

Three Poems

"We left behind one by one/.../...our civilized/distinctions/and entered a large darkness./It was our own/ignorance we entered."

Margaret Atwood, "Further Arrivals," *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

Alice's Adventures under Ground

He titled it this before it was published, when it was only a single hand-lettered volume drawn with his own versions of Alice. He dutifully capitalized Alice, her proper name; Adventures, because they were after all; Ground, the place on which all stood.

But under unseen, secret—
underneath, under-wraps—and wild as undergrowth.

(Now it conjures Alice smuggled North through the underground railroad; coiffed and travelling the Paris Metro; passing out illicit leaflets behind the Iron Curtain.)

As one studied in the architecture of rabbit burrows, the universal truths expressed in numerals, he no doubt knew this word was key. Opener of doors to all prepositions, bestower of subtext, secret pass to every room in hidden places. He could not leave it out or he'd lose the sense (Alice's Adventures Ground suggesting gritty bits of exploration, hard to swallow) but neither could he hand it to her complete with capital authority, as if it were a concept already taught. Instead he plunked her in, let her learn it for herself, take it in like a mouthful of magic cupcake or mushroom. Unlearn above-ground ignorance,

innocence. This a preparation for the later
lesson of through; an adjustment of her eyes

for the journey further into dark & largeness,
when she would have to lift heavier
cloaks of logic, peer through soot obscurity,
navigate deeper holes, to find the true story. Even her own
truth
elusive: a sliver lodged under her skull.

In which alic e visits pacific rim national park

She does not know how to read this untended garden.
Her hands fondle fern, salal, driftwood,
seeking some texture reminiscent of parchment;
hoping for roses, her nose finds only ocean.
There is too much sand
& too few people, only an agelessness
more ancient than the oldest buildings
at home. She resents the algaed stones
which make her sip, soil her pinafore.
This is not the sort of water in which one could meander
in a storied boat. She thinks
if this place has any stories they would not be spoken
in her tongue.

In Tofino she sheds tears at breakfast,
the marmalade has too little peel
& the potatoes too many spices.
At least here there are buildings, a post office
from which she might write letters home, except
she cannot remember what words she used there,
her only speech now a fluttering of hands
like gulls' wings.

She finds small comfort only in the road
that twists its sinuous way, sometimes within view of water.
It moves like a familiar river,
the rowing-place of stories back in Oxford.
Motor vehicles pass, rippling

the wind as fishes stir water. Voices sometimes shout greeting
but they're gone too quick, she cannot catch
a whiff of perfume, cannot assess
Sunday finery & parasols.
Though there is still too much green
for her liking, even that fear is familiar—
once she dreamt of falling
from the rowboat, drowning in the mess of green,
muddled reflections,
& never being found as the don's story flowed on.

Instead of a ramshackle shelter of driftwood on the beach
she empties her velvet purse for a room
beside that river of a road,
where the owner speaks kind words
in a familiar lilt, accepts
payment in £.s.d. In her own small room
she strokes the orange walls,
pulls drapes against green. Then turns a knob on a box
with a dusty screen, and hears regal notes, sees for an
instant
the distinction of an old white parliament;
the image mirrored, sky blue as that river,
home, the blessed word
spelled out before her, now
melting on her tongue: THAMES.

Alice's socks

are plain white in Wonderland
but striped in Through the Looking Glass
because bi-colours went well with chess, and besides
she was six months older now,
knew something of divisions
between colours
and worlds;

knew something
of bars.