,
a hard looking sight by then, but not lost.

~

'Taking photographs.' (1891)

Carried photographic outfit aboard
for a voyage to Cape Town,
having purchased my own from
Mr. Waites' shop in London
where I worked several months
between voyages while lodging
at Lady Ashburton's House

Second week out I sketched off
the Captain, Chief Engineer and Mate
on the starboard side
and now have all I can do to
keep up taking pictures,
the passengers willing to pay me well
for my trouble

Two days off South Africa
met the four master on which I first
crossed the pond, the *Konigsburg*
bound for England —
managed a decent portrait of her,
broad side and set with full sail
so even if the oceans take her now
she is mine to keep

~

'Now in Africa among the Natives.' (1891)

*In vain with loving kindness
the gifts of God are strown,
the heathen in his blindness
bows down to wood and stone.*

Sketches in the old mission letters suggested
these people were grey, charcoaled,
unhappy shadows slumped and frowning.
I see now they are something altogether different —
skin the colour of stained wood
and teeth bright as the keys of a church organ;
hair as rich a black as peat moss, their voices
musical and muscular, echoing thunder and rain

God's will is God's will and if I once pretended to
comprehend a portion I have since given up the lie;
I've kept good company on Africa's shore,
on the white beaches of Brazil, in China and Ceylon,
it confuses me to have shared the kindness
of liquor and song with these when some
brought up under the sound of the Gospel would
see you dead before offering a drink of water

I thought the world would make me a wiser man,
but I am merely more perplexed —
I've learned to distrust much of what I was taught before
my travels showed me different;
the faces of Africa are as dark as a night without stars,
but they are not as blind as they are pictured

~

'Useful information the Holy Lands' (1893)

Desert the colour of winter sunlight,
a yellow that is almost white, shadowless,
constant shift of sand like
a tide swell beneath your feet.
Hills on the horizon as red as blood.

The Commandments carried down Mount Sinai
by Moses in sandals, his feet blistered
by the heat of God's presence,
lettered stone scorched by the sun,
his bare hands burning.

All of this was once under water —
mountains rose from the parting flood
like the Israelites
marching out of the Red Sea
to walk parched into wilderness,
sucking moisture from handfuls
of hoar frost.

I have spent my life on the ocean,
seven years now I have worked
on the high seas,
my hands blistered by the water's salt,
my tongue thick and dry as leather.
The desert was familiar to me,
I knew something of what it
demands of a person,
what it can teach.

I understood that it is mostly thirst
that makes a place holy.

~

The first part of the paper discusses the importance of the study of the history of the English language. It is a branch of linguistics which deals with the changes in the language over time. The study of the history of the English language is important for many reasons. It helps us to understand the development of the language and the influence of other languages on it. It also helps us to understand the cultural and social changes that have taken place in the English-speaking world.

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