

Jean Sprackland

Lock Songs

Jean Sprackland was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival and the Canal & River Trust to write a cycle of poems inspired by a boating weekend along the Peak Forest Canal from Whaley Bridge to central Manchester. The resulting Lock Songs were performed at a special event at Hope Mill Theatre on 23 October 2016 as part of the Manchester Literature Festival.

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Two directions

There are only two directions,
that's what I'd like.
South towards one town,
north to another.

To drift like that,
a few weeks one way,
a few weeks back,
and to make no plans.

I want to lie in my bunk
and feel the heart's long strides,
the creak of my breath
stiff with winter.

The water would keep its own counsel.
I'd let things twitch the line
but if I fished one out
I'd always flick it back.

I'd cut the towpath weeds
for food instead. No one
would think of looking for me here.
I'd make a fire with all my maps,

watch east and west go up in smoke.
This is the life, I'd tell myself,
the sky unrolling
star by remembered star.

Windlass

Gripped in one hand it reminds me
of the school bell I once rang in 1973.
It's the weight, of course, solid and momentous,
the way it tips the scale of my shoulders,
knows its debt to gravity.
When I swung that bell and loosened its tongue,
I felt the power of sound,
the way it opened doors and set us free.

Windlass, *vindáss*, winding pole.
I swing it as I stride the towpath,
though it has no tongue to ring with. Its song
is arm and spindle, rack and pinion,
clockwise turn against the weight.
It opens doors and sets the water free,
makes the chamber rowdy as a playground.

Ladder

That white ladder bolted to the wall
is your one resort, should you find yourself sunk
and abandoned in this chamber.

You must slither around the side deck,
brushing the mucous brickwork, breathing its reek,
step over the dark vortex and find the rung. Imagine it
while you wait for the levels to equalise,

while you enter, and the gates are screwed shut behind you.
Now you descend the lift-shaft, down many floors
until you stand shivering at the tiller
in the narrow basement of the past.

And where is your friend, who should be standing
smiling at the gates, ready to release you? No sign.
Just sky, with its same obsessions. And you
deep in the cave-space, the grave-slot,

its walls scarred with the marks of pick and shovel,
where cutter and mason gruelled and cursed.
Listen, can you hear their faint voices,
the cough of blade on rock? They're close.

You grip the icy tiller in your fist,
feel the water shift and flex beneath you, watch
that white ladder bolted to the wall.

Grooves

Five parallel grooves
scored in the stone
here at the mouth of the bridge

mark the place where every hawser
pulled taut between horse and boat,
made harsh with wet and grit,

chafed and abraded,
the twisted hemp drawing
grain from the granite face,

etching with time and friction
these five syllables,
this rough inscription,

the stone remembering
each horse that worked this route,
sweating, straining, foaming at the bit,

and each rope that tensed
against the wall, finding the scar
and cutting it deeper:

a work of attrition,
the hurt place revisited,
the same word written again and again.

Though the rope frays
and the heart gives out
the stone endures it.

Lift bridge

Not the fancy type with a motor -
turn of a key, push of a button -

but one you have to raise by hand,
cranking the windlass over and over,
feeling the chains straighten and tense,
hearing the wheeze and creak as it rises,

and all the stones and bits of dry mud
caught in the treads of the tractor tyres,
all the straw and twig and thorn and thistle
carried on the shoulders and flanks of the cattle,
the seeds and grit from the cracks in their hooves,
the dust and pollen washed down by rain,
beetles, feathers, early blossom,
pieces of shell from a blackbird's egg,
all the makeshift ecology of the bridge

is tilted, dislodged, balances a moment
as if weighing its choices,
then comes trickling and rattling
down the slope and scatters.

Blue corridor

Though under a ceiling of cloud it's not blue at all
but the colour of mud, or strong tea

and even in sunshine it's not the polished
waymarked route through school or hospital,
but crumpled like dishcloth, or old pages,
scrawled and dawdling, granulating the light,

then suddenly stretched like canvas, pegged tight
to invisible mooring points,

repeating whatever it gazes at,
sketching ash-tree, moss-wall, cottage, factory,
bridge with red-and-white graffiti,
even the cider cans and carrier bags caught
under the edge of the bank are seen double -

and a mallard towing a bent pin
which floats on surface tension
then shivers away into nothing.

Six lorry tyres

They bump and shove, shouldering the lock gate,
all swagger and brag. No way past this gang -
you'll have to take them on.

Take down the boathook and kneel on the frozen bank,
then lie flat to get the leverage.
Drive the hook under its armpit,
it shrugs free. Drag it close to the sluice,
it snags on a rock and bobs away again,
sodden, soused, a dead weight.

It must have been quite a job to load, unload them,
roll each one shimmying to the edge and push it in,
but then it's forty quid a pop at the council tip.

It takes an hour to haul them out and heap them
oozing and bloated on the grass.
Has anyone got a sheet to throw over them?

Boatyard

Winter still has the place in lockdown.
Boats shuttered and tarped, lashed down with ropes,
nudged on our wash and yawning on their moorings.
A cruiser propped on a stack of polystyrene panels.
A rusting barge with a handscrawled sign: *Warning: CCTV.*

Water frisked by the wind,
water pushed up into furrows by the boat,
running away and slapping under the kerb.
A goose patrols the fence, hissing threats.
Bare trees claw the bank,
rattle their fingerbones on the roof of the boat.
A whiff of woodsmoke and diesel.

Under the bridge, our motor thrums in the dark.
past an old working boat,
obsolete as a longship, scuppered
and left to rot at anchor.

The Rochdale Nine

No, not victims of a miscarriage of justice
but nine double locks
which guard the city.

Dale Street, Piccadilly, Chorlton Street

The way is hard, pilgrim,
and you must arm yourself
with windlass, handcuff key,
strength of heart and shoulder.

Princess Street, Oxford Road

Nine gates secured by chains
with links like navvies' fists.
Nine shut boxes with spindles inside

each needing to be cranked
first one way, then the other,
shoving your whole body
against the weight of the water.

Tib Lock, Albion Mills

The towpath cancelled, reinstated.
Stone steps that go nowhere.
Concrete and steel, cobbles and stink.

Step on the iron rung
and risk the balance beam.
Cross, and cross again,
over the lost-and-found of the water.

Enter the city by stealth,
below the streets, the bridges,
office blocks, scaffolding, cranes.

Follow the old road,
the way of the pilgrim,
pausing only to clear the weed hatch
and free the propeller.

Deansgate Tunnel, Dukes

Undercroft

Now we glide into the girdered and graffitied dark, where the city sends its lost and broken: the shambling, the dead-eyed, those who stagger and feel the wall. *It is an offence for any person to engage in public acts of lewd obscene or sexual behaviour.* Underneath the sign, a man dreams on shit and concrete, chin slumped on chest. Another, scavenging among the rubbish, stops and prods him with a finger. *Michael. Michael. You alright?* Our fabulous boat swans past in silence. He lifts his head an inch or two: grey face, long string of spittle. *You alright, Michael?* On the far shore, a shuffling figure, beachcombing, as if for sea glass or ambergris. Yet floating on the gilded water are dozens of needles, still sealed in their shining white packets. Such plenty! I could lean out a freckled arm and pluck them like blossom.

Navigation

The water bears all its burdens equally:
leaves, scum, feathers, ice,
catkins like yellow pleasure-boats idling
out from the shore and back again,
takeaway cartons, carrier bags,
wobbling ovals of light.

Glass bottles hang upright like seals,
mouths open to the sky,
utter a mournful clank when the boat goes over them.
Traffic cones roll hopelessly in our wake,
roadless, bereft,

but where the way is narrow
and the water just inches deep
we steer a careful course between
submerged shopping trolleys,
taking our bearings when their
metal elbows catch and glint a moment,
like navigation by reflected starlight.

Moored

A stake hammered in at an angle
the fender dropped to cushion the impact,
and we are locked in snug to the shore
and its dangerous spill of celandines.

Nearby, a breach in the bank has made
a miniature winding-hole, just big enough
for a single plastic bottle to be drawn in
and gyrate out again.

I spend an hour watching
a crooked shape on the telegraph wire -
bird or plastic bag? Till it splits in half
and flies in both directions.

At night, ducks tap the side of the boat,
chipping off the shellfish.
The ropes sigh and yawn,
the water tugs shyly at our skirts.

Dawn, with song thrush. Under the balconies
of the sleek waterside apartments,
a fisherman sits on an upturned bucket,
smoking and baiting his hook.