

[Dream City - More, Better, Sooner]

Here is the present moment, and all of us contained within it. You are but a body, she said, time-toughened skin stretched taut. A delicate but strong internal structure. Our bodies and the sensations that pass through them, are all that we are, all that we have to make sense of the world, outside of ourselves, outside of our control.

We must begin by grounding ourselves in the present moment, by bringing attention to the sensations of the breath, entering and leaving the body. Stay with the breath, she said, stay with the present moment. Try not to be drawn into past failures or future plans.

The mind will wander, she said, for that is what the mind does.

Acknowledge where the mind travels to and then gently, but firmly, time and time again, return your attention to the sensations of the breath, to the present moment. On the next breath, she said, take a lungful of air and guide it down to the furthest end of a limb. Visualise the breath travelling the length of the body and back again.

Breathe into this point of the body, she said, and out from it. What physical sensations are there in those nerve endings? Perhaps you feel the rush of cool air passing, the touch of material cloaking your skin, a tingling or persistent itch. Perhaps you feel nothing at all, and that is absolutely fine.

A man from the council came and stood in the library foyer. He asked people how they would like the funding cuts to be delivered. She said; that's like being asked which limbs you want cut off first. If you feel a difficulty in any part of the body, she said, breathe in to it. Accept its presence, she said, but do not be drawn into your feelings about it.

We must accept that everything is temporary. Feelings, thoughts and emotions are just fleeting moments, coming and going, flooding past, like cars on a road. A steamboat chugs past, backwards toward things remembered or read, felt, smelt, sensed or heard of, here comes all our present moments past, extending backward or forward embedded in this plot of land, coming and going, coming and....

Here is Badric's Island, the marshland and all its inhabitants.

Here come Mr and Mrs Bundle the sparagrass farmers and Tom Tug the waterman.

Here comes the night soil boat from the city, filled with rich urban manure.

Here comes the common land, the collective workers, the sick, coming to Battersea to be cut for the simples.

Here comes Sir Thomas More, who owns the land here now.

Here comes More's tenant farmers calling out to him More! More?

But More can't hear, he's on another island writing about another island where inhabitants behave as he writes and the chamberpots are made of gold.

Here comes....

[MORE – the past, a history of exponential growths]

There goes the boat back to the city, loaded with Battersea artichokes, Nine Elms melons and bundles of sparragrass grown huge in the night soil.

Here comes the industrial revolution, Morgan Crucible, the glass works, the steel plants
Here comes 160,000 new neighbours, workers work, here comes the house. Bricks, Mortar, The house. A home. More.

Here comes Jessie, shouting to her father the captain up on the bridge board.

Here comes the railway, Nine Elms station.

There goes Jessie's boat, all the boats, the boatyard, the watermen.

Here comes the Albert Palace, glass and steel, a great exhibition, wonders of the world.

There goes the Albert Palace, a steel skeleton on a carpet of broken glass.

Here comes the city's rubbish, the first electric street lighting, the waterworks, sending potable messages to our neighbours down Elephant and Castle.

Here comes the Battersea Tangle. The junction of things yet to come.

There goes the waterworks.

Here comes Dream City, an illuminated tower of electric light.

There goes Dream City, left on a page, in a box, in a dream.

Here come our Chelsea neighbours from over the river, hungry for power.

Here comes the power station, right here. Our Chelsea neighbours have their power. Have their clean air.

Have their valuable houses. We hold the source of their power, the thick air, the hastily built homes.

Here come jobs for life. A war, more, the women.

Here comes Jessie, looking on as Queen Mary visits, admiring her hats.

Here come the world famous artichokes of Battersea, something like a Jerusalem, but....

There goes the railway station.

Here comes the Festival of Britain Pleasure Gardens, leisure, the weekend. More.

Here comes the first council estate, a higher life, better, more sanitary.

There goes the house, Bricks, mortar, and more.

Here comes the riverside waste plant, shipping the waste from uptown, down the river, out the city, buried.

There goes the farmland, the pigs, the cows, the sheep, the nine elms Melons, the sparragrass, the Battersea artichoke.

There goes Jobs for life. More.

Here come the families from uptown, looking for a place by the park.

There goes the steel plant, the glass works, the workers.

Here comes old money, the certain types of cafe, the estate agents, the shops, the shops, we used to run a chain all over the country until we realised that we only needed one, in a place where enough people had more than enough money to buy a few extra bikes for pottering around on, to take down to their cottage by the sea.

There goes the council estate, the market, the post office depot.

There goes the weekend, leisure, more.

Here comes the new market.

Here comes a future haunting the present.

Here comes the present moment, future plans or re-enactments of the past, here comes the railway again resurrected, glass and steel structures, towers of illuminated light, power, new life, more, better, sooner, higher but for who? She said the mind may wander, for that is what the mind does.

Acknowledge where the mind has been and return your attention to the area of the body on which we are currently focussing. She said. Let yourself be with what you find there. I feel nothing, no sensations of breath or body, I shut down years ago. I'm can't even sure I still have all my limbs.

[BETTER - The Present Moment, a process of individual embetterment]

We are not looking to make things better, she said. Not looking to fix anything, or make judgements. We are practising 'being with' our body's response to exterior conditions. We turn toward difficulty, by being with it, by breathing into it. Grounding ourselves firmly in the present moment - we turn our attention to our points of contact with the solid ground, supporting us, holding us up.

But the ground feels soft beneath me, I feel, hear, smell water creeping slowly in. There is a dampness in the air round here, a dampness that no amount of plastering and painting and underfloor heating will ever get rid of. I know the water rising, the ground growing soft beneath me. I keep my eyes firmly shut.

She said; we can not control the conditions in which we live and work, only focus on ourselves, the internal responses of our bodies to exterior forces. All around me I see people at war with their own bodies, acting out the change they wish to see in the world, on their muscles, faces, skin, hair. Each body an island, containing all that it can and cannot be and do.

She said I should ground myself in the present moment, concentrate on the sensations of my body. I am now nothing *but* body. A dormant physique once honed by activity, now vacant behind the eyes, a vessel to be filled with the projected fantasies of others. I am no longer the source of power but its frozen deity.

I'm not sure if I'm inside the plan, a tolerated inconvenience, or outside of it, looking in or out or up or away, to the side, the past. I am too large perhaps, or too useless, encumbered by my excessively bodily body. I clumsily manoeuvre my way through their visions. Never as polished or as smooth as them, their passage through life is seamless, smiling, confident. My vision is too blurred, my hand too shaky, I am all too visible, all too real. Aware of all the eyes upon me I avert my gaze, try to shrink back inside my excessive body, withdrawing from the windows, the doors, willing myself to disappear.

I know there are others like me out there, empty shells whose names no longer signify the workings within, but have become a collection of letters pointing to nothing but themselves.

From North to South, to east to Westfield to East Westfield Here East sometimes we are right inside the drawings, and sometimes we are outside, on the other side of the fence. She said; I just want to find some time this week, just a couple of hours to go to Costa and sit down - sort my life out.

She said, all of these feelings, emotions, thoughts, are just like cars on the road, passing. We've no need to jump on board. I look at the words encircling me and I can't tell if they are a promise or a threat. Some speak in a forceful future tense, others definitively write the future onto the present, willing it to arrive sooner.

[SOONER – The ghosts of futures past.]

But if the future's already here, its presence as the present announces its own death, futuricide at its own hand. An opening for a new future appears not on the horizon, but in the present moment, beneath us, here, on the ground beneath our feet.

I keep my eyes firmly shut and return my focus to my limbs, the ground beneath.

It is the present moment, we might be casting our eyes up, travelling the length of each building or we might be standing perfectly still watching towers melt into the marshy ground, not crumbling or crashing but silently, softly, submerging themselves back into the silt. We let go of the present moment and sink back into the marsh of the past.

We could have been making plans for the future, or recreating the past, what is lost. We could have been imagining ourselves in other times, other places. We could have been looking at memories, projections, flights of fancy or design.

We could have been looking at the symptoms of a mental illness. Disturbed activity, untethered voices, disjointed thought processes, suicidal ideation.

We could have been heartbroken or relieved, or feeling empty but free. We could have been rejoicing or longing to return, to crawl back into familiar holes. We could have been all these things and more, we could have been sitting here, in the present moment, with the sensation of the soft carpet under the toes of our left foot, we could have been aware of each breath rising and falling in our chests we could have been the present moment, Battersea, the house, the home is gone.

We could have been water once more, flowing through the underground pipes back out to our neighbours, but they've killed the elephant, captured the castle and so we look back again, to find something better than this, more than this, the ground of the present moment.

Sooner; we could have been building roller coasters, cementing leisure time, weekends, a Dream City, with stalls and aunt sallys, an illuminated tower of electric light, if this was our new Dream - we could have been.

We could have been building Battersea Towers, leisure time and More. Skating on ice before ascending in a hot air balloon or even an escalator to such great heights, the top floor of themed craft retail with Margaret Thatcher in a personalised hard hat. If this was our eighties dream we could have been.

We could have been building an art gallery, a temple of culture or we could have been building a great stadium, singing in unison, united by our common goals. If this was our blue shirted dream - we could have been.

We could have been building office office residential, we could have been office office residential, been work work live work. We could have been office office residential again and again in all our failed plans from these endless end times we could have been. If this was our present dreamn - yes we could have been.

The failure of our past could-have-beens point only to the possibility of future could-yet-be's, of the softness of solid ground, the shifting value of waste, the overconfidence of speculative fear.

They say there's not enough power in the area, to feed the new developments. They want to erase the riverside waste plant, bury it underground but the waste workers refuse to go.

On the high street of shops, estate agents, certain types of cafe, the street cleaners one Sunday morning refused to clean up after the night before. The people out for a sourdough brunch were upset by the visibility of their own messes, the work which should have been completed silently during the hours of their sleep. They stuck to the other side of the street. We revelled in the technicolour vomit piles and fast food containers, flowing down the high street.

The notes swell, growing larger in volume and in stature, they climb ascending to infinite heights, stave crotchet and quavering quaver stack without restraint, without order. Building order only from disorder. This disorder, our disorder. We wait for our new power.

Down the road a new block plummeted in value as the wifi reception was horrific, the residents said. The phone company refused to lay more cable - the developers were powerless.

We could yet be allowed to crumble and decay, learn to be with our failures, our ruins, our bodies ageing gracefully, softly sinking southward, surrounded by human activity, houses of homes.

She said all we had was our bodies, and at that moment, we did, we are. We have bodies, time-toughened skin stretched taut. A delicate but strong internal structure. But the water is rising, the ground is growing soft beneath our feet.

I let go of the present moment and fly into all of our futures, both past and present, I am, we were, she said, I know and we could have been, yes we could have been. (The water is rising, the ground is growing soft beneath our feet.)

