

hydrodaktulopsychicharmonica

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Matt Merritt

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Matt Merritt's second collection is *hydrodaktulopsychicharmonica*. His debut full collection, *Troy Town*, was published by Arrowhead Press in 2008, and a chapbook, *Making The Most Of The Light*, by HappenStance in 2005. He studied history at Newcastle University and counts Anglo-Saxon and medieval Welsh poetry among his influences, as well as the likes of R.S. Thomas, Ted Hughes and John Ash. He was born in Leicester and lives nearby, works as a wildlife journalist, is an editor of Poets On Fire, and blogs at <http://polyolbion.blogspot.com>.

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“The harmonica excessively stimulates the nerves, plunges the player into a nagging depression and hence into a dark and melancholy mood that is apt method for slow self-annihilation. If you are suffering from any nervous disorder, you should not play it; if you are not yet ill, you should not play it; if you are feeling melancholy, you should not play it.”

Friedrich Rochlitz, *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*

Prelude for Glass Harmonica

You wake late
to hear it, muffled and opaque

in a distant room,
or maybe only dream

that quicksilver music,
feel as much as hear it

playing up and down your spine,
your mind

tuned to a different pitch.
Each day becomes a search

for the frayed ends of what's
just been lost

in that instant between sleep
and consciousness, a melody you keep

twisting, turning, trying to make
new, pristine. Still it takes yesterday's shape.

Uchronie

“Though they [the stars] seem close to us, they are infinitely distant, and so *per consequens*, they are infinite inhabitable worlds: what hinders? Why should not an infinite cause (as God is) produce infinite effects?”

Robert Burton

English Literature

Pens pause one last time,
above the gaping permafrost
of the page

while outside
swifts are scribbling furiously
upon the thinning haze

and summer is swaying us
with the slow, emphatic argument
of the trees.

One chance, you get at this,
he is telling us from the front.
One chance.

Unquiet

Forget the verdict, speculation in the gutter press,
a service for family and close friends, or the tight
clusters of pilgrims round the spot where they found the car
and the condo he left unlocked and lit up like Christmas.

Sometimes, late night, the phone rang
and I answered to find unfinished business
strung silently between us in that heartbeat before the click

and purr. And twice, in later years, I saw him out there.
First, in the migraine-light of mid-morning,
blinking back an evening of cheap local wine
in a town not twenty miles beyond the border.

He was wearing his hair longer, and his face was leaner,
harder, but even as I reached to smooth away inconsistencies
he was gone into the colour and sway of the market. Then

again, in buzzard weather, way out on the flats, when our bus
slowed for some wreck, he was driving an oncoming truck.
And, of course, this time eyes met. His rewrote the story so far
for me, while mine reflected back his original edit.

The American version

of this poem contains several ideas, concepts and tropes rejected from this, the original draft, plus a quite different calibre of wit,

designed to explode and flatten on impact. The packaging is largely the same, but the text does feature a number of innovations

intended to heighten your reading pleasure and exclusive extras available nowhere else. It can be seen as therapy, essential self-expression

or job application. It is bigger, of course, and louder than anything you are used to, and should only be read in the appropriate location

using the approved mindset. It is 100 per cent natural and exclusively tailored to local tastes although readers should note that it may

contain traces of irony. People who like it have also liked this poem. On no account should you conclude

that you can live without one or the other.

With Immediate Effect

If you ever
created an imaginary country as a kid
& elected yourself president for life, in an uncontested

contest, & charted every contour
in dried-out Woolworths felt-tips,
named mountains & towns in your honour,

& wrote & rewrote history to show yourself
founder, victor & visionary, & ruled
with the arbitrary hand of the middle-aged & incurably lazy,

watching suns go down beyond blue woods
from your summer palace in the piedmont;
if, during those balmy salad days

following the gala opening of the first permanent
high-speed link into the interior,
you ever called together

your most trusted confidantes to admit
that the years of plenty & prosperity
were built on shifting sands,

that the hordes were massing on your mountain borders
& a towering wave was poised to drown
the rich alluvial plains, but that

you'd called shotgun on the final seat
in the eccentric inventor's lighter-than-air life's work
– then you'll know exactly how he feels right now.

Uchronie

World broken by countless horizons. No light or sound
flows over them. Swifts scythe rents in the present

momentarily, air crackles and closes in their wake. Wait
while wind harps on wires. Symphonies of electricity

and shadow play behind suburban curtains.

Mirror-fronted new-builds placed face-to-face

make infinity, hollow earth wracked by rumour
of alternate existences. Walls between lives thin

to near nothing. Suspect the survival of stations
never stopped at, dayglo line-workers in on the secret,

while trying to map points of divergence, signposts
to each new reality. Back up on the street,

late arrivals resonate the heart's cage. Still
they keep coming, wiping the dreams from their eyes.

A Fixer-Upper

The cracked quarter-light open all night,
so long before dawn we are woken
by the babble of broken drains and grass-filled gutters,

scent of the cherry trees' blossom litter.
The small room stale with unmade love,
still stacked with alternative versions of past

and future, to pack or unpack being to admit
one or the other. Elsewhere, everywhere, potential,
evidence of an effort we know we ought to make.

Doors to stain, floors to strip, a handful of tiles slipped
from the roof that came unscathed through a century of rain,
pollution, pea-soupers and the Blitz. So this? This is nothing.

Farewell, fantastic Venus

sister planet in our fondest imaginings,
closest of kin who yet held herself
coldly alone in the glare of the sun.

Farewell Earendel, bright son of the morning,
Phosphorus, Lucifer, fallen from heaven.

Farewell Astarte, Ishtar, Aphrodite
– all of you long-worshipped girls of the evening.

Farewell faithful muses, metaphorical standbys,
the slant rhyme we reached for at Earth's every turn.

Farewell easy analog, co-opted to our causes,
your face made and remade, but always in our image.

Farewell perpetual, cloud-shrouded gloaming,
the long-dreamed memories of unendurable light.

Farewell you all-in-one, elusive Eden,
your cloud-shrouded forests and unfading flowers,
sun-seared deserts and wind-scoured canyons,

our words now weightless in the face of your strangeness.
Farewell teasing sibling, farewell unborn twin.

after Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison

Halcyon

You found the feather and brought it home,
a charm against the longest nights,

but dulled by dust or
washed out under electric light

it lost its lustre,
stubbornly refused to ignite

to that fabled bolt of blue-sky lightning.
I found you there, hefting

it in your open hand,
wondering how such a tiny thing,

weighing as much as a few grains of sand,
could ever have calmed the heaving seas

that leave us cast up on this strand,
the past submerged, the future flown.

Treaty House

Here's the hallway, the ante-room
where blood cooled and settled in the system,
and walk-outs ended with a tear trapped
quickly against the cheek. Like that.

Then the living room (forgive all the gaps –
souvenirs snatched by bit-part players).
Behind these bamboo blinds, prayers
for peace, then covenants and compacts

that satisfied no one. And the rest.
The furniture, what's left, fashionably distressed,
and that spot on the windowless landing
that would stay hot long after the storm broke.

Dio Boia

A curse, literally “executioner god”, in some northern Italian dialects

Not that he is one
for anything too public or exemplary;
tumbrils, gallows, gibbets
or a cloud of doctors
around a chair festooned with wires.

Much more the type
to abandon you to the badlands.
Howling emptiness, fierce skies.

Often, you’ll forget the sentence
entirely, until you arrive home one day
and unlock the sun-blistered front door
to find the history piled up behind it

and him, patient in the easy chair,
toting the tools of his trade.

Lyonnesse

The usual place, then? A corner café
in a previous life, but now a near-empty
bar, all flat-pack tables, laminate floors,
leather-look sofas. This suburb where

the house sparrow is still holding its own
among the repossessions and buy-to-rents.
And I'm deep in conversation with myself,
finally getting on with my past. Still time

for you to arrive, though, for the old world
to be hauled up intact, fresh and dripping,
the plane trees green and neatly baubled,
the wide streets clean of exactly what drowned it.

Your Search Also Found

Meanwhile, you are walking away
from the rodeo, bruised but still laughing
with all the other clowns,

you are spending your every offline minute
building the car that will revolutionise lives
and save the ailing planet,

you are Angry, of Anchorage,
unable to find words that do justice
to this latest injustice,

you are back on the street by mid-morning,
pale moon a slice in the gin-blue sky,
head full of steam, a few quid short

but with daylight pouring through your eyes
and the neighbours still suspecting you
of knowing something.

Things Left In Hotel Rooms

Smiles and grimaces, of course, stranded on the shelf in the bathroom, with its skyline of coloured plastic filtering the sullen strip-light to washes of green and burnished gold. The shape of troubled sleep, cooling and hardening in the unmade bed. Half a pair of spectacles. Three glass eyes. Once, a wooden leg, and all the stories that go with that. A poetry of pseudonyms. The ghosts of Saturday night. Scattered like fox-kill across the floor, the eclipse plumage of the adult female. Unfinished novels and the best intentions. Clichés, cringing, ashamed of their redundancy. Threadbare excuses, glad of the company. A mobile phone, battery flat, and the air charged beyond its limit. An ever-expanding universe of dust.

Request Hour At The Numbers Station

“For 30 years, intelligence organizations have allegedly broadcast one-way messages to their agents in the field via shortwave, and the transmissions happen to sound weirder than any Stockhausen score or minimalist electronica you’ve ever heard – a child’s voice, or the obviously synthesized intonation on the Lincolnshire Poacher station, named for the folk song accompanying the numbers.”

Salon.com

For those born too late for the romance of radio, the magic of the lighted dial, to huddle under quilt and candlewick listening to Hilversum, or ships anchored off East Anglia.

For those still bound to the old routine – curtains drawn and door double-locked a half-hour ahead of schedule, then trawling the short-wave for her grey, metallic drawl.

For all you sleepers through those long winters of nations, the mad, bad, fêted and forgotten, left waiting for the word that never came.

For all those out there who know they’ll never know, who harbour no delusions about cracking any code, who’d hate to hear the climax of a never-ending story.

For those still lost amid the fizz and jitter, the hiss and twitter of far magnetic fields – *oh ‘tis our delight on a sbiny night in the season of the year.*

For all those this finds, face-down on the duvet, or dead-eyed in the easy chair. ¡Atención! ¡Atención!
Of course, we’re everything you suppose we are.