

9 September 2022

On board *Manannan*, sailing to the Isle of Man. On all the TV screens, endless rolling coverage of the death of the queen; fixed banner headline at the foot of the screen, THE QUEEN DIES. Speeches in parliament – the sound isn't on but there are subtitles, probably inaccurate. Suddenly remembering a passing reference in 'Through the Panama', searching for it, finding it, an odd echo across 75 years:

Nov. 19 – or 21? The French Government falls: our little princess is married. Gallantly, the French crew drink health of Princess Elizabeth.

Bryan tells me that his daughter had her baby – a girl – in the early hours of this morning. A new granddaughter for him. People dying, people being born; the rhythm, the cycle, we think of as endless, something that will always continue. But will it? On today's *Guardian* front page (I use the term 'front page' even though I'm looking at it not on paper but on the small screen of my phone), below all the coverage of the death of the queen, a section titled 'Headlines', then 'Environment: World on brink of five "disastrous" climate tipping points, study finds'. *On the brink of* – this idea that we are almost at the point of something but not quite; yet the subheading, smaller, reads 'Giant ice sheets, ocean currents and permafrost regions may already have passed point of irreversible change'. ' "The Earth may have left a 'safe' climate state beyond 1C global warming", the researchers concluded'. So not 'on the brink' but already past it, beyond it. Already into a different reality, only we can't recognise it as such.

The ship, with its fast jet engines, moves on through the blue-green water. Over on the horizon to my right, another windfarm; and an array of rigs and platforms whose purpose, as usual, I don't know. The mix of technologies and purposes to which we put the sea...

THE QUEEN DIES. (I think of the Consul reading *El Universal*, being startled by a headline: '*Es inevitable la muerte del Papa...* As if everyone else's death were not inevitable too!') Such a strange use of the present tense. As though the queen's dying is an endlessly ongoing event – as, of course, in a sense it is, at least in terms of media coverage, and the concept of a ten-day period of official mourning. The queen dies, and dies, and goes on dying, is publicly held within her dying, until that dying is officially declared over. (As Beckett's Malone dies, and goes on dying for the length of the book.)

The queen dies. The ship sails. – But that suggests a single, time-limited action, the action of leaving port and putting to sea. It seems there ought to be a different word for the ongoing event, or process, of being at sea, the ship's sailing in the sense of crossing the sea. – And of course it doesn't sail anyway, there are no sails (as Lowry comments of the *Diderot*). The language holds a ghost.

(Subtitle on screen: 'Let us take you to the Tower'. *The lower is the true prison...*)

The language holds a ghost because we want it to. Because we want to believe that a ship still sails, not that it forces its way through the water with diesel engines. Even though, sitting here, I can hear and feel those engines, and if I went out onto the deck I would smell the exhaust from them, and see it, pumping out into the air.

And we also say ‘That ship has sailed’, meaning it’s too late, the point for some possible action has passed. The impossible conundrum for the climate researchers, quoted in the report: ‘We’re not saying that, because we’re probably going to hit some tipping points, everything is lost and it’s game over. Every fraction of a degree that we stop beyond 1.5C reduces the likelihood of hitting more tipping points.’

Always more tipping points. It’s never, quite, game over. As the fruit machines just a few feet away from me in the passenger lounge give their encouraging electronic trills, saying to the players *come on, keep playing, have another go*. And on the screens, the text, in brackets, (NO COMMENTARY) as 96 rounds are fired in a salute for the queen.

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10 September

Swimming at Port Erin. When the sunlight strikes the water, it’s beautiful, the surface stretching away in front of you a rippling play of blue and green, the body of the water when you look down through it glowing green like a jewel, your hands taking on a golden colour inside the green, and the sun’s warmth through the water reassuring. But when the sun goes behind a cloud the water turns almost black as you look at it, black-green, blocked to light, so that you become instantly uneasy, unable to see down through the water – and colder. I swam out to the float – only about thirty yards probably but still I had to work up the nerve to do it, to consider whether it was definitely a safe thing for me to do. Usually in the sea I stay in my depth and swim back and forth, parallel to the beach. It felt quite different, heading straight out, knowing that I was relying entirely on my ability to keep swimming. At the float I felt uneasy – something about the bulk of it looming over me, the cold shadow it seemed to cast, the anchor chains disappearing out of sight under the water. I let go and swam back to shore, consciously swimming as long and full a stroke as I could to make certain to get back into my depth before I might become cold or tired or get cramp. Such a short distance, and a flat calm, and the water not too cold, and yet I felt wary, cautious, aware of my own limitations in the water. It must have felt very different to Lowry, a strong swimmer, accustomed to swimming in very cold water, to diving straight into the inlet from the pier of their shack, unafraid, relishing the shock, the contact – ‘it was the cleanest, coldest, freshest, most invigorating water I had ever swum in’. I relish it too in a way but I’m also afraid, recognising that I can only have a very limited encounter with this element. Yet there is a process of *learning* how to swim in cold water, outdoors; it can be learned, Liz and Alison and the other outdoor swimmers attest to that.

[Evening]

Back in Douglas, watching the huge orange moon rising out of the sea, people drawn to the promenade railings, taking photographs on their phones. Drawn to watch as they must always have been, compelled by the strange alien beauty and power of the moon, the silence of its rising, the deep glow of it, paling as it rose higher in the sky, away from the horizon, the reflected glow of the invisible sun.

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The heritage steam train, on the narrow-gauge railway, which we took back from Port Erin to Douglas. The smoke from it was filthy, dark grey-brown. The man said they were burning coal shipped from Poland, because it’s the cheapest. Ben said he’d spoken to a local woman

who said this was recent, that up until a couple of years ago the smoke from the train had been cleaner, whiter, because they were burning better-grade coal. But the irony – here we are on the island talking to all these people trying to cut waste, control carbon emissions, and enjoying the ride on this pretty little train, burning coal for no reason really but nostalgia.

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11 September

At Laxey. At the entrance to the mine, an information board with a huge blown-up photograph of a group of miners, and alongside them, four men in business clothes, waistcoats and hats – managers? overseers?. The photograph dating from the 1880s, 1890s maybe.

The faces of the miners, their expressions. There seems such a challenge in their eyes, across a century and more – *Who are you? What do you know about the conditions of our lives? or about our strength, our camaraderie?* Some look fierce, aggressive almost. Some are grinning, cocksure. Others have wry smiles; others still look closer to pleading. One young lad with beautiful cheekbones, the light catching the planes of his face – he looks like one of today's male models. Another young man, with a softer, prettier face, his teeth just catching his lower lip, a hesitant expression – he's placed the tips of his fingers gently on the shoulders of the much older man sitting in front of him. It seems a gesture of tenderness, protection. Could the older man be his father? There's a similarity in the eyes, the shape of the brows. The older man has a bushy white beard and side-whiskers; his eyes are shadowed by heavy black brows but there's pride there, doggedness, his arms are folded across his chest as though in defiance, while his son – if it is his son – looks, now, to be appealing to the future viewers of the photograph, to be saying: *Look, this is my father, a proud, tough man, but I hear his racking cough in the mornings, I know what this trade has done to him; look at us, see us, whoever and whenever you might be.*

Easy to romanticise the Isle of Man (as Lowry perhaps does to some extent), to overlook the industrial side of things. Another of the information boards tells us that in 1875 Laxey was producing 50% of the total zinc output of the entire British Isles. It was a huge centre of industrial extraction and production – and a deliberate statement of national pride, too. The board just below the 'Lady Isabella' – the giant wheel built to power the pumps to keep the mine clear of water – comments that it was probably George Dumbell, Chairman of the Great Laxey Mining Company, 'who suggested embellishing the wheelcase with the Three Legs of Man (also the largest known casting of this device). Ever the showman, for Dumbell the wheel was as much a statement as it was a working object'. I manage to get a photo of Bryan, flattening himself nervously (he doesn't like heights) against the whitewashed stone wall of the wheel-casing, just next to the symbol, the three strange disembodied legs in their shiny white armour, their knee-pieces and ankle spurs picked out in gold. The photo captures the fleeting moment, the expression on Bryan's face caught as it changes, somewhere between a grimace and a smile, just as the other photograph captures the miners' faces, caught in an instant, more than a hundred years ago.

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Walking with Matt from the Electric Railway terminus in Douglas back to the hotel to pick up our bags before heading to the ferry. He comments that, as he sees it, the idea of the

project is ‘to allow Lowry to flow through you and see what happens’ – which will be different, of course, for everyone. He says that one thing he’s picked up from reading the stories is that Lowry, alongside his obvious love for the natural world, did often find a kind of beauty in the industrial aspects of the landscape – the oil refinery across the Burrard Inlet blazing like a cathedral at night, the wastes burning like candle-flames; even, Matt says, the way the oil, after a spill, creates mirrors and rainbows on the water. And it does seem so important that we acknowledge this too – that we aren’t just thinking of him as naively idealising ‘nature’, imagining an impossible idyll without human presence, without industry. In the same way for instance that Rowan, whom we met on Friday and who’s working on a project researching blue carbon – the carbon stored in coastal and marine environments, saltmarshes and seagrass meadows and kelp forests – isn’t suggesting that industrial fishing or farming could somehow stop or disappear, but is trying to find ways to make things work in balance.

I’m not sure how to pull all these things together, but Matt’s comment seems so fruitful as a way of looking at what we’re trying to do, how it’s possible to use a writer, a figure from the past, to help us think through our present, and our possible futures...

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Recording sound in the passenger lounge on *Manannan*. The sound trace on the phone-screen more or less unchanging, an ongoing thick rope of sound, woven together from many voices, with the underlying constant bass-note of the ship’s engines. Occasional bursts of laughter, the crackle-rustle of plastic food wrapping. The voice of the woman behind me, suddenly distinct, stating with authority how much the queen liked Balmoral, as though she had known her intimately. On the TV screens, drone footage of a motorcade, the queen’s body being driven from Balmoral to Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh. (I can’t help thinking of the Consul drily reading out the train timetable, in the Bella Vista bar at seven o’clock in the morning, to the long-suffering barman: ‘A corpse will be transported by express! ... But why, Fernando, why should a corpse be transported by express?’). And still that fixed headline, that strangely extended present tense, THE QUEEN DIES. And the ship sails, and goes on sailing.