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Harlequin Blue; or, A place like Paris and a new brain map

– after Pablo Picasso's painting Autoportrait, December 1901, Paris

Biographical note:

Ashley Haywood recently completed her creative research PhD thesis *Harlequin Blue and The Picasso experiment* with Southern Cross University. She has had writing published in journals and anthologies, and in some cases performed, in Australia and overseas. Most recently, her prose poetry appears in Spineless Wonders' anthology *Out of place* (2015) in print and video artwork. Ashley's creative writing and research usually involves art/ists and often draws upon her background in the biological sciences.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Experimental writing – Pablo Picasso – Biosemiotics – Complexity – Creativity

We have met before, and you call me Harlequin. We've met in every instant: the lost beginnings, worlds out-of-time. And you'll ask me, what is love in this place?

Listen for the jingling and tinkering at the door, which is not really a door in this story, or a stage, but a cobblestone street in the evernight.

This instant is almost in time—Floating Man is here, the street-lamps are lighting.

What is love in this place? Let me tell you a story.

Slow and heavy in a pair of oversized, wet boots, a floating man shifts one foot after the other beneath a thick, charcoal woollen coat. It hangs like bedding from the neck down, over a pocket-filled chest soiled with soot and the all-night. Beware a coat-shuffle so cumbersome, thicker than memory and flesh.

Look at his mouth. Babe-naked and clean as a worm.

Wet and warm, the Floating Man's lips part open to smoke in the cold with a loosely rolled cigarette. The match burns down to his nail as he exhales over his upturned collar – just now (wait, there, pause) he could be the eternal lover, suspended, tight-rope high above nicotine alleys. Is he daring the whole city to topple, the evernight to fall?

We look up with him, we look up to a fading bombazine, starless and tattered. Its holey warp and worsted weft hangs over cobbled corners, mourning space at the dead ends and double-backs, spooling lost-and-found thread into every hidden crack.

Darkness has become a toothless thing with thimble eyes, a thousand blinking eyes, watching from under hitched-up cloth, making lovers of long shadows and stone nooks. The darkness grows fat. Smacking its jaws around a gummy face, the darkness says, Come home, my lovely, come home to the dark blue sea.¹

With every pause, every step, Floating Man bends toward abandoned things and things not whole – half-empty bottles and sodden underwear, fresh cigarette butts dropped after having kissed multiple strangers – things this city has yet to gather into its folds, what is not yet pulp in its grey snow.

A street-lamp sputters, flickers its halo, detaching passing limbs from the evernight (muses scatter to their nests that once were neat) and a sign overhead reads (Rue de la) (Rue de la) Pêche.²

Floating Man dips his head beneath pegged bed-sheets, hoisted window-to-window, hanging heavy over the alley, rope after rope. Beating windward, his waterline bobs under and between the damp, life-stained linen.

There is no sea here, stop thinking of the sea, thinks Floating Man. But what if there were a sea to find downstream, in the beneath-stream of the river-running fissure, beneath clay and silt in the below of the below?

The alley opens onto a new avenue. A canal is to the east, a somatosensory gyrus to the west. The trees are bare, their trunks are bald. Street-lamps pop light over his synaptic footsteps.

Floating Man trawls with another cigarette, glowing over the ruins of split wood and corrugated tin from another time, another shipwreck.

Look again, Floating Man, and let The City see itself in water.³

Behind Floating Man the street-lamps are almost out, and his footprints begin to tell a different story, one as slippery as the gutters: there once was a floating man who crossed an ocean.

Behind him the sheets have set sail in the alley, and the alley is almost lost to itself as like a horizon.

Floating Man doesn't look back, but looks ahead with the street-lamps that are still waking as he walks, lighting stone walls and locked wooden doors, iron knockers rusted and fused, and there is a heavy taste in the air of people who having massed and eaten are now centuries gone. On his tongue is the salt of men and women and muses. He stops, drops his cigarette. Are the doors unlocking from their latches? His coat is wet, his pockets deep, he fingers polished bone.

Clap-clack like a bird-call.

Floating Man is turning his head – Yes, yes! Look!

See what lives in the dark!

His Andalusian nose breaks frame, turning clockwise, eyelids-eyelids half-open. There, in the dark, is a thing, half-whole and feasting and half-full, its scent twisting – the lamps go out!

The thing arches back on itself, and crawls out from his sharp nasal passage as a flayed homunculus with a mouth as wide-as-wide throat open and gasping, laughing in the dark, eating itself feet-first until it vomits.⁴

Floating Man's brain remaps.

A new boulevard shows off with a hundred new lights and a round-a-bout with spoke-wheel streets radiating in every direction. Floating Man walks on, and he does not look back, as doors and stonewalls are remade in the dark, opening when he has gone. Gas goes pap-pap and the lamps that sap methane from the Undercity shine blue on his fresh footprints in the snow.⁵

Endnotes

1. We drift into the velvety mould behind the eye, the warm fuzz behind the eye, and go further into its humming black, further and further into the starry-split between skin and No-place.

Down in the below of the below, darkness is folding space into a labyrinth of ends, barb-wired with cat-piss. Travellers in the under-darkness scratch pit-tap directions in stone like love letters. On these roads, we sleepwalk tirelessly, hooked on endlessness, spinning our own inferno circuitry all the way back into the arms of darkness, the great-grandmother of darkness waiting at the kitchen door.

She sucks on our eyes, mouthfuls of fire. Spits out white-spots to make us laugh.

We laugh, and shut-up our eyes.

We find hallelujahs in a grain of sand while the darkness catnaps. We cross its glassy peaks like water, as water moves through the infinity of sand. (Muses sing out: *Hoorah! Ceci c'est ne pas la terre!*) And we lay back like giants curved over a new moon.

Beneath its frozen waters, we know life is on the move, and we listen to sonic clicks deep down in the deep, cold abyss of the moon.

2. Muses come and go, blimp-lipped from the fissure. Some still caught on the lines, slurring words behind rusty tackle and half-chewed once-were things. They cough-up handfuls of silt from their gullets and sinkers clink when they hand out guarantees for the scent of things to come yesterday.

They are not old or young, but in a past, on repeat, so they come and go from the river-fissure, flaunting their dead limbs and epitaphs with pearly grey runners beneath their skin.

Muses carry the river on them, searching for home in sandy pockets. They are a thousand mouths awaiting a shipwreck.

3. Floating Man looks over the side of the boat, deep into the ocean's belly, where whale carcasses tumble down chasms like coins, and his less than mouthful-face is speechless.

We pick up Poulpe [*Poulpe is Gora in the form of an octopus*] who speaks fluent silt and sulphur and eggs. She calms the ocean into steps before nightfall. And, as we climb the six-floor swells, we can see through the windows of sunken cities.

Limpid attics hold us—teasing, tipping—before plunging the boat into their lightless basements. As we rise, bioluminescent lamps flicker on every other floor. The lives of fish are exhausting: parties gather in kitchens, singing round-robins with the darkness, while others plot murder behind closed doors, but all are smoking up their living rooms with ravaged flesh.

At the top of the stairwell, we meet glittering rooftops, starry rooftops.

We swoop, we fly, we fall down ocean floors.

Behind us, Floating Man watches hydrangeas bloom, in the bluer-blue, a red of doorways. Their floating heads follow the boat like a funeral procession. [*Gora throws two coins on the bar for one last drink.*]

Behind us, there are black fins, so graceful, so steadily they thread back and forth across the face of the waterworld, tending all the flowers, weaving flowers in her watery hair.

Pouple looks into the face of that waterworld and falls in love with the unbearableness of love. Without looking back, she dives limbs-first, deep into goodbye, goodbye blue.

4. *A sea-monster is lurking, a-lurking in the dark.*
5. Listen with your eyes, then your hands. Let sound loiter between hairs-on-end which are each their own frequency and swan-song. Practice until you forget your bones, and your eyes finally break free to make love with their optic nerves, twisting and feeding on the rest of you until they self-cannibalise. In this city, there is no curtain call, there will never be an applause. Just shoes on a bridge.

Leap!

Research statement

Research background

How to write like painting? This question led to investigating creativity in terms of biosemiotics and complexity theory, and an understanding of ‘mind’ as different to ‘idea’. Biosemiotics describes life, from molecule to song, as a web of complex nonlinear evolutionary feedback systems of sign relations (Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 1992, Wheeler 2011). Contemporary bio/semiotics is in its youth, especially in its relations with, and applications to, other disciplines and/or fields of practice (Kalevi and Velmezova 2014).

Research contribution

Harlequin Blue is an experimental prose-poetry-play work, set in a city-as-brain, in a suspended instant of time. Harlequin’s narrative follows the action of Floating Man’s mind internalising *newness*. Excerpts have been arranged here to illustrate a condensed version of the whole. The writing embarks *within* Picasso’s Blue Period (1901–04) paintings to pursue possibility in ‘non-knowing’, to capture the ‘wholeness’ of a monadic instant, as a painter might do with paint. The writing engages with a cultural momentum – growth dependent on metaphor, or imitation-for-*newness* – which pushes the receptive ‘mind’ toward internalising *newness*, consequently disturbing ‘wholeness’ and knowing. *Harlequin Blue* is a story and investigation of this (its own) emergent and necessarily disturbing (for growth) process.

Research significance

Harlequin Blue and The Picasso Experiment is a recently completed creative research PhD thesis. Excerpts from *Harlequin Blue* (creative component) have been performed in Paris, France.

Works cited

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