

John McCullough

## Polar & Other Poems

### ↳POLAR↵

Muzzled and chained, the yellow bear  
leaves the Tower. Faces assemble under granite sky  
to watch its mucky form tied by the Thames,  
a new cord permitting brief jaunts in the river,  
the chance to stalk salmon. A live gift from Norway  
to Henry the Third, the beast silences rebels.

*Gaze at my captive and despair.*

And the crowd does gaze as the monster's  
scooped claws thrash the water—release imagined  
before a sharp tug at the neck begins  
another departure, its bulk steered inside,  
shrinking slowly then vanishing into the black.

\*

Stepping into your room is entering tundra.  
No heat, half-light. A spider plant's brown arms  
dangle down the wardrobe.

Mostly you're on top, your body larger  
than mine, pressing down,  
my throat kissed  
by paws I've watched swing in bar fights.  
Carnivore, you eat softly.

It is not love  
but you let me hold your leash  
and return my spine unsnapped.

On the phone, your voice is different.  
*No one usually calls.*

A loose word, the wrong  
news, and I unbag a blizzard.

Your last sentence:  
*Find a rope  
and go hang yourself.*

\*

In my nightmare, I walk towards an Arctic river. Two white bears, fishing, lurch round and start pacing my way. I grab my rifle and fire six blasts into cloud. They keep striding. I shoot one in the eye, bullet after bullet. I kill both, but they appear again, closer.

The set-up is doubtful on several counts:

1. Wild polar bears hunt seal, not fish.
2. Adult bears live solitary lives. (They part soon after mating.)
3. Attacks on people are rare.

I watched a survivor interviewed, a man who shot one as it dragged him from his tent. Like most aggressors, the animal was a hungry young male, abandoned by its mother. It had not yet learned to fear humans.

\*

No one could look less like a bear  
than you, hollow-cheeked, confined  
to one room. In this last photo, you smile.

Your teeth have rotted so it's a denture.  
You are going to die.

Still,  
a grin's let loose, persists after your time.

I think of Henry's captive  
exploring the Thames:  
a doggy paddle, front paws doing the work.  
Wrong a creature so heavy  
should float  
but there it was, badly lit, shifting—  
a dirty cloud  
in a sky of grey water.

### ✠STIRIOUS✠

*a. Resembling icicles—Samuel Johnson, Dictionary*

On the rink, people are letters, rush past  
gleeful, immortal. They form names

and fragments then rearrange—  
*polar to pallor, guilt to gilt.*

Words race ahead of me, free  
from punctuation, scarves and tails flapping.

They go where they must.

Where I shall follow.

\*

*Why are you always so bloody distant?*

Your kitchen lunges into my eyes like starlight.

A moment when we are language.

You're Anglo-Saxon, coarse. I'm bookish,

abstract—derived from Latin. The difference

is audible: *rise/ascend, go/exit,*

*dead/defunct.* I promise to become

less detached, that I will change, and soon.

*Soon* from the Anglo-Saxon for *now*,

from a thousand years of people saying

they'll do things instantly, though of course

they don't. They only promise.

\*

this is how words die                      slow as icebergs

luminous blue structures                      they drip

in afternoon sun                      water probing

each fissure                      over hours, decades

prising                      sounds                      apart

\*

Everywhere we turn

beneath the hard sky

is blue—

cold noses, deep ice, trapped breath.

Language moves into itself.

*What are you thinking?*

I suck lost words like stones.

*Chantpleure*—to sing  
and weep at the same time.

*Nepenthe*—a drug  
for all pains. You touch my fingers, withdraw:  
they are icicles.

Only my tongue probes edges, textures.  
It reaches into grooves  
for each fragile nuance,  
where every word reveals  
its limitations,  
opens into what cannot be spoken.

### ✠SANTA MARIA✠

This bouquet is steering me round town. Celosias jut  
like the prow of a ship. Goldenrods are flags prancing,  
the one starburst chrysanthemum a giant face  
I cannot see. Perhaps I am a bloom too but forgot—  
a dozy poppy. Where are we going? We sail  
down avenues as if looking for something,  
hunting someone down. Waves flail at the deck  
but our voyage continues. It is necessary.  
It is inappropriate: the calla lilies are tongue-coloured.  
For Christ's sake—show some reverence.  
We rearrange the ship. What were we doing?  
That's right, America. We had chosen to discover  
a country. All we need to do is find it.  
But my leaves, my hands are cold. My shirt is soaking.  
I have been carrying flowers for five years  
through rain, patrolling the same bare street.

## ↳QUEER SHORES↳

Gutspur fled the coast. I blame the mob.  
He was jellied of Blue Val, Stones and Dancing Felix,  
who days later salsa'd off a cliff. I smelt  
this island before I saw it, spooms that were nearly  
vanilla, almost breadfruit cooking—the sweat  
of a tall man's thighs. A fresh trade spices the air,  
stirs in the changes. Philosophies show up  
like plagues of spiders. Scant hope of keeping chot  
but I manage, helped by rowdy one-armed women.  
Blunt chased a sea snake with dynamite. The shell unpeeled  
inside her hand. I wix her on the veranda of her coral-built  
store, cleaning a pistol, face boiling with flies. She grins  
as I buy small gifts for my lover, his favourite guavas,  
beetle bait, watered copra. We leave our cases packed.  
The trader before me vanished without notice, chanced it  
on a skoof ship. That or he drowned trying backstroke  
while stewed. Either way, they never found a body,  
though you know what an island's like for talk.

## ↳QUEENS ROAD BOOKS↳

*i.m. Noel Brookes, 1942-2007*

He might have shot up from an Arnold Bennett,  
one used as a doorstep. A dapper, six-foot  
statue with a whiff of cheap fags and the infinite,  
  
his realm a city of book skyscrapers and rubbish  
heaps, maimed shelves. Extracting finds required panache,  
a dance of slide-and-balance to prevent the onrush.

Beneath wreckage, Delia nuzzled Jung Chang,  
Yeats lounged beside *A Practical Man's Things*  
*to Make and Do*, the smells of previous owners skulking

with soup spots, French blazonry, the occasional hair.  
Week on undisturbed week, I forged through *The Empire*  
*of Dust*, misshelved in Art: "beggar's velvet" circles each star,

*falls with each drop of a thunderstorm . . . The tiniest*  
*motes can enter pores in human skin.* I read that last  
part to a lover. I can't remember his name, just his lack of interest

in events beyond *now*. He grinned and kissed my neck  
then went to ground in Modern Fiction. I can't bring back  
the start or finish of the thing, only that hour of hide and seek.

Mr Brookes had no problem locating any volume.  
The marble jaw lowered in oracular time  
before a brisk *Back room, top shelf, by the doorframe.*

He kept a second shop inside his head, each trade and purchase,  
subsection and subsidence mapped in neural space,  
his not-quite-chaos. (Ross. My lover's name was Ross.)

Then overnight he went, the landlord price-slashing an abandoned  
family of texts. *Whereabouts unknown*, though near the back I found  
a *Footnotes in Bibliomania*, unauthored and tobacco-stained.

A proud though not unfriendly hardback, published recently,  
already ancient. I stroked its spine, replaced it gently.  
I couldn't confine it to an alphabetical study.

The stock dispersed, the bare shop closed, unable to survive  
without its secret twin, but man and map live on in shelves  
inside my brain. Whenever a memory sinks, turns fugitive—

a flower's name, school hymns, an old friend's face—  
I wake myself in that small city, running fingers across  
its terraces and skylines till I find it, the oblong shape of loss.

## Author Bio

John McCullough's first collection of poems *The Frost Fairs* (Salt) won the Polari First Book Prize for 2012. It was a Book of the Year for both *The Independent* and The Poetry School, and a summer read for *The Observer*. He has written commissioned poems for both the British Museum and the British Film Institute. Originally from Watford, he now lives in Hove with his civil partner and two cats. He teaches creative writing for the Open University and New Writing South. At present, he is working on his second collection, sections of which have already appeared in *Poetry Review*, *Poetry London*, *The Rialto* and *Best British Poetry*.

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