Excelsior - A Poem in 9 Parts (post 1 of 5)

by Iain James Robb

Excelsior: A Poem in Nine Parts

Preface: Musings on a Lighthouse by an Eastern Isle

(Suggested by a painting by Mario Larrinaga)

It is bright tonight; this plain, displaced from place
In Time's broad flight, yields nothing to the strains
Of air, no marbled hand unstrafed by rains
Or gales retraced through past days' shaded waste.
Great things may fall; through all life's vagrant seas
Drift things so small we pass them as they fly-
Yet a man may have no memories of these:
Things carved against doom's deep shall last yet die.
What listless whispers from the winds are these,
That lead thoughts prior to pass of fortune's page?
All death's a dream that fades upon the stage
That raised strayed sails, to strange eternities.

Beneath the wreaths of green and Eastern skies
That wheeled through fields of liquid emerald,
Your range of years, white watcher of the world,
Perennial as the fires that marked your rise,
Had outfaced an age. Your pale palladium
To those who'd tamed the treason of the seas
Awaits no voice of time's now but the thrum
Of waves, cast far from strands and galaxies.
In lampless lands where sunlight never glides,

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Your eye gone out, what man may mourn you now,
No guiding height by weightless Wain or Plough,
No land-bound star and temptress to the tides?

Now hushed beneath the breezes and the bays,
Now shut from all the seasons touched by sun,
Your plinth's height through its Hepastadion
Could not forestall your fall; your starboard rays
Had reached at length your fatal yield of years;
The spells that stars cast pass but won't reverse.
Had a shape been traced in space that sigiled tears,
That had passed across the looming universe
For prophets' tongues? They seem to live where press
The currents that succumb or beat their breasts,
Past lightless realms where suns are rocked to rest-
That rise to leave your shipless wilderness.

Faint Pharos, shall men ring your name once more,
Or praise the safeguard of light's beaten breath?
Some things, it seems, are only born for death:
You seemed as ageless as your salt-lipped shore.
What bronze-thewed youth or white-haired wanderer,
From lands unguided now through floodlit seas,
Rides by raftered strands to Alexandria,
Over windless ways no steep sun seeks or sees?
Detained past hope and range of loss and rage,
Corrode to pumiced stone, and turn from sight:
O voiceless watcher once through lanes of light
On night-bound paths: to narrowed straits of age.

I. *Brunel on the Beach*

Though Beauty, men say, lives in the beholder's eyes
(In the eye of which an only-child was Beauty,

Without Her playmates mingled in our annexed sighs,
Whose nature's multiform, though universal-
Both as deep as skin but wielded forth through bones
And flesh to grace all men's eternal temporal:
So that every sweetness dies and leaves its mirrors
Far across the visors of remembrance This)

Beauty writhes for all men; I wish I was the eye;
The thing I have striven for I wish was beauty.
This ship, which I have worked on for so many years
That I grow tired of the sands in passage,
Has become my beauty, though not beautiful
As her whose limbs slip like the curves of psalms
Across their scented buttressed love, old David's temporal,
As it becomes my own, in age: that nourished her
I know - though I decay beside sterile perfections
In the metal destinies that outdistance either
These limp cages peered from, though the flesh is cleft.

And I, Brunel, what then is left of me?
My name's worth something. O, great Western Railway,
Propeller driven transatlantic ship,
Steam-driven; route passed off from Marlborough Downs;
Excelsior - a word I know falls ever short of breathing.
What is this worth, you sand-occluded float?
I wish that God was friend as well as sculptor:
I, Brunel, what then is left of me?

Come swiftly to me now, I am afloat,
O brazen age; I'm beaten by gigantic pinions.
We are ants diminished under glass dominions,
Whose wingspan's locked, but I am bare, below
(Come swiftly to me: I am cast afloat)
The moltenness of future. You reveal yourselves,
However, ghosts, and point my shoes down sillions

Towards the wraiths they touch as futures. Come once more
Darlings and daughters of posterity, drifting
Into the abbysic fray; we are trapped once more into doldrums.
My creditors who mock me here (below, I am afloat)
Are looking for a sacrificial goat, and scrabbling
For a lamb to drag apart into the shambles.
For a strangled pittance you will become my pittancers.
Culture has become fostered by the hands of unskilled
Butchers, shreds cut off from gelded meat,
Who milk the lotus where all ashes are.

And I, Brunel, what when? Is left of me
My name, worth, something? O great Western railway,
The prayers they make buckle at their birth and slip
Like mine: from hill, wind-battened heath and downs,
The hail-flecks flail, and air is short of breathing
When sun-drops fall, but prayers are cast a float,
And I never asked once to be God the sculptor,
But I must thank the odds for what is left of me.

Though beauty is, in the beholder's eye,
It bequeaths itself in turn to all beholders.
My ship is stranded on the sundrown sands,
But I remember once I was called Isambard
Instead of Brunel; which is what I will be known by-
Brunel, the shining wright and king of folly:
The Deadalus your dyes depreciate,
And son whose wings char in the Father's eye.
Mark men as being mad, but we exist for folly;
It is only being thus you mark your highs, your part.

Lord, if you'd look kindly on my heart,
Though heart could also translate to the soul,
Ring your beams to fracture me and make me whole.
My wings are clipped by your munificence.

Strange ways there are but I would make them stark-
So that I'd walk the way of you and seek you whole.
My wooden boats are barks that disembark
To wooden courts, but teach them ecstasy.
Lift up their sails to starboard in your skies.
Your eyes are diamonds that outshineth lights:
Reach to my own, pour temper over me.
I am your map yet float no island free
Against a landscape I inhabit less
As does my inland neighbour, fly or flea,
But pour through me as does the rain's bow lower,
And separate me from this tiny death
My consciousness enjambs, with every breath
That gilds my puny vault, and teacheth me.
For I am made up of your many cores,
And prisoned men, by mercy, champion your free.