



THE POOR PRINT



RIP Dr Mark Whittow

The Poor Print *shares with the whole college community its shock and sadness at the sudden and tragic death of Dr Mark Whittow, College Lecturer and Provost-Designate, and extends its respectful and sincere condolences to Mrs Helen Whittow and their children, George, Mary and Flossy.*
This issue is published with a black border in his memory.

Current Narratives

Michael Angerer

To us, narrow-minded land-dwellers that we are, the sea has for millennia been the great unknown, the Other, a fear to be overcome. Even now, in the age of submarines and recreational scuba-diving, it has managed to remain enigmatic: it is one of those so-called interesting facts that less than five percent of our oceans have been explored. Little wonder, then, that we so frequently invoke the sea to play its menacing part in the stories of our lives, from the Odyssey to the Titanic; the very word ‘wave’ has a threatening ring to it – here comes the towering Other, ready to break and bury you beneath its foaming waters. But one of the most recent uses of this image also showcases the dangers of trusting narratives of reality: the so infelicitously named ‘migrant wave’ of 2015 reminds us to watch the murky waters of political framing carefully.

Many of our earliest narratives betray a fascination with the inscrutable sea: are we not captivated by the tribulations of Ulysses upon the wine-dark sea all the more because of this forbidding backdrop? In the *Odyssey* and its unauthorised sequel, the *Aeneid*, it is a natural force that is only overcome after

innumerable challenges. The Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, on the one hand, has the eponymous hero safely sail to and from Denmark; on the other, we hear of him fighting off sea monsters for days on end during a swimming contest. These stories show us the ocean as an impenetrable expanse: men brave the uneasy calm of the surface, but deadly threats lurk beneath. Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* exploits this fear of the unseen masterfully, with its monster out of the deep. The ocean, in these narratives we tacitly accept, is best kept at a safe distance.

It is absolutely terrifying indeed when the ocean itself does not see it that way. Regularly, we are reminded of our impotency by the news of underwater earthquakes and tsunamis: 2004, an earthquake in the Indian Ocean caused waves of up to 30 metres that killed over 230,000 people; more recently, the 2011 earthquake off the coast of Japan resulted in waves 40 metres high and provoked the Fukushima nuclear disaster. These natural catastrophes are above all tragic for all those whose lives they impact. But even while casually reading these facts in an article, it is difficult not to feel afraid: such events subvert our comforting narrative; there is no distance to be had when a tropical beach can within seconds turn into instant destruction. The wave is the deadly arm of the unprovoked Other that without warning reaches out for the innocent bystander.

With this in mind, we see the force the figurative use of the term ‘wave’ can have. The tactic of the ‘human wave attack’, an infantry charge frequently used until it was made completely ineffective due to modern weaponry, builds upon the same psychological effect: the Other – by now very firmly the Enemy – pushing relentlessly forward. For a slightly different use, we may turn to Morton Rhue’s 1981 young-adult novel *The Wave*, based on a real social experiment. The title is the name of a pseudo-fascist group created to demonstrate how National Socialism could gain support: discipline fuses its members together into one common movement, a single wave ready to crush those who oppose it. Here we do not see humans as individuals anymore, but as one mass: alien, dangerous, and, like a tsunami, threatening to engulf us at any moment.

It should come as no surprise whatsoever, then, that the term ‘migrant wave’ – used together with other endearing terms like ‘refugee crisis’ – does not exactly encourage a very welcoming response; the dramatic increase in refugee arrivals to Europe in 2015 predictably resulted in a sizeable boost for right-wing parties and may well have played an important part in the vote for Brexit. There is a German word for it (there always is), *Flüchtlingswelle*, ‘refugee wave’, which is used almost constantly – and it is one of the reasons for Angela Merkel’s heavy losses in the 2017 elections and the rise to power of a new right-wing government in Austria. This goes beyond simple framing: this is the

adaptation and acceptance of a narrative. Refugees are cast as the malevolent mass of Outsiders sweeping in on the peaceful lives of the people; they are the villains of the story. And since every good story needs a hero to defeat the villain, populists thrive in the wake of this wave.

But we must remember that life is not a narrative; rather, it contains many of them at the same time. Is it not just as easy to cast the roles completely differently? Going back to the *Odyssey*, we might think of the refugees crossing the Mediterranean as embodying the Ulysses of our times; the hero defying gods and nature in order to bring about a happy ending. Warsan Shire’s poem ‘Home’ powerfully shifts the focus back to the individual in the ‘migrant wave’, back to the story behind the journey:

*you have to understand
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land*

Perspective, as always, is a powerful tool; it would pay to be more aware of that rather simple fact. This is not about glorifying anyone, or insisting on a particular narrative view: this is about empathy, understanding, and looking beyond the narrative to maybe catch a glimpse of the world. Do not look for narratives to keep you afloat in deep water.■

‘Evolving’

Tom Saer

I have apparitions of a pillowcase
Stuffed with lion feathers

I have fifty pence from grandpa
To buy slow motion food
On the vibrating bus seat by the bus
stop

I have pins and needles in my face
Dripping with autotune

I have a citadel of hair and glasses
Made from a pile of the slain

I have a sword in her altar
Bleeding grapes from a kitchen tray

I’m better than you

I have a gunshot wound in my hind leg
from a volcano of mercy

I have a contract with my mantelpiece
Bathing my head in salt water
Letting all the reptiles feed

I have a disciple’s greeting
Soft and fast and weak
Bristling with water

I’m better now

‘a threesome’

Fanxi Liu

THE DIFFICULTY OF DISENTANGLEMENT

Girl holding your hand. I dreamt of empty dormitories last night
very quietly, Henan summer blowing in through the open door.
There was a drought that year, three reservoirs drawn dry, despite which
the evening air was sharp enough to cut my thoughts in half:
upturned faces touched bright with rapture; palm clenched around a pocketful of stories.

Screen red on a backdrop of stars choked out of the sky.
I imagine that after a tragedy the characters stagger away, mostly because
they are shellshocked by the knowledge that all else will be afterword.

Girl sitting on the balcony. You shudder at yourself
that you bruised her shoulder so she would carry something of you away with her
that you left your best hope at redemption behind your teeth
that you can only stand in a wash of tail-lights
– having been breathed out.

BRIGHT ENOUGH TO BURN

Found his breath stolen one morning, he whispers faintly to me
barely audible however his slashed lungs flutter. Eagerly helpless.
He doesn’t know about the missing Friday, the canal, the sleeves pushed up her arms
or that I’ve been putting all the tenderness I can no longer muster there.

Benediction murmured soft against my wrists.
Murakami on my nightstand.

Perhaps during the dark he can wander to the edge of the grass
kneel where the ground is warm and exhale ripples across the water
sink into the gentle lost. Waking
he deserves better than to believe himself lucky.

SOMETIMES WE HIT UPON A THEORY

Held to her, light streams through.
It’s always that kind of violence you crave for him:
past like bones rebreak reset.

Making a Move Into a Movement

Amanda Higgin

Xanda and I sit at a coffee shop window overlooking Cornmarket, exchanging forecasts for the term ahead as we warm our hands around drinks. Xanda is drinking green tea; I’m in dire straights with my collections revision, so I’m on coffee. I’ve been complaining about the need to make life choices, although right now that mostly means internship applications. The prospect of irrevocable decisions is intimidating, okay?

My cup rattles in its saucer as the table vibrates.

‘Sorry,’ Xanda says, reaching for her phone.

‘No, don’t worry about it!’ I shrug. ‘I’m just glad there isn’t an earthquake coming. Or a stampede. Or a really heavy monster that takes inexplicably slow steps. What is it?’

‘Nothing important. I keep forgetting to turn off the notification for ‘Word of the Day’!’

‘Oh? What is it today?’ I drain my coffee. It has a lot of sugar in it.

‘It is...’ she checks her phone again, ‘*murmuration*: one, an act or instance of murmuring; two, rare, a flock of starlings.’

‘Oh, I know that one. Murmurations are those huge aerial displays of starlings, when they seem to just hang around in a flock forming these amazing, flowing patterns. I’d love to see one, one day. I’ve no idea how.’

‘I heard a really interesting segment on murmurations once,’ Xanda puts her phone down. ‘Nobody’s quite sure why

they form, or at least the presenter at the time didn’t know. One theory was that they form over areas where the flock’s going to roost. The murmuration needs to descend, but the bird that moves first is vulnerable to the predators that follow the flock. So the whole group hangs around until one of the birds has the courage to go first, and since they can’t stay still in the air they end up forming these elaborate patterns.’

‘Wow. That’s pretty cool. So, unless a single starling decides to take the risk, the whole flock can’t roost?’

‘Basically. Those photogenic patterns are just starlings being indecisive.’

‘That sounds a lot like social reform. Or any kind of ideology, come to think about it. Somebody has to be the pioneer, because until they do all the people who agree can’t make the move.’

‘True. There has to be one starling pioneer to let the murmuration do what it has to do and roost. But it’s still true that the first starling to move is in immense personal danger from predators, and might get eaten. Bearing that in mind, it takes almost as much courage to go second. You’re slightly less likely to be eaten, but once the pioneer is then suddenly you’re in charge.’

‘Ah, yes, the eternal glory of the person who goes second,’ I raise my empty mug in salute.

‘The person who goes second, who earns no glory if they just follow in the clearly extremely easy path of the person who went before them, but earns unending misery if they somehow manage to fudge what was a perfect start. It will always take courage to follow the pioneer, and you never get any credit for it.’

I consider the point for a moment. ‘If the person who goes first has found a perfect opportunity, gone first, whatever, and everyone follows them, then how is that especially commendable? At that point, it’s just going along with the crowd.’

‘I’m not really talking about that. I’m talking about the first follower, or the first few. When you see that someone’s proposing a good idea, and you hope that everyone will jump on the bandwagon and make it a safe bet, but you have no idea. At that point, you don’t know whether you’re going to be supporting the next leader of a cultural movement or just putting your own head on the block next to theirs. But, if a pioneer makes a move and nobody follows then their efforts have been wasted. They’ve been eaten by a peregrine falcon without anybody getting any closer to roosting. The followers are necessary in order for the risk to be worth it, and they also grant a degree of safety to the one who went first.’

‘Well,’ I tap my nails on the table top for a moment, ‘here’s to the followers: the unsung seconds-in-command, the right-hand men, the starlings who went behind.’

The table vibrates again, and Xanda checks her phone.

‘What is it this time?’ I ask. ‘Another pertinent, nature-based metaphor for social revolution?’

‘An email,’ Xanda sighs. ‘Apparently the central heating’s broken.’

I smile, ‘I suppose even the roost isn’t free of troubles.’■

Love Note to Oxford

Shirley Russell

I suppose it should come as no surprise that I’ve fallen completely in love with you. After all, this is a return and not an introduction. I’ve seen you before; I’ve seen your spires and your streets and your narrow little lanes and cosy coffee shops. I’ve been in your libraries and your colleges and your halls.

But what has surprised me is how different you are this time; and how beautiful. It’s as if the wounds and hardships and sorrows that I’ve experienced in the outside world have made you all the more spectacular. Now I compare you to the darkness outside, and you shine. How you shine! Your spires soar upwards and point to the vault of the heavens, and on a sunny day I look at you and think my heart will explode.

I work in your libraries and look at the beauty around me and somehow can’t believe I’m here. I used to have trouble concentrating on my work because I thought my heart would break; now I can’t concentrate because my heart is soaring. You both distract me and inspire me. I want to be worthy of you and do the best work I can, but I’m caught in the wonder of seeing you every day.

There is peace and rest and wisdom everywhere. I go to Compline and serenity rests on my shoulders like a cloak; I listen to chamber music and it heals

my soul; I read and write and discover intellectual possibilities I never knew existed. I used to stare at the pavement as I walked, wishing I could be anywhere else. Now I look at the blue sky and think of endless promise and the wonder of being alive and being here.

Even on a rainy day, your magnificence shines through in the small things; the fireplaces and snug studies and steaming mugs of tea. I peer at books that have that wonderful old smell and speak to me in different ways than to the scholars that have read them before, and will speak to later scholars in different ways still. I run to hall, not because it’s raining but because I’m looking forward to seeing my friends who love you as much as I do. The skies are grey but I laugh, loudly and often. I laugh as often as I used to cry.

I had genuinely forgotten what happiness was until I came back to you. Have I regressed somehow, or gone back in time? No. I am not the fresh-faced undergraduate I was when we first met. I am older, scarred, worn by sadness and the passage of time. But you are helping me find out what I want and how to move forward. You surround me and lift me up and make me more of who I really am.

I am not Auden; I can’t write some wonderful ode that will be read long after I am gone. All I can say is what has struck me every day since I returned. I love you with a heart that is whole again because of you.■

‘Hypnagogic Waves’

Michael Leong

hey! what are you doing

begone, the night should not gather here

disperse your images of

me clutching you tightly, arm wrapped

like saran around your waist, warmth

bubbling up like a barnacle on the seabed.

go away, memories of dim quiet

worlds past as war heroes of the night

sing their battle hymns, golden saxes

bouncing off the walls as our faces almost touch.

stop distracting me, I've been changing the pictures on my wall, the old, long

ones have been

cluttering up my hallway, gathering dust, pulling me in.

once again I find myself alone, looking at the wall of the two of us - funny, I

could have sworn I'd cleared it only yesterday.

UPCOMING ISSUES

Issue #27 - Dissonance

Submission deadline: 28/01
‘Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.’
– Walt Whitman

Issue #28 - Charge

Submission deadline: 11/02
*‘Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!’ he said.
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.’*
– Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Oriel to Fly Rainbow Flag for February

Teofil Camarasu

Oriel’s Governing Body voted on Wednesday to fly the rainbow flag in February from 2018 onwards – except days when the college flag takes precedence. February marks LGBT History Month in the UK, an annual event that aims to raise awareness around discrimination against the community and interrogate heteronormative attitudes in society.

In committing to flying the flag for the

whole month, Oriel joins the ranks of 12 other colleges that do similarly. Oriel has in previous years flown the rainbow flag for the first and last day of February.

The move comes as a result of a campaign led by former JCR LGBTQ+ Officer Alex Waygood, who presented a 26-page position paper to the Governing Body in January. By flying the flag throughout February, proponents argue that Oriel reaffirms its commitment to the Equal Opportunities Policy and expresses solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community. The JCR voted twice in support of the changes over the past year.

The rainbow flag was designed by activist Gilbert Baker in 1978 to be a symbol for the LGBTQ+ community. It was commissioned by fellow activist Harvey Milk, and has come to be used internationally as a symbol and celebration of diversity.

The Governing Body also voted in the meeting to clarify the flag policy available to students, to display the reasons for a certain flag being flown in the lodge, and to clarify the process for flags to be approved by the Governing Body. However, the Governing Body chose not to amend the current ban on flags flown from students’ windows. Those proposals were rejected ‘on grounds of tidiness, health and safety, and avoiding conflict over the flying of flags’.■

The Poor Print Online

Check out Chris Hill’s new composition for this issue, titled Wave, and Sophia Smout’s article from Memo-ry, titled The Symbols of Memory: Liberating or Limiting?



The Vanity of Man

Tobias Thornes

How curious it is, my friends, that my memories should remain so vivid of the far distant journeys that I made so many decades ago. I have now recalled to you that first happy adventure I had, in the long-ago summer of 2017, which so piqued my yearning for exploration and magnified my fears about the short-sighted ways in which the world was then engaged. Before that brief digression, I was explaining to you the course of my longer *Slow Travel* excursion that that first trip incited: when, in the spring of 2018 I set out, by slow but steady means, to discover the reality at the root of rumours then circulating about a changing world and catastrophe to come. How naïve we were, in those heady, Halcyon days! How proud the strut before this bitter fall! Perhaps you find my tale incredible, so difficult is it now after the long march of years to comprehend such stupidity, such ravaging and waste! So priceless an ornament, of which you and I can now only dream, we held then in our hands, but scarcely saw its beauty before it was irreparably shattered, crushed by the grip of greedy fingers.

I shall resume my tale where I left it, a year into my long *Slow Travel* journey, at the beginning of April, 2019, in Ulaanbaatar. For a traveller coming south by rail and foot from Russia, there is only one way onwards through Mongolia: down into the Gobi desert, and back into China, through which I had travelled but a few months before. We pulled into the Chinese border-town of Erenhot in the mid-morning, for the customary stopover while the wheels were changed from Russian to Chinese gauge. I was glad to be there at that time of the year, which presented a happy medium between extremes in a barren desert climate that plunged to twenty degrees Celsius below zero in January and climbed well above thirty on a typical day in July. Now, in spring, the desolate plains and bare mountains were at, I suppose, their least bleak, for a land where little rain ever falls and little vegetation ever tries to brave the dusty, salty soil. I was surprised that some hundred thousand inhabitants managed

to survive in this desert settlement, but the population had proliferated fifty-fold in a quarter of the century before, brought in to facilitate trade after the easing of restrictions when the USSR fell.

More interesting to me than this dusty town was the story of what some of the Chinese were attempting nearby, at the fringes of the desert. The Great Green Wall, a project that already had a forty year history when I visited in 2019, was a vain and desperate government-sponsored attempt to hold back the encroaching wilderness from the pastureland beyond, over a thousand square miles of which were already being lost every year. The reason for this desertification was clear: decades of logging to convert sparse forest to flat grassland had opened the Gobi borders to bitter winds that stirred up dust storms, destroying the remaining vegetation. Now, the Chinese aimed to increase forest cover from five to fifteen percent, hoping that a new Great Wall of trees would break the storms, secure the soil and hold back an invasion just as frightening as that of the barbarian hordes their ancestors were desperate to repel.

What I saw was not encouraging. Acre after acre of monoculture trees that offered little to local wildlife; the two-thousand, eight-hundred mile stretch still far from finished; and ugly grey, empty trunks – like spectres of the winter still haunting the spring – that occupied vast patches where the hastily-planted trees had simply died. These trees were not designed for this desert, nor were its few native animal inhabitants likely to benefit from this alien sort of forest. I would not have been surprised, had I been told then that the venture would prove ultimately unsuccessful, and indeed the Gobi did keep growing, whatever man might do. We were arrogant in those days. We thought we could control the world, or at least predict how our actions would change it. Only subsequent events have proven just how wrong we were.

It was time to move on from Asia. I was told that there was another Great Green Wall taking shape with more success in the Sahara, and my mind soon turned to that first human continent, the northern stretches of which that largest of deserts dominates. But I had now seen all that I could stomach, for now, of the Northern Hemisphere, where up until then I had spent my entire life. There were boats from Beijing, I found, that would take me to the

more southerly stretches of the still mysterious giant triangle in the middle of the map: it was time to sail south at last, into Africa.

Another lengthy voyage awaited me, as I boarded the huge European cargo ship making its months-long journey home via southern Africa, even though I was to be disembarking at the first port of call after Asia. The seasickness that would previously plague me after even a few hours on a mirror-smooth sea had fortunately already been cured by the weeks spent boating to Hawaii from Japan, yet still the prospect didn’t please me, as a lover of land and of roaming far on foot. I had one of only half a dozen passenger cabins – this sort of slow travel was not a popular undertaking – and ate my meals with the crew but otherwise was left alone to read, to write, to ponder and to miss the sight of land.

Nevertheless, the journey was surprisingly pleasant. I found again, on that unending trip, a tranquillity that cannot be obtained except on long sea voyages. For days on end, there was nothing but the endless, rolling waves of the warm Indian Ocean, stretching interminably in all directions as the sun sailed slowly between two empty horizons, from utter east to farthest west. I had no means of communication even to tempt me to contact the wider world, which might as well have ceased entirely to exist. This was what it was, I reasoned, to pioneer the unmapped seas of old, cresting the blue-green wilderness as flotsam on the waves, not knowing what – if anything – awaited on the farther shore of this gigantic lake. The world now seemed wide again – wide and wild, beyond the bounds of human habitation. Home and ground were alien, like an ambrosial dream or fantasy that ceased to be reality in a world composed of water, its only inhabitants the seldom-passing other ships and strange sea creatures dancing on the surf. This experience was at once imprisonment and escape, inspiration and despair. For those who

manned humanity’s thousands of long-haul freighters, it was a day-to-day normality all seasons of the year. For me, it was an utter strangeness, an enforced span of contemplation that has left its mark on the remainder of my life.■

‘Marriana’

Aaron Cawood

Marriana.

The skyline horizon break between ocean, sky and shore.
The smell of parchment and kindled fires and muddy boots.

Water on a wooden boat.
Bridges across a stagnant moat.
Brass hooks along a winter coat.
Calligraphy of a tattoo quote.
The perfume smell of a love note.
An argument, an outvote.
Some poetry some teenager wrote.

Marriana,
keys and maps
and adventure.
Thank you.
Please.
Thank you.