

AT MALDON

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C *editions*

to Ursula

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ARGUMENT

An invading force. A local army mustered to defend. A battle. An overwhelming loss. And, later, a poem.

A poem that, somewhere in the intervening thousand or so years, loses its beginning and its end, but, nonetheless, becomes the history it tries to tell.

An unreliable poem from a poet not permitted onto the field, who has no immunity, no bardic badge; no dodging of projectiles as he muses on the best way to note down a soldier's dying breaths.

A poet picking morsels from the aftermath, the sad survivors; analysing second-hand accounts for personal embellishments, for misrememberings, for shy omissions.

The poet's aim: not to present for posterity the known and indisputably dreary facts, but to cast the real events in an unreal mould, and in so doing hope perhaps for accidental truth.

AT MALDON

Muzzle-nuzzles.
Kisses on the nose.

Sugar-lumps suede-lipped from flattened palms.

A drift of dusty perfumes.
Barley-breath.

‘Let the smiling circle of your shield
be the only face they fix upon.

Let it twirl before you,
a bright umbrella dazzling,
for you to strike unnoticed from its rear.’

A soldier’s ungloved hand
fanned to the disc of a horse’s cheek
unbuckles the bridle.

‘Let spear-tip be your tongue
protruding, taunting as it pokes
and waggles, till
they are affronted by its brash simplicity.

Then let fly your word upon its point.’

A slap upon the rump,
the horses trotting hover-footed
to the lonely wood that hedges the field.
Huddled in among the mossy boles
with heads held low they peer out
blinking at the war-band's muddled ranks.

‘Inscribe your arrow-shafts with marks of love
that, following their aerial ballet,
dig into the bosom of their beau.’

A boy in his rebuffed excitement
cooing to his blue-winged hawk;
tickled below the hard hook of its mouth,
its gold-ring gaze refuses to meet his.

Extending the upswing of his wrist
its light weight lifts,
is balanced on the brightness of the air,
allows the world to fall, to pivot,
and with the sharpness of its flight
positions the tree-top beneath it;
there to turn its back and pause and preen.

‘When unabashed they rush to meet you
embrace them with broadsword,
with daggers caress,
till they wallow in the wetness of your kiss.’

In among the many: Eadric,
teenaged kinsman to the earl,
with tea-towels padding the sag
of his hand-me-down mail;
only half-heeding the speech's instruction,
of what is to be and not to be done,
tucks in his shirt and swallows his gum
to whisper his own words of comfort.

‘Mum said to stand harder than oak,
so if they come on like a gale-force wind,
well, I shan't be so easily uprooted.’

Cresting the high banks
beyond the crowd:
the patchy yellow-blossomed gorse.

The ever-wind-blown willow,
backcombed branches
dipping to the weight of little birds.

‘She said fear grows of ignorance,
how, unprepared, they'll be more scared of us.’

Seedcase fragments graining shady airs
garnish the conveyored river-top.

A gully deepens to the water's edge.
Sunlight through thin ripples
reddens flagstones.
Small black fish hold steady at the lip.

‘Stick with the prince
and with the fight
and do your best
and come back home again.’

Beyond the stream, the slope, the fringe of trees:
the Viking horde —
who limber in the summer sun,
touch toes, check pulses, sip hot soup,
laugh at foreign jokes in foreign tongues.

‘Come blood and muscle-ache and grown men's screams,
there's nothing will make me doubt my mother's word.’

A great white horse, the sun
reflected off its silky flanks;
its tail's peroxide swish
as pallid skin-soft reins
are given over to the groom.
Led heavy-hoofed away.
Its big-eyed backward glance
beneath a flop of fringe.

And as the earl now backs himself
into the space reserved by his best,
upon the far shore:

a little man
detaching from the host
waddles to the waterside.

With the voice of a curlew
who finds his feet have dried fast into mud
he calls.

‘Dear neighbour,
long kept strange by a width of water,
see how hard we've worked to close the gap.
One finger of wetness left to cross
till we can be together.’

The earl: secure within a knot of strength,
his colleagues from the club, his favoured few,
who check each other's costly gear,
re-cinching sculpted raw-hide over silk
zipped up at the back, behind
a chest-high screen of shields.

Old iron half-drawn from the scabbard
finger-greased with lightly scented oils.

‘Do you think we’d step so far from home
if we were only looking for a fight?’

Our land expands, we’d like
to cut you in upon the deal. This is
a great investment opportunity.’

As one who slowly registers the soft persistent tapping
of a moth that bumps itself against a bulb, only now
does the earl squint towards the far bank;

the little man
in his green-wool cream-lined fitted business suit,
little hands behind his little back,
pacing the shore in winklepicker boots.

‘A start-up fee, a bit of gold — a token, if you like.
You won’t miss it.

Bangled lords function better unshackled.
De-tag your lady’s hole-punched ears.
Lift off the heavy lace that yokes her neck.

And of those coins hard-bitten yet unused:
what good is gold kept hidden in a box?’

A foreign war-horde, cramped
upon a tuft of unkempt unloved land;
a bobble sprouted from the river-bed;
a morass — a swamp.

Behind: the furled umbrellas of their boats
parked neatly in a row,
high noses buried into ryegrass,
mooring ropes slung loose round crooked trees.

‘A transaction of mutual good grace.
You pass over the money and we
provide an authentic receipt,
hand-printed and stamped.

After which you can toddle off home
lighter-hearted, lighter-pocketed,
and with your integrity
on the right side of your skin.’

The channel that runs between them —
a thin limb of water, a steeply banked stream;
joined at each end to the wide neck of river
offering its body to the sea.

And here:
a single solid block of muscle-men,
from which lord Byrhtnoth
steps out, one pace forward,
leaving an earl-shaped gap in the leading edge.

‘Such a crowd to head out for so small a request
yet each of you wishing to fill your party-bags.

Perhaps if the numbers were cut, but alas
my purse is still back at the castle.’

The broad-breasted river
puffed to capacity
now breathes out.