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Peace Talks

ANDREW MOTION



FABER & FABER

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I MY OWN BLUE EYE

The Discoveries of Geography

If only the stories were not so tempting –
but from day one I started to embroider,
and in no time was suggesting a country
far to the north
where fish are as large as dragons,
and even minor administrators
eat off gold plates,
and sleep on gold beds.

This is why I have packed in my birch canoe
a robe
made of the feathers
of more than a hundred different species of bird.

So that when I have finally crossed the ocean
I will have a ceremonial costume
rich enough
to impress in my encounter with the Great Khan.

*

We have an excellent long boat with outriggers
and therefore travel dozens of miles in a day.

Furthermore, and speaking as a navigator,
I can predict every fickleness of weather
and also the change in direction of currents,
sometimes dipping my elbow into the water
and sometimes my scrotum
to feel the slightest change in temperature.

These are the reasons

I shall be considered a saviour by my people
and die in peace.

In my own mind I am a simple man
who threw his spear at the stars
and landed there himself.

*

I now have in my possession
a map:
two handfuls of mud
scraped from the bank of our sacred river,
flattened into a tablet,
baked,
then pierced with the blunt point of my compass
while I spun the other sharper leg
to produce the edge of the world as I knew it,
and beyond
the salt sea on which I am now perfectly at home.
In this way I look down at myself.
I think: I am here.

*

Astonishing, how many horizons are open to me:
at one time mountainous heaps of smashed slate,
at others a vast delta of green and crimson light.
And every day a different shoreline ripples past
bearing its cargo of white sand and dark palms.

Very beguiling they appear, but all encumbered.
All spoiled by the tantrums of their local gods.

Out here there are storms too,
but in the religion I have now devised for myself,
I am convinced
the shaping hands have pulled away from us at last,
so the Earth hangs with no support at the centre of –
what?
That is the question I have in mind to answer.

*

You might suppose better charts would help me,
but despite their much greater accuracy
in terms of coastlines and interiors,
and the intricate detail
guaranteed by developments in printing,
not to mention the understanding of perspective,
empires still lie about their extent and stability.
These are the simple deceptions.

More difficult,
as I continue north to my final encounter,
and wave-crests flicking my face grow colder
and daylight a more persistently dull dove-grey,
is how to manage my desire to live in the present
for all eternity,
as though I had never left my home.

*

It transpires the last part of my journey
requires me to abandon everything I once knew,
even the gorgeous costume
made of the feathers of more than a hundred different
species of bird.

No matter, though.

It is delicious among the constellations,
as the planets begin to display their gas-clouds
and the beautiful nebulae their first attempts at stars,

When I look over my shoulder
to see my own blue eye staring back at me,
I realise before I disappear
I still accept what it means to be lost.

The Conclusion of Joseph Turrill

Garsington, Oxfordshire, 1867

I suppose I was cut out for a quiet life;
whether I have managed any such thing
is another matter,
what with larks to shoot,
and harvesting, gooseberries, and whatnot.

Then there was all that with Netty:
would she or wouldn't she;
did I or didn't I?
It is my belief
I spent more hours kicking my heels at her gate
than happy the other side.

Be that as it may.
Anno Domini drives out stern matters of fact,
and faults that appear to us
when we compare the lives we have
with those we imagine . . .
There's nothing a gentle stroll
in the woods by moonlight can't put right.

I tried that just now.
I saw swallows on the branches like clothes pegs,
which put me in such good humour
I brought home one of their nests and also four chicks.

An Echidna for Chris Wallace-Crabbe

Whatever kind of determination a creature needs
to enjoy one state of existence before confronting the next,
the echidna has a-plenty.

Look how the legs which once upon a time were fins,
then paddles,

and now are covered with spines as delicate as fur,

shunt this specimen up the barren mound
that forms the one significant feature of his pen,
still hampered by the excessive weight of his body
but clearly not enough
to feel distracted from his main ambition.

Which is to reach this particular point
by the concrete wall that marks the limit of his freedom,
where he shovels the earth aside with his rubber snout
before giving up when roughly half submerged.

He has no idea
anyone is waiting for him at the end of history.

But he obviously understands
that to start again at the beginning
and change faster
would only mean taking the straight road to extinction.

A Meeting of Minds with Henry David Thoreau

1 *Into the Wood*

When I arrived in that new country for the first time

I came by boat

by canoe in fact

and completely alone

so the pines and conifers

stepping down to the river

some with their roots

as pink as pigs' tails

in the dark current swirling around them

were my only company.

It was for this reason I found myself

striking my double-ended paddle

hard against the side of my canoe

to frighten them away

if such a thing were possible.

To start echoes

and have those echoes

multiply

and fill the woods

with circles of dilating sound

awakening the trees.

Stirring up I call it

as might be done

to animals and people.

To make all melodies a replica

of the things they give a voice

and the places where I find them.