

Victoria Building 130th Anniversary

Redbrick Writers
November 2022

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Entrance

The walls
tiled to the tips of our heads
shine.

Pillars are trees
arches branch
seeking the sky.

Old and new:
a marble staircase,
a glass elevator.

Edmund, Olive, Charles,
Oriel, Rainer,
George. Herne, Christopher.

Mosaic
of colours,
stained glass so bright.

Names
carved in stone:
they died yet are not dead.

The magnificent fireplace:
crackle, spit, light.

The timeless clock
facing forward
serving all.

Georgina, Shirley, Brian, Annette, Hans, Sue, Brenda, Paula and Lesley

FIAT LUX

Opaline diamonds illuminate windows, alight
on skulls like tongues of fire, ignite
keen scholars, kindled by letters
and words and books,
and words and books,
whose leafing of pages fans learning that floats
as dust motes suspended in sunbeams.
Bottled nightmares, gilt-framed dreams
cheek by jowl, curiosities
sparking thoughts to smoulder, ideas that glow,
through arch, round curve, and onward the flow
of knowledge, understanding
in words and books,
and words and books.
Fiat Lux.

Andrea Power

Hush

If I ever had this great forest to myself, I could close my eyes, find my way between the tables, place my hat neatly on my favourite desk, turn round and carefully step across to find the books I need. I'm sure I'd know them by their smell, familiar as autumn leaves after rain. I take the same route every day. I like to think I've worn a subtle channel in the carpet.

I am never alone. All day figures flit in and flit out: some single, some pairs, some little flocks landing at a desk like ducks on a lake or finches in an oak. It's intriguing to watch, as after a little preening or rustling, some settle into individuality. Other times, the social urge wins and people whisper, mouth each other vital information, write notes, grimace and wink.

I keep one metaphorical eye on these distractions and get on with my work. I read, take notes, try to arrange my thoughts, take regular short breaks to help my body help my mind. Although we're lit by artificial suns, the day still darkens; the library empties until there are just us dedicated few. Now we can hear the clock tick; each book as it slides or quietly thuds on a desk or shelf; the tiny avalanche of falling pages; the claw of pen over paper; the squeaking of chairs; the creaking of shoes. We try not to cough or sneeze or sigh or signal by hands on foreheads how much our brains ache. This is the time when all thoughts lead to failure.

Oh, we should go out and get drunk. We should go home and make love to our wives. We should kiss our children good night. We should thank our mothers for an excellent meal. But we have no money, no wives, no children, no homely mothers. We have to leave when the final bell chimes. We stash our books away, echo down the staircase, wish each other good night and put our collars up against the rain.

Shirley Jones

Nell

Nell entered the library and returned the carriage clock to the mantelpiece. She stepped away and admired the mechanism working once again.

'Thief!' said Mrs Harker the Housekeeper standing near the door like a shadow in her long black dress. Nell spun to face Mrs Harker whose face was twisted in fury.

'Had second thoughts have we and decided to return it? I'd never have taken you for a common thief, girl but having no family I suppose it's how the likes of your lot survive...stealing.'

'I didn't steal it Mrs Harker. I fixed it. Look it's working now.' Nell pointed to the clock ticking away.

'Accruing lies to your litany of faults,' said Mrs Harker as she approached the mantelpiece and inspected the moving arm of the seconds face. A selection of keys jangled at her hip where they hung from a belt. 'Mmm this clock hasn't worked in four months. You've taken it to a clockmaker.'

'No, my Grandfather taught me...'

'Enough Nell. I think it best that you no longer dabble in such things. Lord Palmer wouldn't like it. I certainly don't. Return to your duties.'

'Yes, Mrs Harker,' said Nell. She lowered her gaze and walked out of the library. She crossed the main hall and lit the parlour and breakfast room fires. In the kitchen she returned the matches to Cook. Cook was busying herself with breakfast duties for the household.

'Thanks Cook,' said Nell as she dropped the matchbox on a shelf near the stove.

'Why the long face, you look like Bucky, the Master's horse?'

'I fixed the broken carriage clock in the library and Mrs Harker thought I'd stolen it and then she said I had someone fix it,' said Nell as she rolled a lime under her palm against the kitchen table top.

Cook cracked several eggs into a ceramic mixing bowl. 'Don't mind that one. She's always looking to pick on staff for some reason or other.'

The main door of the house opened and men shouted their cries of victory throughout.

'The shooting party have returned,' said Cook. She whisked the eggs. Nell and Cook exchanged glances. Nell stopped rolling the lime.

'He's with them isn't he?' asked Nell. Her eyes widened. She trembled. Cook stopped whisking. 'He arrived late last night from University. That's him with Lord Palmer and Ignatius Burke the banker.'

The men's voices retreated into one of the rooms apart from one whose boots stomped in the direction of the kitchen.

'Morning Mr Palmer.'

'Harker,' said Mr Palmer not waiting for a response from her and continued to his destination.

'It's him,' said Nell. She opened the pantry door and slid inside closing the door just as young Mr Palmer entered the kitchen.

'Where's Nell?' he asked Cook. He flung three dead pheasants onto the kitchen table. They landed with a sticky slump, blood squirted from a gunshot cavity in one of the bird's chests and splashed into the bowl of eggs Cook was mixing.

'Mr Palmer they were good eggs now they're...they're ruined.'

'A trait of mine no less, where is she?'

'With Mrs Palmer in her bedroom, Oh this is ruined. Dead birds bleeding on the table, eggs stained with blood,' said Cook carrying the bowl to the sink and pouring out the contents. 'Order is needed in a kitchen Mr Palmer not chaos.'

'Hmm, these are for hanging,' he said brusquely. 'Two days,' he said and marched out.

'Damned fool, learnt nothing at that university,' muttered Cook as she cleaned the ceramic bowl.

Nell opened the pantry door and peeked out into the kitchen. Mr Palmer was gone. Her nose twitched at the smell of the dead pheasants on the table.

'He's gone...for now,' said Cook cracking more eggs into the bowl.

'What if he enters Mrs Palmer's chambers and I'm not there?' said Nell writhing her fingers.

'He won't, there's a written rule about sons entering their Mother's spaces with this lot. He'll not know you're not there,' said Cook. She smiled at Nell.

Mrs Harker entered the kitchen and suppressed her disgust at the bloodied pheasants strewn upon the table.

'Nell, I want you to help Lisa to place some fresh linens in the guest bedroom. Lord Palmer's friend will be staying another night.'

'Harker,' shouted Mr Palmer as he called from the main hall. 'Harker.'

'Clean your hands. Don't want you dirtying the linens,' she said as she turned to leave.

'Here you are,' boomed Mr Palmer as he entered the kitchen. He saw Nell and smirked.

'What are you doing here Nell?' said Mr Palmer as he addressed Cook.

'I was instructing her about the pheasants,' said Cook and whisked the eggs faster.

'I can instruct Nell about the art of hanging times,' said Mr Palmer to Nell, 'I'm an expert on that and how the soft mouths of the Cocker Spaniels never puncture the body of the bird it carries. Such an animal takes a certain amount of training. It has to obey its master completely.' He addressed Cook and Mrs Harker, 'If it is disobedient in any way it is severely punished, especially if it yelps and scares the bird away.'

The kitchen clock chimed on the half hour.

'Gracious me,' said Cook, 'Six thirty. Nell, I'll be needing you to fetch our grocery order from Mister Fletcher on Brownlow Hill.'

Mrs Hatcher frowned. 'I'll get Agatha to help Lisa.' And she exited the kitchen.

'I'll have the carriage readied and brought to the back door. I'll take you Nell,' said Mr Palmer and he was gone.

Nell and Cook exchanged glances as Nell put on her coat.

'He'll not be groping and seducing me in the carriage. I'll run there. Be as quick as I can and use the short cuts on my way back,' said Nell. She opened the back door and was gone.

'Careful Nell, careful,' whispered Cook. 'God, protect that child in any way you can from the lust and dangers of young Mr Palmer.'

Nell ran so fast she was almost at the top of Brownlow Hill when the carriage drew alongside her. The door opened and Mr Palmer was inside flushed and angry.

'Get in,' he said. Nell didn't move. The carriage driver sat like a stone. 'There will be dire consequences for you Nell if you disobey me.'

Nell's heart beat so fast she thought it would burst through her chest. Across the road was the Red Brick building of the University College. A shadow on its wall

turned into a door. It seemed to beckon and offer sanctuary to her. She ran across the cobbled road avoided clumps of horse manure and almost fell through the door. She climbed wooden stairs that opened into a large well-lit room with a ceiling so high it became a hatch. Wooden stairs climbed the walls to the top. A strange mechanical structure dominated the space. She walked around it admiring the metal cogs, wheels, pulleys, cylinders, metallic rotating teeth that fitted into smaller cogs. It was a work of genius. The most beautiful thing she had seen. It suddenly whirred, components spun and somewhere in the vastness above a great bell rang and chimed seven times.

‘They say seven is the magical number of the Universe,’ said a young man who appeared from the shadows and approached the machine. He was dressed smart in trousers, shirt and tie and shiny shoes yet different in some way.

‘It’s a time mechanism, isn’t it?’ said Nell in an excited tone. ‘I recognise some of the components but they are on a huge scale to what I’ve seen before.’

‘Correct young Nell. This is the heart of the University’s Red Brick building – the Jubilee clock and bell,’ said the young man.

‘It’s beautiful.’

‘You have an interest in such things?’ asked the young man removing a smear of grease from a cylinder with a cloth.

‘Yes, my Grandfather was a clockmaker and watch maker. He taught me a lot before he died.’ The door to the room was kicked open with a thud and Mr Palmer stood there, Dishevelled, sweating and ablaze with fury. Nell gasped and stepped away from the crazed figure. The young man held her elbow.

‘He won’t trouble you no more.’

Young Mr Palmer started to fade and then disintegrate into particles of dust.

'He's gone, what just happened? Am I going mad?' asked Nell removing her elbow from his hand.

'The clock has chosen you. The time you knew is no more, it's in the past. Those people, that life, it's behind you. You are here in a place where you will flourish Nell, you will learn, grow and live. The door in the Red Brick wall doesn't appear to everyone Nell. Open the window shutters and look out.'

Nell opened the window shutters and gasped at the world as sunlight swept in over her open mouth and wide eyes.

Paula Frew

The First Nobel

Conical beams of soft ochre illuminated University Librarian Miss Hartington's path, reflecting off the smooth cobblestones in the courtyard. She preferred the university buildings at this time of night when the students had packed their satchels for the day and set off down Brownlow Hill in search of frothy beer and convivial company.

She quickened her pace as the glowing face of the Victoria Building clock tower came into view. Passing through the tall wooden doors with ease she entered the Tate Hall library and was greeted by the familiar musty scent.

The knock came as expected, short and sharp on the stroke of the eleventh hour. She drew up a seat at the table, the chair giving a high-pitched sound across the floor. 'Come through!' she shouted.

The opaque grey shapes of her visitors floated into sight. Their voices jarring against the gentle hush of her favourite room.

'Makes haste now, all of you,' she gestured for them to stand around the table. Holding her a pen, she began.

'Ross'?

'Yes,' came the mumbled response, followed by a bout of coughing. She looked up at the apparition before her and her raised eyebrow was met by a shrug from the man.

'Barkla?'

'Here – although only just. Those blasted glass front doors. Awful idea.'

'I doubt they've considered our needs in their planning,' Ross chuckled, causing another coughing fit.

Barkla continued as if he hadn't spoken. 'A blasted Nobel Prize isn't enough to get your voice heard around here these days,' he shook his head.

Miss Hartington rolled her eyes. 'Sherrington?'

'Present and correct and looking better than you, old man,' he chuckled, digging an elbow into Chadwick's ribs.

'Uncalled for, Mr Sherrington. Been ill and all, but I'm here. Goodness knows why.'

'Hello, Chadwick,' she said as she ticked him off her list.

'We can hardly say no to her can we,' Sherrington muttered.

Honestly, they were worse than the students. 'Let's get this finished and then we can all go,' replied Miss Hartington. They nodded. Sherrington studied his shoes. Ross stifled a yawn behind his hand.

'Robinson?'

'Yes, miss, good to see you and the gang again!'

She looked up sharply to see a smile playing round his lips. 'My granddaughter was born this morning. A Christmas Day baby!' He beamed.

'Hush Mr Robinson! No talk about the living today, remember,' Chadwick said. Mr Robinson's eyes shone as he made a gesture of pulling his lips closed while simultaneously fizzing with energy.

'Porter?'

'Present. Good to see you all!'

'Khorana?'

'Yes,' he replied, raising a hand which shook slightly.

'And finally, welcome Mr Rotblat to your first year with us.'

'Think I'm the sprightliest of the bunch.' He looked around and puffed out his chest.

'Although Miss Hartington,' Khorana pointed a crooked finger at her. 'Do you regard aging as optional?'

She inclined her head and closed the book with a flourish, releasing a cloud of dust motes. 'Welcome men of science to the year 2008!' She opened her arms in a wide arc.

'Don't like what they've done with the place,' Sherrington said, glancing around the room. 'At least they've left the Library alone,' he grumbled.

'Change is constant,' she replied briskly.

'Now, to your reports. I'll cut to the chase – we're not all going to get to see 2009.' Their faces fell.

'What?' Ross shouted.

'I say!' Chadwick sat down.

Parker stepped forward. 'We've done everything as usual, in challenging circumstances. That building work was horrendous for us.' He looked around at the group and received a chorus of 'agreed' and 'here here's'.

'Some of you have,' she tapped her pen on the pile of reports.

They looked around at each other, wondering which one of them had let them down.

'But my granddaughter. I must be there when she gets home,' said Mr Robinson.

Miss Hartington raised a hand. 'When this place was given over to Administration, we made a pact to do the rounds at our allotted times.'

Robinson pressed his case. 'It's not been easy. We all have loved ones, lives ...'

'Afterlives, you mean, Robinson,' said Rotblat with a grin.

'But if we fail to take care, you know what will happen to this place,' she countered.

'Parker's been sneaking out to the pub,' Rotblat blurted out.

'Damn newbies,' Khorana shook his head.

Parker gave a sigh and glared at Rotblat. 'You give us physicists a bad name, sir!'

Rotblat dismissed him with a wave of his hand. 'Clearly you need new blood around here. The old guard are forgetting the rules!' Rotblat replied.

'My grandson's having a rough time. I follow him. Like to think he feels I'm by his side,' Parker shrugged.

Miss Hartington glanced at the report, noting the times he'd been missing at his post. 'I sympathise, Mr Parker. But laxness caused us to almost lose this building before.'

'I couldn't leave him,' he crossed his arms. 'I didn't think you'd find out,' he added sheepishly.

'I know all, Parker.'

Miss Hartington tuned to Ross. 'Mr Ross. As the first Nobel Prize winner through these doors at University College Liverpool, it is you who will make the sacrifice.'

'Shouldn't it be last in first out?' Ross asked, frowning.

Miss Hartington shook her head. 'Mr Ross, please accompany me to the clock tower.' She stood up and ignored the protestations from the group. They knew the rules. A lapse in duties meant they'd be ensconced in the tower on clock light duties.

'Thank you, Mr Parker for condemning me to a whole blasted year on clock light duties!' Mr Ross spat out the words before folding forwards in a coughing fit. He composed himself and drew his scarf tight around his neck, fastened the centre button on his suit jacket and floated to the door. He turned and pointed at the group. 'I'll come back next year and haunt you, Parker, you see if I don't!'

The light in the clock tower stopped shining three months later. The University Estates team tried and failed to restore the glow that had shone for over one hundred years. Restoration experts were sought from around the country but each one failed in their task and the clock tower remains in darkness. A reminder to us all, of our responsibilities as custodians of our precious history.

Haec otia studia fovent. (These days of peace foster learning).

Karen Bryony Rose

The Forbidden Grounds

'Christine, are yer coming in for something to eat!'

'Oh hey mam I'm just out playing.'

'Well don't get too dirty. I'll put it on the side for a bit and then yer better ger in.'

Christine loved playing footie with the lads who called her Chris cos she was just like a lad. They usually played round the Bully, St Andrews Gardens, to the uninitiated, where they lived, but sometimes, they would have a kick around the forbidden red brick building nearby, until a cocky watch man would confiscate the ball to prevent them from entering the hallowed university grounds. However, this didn't deter them as no one scared Chris. One night she took her turn to get the ball and moved further into Ashton Street that ran right down to Pembroke Place. As soon as she got to the main buildings, she saw a little boy of around seven years whose clothes were more ragged than hers. It was freezing and he had no shoes on. 'Where's yer shoes' she said. He seemed to ignore her despite throwing the ball to her. 'What's yer name then?' he looked right through her and ran towards the Catholic Cathedral. She wanted to follow him, but something stopped her, maybe because it was somewhere near where a workhouse stood on Mount Pleasant, she shivered.

Christine shared the story years later to one of the other cleaners during their break at the gallery. She was a bit hesitant at taking the job as she had heard the building was haunted but she believed that everyone shares spooky tales about old buildings even if they are untrue. She cleaned part time there to support her part time degree course across the way on the University campus. She hadn't seen anything in the gallery but there was one incident in the café when she saw a couple of women dressed in dark Dickensian costumes standing as if they were there for a Christmas event. This hadn't been advertised and she saw the women laughing and drinking coffee from small China cups as if they knew they were important. She spoke to them, and they laughed and asked what she had come as. She was just wearing a pink pinafore uniform. She thought this was very rude and continued with her work despite wanting to give them a tongue lash. Later she asked her supervisor who they were, but she shrugged her shoulders and said she knew of nothing taking place in the building and besides the café had been closed for the last few months and as the receptionist had told her nothing had been booked for the foreseeable future. She wondered if they were the ghosts of former female students who were first permitted to study there or maybe they were the wives of some of the high nobs whose portraits decorated the corridors. She put her head down and continued her shift without a second thought.

Brian Wharton

Captive

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875 – 1926) writes about a caged beauty in his poem 'The Panther'. I see a parallel to the shapely silhouette of the woman, held captive in the glass case in Gallery 2 of the Victoria Gallery & Museum. I imagine she unleashes the lion from his chain and together with Herne's ghost they roam the halls at night; peering at the bronze busts of men revered for their art or philanthropy. Rilke is one of them.

She is nameless, not even a nickname or alias to go by. Do they notice her "powerful soft strides" as she passes. I try to call her Nonie, Winnet, Molly, and she feels different already. Real.

Annette Mackinnon

The Panther

His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
has grown so weary that it cannot hold
anything else. It seems to him there are
a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.

As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
the movement of his powerful soft strides
is like a ritual dance around a center
in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils
lifts, quietly—. An image enters in,
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
plunges into the heart and is gone.

Rainer Maria Rilke

A Journey of Welcome

Rosemary tossed and turned in bed. She felt so scared. She knew she shouldn't be feeling this – she should be excited, here was her chance to start meeting people again, and hopefully make friends.

However, for the last eight years she had been her Mum's sole carer, and her life had been put on hold. Except for doing the shopping (as quickly as possible), she had stayed at home.

Sadly, now her Mum had passed away, and people were telling her she must now start making a life for herself.

Somebody had told her about an Art/Writing Group which would be starting again in September, at the Victoria Gallery on Brownlow Hill.

Rosemary knew she had a buried talent for writing at least. She was undecided, but something inside kept nagging at her to give it a try. She was sure she would regret it if she didn't.

So, trying to put her fears aside, she got off the bus and started the walk up Brownlow Hill. She felt invigorated. She had seen the Clock Tower in the past but had never thought much about it.

Her eyes shone with amazement as she entered the Victoria Gallery. The lovely fireplace at the top caught her attention right away, and she studied the polished patterned pillars and archways with delight.

She thought how beautiful it all was and imagined all the students through the years taking their exams here.

She felt privileged to see it all, and to know that she was going to play her part here as well.

The staff were so friendly and welcoming, and when she went up to the Learning Room, she could see right away what a lovely group of people they were.

The theme was 'Portmanteau', and Rosemary was soon filling a suitcase with mementoes to represent her journey through life so far.

Brenda Roberts

Victoria Building

Welcoming warm bricks, flamed red by sweet philanthropists
Gothic in style, fairytale in looks. Rapunzel in situ in turret on high
Keeps company with Pott's ticking face and Tennyson's words
Standing straight. Beacons to signpost inwards to the sugary tomes

Entranced by a cavern of terracotta, turquoise and Arches Thirteen
Beloc, Holst, Redbrick Writers did and do wander their apexes
Inspired by resonance, beauty and captivating culture
Lit with stained colours from windows ablaze

Built by Liverpool's generosity
Open for Liverpool's use
Still

Lesley Beattie