

Hypatia's Loss



poems by Martin Locock

Hypatia's Loss

a collection of poems
by Martin Locock

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Biography

I was born in Barrow-in-Furness in northern England in 1962, and grew up in Gillingham, Kent, and Bath, Somerset. After studying Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge, I worked as a professional archaeologist throughout the UK for 20 years, latterly as a Project Manager. I published numerous technical reports on excavations and historical topics, and edited the volume *Meaningful Architecture: Social interpretations of buildings* (1994). In 1991 I moved to Wales, and since 2003 I have worked at the National Library of Wales, creating a web index to archives: www.archivesnetwork-wales.info. I live near Swansea with my wife, also an archaeologist, and three children. In my spare time, such as it is, I write a blog, *A Few Words* (<http://locock.blogspot.com>).

Perhaps because of my experience in technical writing, I have come to believe that clarity of thought and expression are the cardinal virtues, almost the only virtues. We live in perilous times, when freedom and tolerance are under attack from all sides; underlying any defence of civilized values is knowledge, not preserved for its own sake, but because it represents the sum of human wisdom. If there are any moral absolutes, one is surely that burning books is wrong.



photo by: Zachary Hall

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The Last Librarian

Memory—
Keystone of civilisation,
Of all progress—
Is underwritten by paper

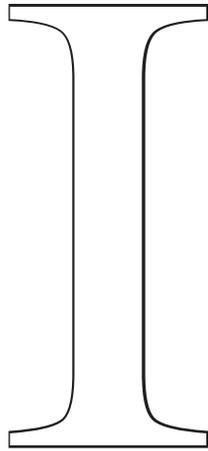
Amnesia
Lives in the continual present
Errors repeating endlessly

Hypatia
Knowing this
Collected scrolls
In numbered halls

Theophilus
Hearing the word of God
Wished to burn all others

Alexandria
Glowered
Under flaming skies

Hypatia weeps
Her loss,
Oblivion's gain



Peterstone

“Nothing, like something, happens anywhere”
Philip Larkin, I remember, I remember

On the Levels, the sky seems vast,
A vault of blue above the fields.
A slow procession of clouds, trailing skirts of rain,
Gives notice of the need for shelter,
If there were shelter to be found:
But the hedges are sparse ragged clumps,
The few trees gnarled and stunted by the wind.

On the pasture, horses stand immobile,
Heads downwind, tails blowing back and forth,
Incurious eyes looking out, unblinking;
Overhead, gulls fly in busy Vs.
Across the Channel, hills emerge,
A fleeting vision of another shore.
The gulls can leave; the horses stay behind:
Yet, they observe, the gulls always return.

On this approximation of the mathematician's plane,
Zeno's motion paradox stays the smallest step;
Free will is revealed as illusion:
All we choose is how we stand,
Not where. And if once the chain should fall
Allowing us to move to other, better, places,
Still the evening wind would blow,
Bringing the scent of far bazaars,
The prospect of distant hills mocking our ambition
For purely local victories.

The thesaurus of love

Carouse

Shiver

Arouse

Quiver

Often

Quicken

Soften

Thicken

Contrive

Repeat

Arrive

Complete

Laughter

After

Human Geography

China is far away
Loneliness enwraps me

Japan is close at hand
Fall, I will catch you

India lies to the west
Sadness grows between us

Tibet will house our souls
Come, I will hold you

The sea washes my feet
The wind dries my hair

I will wash your feet
I will dry your hair

Mr. Eliot's Saturday afternoon service

"Judy Egerton had bought the toffee at a bazaar opened by T S Eliot."
Anthony Thwaite, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*

I have seen them coming in
Their hats and coats like dromedary's hair
As they brave the streets of Pimlico
Alas

I have seen the stalls weighed down
With so much useless clutter
Left over from a life apart
Alas

And now the church hall clock is telling us it's time
It's time for us to reach across
To try to spend and buy and sell
As if we were not coral reefs
Immersed inviolate alone

Outside I hear the tramcar sound its mournful bell
As night enwraps the street and tucks it in
At half past four the dark descends
Alas

Aegeus lived to see the black-sailed ship's return
There is no cure to salve the Gorgon's breath
The fete is open, worse than death.

Rhyme and reason

There are, after all, some grounds for hope
It's not as desperate as you fear
People do like Wendy Cope

Although poets dismiss a facile trope
"Mere doggerel" is the usual sneer
There are, after all, some grounds for hope

Not everyone has bought the dope
That they should distrust what is made clear
People do like Wendy Cope

Simplicity does limit the scope
For hiding that you're insincere
There are, after all, some grounds for hope

People who've never heard of Pope
Know of Strugnall's "Ode to beer"
People do like Wendy Cope

It's not as desperate as you fear
Dumbing down won't happen here
There are, after all, some grounds for hope
People do like Wendy Cope

Dead water, Oxwich Bay

The languor of a hot midday in June
Spreads to the sea, where slackwater waves
Slap ineffectually at the sand.
A moment of silence: the humid air unmoved,
All action countermanded by the heat;
And in that moment all the world stood still

A choice to be made: to start again?
Renew the tide of life and thought?
Or else to let it end, worn out
By one too many days and doubts.

My heart drummed out the seconds one by one,
Until at last an answer came—
A breeze across the water cooled the shore;
A Wind forgave the sinful land.
Gabriel unpursed his lips, lowered his horn.

III

The fall of Troy

I

The fall

After ten years, the siege was lifted
The encircling army gone off in their ships
Leaving the Horse as recompense
We hardly considered it, in the delirium of victory;
Brought it into the city, and then
Gave over our night to drink.

Few noticed as the shrieks changed pitch
Laughter dying as the gutters ran red
Flames licking up to the wooden roofs
As shadowy figures, armour clinking,
Sought out the handful of sober guards.

It was a different dawn
Than we had dreamed the day before
Victory become defeat.
Lines of captive women and children queued
To fill the ships, some looking back
At the smoking ruin of their homes
While the men lay dead, unburied,
Unregarded by the Greeks,
Laden with loot, laughing.

There was a rumour
The Prince had got away
Escaped with his family;
But rumours will fly wildly
And even if true
Remove no chains,
Open no locks.

II

Cassandra

I have been proud
I have told the truth
Though fated not to be believed
I warned them
With unwelcome doubts
They chose to ignore

And though I'm now
Dragged into exile
To be some prince's trophy bride
It still is good
To be proved right:
But better to have been listened to.

III

Aeneas

Despite the tears that we shed
We must rebuild the walls of Troy
This is the debt we owe the dead

It's difficult to look ahead
When time's done nothing but destroy
Despite the tears that we shed

Comfortless words must be said
A duty that none can enjoy
This is the debt we owe the dead

Memories of the lives they led
Urge our talents into employ
Despite the tears that we shed

Though auguries can be misread
And the future vision can be coy
This is the debt we owe the dead
We must rebuild the walls of Troy

A pomegranate seed

Persephone
going underground
crossed the chill fields
crusted with snow
to be swallowed
by the
cave

Sleepers

Dust lies thick on marble pillars
Temples hide discarded gods,
The bastard sons of the mother city,
Left alone on the hill to die
Their only marks are worn inscriptions,
Engraved in vain prayer long ago.

The oracle is empty, quiet,
No god-sent warnings disturb the cave.
Foretold dooms have come to pass,
The Fates have taken back their own.
Even the stars have now forgotten
The stories that they used to tell
To all who saw, and read them truly:
Seeing sights has left us blind.

I came across a shattered statue
In a barren olive-grove
On the ground lay sharp-edged pebbles,
Votive jewels from the earth.
The zephyr found no leaves to rustle;
The trees were dead, their spirits gone,
Hitch-hiked to the busy city
Where the streets are paved with souls.

The chuckling stream runs silent
Down to the oil-dark sea.

I heard you breathing in the night,
The guardians, the sleepers still.
The regents are no longer ruling,
The infant kings are now of age,
Heedless of your counsel, even
Grudging the blankets on your bed.

At home with the Muses

Clio, Muse of history

Clio has got Time
On her hands, now they say that
History is dead.

Polyhymnia, Muse of sacred poetry

Polyhymnia's
Rather quiet these days — she's
Very seldom called

Melpomene, Muse of tragedy

Melpomene's such
A drama queen, dressed in black
Veiled, gloved and stockinged

Terpsichore, Muse of dance

Terpsichore's out
'Til dawn, at a rave or in
Some cellar night-club

Thalia, Muse of comedy

Thalia laughs but
Needs no joke — it's just as well
The last has been told

Euterpe, Muse of music

Euterpe plays
With drum 'n' bass and scratches
Her harp is rusted

Urania, Muse of astronomy

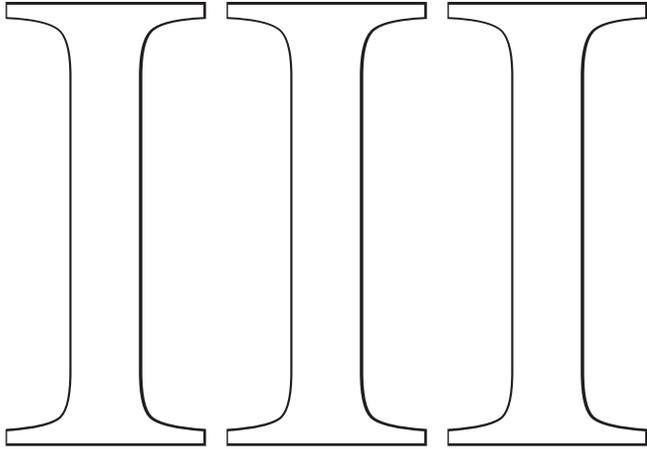
Urania's head
Is in the clouds that obscure
Her quarry, the stars

Erato, Muse of love poetry

Erato's busy
Wrting txt mssges of
Electronic love

Calliope, Muse of epic poetry

Calliope sleeps:
Now that movies are epics
She is not disturbed



Philosophy 101

The Wittgenstein amendment

The philosopher, his voice become violent,
Asked again: "Where's the volume that I lent?"
I answered in pique
"Whereof one can't speak
Thereof one must remain silent."

Socratic wisdom

While browsing the books on the shelf
Among those about health and wealth
One touched my soul
Its contents, in whole,
Were these two words: Know Thyself.

Language and logic

The logic of Professor Ayer
Can distinguish between every layer
Of black and white;
But that's not right—
The truth is often greyer.

Only human

When my studies had reached up to Goethe
I started by looking at 'Werther'
But couldn't find
The strength of mind
To investigate any further

The danger of nihilism

In the writings of Freidrich Nietzsche
Morality doesn't much feature
My classmate soon fell
Quite under his spell
And proved it by killing the teacher

Angst Parisienne

Existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre
Was always a bit of a martyr
To De Beauvoir's moods
And exotic foods:
He preferred escargot as a starter

A Communist manifesto

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels
Between them have covered all angles
Capital, family,
The bourgeois mentality,
And the radical's right to wear sandals

Psychoanalytical debate

When Carl Jung disputed with Freud
Sigmund became quite annoyed
"Your ideas fall flat:
If I spoke to my cat
My time would be better employed!"

When Freud disputed with Jung
Carl replied "Now just hold your tongue
Your ego and id
Don't like what I did
But that's just because I am young."

Cogito ergo sum

In the mind of Rene Descartes
Doubt comprised the main part
But he knew that he was
And this *was* because
He *thought*, which at least was a start

Revolutionary prose

The work of Thomas Carlyle
Is set out in a tedious style
His theories of power
Are usually dour
And seldom engender a smile

Unchained

The groom found the works of Rousseau
Hidden in his wife's trousseau
When he taxed her, she
Said "We were born free,
If I want to read them, I will do so!"

Deconstruction

"The author is dead" said Derrida
"The readers' powers are wider"
But there on the spine
Is his name, not mine,
Which ought to be the decider

Paranoia

According to R D Laing
(Whose Sixties went with a bang)
Nobody is mad
The doctors are bad
They all conspire in a gang

Physics 101

Sleeping in

Motionless bodies
Will remain motionless when
In bed on Sunday

Hypercriticism

Every action will
Cause an equal opposite
Over-reaction

Stress management

Bodies when pressured
Will transmit that pressure to
Everybody else

Argument against filing

A system's total
Entropy over time will
Tend to a limit

Gravitational pull

Small bodies exert
Small forces of attraction:
Large bodies, larger

Poetry 101

As I was walking on the beach,
Or through the wood, or in the street
I found a seashell,
Or saw a bird, or met a man
It set me thinking about life,
Or love, or death
And I resolved to do good works,
Or behave better, or get on with things

IV

The raven's tale

For forty days we had huddled in the rafters
Birds of every kind, squabbling over perches,
While the roof of the Ark was hammered
By incessant rain; through cracks in the shutters
I could see the swirling waters, heavy with silt,
Swelling and flowing around the boat

Then one dawn we woke in great surprise
Some change had happened, but what?
It took some time to realise
It was the silence, the absence of sound:
The rain had stopped;
We chattered in excitement

Noah strode in from the stern
His face drawn and pale
His clothes stained and damp
But relief filled his eyes
“It’s over,” he said, “We’ve come through”
We didn’t know what he meant
“We’ll start afresh—now all I need
Is a creature to search for land
As the water drops”

The dove, primping his white feathers,
Lifted his head high for notice
Raising envious glances
From his neighbours
But not from me

Noah shrewdly assessed the candidates:
Too fat, too slow, too dumb
He passed the dove and selected me
“Go, find a tree, quick as you can,
And bring a leaf to show me
That we can start our lives again”

Off I flew, fast and high, and straight
Lazily flapping my wings
Crossing the calming waves
Looking down for a trace of green
On and on, further and further,

Until, days later, I saw a rock
A pinnacle of some great mountain
Standing just proud of the sea
And landed there to rest

Later, much later, I heard the story
Of how the dove got on
Became a symbol for peace
For a covenant between God and man
And was blessed by Noah;
But I also heard rumours
That Noah dined on pigeon pie

I made my own way,
Self-sufficient
Needing nobody's grace,
Content to fly
Until my goal appears.

Mary's lament

I

Pregnancy brought me joy and pain
Pain and joy, joy and pain
Joy first, and then pain

As soon as I felt it grow within me
My body succumbed
To the swashes of hormones
The tides of chemicals
The traffic in tissue
I grew and changed
As he grew and changed

I became large and ungainly,
Comically rounded;
I smiled and patted my belly
In joy

My good humour even survived
That hurried journey along crowded roads
In the muddy, frosted fag-end of the year
To Joseph's native village

No room
Still, can't be helped, we bedded down
In straw, flanked by the steaming forms
Of cows

Then the baby came, and with it, pain
My muscles straining
I lay there, panting, sweating;
heart pounding, I cried out
Wailed in the sunset
Pain, such pain

Then there were two voices wailing
Then only one
Then none

II

Thirty years on, and thirty miles north
I reach the foot of the little hill
Of ill-omened name
The city walls behind me; the gate locked
against encroaching dusk
The three trees stood on the summit
Long shadows sweeping the grass
And something ending

We had done so much, taken such care;
Food, water, clothes, love
Joseph taught him a trade
We had thought to relax
See out our days, warm
In the knowledge that he carried on

But then Joseph died, left us alone;
And then he left,
Said he was called to other things
Had work to do
I waved him off
Kept my fear to myself

The rumours came
From time to time
Travellers, soldiers, relatives
Buzzing with news
He'd been here and there
Doing wonders
And helping, always helping

But then the good news stopped:
Instead, capture, trial, and sentence
I hurried to Jerusalem

I can do nothing but watch
But must do what I can
As he labours through the hours
His face drawn, plastered with sweat and blood
His voice cracked
He asked why his Father forsook him
I wanted to tell him
His mother had not

III

Now all is dark
I'm in some room
(I can't recall where)
With some people, friends I think,
Downcast, snivelling and sobbing
He had such strength!
And we do not

It is unbearable
What can I do but bear it?
I cannot go on
What can I do but go on?

Joy and pain, he brought me,
Pain and joy, joy and pain
Joy first, then pain
Such pain

Collateral damage

“Hark, lamentation is heard in Ramah, and bitter weeping,
Rachel weeping for her sons.
She refuses to be comforted : they are no more.”
Jeremiah 31.xv, quoted in *Matthew 2.xviii*

“Were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly”
T S Eliot, “Journey of the Magi”

I

Raising a child in a world of dirt
There are times of necessary hurt:
A thorn extracted, a decayed tooth removed;
Parents must demonstrate their love
By acting thus, but also by
Soothing pain and explaining why.

II

The birth of God’s son needed witnesses
He called the Magi from afar
From obscure Eastern fastnesses—
And sent them a guiding star

It was unfortunate that the Wise Men
Had been directed through Jerusalem
And by enquiring for God’s son on earth
Alerted Herod to his rival’s birth.

III

Through the smoke of Chanukah’s candles
The soldiers came to Bethlehem:
Their orders were clear.

They searched the village, house to house,
Rounding up babies and toddlers
Who stared dumbly, not understanding
The import of this baleful power.

Too late they heard blade slip from scabbard
Saw the edge gleam in the dusk:
Their cries were brief.

IV

Weeping, I lifted the featherweight body
Carried it to a table and laid it out.
The rabbi came to comfort me.

“God’s hand might have saved him—
We know that One escaped,
But He did not—could not, or would not—rescue more”

“Perhaps His purpose entails
Some suffering of innocents
To achieve His great designs—
We are as children to Him,
And cannot hope to comprehend His plan.”

V

No ceremony was made at the burial
I had no confidence in the care
To which I must entrust my child’s fate
Turning away, I covered my head.

And laid curses on the soldiers
And I cursed the king
Then I cursed the Magi
And then I cursed the Author of my loss.

Seven cities

“You saw such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands”
T S Eliot, *Preludes III*

“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it”
Jonah I ii

I

On Malvern Hill, I looked across the peopled plain;
I lay down to rest and, sleeping, dreamt a dream.

II

It is the evening of the world,
And it will soon be night.

In the suburbs of the world,
The dormitory countries,
The remnants of the green belt,
The crickets sing at sunset.
They need no sleep, no sun; they only sing.

Here in the busy city,
We also need no sun:
For we have neon, sodium,
And furnace fires always lit.
And as for sleep,
We do not sleep.

III

The razor-blade dawn slashes the night canvas
Yellow-white light stabs through
The dawn chorus of cups of tea rings out.

Did you feel the buildings shiver?
Facades are streaked with soot;
Blank windows cry carbon tears.

An echoing roar heralds the march
Of the smoke-screen maker,

The silver arrowhead, the frozen bird,
The jet, across the burning sky.

Did you see the girls in summer clothes?
They stretched out lazily on lawns and benches,
Chatting through the molten hours.

The town hall clock has stopped again
Only shadows move across its face.

Did you hear the rattle of the train in the night?

Domes and steeples, tower blocks and pylons,
shine in silhouette against the city glow.

Did you read the news today?
Or did you make a headline when you died?

IV

I heard the choir of angels; I heard them in the halls,
And they echoed in the streets:
Yes, I heard them in a dream.

I heard them when awake; I heard them in the dawn,
But only on the radio:
They were not living, were not here.

Unclimbed stairs echo; the elevator falls,
Blinking its lights as it passes the floors.
Will we stop? Will we rise? Will we rise again?

The shroud sticks: a curtain wall without a window.

V

We have been cast out from the temple
How are we to enter once again?

We are not here to live, here in the city,
We are here to collect our rations in a line

We are in the egg of the phoenix
We feel the heat of flames

We are the ashes, we are the embers;
We shall fly, we shall grow again—
We will burn again.

VI

Above the traffic noise I heard a voice
Did someone smile, did someone love,
Among the millions?

I love them all, each one, even those I do not know,
But one especially—an intimate communion.

VII

In the dormitory countries, they sleep to the sound
Of crickets singing.

Here, we do not sleep (we do not need to)
We hear no singing (we cannot hear)
And yet we live, until we die,
And then we cease to live among the crowds.

It is the night-time of the world
But in the city there is no night;
Where there is no night there can be no end
World without end
Amen