



Fisherrow - and the Joy of Chapbook 'Code Shifting'

Andrew Melrose

When the poet/academic Professor Jen Webb wrote to me saying, 'I really love this little book [*Fisherrow*] and how you code shift throughout while keeping your eye on the narrative. It's totally gorgeous.' I felt as though a window had opened, letting light into my year-of-pandemic world. Not the compliment, which is always lovely for any writer to receive, but the 'code shifting' validation.

Let's not skim over it; 2021 has been a real *annus horribilis* for most in a world where horrible things already happen. Adding to forced migration, homelessness, rising domestic violence and war, and all those other things we have to deal with on a personal level, friends and family dying etc., we have the pandemic. It is enough to scupper many's a boat. For me it has certainly been a time for thinking. And it might have been unintentional at first, but during the lockdowns and the like I slipped into a *modus operandi* which allowed me to reflect, take

stock, cycle even (I cycled 3000 kms in my own kitchen) and then I found myself writing in a way I hadn't previously. I don't generally write about myself. I like to keep distance between myself and what I put on the page. But during lockdown and long periods of isolation, I eventually found out that what my subconscious writing thoughts wanted to do with the year was create a personal reflection; part fact, part fiction, poetic, lyrical, biographical (and not) and definitely musical. Having written films, books (fictional and non-fictional) poetry, articles and critical commentaries in the past (I have published something every single year since 1994), I found myself reflecting on my life before writing had taken hold. What came out of it was *Fisherrow*.

Fisherrow is a small harbour town at the delta of the River Esk where it meets the Firth of Forth, just south of Edinburgh. I lived there for seven years. But as the title

of a record and chapbook it takes a very personal look at life; not in any way a precise biographical account of my life there, or a travelogue of the place but echoes I heard during this pandemic when I had lockdown and quarantine time to listen out for them. It became a chapbook and record pulling on memories and images and thoughts of my own past, mixed up with images and ideas in the present; the present built on the past but like all echoes they are imprecise and often only loosely attached to the source, so it's only a true story maybe.

In the story, the chapters Portobello Beach, Fisherrow, Gullane, Dunbar Harbour, Port Seton, Torness Point, St Abbs Head, are names of historical towns, with a rich history of their own. However, they are also the poetry and melodies which walk me along the Firth of Forth coastline of my youth, edging me towards the wider reaches of the North Sea. And all the while they bring a nostalgia for a place which really only exists as an echo without certainty. Sea towns, harbours, beaches, coastal beauty, lighthouses, points, cliffs and headlands, their ever presence bring a sense of continuity, an ever remaining, lovely strangeness which sits on the sometimes shushering, sometimes roaring sea. It is there and not, flitting in and out of dreams and images and a deep feeling of distant rootedness which keeps me attached; an analepsis, the echoes of my own past, my own history, which shape the story of my now. In many ways it is my Scottishness, though I haven't lived there for forty years. It's my homeliness if I was ever to say where I was going back to, and yet forty years after leaving it offers a familiar strangeness which I carry continually into my own future.

I was sitting in the kitchen on my lockdown bike when the first piece came along, helping to map out the ideas behind what I was thinking. It was a prose poem I had written previously around an event from my childhood and reconnected with. My father was a coal miner and sometimes in the summer he would come home from the nightshift and take us to the beach where he would sleep and let us play. And I found myself juxtaposing his coming off the nightshift into two other parts of a memory of him; one with me on that beach and then one as a personal reflection on the beach no more which rounds off a lifetime of memory, so the whole thing reads:

I

Dog tired from the nightshift,
shoulders slumped and weary,
but when he unslung his pit
bag and coat his strong arms
opened to let us in.

II

Give me maps and a compass,
some old bones, a bag full of
shells, beach washed pebbles,
dried seaweed, a clear stretch of
water, a sunny day and a view
of the Bass Rock; it's okay, you
can sleep off the night shift,
while I plan the journey, there's
no rush, I'll no' be far away.

III

Even now I think of you every
day. There will come a time
when I won't. Maybe later,
when dusk settles over the Firth
o' Forth I won't hear you saying,
'Think we could swim tae Fife
fae here?' 'Aye,' I always said,
though we never did.



The first chapter in the Chapbook is called *Portobello Beach* and I called it *Portobello Beach* because of the connections and memories I have of it as a seaside town. But the image in my head is a combination of Portobello, Fisherrow Harbour and Brighton Pier (near where I live now) because they have morphed into one picture. The first place I moved to when I left home was Fisherrow, which is Musselburgh's small fishing port. The idea of moving to the seaside had lingered long. I grew up in the coal mining village of Newtongrange;



I came across a group of people huddled along the harbour wall against the chill wind. 'What are you doing,' I asked. 'Waiting for the boats,' came the reply and then silence, bar the blowing of a cold wind off the North Sea.

Growing up in a coal mining village, I remember one of the eeriest sounds on earth is a pit horn being blown at the wrong time. It is the sound that traditionally called men to the mine (it was always men, women weren't allowed to be coal miners). They are regular as day follows night, signals calling the men for the dayshift, backshift and nightshift. When a horn goes off out of time, like one I remember at 11am one morning, it's usually a signal there's been an accident. At this the men waiting for the next shift, or the women and the old men in the village are immediately alerted. It could be their own mates, men or laddies who are hurt down the pit. My own dad lost a finger and broke his back in separate accidents. But a storm gives a fishing community a different warning.

That morning it became clear to me. The fishing boats hadn't been brought back into harbour for fear of them being bashed against the quay in the storm. The captains would sit the storm out at sea and that could be all night, sometimes days. I was shocked because I really should have thought that through. 'Waiting for the boats' then, alerted me to the simple fact that life at sea was as hard as life in the pit and my romantic notions of coastal living had a new edge to it.

That's where the 'Portobello' song comes from. I tried to combine the waiting with the pier to juxtapose the idea that (for me at least) there were two coasts; the working coast and the holiday coast of my romanticised childhood. This is the lyric:

I'm biding my time, at the edge of the quay,
watching the tide, waiting for the boats.
The lighthouse on the causeway is scanning the sea,
and the moon is watching.
I'm standing in line, with those left behind,
with the patience of saints most of the time.
They sleep in cold linen, on long winter nights,
waiting for the boats;
and the girl on trapeze,
at the end of the pier,
is singing the blues in a minor key.
She put a half empty bottle on the table
and said I can make it half full, if you like,
the girl on trapeze, at the end of the pier,
singing the blues in a minor key.

The song (and others on the record - produced by Phil Jones @ Long Way Home Productions) can be heard here: <https://andymelrose.bandcamp.com/>

'Portobello' is only an eighth of the project; there are other tracks on the record and chapters in the chapbook. But what I came to realise, as I progressed, is I was writing a small Scottish record as it felt to me in 2021, the year of isolation and quarantine, forty years after I left Scotland, and in a time in which the future is no longer what we thought it would be, places are not as we remember them and not even as we misremember them, but are present as a belonging, a feeling of being distant yet connected still, while, in my case, living over the border. To this end, then, the 'code shifting' nature of the storytelling, prose poetry, song lyrics, fictional and non-fictional prose allowed me to deliver *Fisherrow* in a way which wasn't a biographical account of a life or a travelogue of a place, but snatched echoes and traces which occurred to me when I had time to listen out for them, while being hundreds of miles distant from them. These echoes come from a position of neither coming nor going, as an insider outsider, as a decentred migrant looking for a lifebelt while throwing out a line to any who would like to grasp hold. The strange loveliness the lovely strangeness of being. The towns, the harbours, the sea, the hardship, the coal mines and lyrical soul mining.

What occurs to me in this kind of writing is that it reflects who we are. I am a fiction writer who writes non-fiction; a poet who writes song lyrics; a film maker who paints lyrical scenes, my writing doesn't easily sit in a box; indeed each of us probably dredge our own echoes in this way. We see how the story can be influenced by personal experience while also finding ways of letting that story be told. The 'code shifting' idea Jen Webb refers to is also important, because of the impact textual codes have on us; images, sounds, music, poetry, words, lyrics, biographical memories, nostalgia (which is essentially a return to a place that never existed in the first place) as it all comes to be the melting pot of our own selfhood. Add in love, loss, heartbreak, joy and other such effects which we carry around mostly unnoticed, a story of sorts begins to unfold. In my moments of reflection I found I no longer wanted to pigeon hole everything into its proper 'literary' space but to use all the codes at my disposal to tell the story. The lesson, I guess, is that the eighteenth century tradition of the 'chapbook' being a small pamphlet containing tales, ballads and or tracts, sold by pedlars, suited the project just fine.



Prof Andrew Melrose is Emeritus Professor of Writing at the University of Winchester, UK. He has over 150 films, fiction, nonfiction, research, songs, poems and other writing credits, including 33 scholarly or creative books. He is currently working on *The Boat*, an extended poem, book and exhibition about people migrating to safer countries on boats.