

Radiance: a poem for performance to music

(in celebration of The Leeds Library as a 'hidden diamond'; an important historical, political and contemporary treasure within the city of Leeds. Commissioned by The Leeds Library as part of The Hidden Diamonds Project, co-curated in partnership with Alchemy)

Written by Rommi Smith

Performed by Cole, Molloy and Smith: Laura Cole (piano); Jenni Molloy (double-bass); and Rommi Smith (poems and vocal)

March 2015

I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library – Jorge Luis Borges

The universe is not made of atoms, it's made of stories – Muriel Rukeyser

The poverty of life without dreams is too horrible to imagine – Sylvia Plath, from Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams

Each grey, un-hallmarked day
(where the presence of rain seems mendless
and the absence of sun stings like theft),

she climbs the Empire Ladder. It is fragile now,
though each rung remembers -
as wood is its witness.

Each step ascendance
into the upper reaches of the atmosphere;
this place, where *The History of Electricity* meets air –

where dust is possessive
of every era and every cover.
Her craft? To consider every strata

of this universe for the man at the desk
with the heartache and the girl
with the homework to complete, whose

question hasn't had the courtesy
to answer,
yet.

So, higher up and into the firmament of thought
she goes, with their hopes as her quest,
past Vincent Thomas Sternberg's

postscript of a ghost,
past *The Dreams of an Astronomer*
and *Unfinished Worlds*,

past *The Story of the Sun*
and *The Story of Comets*
to *The Earth's Beginning*

and *The Handbook of the Stars*.
All possibility begins
inside the dark.

So she reaches for
a spine the colour of midnight
(a book the weight of thought),

another the colour of love,
and opens them out
to reveal words

that shimmer with the atoms
of the matter
of this universe.

She knows that, if an idea holds its concentration,
compressed in the dark mantle of imagination,
then time hews it out

and raises it, to marvel at its light;
each idea praised as a page
made of the stars that fell to earth;

well, then, every diamond
understands
how much a book is worth.

It is the moon,
which lights the homeward paths of
the Lunar Men of Birmingham:

the Priestley Politician!?!; the philosophers;
the Liberation Potter, selling 'what the world desires'.
It is Frederick Douglass,

1859, Albion Street Music Hall,
'for want of utterance'
singing his own soul

and announcing the train
leaving from wherever you are,
via *The Leeds Mercury*, to *The North Star*.

It is the story of how the book
got its beginning:
each letter's ink distilled from tears of gods;

each idea, diamond-tipped and shot
from Cupid's bow at dawn -
setting the sky alight,

shocking sunrise into being;
so as the story of the day
begins, each god sees what has been done,

sees that it is good,
hears the script of larks
upon the page of morning air
– and weeps,

for all it means –
and, so, the story of the day
can begin again.

So, she descends
the fragile Empire Ladder,
with the weight of thought

and the colour of love,
balanced on top of each other;
down past *The Teahouse of the August Moon*

where *An Old Dog Barks Backwards*,
through *The Other Door*
where *A Grain of Truth* leads to

Echoes from the Backwoods,
where *A Polar Star*, in *The Arctic Sea*
meets *The Wealth of Nations*

and *The Rights of Man*
leads to *A Vindication*
of the Rights of Woman;

each luminous quire
of pages singing to the other,
each voice a hallelujah

in the hard-backed jacket chorus.
And she gives each book as a gift:
a book the weight of thought

for the girl with the homework
to complete. And a book the colour of love
for the man with the heartache.

And as they descend,
out into pigeon-grey streets,
footsteps against the pavement,

the sound of mendless rain,
the sense of carrying an answer -
a glimmer of sun.

References

1. The poem's title, Radiance, refers to the 'radiant' cut of diamond; one of many diamond shapes.
2. Empire Ladder is the name of the type of ladders library staff use to climb to high shelves of room-high bookcases.
3. The ghost of Vincent Thomas Sternberg (former librarian of The Leeds Library) haunts The Leeds Library and has been seen and sensed by a number of former librarians and library staff. In 1884, John Macalister, librarian, was working late and saw, what he believed to be an intruder. Grabbing his gun he moved towards the figure only to see a tall, grey, pale old man emerging from the end of the bookcase. The figure walked towards the men's lavatory and Macalister followed him only to find that figure had entirely disappeared.
4. Italicised titles (all except Douglass' own newspaper The North Star) refer to books and journals that exist in The Leeds Library.
5. ***The Lunar Men*** is reference to the book by Jenny Uglow (there is a copy in The Leeds Library). The book celebrates The Lunar Society, a society of scientists, poets, philosophers, inventors and scholars who met on the Monday nearest the full moon, its presence allowing them to walk home through the darkness, after meetings. Members included: poet and scientist, Erasmus Darwin (grandfather of Charles Darwin, author of *Origin of the Species*. A first edition copy of this book exists in The Leeds Library); chemist and discoverer of oxygen, Joseph Priestley; and English potter, Josiah Wedgwood. Priestley, (whose books included *The History of Electricity*), was sarcastically referred to as the 'Priestley Politician', for his religious and political views, (which included support for the French and American revolutions). Josiah Wedgwood designed the abolitionist medallion (Am I Not a Man and a Brother) and is described in the poem as the 'Liberation Potter'.

<http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/themes/59/59220.html>

6. 'What the world desires' is a quotation from James Boswell, quoting Matthew Boulton, celebrated manufacturer and Lunar Society member. The quote is cited in Jenny Uglow's book *The Lunar Men*. The full quote is: 'I shall never forget Mr Boulton's expression to me', wrote James Boswell after a visit to Soho in 1776, "'I sell here, sir, what all the world desires to have—POWER'" (**Boswell, *Life*, 2.459**). The poem makes a play on this quote, positing that it is in fact *liberation* that all the world desires.
7. 'For want of utterance' is taken from Frederick Douglass' Narrative: *These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest. They gave tongue to the interesting thoughts of my own soul which had frequently flashed through my mind and died away for want of utterance – Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.*

Douglass, a former enslaved man, abolitionist, scholar and newspaper editor of The North Star, was hosted by Quakers in Leeds. He came, as a distinguished guest, to the then Albion Street Music Hall to speak. Given the historical Quaker involvement in The Leeds Library and the proximity of The Leeds Library to Albion Street, I feel sure that Douglass must have known about The Leeds Library and been hosted by its members, or their associates. Imagination ventures that, perhaps, he visited The Leeds Library.

8. 'Ink distilled from tears of gods' refers to the ancient Greek belief, that diamonds were either tears of gods, or stars that had fallen down to earth.
9. Cupid's arrow being diamond-tipped refers to the ancient Greek belief that diamonds were 'heavenly fire' and that Cupid's arrows were diamond-tipped and, therefore, a symbol of love and passion.