

Let the river sing

A narrative poem written by
Quay Words summer 2019
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I

Let's walk through this old redbrick house, a place with layers of history, where we can find rusty fireplaces with brown tiles still caked with soot. We'll peer through glass at copper scales and tillet blocks, listen to the sounds of music, voices, drifting in. Gaze up at ornate ceilings where serpents with strange eyes writhe and plaster flowers bloom. Glide down the wide, grand staircase, perhaps noticing the way in sunlight, shadows fall across the sills. In late September we might glimpse the ghost of Samuel Pyke¹, walking on his knees. We might smell old damp and must, the faint scent of tobacco being burned, see straw spilling from a barrel onto an ancient floor, run our hands over brick walls where white paint turns to dust.



²It was different then. It's sad to see the Custom House like this. We took great pride. This was The Long Room – with a long mahogany counter. Downstairs goods were unloaded, open arches on your left, a dark hole where the King's Pipe burnt contraband tobacco. The quay was different too, a working place, a noisy, banging metal place. An old boy ran Butt's ferry, he was never paid, but kept the fares of two old pence. In the '60s, '70s, he'd come in every day, make himself a cup of tea. He was a lovely chap. Once the River Exe was frozen, I found him with an axe, trying to break the ice. The café over there was once the shed, where fish were stored in fridges. Lorries came overnight with fresh fish – haddock, cod and more. I was the last person to lock the door. It was 1988. I'd worked here twenty years.



And on through kingfisher-blue doors, past Russian canons, gleaming like black onyx in the sun. We might hear echoes of the past – boats and barges docking, men hauling goods onto land. The thud of horses' hooves on mud. Perhaps we'll smell the offal, dung, and bloodied water from the butchers which ran through these streets back when the quayside was a slum. We'll look up into a blue-bowl sky, see ghosts of larks fly overhead, remember how they filled bellies in a city that was starved of bread. We might see men from Brittany in berets, strings of sweet, pink onions wrapped around their bikes. See rack fields in the distance, rows of woollen cloth. See women pound serge in the river with hammers, brush it tenderly with teasel spikes.



³They call me troublesome. Perhaps I am. All I wish for in this life is to be left all on my own. When I shut myself up on Exe Bridge I stopped the traffic, stopped everything. I am not like other womenfolk you should see what I can do with a hammer and some nails. My pa taught me, God rest his soul. I had a job, as hermits often do, collecting tolls, repairing wood and stone when weather or the river wore it down. Not long ago in this city, they'd have burnt me as a witch. The things I have seen. It is why I wanted darkness. I have stared at stone walls crowding in on me, smelled my too-ripe body in that tight, small space. My skirts heavy with river mud. Listened to the river flowing underneath the bridge. They are coming closer – I feel it in my bones like winter – to knock down the walls I built around me. I will drop from this bridge like a stone into the river, let her waters hold me, take me home.

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A stroll past the transit shed which rests on pillars of cast iron, where once cargo was weighed on the King's Beam, where now in summer, notes of jazz float like dust motes towards the white underbelly of the roof. We might hear tapping feet, or laughter, glimpse the man squeezed into a football shirt balancing a tray of beer. And on, past dappled water that ripples like a metal sheet, past bars and shops, some hewn from sandstone cliffs. We'll stare into the river, ask whether it's black or green, watch a Coke can floating by, white feathers, riverweed. Perhaps, we'll say, the river's not a single colour, but a mirror to the quay: the silver of the clouds, terracotta buildings, sky. We'll pass brick-lined cellars which once held bolts of silk, wonder if the stories about smugglers and tunnels are true, watch gulls wheel in the sky, swans and cygnets dip their heads. Perhaps we'll see cormorants in flight, their sleek black wings skimming the water as they rise. Or snipe, grey wagtails, moorhens, the turquoise flash of kingfishers, or iridescent dragonflies.



II

I worked the lock at Topsham⁴ over fifty years, on duty all hours of the day and night. When a boat needed to pass through, I opened and shut gates. Not many women had the strength to do what I did. Some thought me strange, a woman, alone, my arms thick and strong as the branches you'd see floating in the water after storms. I had a husband once, before God took him home. The cottage? It was cold and dark, no running water, gas. Lit and warmed by flames. Like a tiny island, surrounded by black water. Anything I needed, I had to fetch by boat. And damp rose up, crept into everything – the walls, my clothes, my skin. Oh, I was never lonely – I had the rats and moorhens to keep me company, the chug of boats, the swish of water as they passed through. I was born and raised by the water, lived and died there, there was nothing else I'd rather do.



This is not my river, although not far from here I swam in moorland waters, jumped into plunge pools. Sat next to the River Dart, walked through long grass on the riverbank, on days I should have been at school. I became the River Dart – water moving over stones, a forest of green riverweed – I became the land around me, the way the young can do. This will never be my river, I'm just a tourist, passing through. This is not my river, although it's beginning to seep in, to fill my heart, my dreams, the flesh and bones of me. Tell me, where do the two Leats meet? Where do Atlantic salmon leap and swim? Where are the too-small bones buried in the earth, the clothes from those the Cholera took? Where did the Fairground families live? Where do migrating birds go to rest and feed? At what point does the canal become the river, river become estuary, estuary become the sea?

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The River Exe – sometimes she takes sacrifices. It's not all dappled light and kayaking. They drowned, you know, in these black waters, my son, and others, much younger ones than him. It's not just a dark history, but now, these times. They'd had too much to drink, slipped and went in. He was missing for five days; I knew he wasn't coming home. They found his mobile phone, wet from the river, buried in long grass. Grief like that, it never leaves. Sometimes I wake at night and feel the water rushing in, riverweeds tightening round my limbs, taste silt from the riverbed slipping down my throat.

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We'll pass the match factory, redbrick and green, dodge people riding bikes too fast. Perhaps we'll notice poppies, cornflowers, blackberries ripening in the sun. We might feel the wind that blows across the water stroke our skin, see bulrushes with moleskin stems, reeds, daisies, being choked by bindweed. We might see the Viking ghost ship⁵, with oarsman and a drum that beats the rhythm of the oars, see an angry Viking point towards the city with his sword. And past the weir, where the river turns from a sheet of steel into a waterfall, as though she's been asleep and softly breathing, then wakes up and roars. Here are the gulls, perched in a line. Here's the fallen tree. And on, past the Port Royal, all blue paint and pointed palm leaves, on past the deep, black river, on her way towards the sea.

III

It arrives at the Sugar House⁶ in lumps and loaves and we turn it into cones, which sit inside clay pots. The way this country eats it, we might as well be spinning sugar into gold. Sometimes I think of slaves, toiling under foreign suns – although they're far from here, our grey, damp lives – and wonder, is the sugar tainted with their blood? They might be no better than dumb beasts, but even beasts should not be whipped or worked to death. Of course, us poor of England are little more than slaves ourselves, working all the hours God sends us, from the cradle to the grave. I saw hundreds of them once – William of Orange⁷ rode up from the river to the city, with his entourage of blacks. How we stared at their skins, dark as the river at night, fancy turbans, white feathers curling from their heads like plumes of smoke. The Sugar Kings on these riverbanks sometimes bring them home – a full black, or a mulatto, with boiling sugar-coloured skin. Rumour is, these men on the plantations, they like to lie with women slaves, produce their half-breed kin.



Past giant mill stones, underneath a willow tree. This looks, we'll say, just like a tiny beach. Let's rest on stones in a cool river-breeze, before we meander back to the Customs House, see the river from the other side. Perhaps we'll notice the island in the water, filled with swans, its edge marked by a tractor tyre, curving like a smile. It reminds us nature isn't always wild. Let's sit here at the water's edge, listen to the river's secrets, listen to her sing.

III

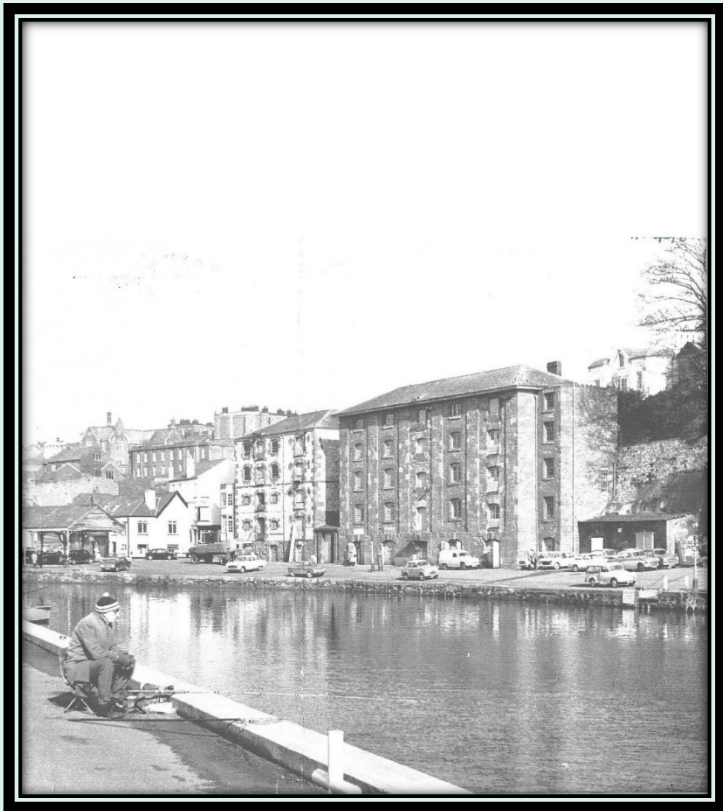
And on again, past Belle Isle Park, where trees' shadows stretch across the grass, over the green bridge which bounces underneath our feet. We'll see the names of lovers padlocked to a fence. We could continue on to Double Locks, where once day-trippers took whitebait teas and lovers went to meet, and on, to where freshwater greets the sea. For now, here are the boats, like beached whales, a place of rust and peeling paint. Perhaps, we'll say, they're dreaming of a freshly-painted life, out there on sun-dappled water. And on, through a sunlit square, where kayaks rest outside a shop, down streets, past a purple bicycle growing from a roof. Over tiny bridges, cobblestones, and we're back where we began.

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⁸Sometimes the children sleep with me, while I sweat and cough till first light comes. I turn my head to spit, stare at their sweet faces, dread what will become of them. The women remark how pale I am, how thin. How red my cheeks, how they can see the fever glowing through my skin. When I saw the blood – red daisies flowering on white cloth – I knew death was going to come. I've no husband, no family to take the children in. I thought the river air might heal me. Some nights I imagine carrying my babies to the river in their sleep, letting water fill our lungs. Each day my boy lights a fire at dawn to warm my bones. My girl, just eight, she cooks and cleans. On Sundays, the woman comes to take them to the Sunday School – washes their dirty, angel faces, tidies up their hair. Did my family come over the sea when the potatoes wouldn't grow, for this? I lie in darkness, black mould blooming on the walls, listening to the scratch of rats as they run through.

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/sca⁹: abundant with fish, abundant with history. We have walked along your banks, listened to your stories, traced your journey to the sea. Tell me, do migrating birds carry drops of your waters in their throats when they fly home? Do they sing of your secrets, fragments of history trapped in silt? /sca. I want to pick more secrets from the riverbed, like clams. I want to see the orange light of sunrise, listen to the sounds as morning breaks. I want to see you burning under fiery skies, see you silvered by the moon when daylight dies. I want to wade in your water, listen to you sing.



References:

- 1 Inspired by a story told to me by staff at the Customs House, included in the blog post about more history
- 2 An extract from a conversation with Roger Luscombe when we spoke at the Customs House during my residency.
- 3 Inspired by 'The Hermit', p12 of the booklet *The Exe Bridge, Exeter*
- 4 Inspired by Jennifer Rowland's research which included Women on the canal, (as included in the blog post about more history)
- 5 Jennifer Rowland told me about this. Apparently the ghost of a Viking Longship was last seen on the river in 1968.
- 6 Local families were involved in the Transatlantic slave trade, such as Samuel Buttall who owned sugar plantations in South Carolina, and a Sugar House (where sugar was refined) near Countess Wear.
- 7 I first read about William of Orange and his 'entourage of blacks' in Lucy MacKeith's book *Local Black History, a Beginning in Devon*
- 8 Inspired by the memories of Olive Johnson on the Exeter Memories site
- 9 According to Wikipedia, the name *Isca Dumnoniorum* is a Latin word that describes flowing water, in reference to the River Exe. The name seems to have originally meant 'full of fish.'

Acknowledgements:

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A note on the images:

All full colour images including those of the building and of Louisa Adjoa Parker and Roger Robinson are property of Literature Works.

The black and white images have been provided by Jennifer Rowland and were obtained as part of over twenty years of research for an exhibition entitled 'Reflections in time' which was held at the old Maritime Museum on the Quayside. Some of these images have come from the Exeter *Express & Echo*. This was an Exeter City Council project.