

Colours in a grey landscape

(An East End child in the 1960s learns the value of words).

The budgie always knew. Long before we were even aware, he'd be whistling loudly. Then there would be the faint, distant rumble, the rhythmic throb growing to a crescendo until the house shook and crockery rattled in the cupboard.

A glance out of the window would tell us what was passing. Sometimes two locos hauling massive containers out of Tilbury, crammed with essentials for the ravening metropolis to our west. Or a car park on rails, half a mile long; shiny Cortinas and Fiestas, fresh from Dagenham, destined to rust away within a few years in the seemingly-endless grey drizzle.

I can still recall the blank greyness of the estate; the railway lines, embedded in their sooty, oil-stained gravel, just across the patched and potholed road from our grimy end-terrace. The endless, unforgiving concrete. The dull, swirling rainbows stretched across the skin of the greasy puddles, the brightness somehow leached out of them. A world full of things half-finished that would never be completed, or things broken that would never be mended. Bare charcoal trees loomed against ashen skies, clumps of straggly, dusty grass the one tiny punctuation of colour.

Sundays like these could be endless. "I'm bored. There's nothing to do," I whined. The television's grey test-card was a mocking echo of the damp, dreary, monochrome world outside.

"Read a book," Dad replied absently, seemingly absorbed in his paper.

"Books are boring. They're just – words," I pouted.

"That's where you're wrong. Books are like the TARDIS. They can take you anywhere."

"Only if they've got pictures." I preferred comics; the reading was easier, and you could see straight away what they were on about.

"Pictures are a start, but they only show you what someone else can see. If you read the words, you can make your own pictures," he replied, still apparently absorbed in his paper.

"What do you mean?" The hook was baited.

With apparent resignation he got up and selected a book from the meagre volumes on the shelf, opening it at a seemingly-random page. A flash of purest blue struck my grey-soaked eyes like a beacon.

"Well, how about this? 'Lapis Lazuli,'" he read. "'A brilliant blue mineral, found only in Afghanistan'." He looked up. "Know where that is?"

I shook my head.

"Get the atlas. I'll show you."

He pointed to a remote area to the north of that vast triangle I recognised as India – unbelievably exotic and distant. "These are the Himalayas," he said, indicating a brown and

purple smudge on the map, “the highest mountains in the world; the tops are usually in cloud, so you can’t even see how high they are. And people have to hack lumps of this mineral out of the rocks over *here*, then take it on camels, through mountain passes, *here*, and across *these* deserts, thousands of miles overland to Europe, right over *here*. They might go north through cities like Samarkand and Tashkent, on the Silk Road, or west through Qom and Baghdad.” All the while, the moving finger traced the invisible route through unknown lands and places with romantic-sounding names.

“There are towns full of tall minarets and weird domes and muezzins calling people to prayer. And souks – bazaars with so many winding passages and market stalls that you get lost in them. Imagine the sounds! The silversmiths hammering patterns onto metal trays, birds squawking in cages, stallholders calling out in strange languages, trying to get people to buy. And the smells! Fresh spices, mint tea being poured from big urns, smelly donkeys.” I turned up my nose at this last thought.

“Why do people want lap-is laz-u-li?” I read the strange words and tried to pronounce them the way Dad did.

“To make blue paint. They used to grind it up by hand with oil and stuff. What would pictures be like without a blue sky?”

It seemed to me that skies were always grey, so all you’d ever need was a pencil or a bit of charcoal. “Didn’t they have paint in tins?”

His smile was the thing I liked best about him; crinkled eyes glinting, two rows of white, even – and, sadly, false – teeth. “We do now they can synthesise the colours. Back when the great painters were working – Vermeer, Michelangelo, that lot – they all had to make their own.”

I’d never heard those names before, and looking back I doubt that Dad would have known a genuine Vermeer from a piece of Formica veneer, but this glimpse into the unknown was enough for him to hold my attention. The line was tightening.

“How come you know all that?” I asked, still wondering what ‘synthesise’ meant.

“Because it says it – here.” He pointed to the page in front of me. “These *words*. Yes, there’s a picture of the mineral, but that just shows you why they wanted the stuff – because of its blue-ness. It doesn’t tell you how they get it out, how they trudge across miles of barren landscape to bring it to market, how it’s used to make paint. For that you have to read the words, and then the pictures form in your head. Imagine going through mountain passes on the back of a camel. Places where the air is so thin you can hardly breathe, and when you do, a frost forms round your mouth from the cold and the moisture. Where, even though you’re already so high, the mountains still go up, up into the clouds on either side of you. Where there could be a tribesman with a long *jezail* rifle hiding behind every rock to kill you and steal your precious lapis for himself.”

I’d read some stories about “The Wolf of Kabul” in a comic, a jingoistic tale set in Afghanistan in the period between the wars. It had seemed fun, the fearless “Wolf” prowling the bazaars with his faithful side-kick Chung, seeking out spies and ne’er-do-wells. Dad’s words conjured up a very different picture of this exotic land, where a brutal climate

and an unforgiving landscape shaped a fierce and determined people, struggling to survive by hacking rocks from mountains and transporting them across unimaginable distances.

“Just think about trudging across the desert,” he continued, “climbing each dune, and then the next, seeing nothing but sand-dunes in every direction. Even the camel’s feet, designed for deserts, sliding in the soft sand. The heat leaving you frazzled by day, and then shivering in the cold desert nights.”

“But I thought deserts were hot all the time,” I replied, puzzled.

“No. It can get really perishing at night, even though you get fried as soon as the sun’s out.” I knew Dad had fought in North Africa during the War, so I guessed he knew what he was talking about.

“But why’s that?” I asked, still puzzled. The extremes of temperature didn’t make sense.

“I honestly don’t know – but maybe in this book it’ll tell you. Try looking it up - or ask your teacher. See, the words have to sink into your brain, to make questions to help you find more answers; that’s where knowledge comes from.”

I gave him a quizzical look, and he fixed me with his ‘listen here, sonny’ expression and raised a finger as if pointing something out.

“I keep six honest serving-men, (They taught me all I knew). Their names are What and Why and When and How and Where and Who.” The finger wagged in time with the rhythm.

“What’s all that about?” The hook had caught, and I could almost feel the reel turning a little more, the line tugging harder at my young curiosity.

“Poetry – Rudyard Kipling. ‘If you can fill the unforgiving minute, with sixty seconds’ worth of distance run, yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it, and - which is more - you’ll be a Man, my son!’”

“Poetry! Ugh!” I protested. “Now that really *is* boring!” I’d never seen the point of what we were forced to read at school and my young mind couldn’t yet grasp Kipling’s eloquent summary of the challenges of a life to come.

“Ah, but poetry’s about using words to make something beautiful, and then showing you a mixture of truth, beauty and emotions in one perfect picture that you couldn’t find any other way.”

My expression must have shown him that I thought he was talking rubbish. He smiled again.

“Look, there are lots of ways to see things; a photo shows you what’s there, but just from one angle. A painting can often tell you more, like what the painter actually *feels* about what’s there or the characters of the people in the picture. A story or a newspaper article can tell you what the writer wants you to know, and that might be the truth - but it might not be. Now poetry is a sort of code. It makes you think, and that’s not always easy. But when you do, you sometimes see deeper, like through a magnifying glass or a clever mirror. If you really think about what the poet’s trying to tell you, the meaning can be deeper and come across more clearly than anything else.”

My head was spinning now. I'd thought words just said stuff, and you just *read* them, and that was it. Now words seemed both exciting and dangerous. I was almost afraid to open a book in case the words jumped out at me. "But – but how do you know which words are good and which ones are bad?"

"Ah well, that's all about using those 'honest serving men'. Like I said, you have to let the words into your brain, mix them up with things you already know and other things you read, and then decide what's true or false. That's all any of us can do. And some words can go through the brain and straight to the *heart* – and they can make a lot of difference. When Henry V shouted 'Once more into the breach dear friends', or Churchill said 'we will fight them on the beaches... we will never surrender', people who thought they had no fight left in them got up and fought - and *won*. That's the power of words for you, my boy. Now read some more and tell me if it's still boring."

Having reeled me in, hook, line, sinker and a whole stretch of the river bed as well, he went back to his paper and left me staring at pages of scary – but fascinating – words that now took on an entirely new set of meanings. Suddenly, there was colour in the world, through the powerful kaleidoscope in my head.

Forty years later, as I stood by his grave, I thought back to that day. I'd taken his words in deeply; very deeply. Thanks to him, they were engraved on my soul.