

BRIGHTWORK

[extract]

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Slipway

Your other names are less lovely to me – boat ramp, launch, boat deployer. As the rain slips in, sluicing over silt and sawdust in the harbour, I think of slippages, how your name could slip to skidway, or siltway, or saltway, or softway, or tiltway. I've seen you slide into the water, lowering yourself with an easy song, a sweet whining, a slow clanking; I've seen your wooden posts sink deeper like fins. There are other lovely things about you: your timber cradle, how you hold the hulls of boats so closely, how you keep your chocking stable, and whistle at the sight of a wooden deck. They call you a Heave-Up Slip, but the only heaving is done by the men around you, who lower poles, wind winches, puff and glance up at the sky. You are serene, slipping into the water with the ease of a seal from a rock, moving your great body through the harbour, stretching like a spine, singing your sweet, sweet song.

Say *Elbow*, Say *Heart*

Spritsail, butt block, camber, centreboard,
aligned ribs, apron, gaff rigged sloop, breasthook.

The boatbuilders balance by curved pieces of timber
(oak for the keel, pitch pine
for hull planking, larch for masts and spars).
They let language fall from their tongues,
let it shape the movement of their hands.

Chine construction, scantlings, sap wood, rowlock,
topside, capstan, bowsprit, fender, jib, footwell.

I say *elbow*, and they think of the curved piece
of frame at the turn of the bilge, I say *heart*,
and they picture the centre of a section of timber.

Pintle, peak up, planking, rabbet, rigging,
oakum, middle futtock, limber hole, lodging knee.

The language is worked into the wood as they move,
mahogany murmuring with the sound of *canvas*,
carlins, *clinker*, *coaming*, *cradle*, *crook*,
taking on the shine of *seam*, *scuppering*, in place of varnish,
settling down into the hull of the yacht soothed
by the words *starboard*, *spiling batten*, *shutter plank*.

Chocks away, *heave-up*, *nearly there* they call out
in their sleep, empty hands grasping rope,
lidded eyes imaging the sight of a red hull inching
onto a slipway – and as the dream fades away,
and the sun eases up over the harbour,
the words *brightwork brightwork brightwork*
lap at the corners of their rooms.

Barnacle Oblong

Having been told by the boatbuilders
that there is no name for the hollowed space
between the keel and the rudder,
for that oblong space that is like the body of a fish,
the space that peeks out behind the white and aqua
hull of the boat that Jasper saved, the little hillyard,
the little 9-metre hillyard named Puffin,
having been told that the space is for a propeller,
but that there is no name for the space,
I cast around and ask the boatyard strollers,
the visiting tourists, the women with pushchairs,
the men with long cameras, the children with caps,
what they might call that space, standing next to
Win's Clair de Lune, that beautiful white boat
with the peeling hull, the rusting rudder,
and that unnamed space peering out behind,
and they say, laughing at first, looking round,
rudder-hole, prop gap, propeller housing,
and Andy, passing, says *wiggle-space, spin space,*
and Julie says *prop shaft exit,* sounding technical,
and then serious men who pass say *propeller aperture,*
rudder gap, and one wonderful woman says
The Void, and walks off, silently, and I think *moon void,*
and a laughing man says *The No Idea,*
the nautical gap, and another man says it looks
just like a bow, an archer's bow, and then words build
and pour: *boat crescent, hull crescent,*
The C, The Cake Slice, rusted teardrop,
interrupted moon (I think, as someone says *moon,*
then *moon cut*), *The Reverse D, The Knotty Question,*
spare space, spin spot, Phillip, Knobber,
and one woman who used to be an English teacher
says *aerated vista,* and one man, scratching his head,
says *The Hole & Gap,* like the space is a pub,
a beloved space, and a passing French woman says
l'aileron, the word lilting out into the air,
and the German girl pauses, thinks, says *das Hörnchen,*
and the man she's with says *back wing,* and now
the boatyard is alive with words taking wing:
media luna, navigation alcove, pickle moon,
sickle moon, propeller crevice, cor blimey,
The D-Space, thrust capsule, half moon,
and I think *griddle, barnacle oblong.*

Rain

After Francis Ponge, 'Pluie'

The rain, in the boatyard where I watch it fall, falls at very different speeds. By the slipway, it's a fine intermittent curtain (or lacy net), an implacable but relatively slow fall of probably quite light drops, an endless listless precipitation, an intense fraction of outer space. Near the right and left walls heavier drops fall sonorously, individually. Here, they seem to be the size of a full stop, here, a pea, elsewhere almost a marble. On the jambs, on the window ledges, the rain runs horizontally, while underneath the same obstacles, it is suspended in convex diamonds. In accordance with the surface of a little zinc roof, it runs in the form of a fine tablecloth, shimmering due to the varied currents set off by imperceptible undulations and wrinkles in the roofing. From the adjoining gutter, where it runs with the restraint of a shallow stream, it suddenly tumbles in a perfectly vertical, roughly plaited trickle to the ground where it shatters and splashes up again in brilliant needles.

Each of these forms has a particular speed: each creates a particular soundscape. The whole lives with the intensity of a complicated mechanism, as precise as it is reckless, like a clockwork whose spring equals the weight of a mass of vapour in precipitation.

The peeling of vertical trickles on the ground, the gurgling gutters, the minuscule gong beats multiply and resonate all at once in a concert without monotony, not without delicacy.

When the spring is unwound, certain cogs continue to function a little, turning more and more slowly, then the whole machinery stops. Then as soon as the sun reappears, everything is eclipsed, the brilliant apparatus evaporates: it has rained.

Underfalling

It is a gloriously wet day:
rain thrums on hulls and hoods,
batters hatches, haunts heels
and heads of sails.

The boatbuilders drill,
saw, patch, plane, hidden
by the plastic-covered hull
as the boat sways.

Scantling

When I next lift my mother in her hoist,
into the air as if she's a heavy stone,
I'll untremble my hands, turn her voiced
cries of pain into the sound of waves, blown
back against the shore, and conjure
my secret boatbuilding words: *scantling*,
roperoom, *crab winch*, watching her posture
among the scaffolding.

My mother is a climber, up the mizzen mast,
checking the trim of the boat, the lie
of the land, the weathervanes, the forecast;
and that sound? – a seagull cry.

Cradle, *taffrail irons*, *spunyarn*, *ship's bell*:
around us moves the briny sea swell.

The Dredger Paddle

The BD6 dredger paddle is gently rusting, is gently resting by the powerhouse tower. Once a scraper of silt, a heavy jaw in the river, the dredger paddle is now a spotted masterpiece, exhibiting its many variations of rust freckles and salt teardrops. Its dots gather under the iron angles, darker and heavier at the top, speckling down like rain, turning from almost-coal-colour to russet to orange to the slightest suggestion of pale blue. Its temperature varies, depending on the weather: it can scald or it can cool. Its teeth, meanwhile, rest harmlessly, siltlessly, on the ground: while *corrosion*, from the Latin *corrodere*, might mean *gnaw through*, there is no more river gnawing, no more silt swallowing, only the slow turning of iron to mottled freckling, to rusted speckling . . .

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and after that, it's done and dusted,
done and rusted

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Slipway Song

No other patent slip can sing the same song. It begins high-pitched, siren notes let loose in silty air, all arching of vocal chords and sly sideways glancing. Soon, it is underset by the rhythmic clanking of the not-quite-round wheels sledging down the rails, a sweet friction, an acoustic tumbling, an unwinding clinking of slipway soundbits. A regular noise whined and sung over, the sound of grease and movement. And *eeeeee-eee-eeee-eeee-eeee* ribbons its way into the harbour air, a *nails-down-the-blackboard* sound that curls itself into the ossicles of boatbuilders and passers-by, a *nails-down-the-blackboard* sound which is nonetheless not unpleasant – fragile, singsong, closer in effect to a cat’s purr, although without the deeper timbres. *Clink-clink-clink-clink-clink*, *ting-ting*, *ting-ting-tingtingting*, *a-dingding*, *a-dingding*, and always accompanied by that rolling clank, redolent of the noise of bedsprings and bedposts when they are at their happiest.

Bedsprings and bedposts, yes, but the sound could also be that of an orchestra tuning up, violins tucked into shoulders, strings exposed to air and then to fine brushings of horsehair. The shiverings of sound overlap, braid together, form plaits and tresses, resonate against the red brick walls, lie alongside the water and murmur over it, only a moth-wing’s worth of distance between the sound ribbons and water ripples. The noises are louder, more irregular, as the boat is pulled up, more faltering, more questing, more waiting on the movements of boatbuilders as they tug and deliberate and squint and communicate. Their to-ings and fro-ings are echoed by the slipway, absorbed into its woven fabric of silt song, the lift of its melody, its mechanical mutterings. At its lightest moments, the song can be felt in the word *wishbone*, the underwater contraption which holds the wire to the winch; the song is also in *wire*, in *winch*. Like the acoustic patterning of rain, this song is without monotony, not without delicacy – and at the moment of playing, the harbour is graced with double waves, as the boat’s waves move in synchrony with the slipway’s sound waves.

‘sans monotonie, non sans délicatesse’ – Francis Ponge