

The Undersea Adventures of the Lancaster Poetry Society

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‘There has always been poetry at the Storey Institute and the fact that the Storey is drowning under a million tons of seawater is no reason for the Lancaster Poetry Society to hold this year’s festival elsewhere,’ said Billy as he handed round a list of poets, an inventory of diving equipment, and a four-page risk assessment.

Billy had been on the mini-submarine trip to the latest contemporary art extravaganza in the flooded Storey Gallery and had been thrilled by the blackness, the stunning silence, the otherworldly beauty as gorgeous artworks rose up in the stalk of the submarine’s headlamp amid swirling shrimp-clouds. If the Storey Gallery could do it, the Lancaster Poetry Society could too.

‘Divers will lead the audience and the poets into the building.’ He indicated a map of the seabed where the flooded town centre of Lancaster now

sat. ‘We will enter the institute here, and our poets will perform using printed cards. This dark, magical drowned space is perfect for poetry.’

The chair of the Storey management committee sucked air through his teeth. ‘Billy, Billy, Billy. Give up lad. There are theatres in Preston. Lancaster’s for the crabs. Move yourself on. The government is about to make these festivals illegal. The Storey committee can not be associated, even in the name of art.’

Everyone left and Billy sat in silence staring at the line-up for an underwater poetry festival that would never happen. He had no deep sea diving expertise, and couldn’t afford to hire experts. The dusk gathered outside and he contemplated the inevitable: Preston Guild Hall, home of world snooker. Then, out of the silence a mind-bending screech made him leap to his feet,

and he turned to see a man in diving gear scraping a rusted boat hook down the blackboard. The man's face was the deep brown of mahogany wood-stain and scoured all over with wrinkles, like an asteroid scarred planet. From a complicated belt hung a holstered dagger and a harpoon gun that clinked together as he approached.

'If it's an underwater poetry festival you're after,' he said through a twisted smile, 'then I'm your man. But a festival like that doesn't come without cost.' He had mad frazzled black hair that shot out in all directions. 'I don't know anything about poetry myself, but I need a special poem and I need it fast, and if you can produce this poem I will deliver your underwater festival.' The man stuck out his hand. 'Finbar O'Keefe, specialist in caves, cold water and ice. They don't call me lentil-balls for nothing.' Billy shook the hand, wrinkled and dry like a monkey's.

'I like a poem with a clear function,' Finbar O'Keefe continued. 'Like, *thirty days has September, April, May, July, December. All the rest have thirty one except....February.* I've always thought that last line needed work. But nevertheless, it's a useful poem and everyone knows it. This is where you come in. I need you to apply poetry skills to a deep-sea diving problem. The bends, lack of properly timed decompression. The diver's head drifts off and never comes back. They say it's like being high on drugs but I wouldn't know about that. Some say freaking out down there alone is not a bad way to leave this world, if you're going to leave it, and we all are at some point. But for those who aren't ready yet, what I need is a poem about the rules of decompression. I don't want hidden meanings, symbols, allegory, or metaphors for this and that. I don't want observations about evol-

ing from fish, or baptism, or rebirth or cleansing, or any of that crap. I don't want anything about sea-bed ownership or the ocean as a haunted border of transgression, or the way tides relate to insanity or women's cycles, I want this poem to have no depth, no resonance, and no meaning other than what it states on the surface.'

'Have you tried Simon Armitage?'

'Busy.'

'Do you want it to rhyme?'

Finbar O'Keefe thought for a moment. 'Not necessarily.'

Underwater poetry festivals were pronounced illegal as predicted, and so it was in the utmost secrecy that, on a starless moonless summer night, Billy and the poets assembled at Garstang where the Irish sea lapped up against a new pebble beach, and waited for the audience who had been invited using secret codes. Cars were soon parking higgledy-piggledy on the verges, poetry lovers leaping out, bouncing and whooping down the road, poetry booming from ghetto blasters on their shoulders. Quickly they were helped into shiny new diving kit and then Finbar O'Keefe instructed them on underwater signalling and made sure their headphones worked for Billy's decompression poem.

At the bottom of the sea it was silent, black and grainy like being in a scratchy curl of old celluloid and Billy rapidly became anxious; all of a sudden he didn't feel like swimming into a flooded building to watch people hold up cards with poetry written on.

Finbar led them through the shattered stained glass window depicting the six arts, then down, down, down into the flooded lecture hall, where they had to clamber over the body of

a dead basking shark to get in. Billy shuddered, thinking of the Icelandic man who had been sucked into a dead whale's vagina and had to be rescued by the emergency services.

In the lecture hall shellfish jerked and skittered about on the barnacle encrusted theatre seats. Fronds of weed waved at him from the walls, an eel twirled about his head as if interested in him sexually. Caterpillarish jelly-blobs rippled on the walls and long limbed starfish pranced out of corners. Everything seemed translucent and colourless. He thought of the place just before it flooded, newly spruced up for the 21st century – dynamic, bleeding-edge, with slick new media companies: it was as if the Storey had been poached in its own creative juices.

Billy began his introductory speech, but his hands felt like useless fat fists of blancmange, and he could hardly hold up the cards. After the first poet had performed, wild hand gestures from the cold, terrified audience indicated a desire to return to the surface, and Finbar O'Keefe led them out over the dead basking shark and through the shattered stained glass to the open ocean floor where he explained how they would make their ascent. Then Finbar played the special decompression poem and Billy's lips moved along with the words he'd written.

*hunted and filtered for gas seeds.
compartments mimic human tissues,
Fast tissues turn to slow
We check for open circuit bail-out gas
loaded or unloaded by time and
inspired breathing
Shave down, shave down,
Your shallow stop time*

Underwater, the words seemed to Billy bloated with new meaning, uncovering a buried truth, an inexact,

but somehow pertinent story of loss, desire and lacking, every vowel freighted with peculiar, scary notions.

*Fast tissues turn to slow
We check for open circuit bail-out gas*

Billy sat down on a rock, the strange syllables blooming into his brain's furthest corners.

*loaded or unloaded by time
and inspired breathing
Shave down, shave down,
your shallow stop time*

The other divers were frozen like him, they too reciting the words of the poem, staring at the seabed where a group of sea-sponges in sequined dresses were ballroom dancing, calling for the divers to join them. The last thing Billy saw was the trail of bubbles from an oxygen cylinder as Finbar O'Keefe headed to the surface, then Billy's head began to creep with fuzzy static waves, golden voices crooned his name, and he felt exquisitely light and unimportant. He thought that the poem he'd written was the most beautiful poem he had ever conceived, and the most meaningful, because Billy should indeed *shave down his shallow stop time*, that was Billy's problem. He clicked on his torch and in the sour-milk soup, weird tube-worms nosed out from a honeycomb of cells, and from their slimy anus mouths, sprays of whirling tentacles shot out like plastic flowers from the end of a magician's wand, and he became one with them and watched as the other divers loosed their weights and floated free, and he wondered whether he should do the same or just stay where he was.