

Not Like a River, But a Tree

by James Roderick Burns

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HE DIDN'T GO every week, sometimes not every month, but passing the cathedral that day something spoke to him, and he took hold of the great circular handle. As he stepped inside, Charles noticed the other half of the door. It rose up, a bisected arc reaching its high point five feet above his head, and was ornate with decoration: stripes and inlays, knots of carved foliage and bulbous cherubs' heads dotting the curve of the arch, deep scores and overhangs broad as tram-tracks flowing down to the first of the porch flagstones. They disappeared into warm darkness and distant flickers of candlelight.

No one was expecting him, and while it was certainly inconvenient that the car had broken down, it was Sunday and he had limped into a final unmetered space before the engine gave out completely. Surely someone would come and get it. He glanced at his watch – three thirty, give or take – then waiting a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloom of the foyer, he peered at the service sheet tacked to a music stand: Evensong, the service about to start by the look of things.

From inside the dark, high space he heard a brief rush of air as the congregation rose, knew the choir was massing somewhere behind a mounted shining crucifix. He looked at his watch again. It was the one Maureen had given him for his birthday, some years back, and he'd been meaning to take it in for a cleaning, some minor repairs. He turned the face into the dim, reflected light. Only a minute had passed, and he realised with a smile he could still slip inside, join one of the back pews without interrupting the service. Nodding, Charles quietly pushed at the heavy glass door.

He went left on instinct, passed a long oak table set flush with the last pew and strewn with gift-aid envelopes and parish magazines. There was no time to stop; instead he rounded the base of the pillar at the pew's end, opposite a round-topped door studded with black nails the size of golf balls, and sat on the carpet-like strip running along the wood, placing his light summer jacket over the back of the next pew. At this extremity, there was nobody in front of him.

He could see beyond this gap, the pillar a few feet away and the back of the woman to his right – hat set neatly in place – and a man to the right of her, by the wavering light of small devotional candles laid in the racks of an old metal stand. Everyone seemed settled, and now the choir was making its way towards the altar, splitting in half and pouring into the facing halves of the stalls. The procession seemed a little more distant than usual, and he took off his glasses to give them a wipe, squinted for a glimpse of the choristers' faces. Not much to be seen – red robes, white collars, rows of small lamps glowing down to the altar like guide-lights in some dusky harbour. Charles smiled. Much like usual, then.

He relaxed in the shadow of the pillar, sitting comfortably and enjoying the feel of cool stone through his boat-shoe soles, the tiny, comforting rustling noises of a body of people waiting for something to begin.

The voice of the priest – low and cultured – suddenly parted the silence.

‘Welcome to our service of Evensong,’ he said. A crackle, puffy with static, clashed slightly with the man’s voice. Charles looked up at the long hanging speaker, then away over the rows to the choir-stalls, but as ever failed to locate the priest. He seemed to be merely a voice incorporeal, coming somehow from the body of the church itself rather than any one place, floating out through the cool space of the cathedral like a reassuring perfume – the bloom of woodyard sawdust, perhaps, or the dry sweetness of leaves turned over with a pitchfork. The speaker crackled once more then resolved into a tiny, sibilant background hiss, and the service was underway.

The priest passed rapidly from semi-formal introduction to the resonant words of the Confession, the words (as always) detonating like small musical charges in Charles’s ears:

‘Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us ...’

He was familiar enough with the service, its pauses and resumptions, the moments when momentum flowed from priest to congregation – those points when he must stand, and when sit – that he didn’t need to follow either plain text or bold in the prayer-book he found in his hand. At the junctures for standing, he stood alongside

the others in his pew. The slight differences in timing across the rows – one man adjusting his coat before rising, the woman beside him beating him to it, and crouching for a second to wait for her husband – created small waves of whispering cloth, muffled scraping of shoes across stone.

Seated again, he closed his eyes. Now and then he had sampled High Anglican services (had, in fact, dragged along both Maureen and the children) where the priest broke out the censer, smoking the pews like a beekeeper gently rousing his charges, but he preferred things here in the cathedral: high enough, quite solemn to be sure, but musical and slightly imperfect; human, somehow, and all the better for it. Sometimes he'd invited people from the office.

'Lovely service, Charles,' they would say. 'The music was *delightful*.' And so it was, but for him the charge lay mainly in the words themselves, their power waiting to burst afresh each time from phrases so well-wrought they moulded to the contours of his needs like handmade shoes.

The priest reached the Absolution. Charles's eyes remained closed, and he soaked up the familiar sentences once more: 'Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live ...'

To his ears they had a startling quality, still – a live call to arms for each person listening, as he imagined they must always have had back through the centuries, falling on administrators or merchants in the previous era to clerks, maids of all work and footmen before them, each poised in their starchy best on the hardwood pews, the compassion of the first phrases a gentle warm-up for the next passage and its barbed pointers to redemption: '... and hath given power and commandment to his Ministers, to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins. He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel.'

The priest had retreated wholly into his words – dissolved, almost, fusing voice and meaning as fully as a headache powder swirled away into hot water. But his head felt fine. This, he felt, was the crux of the thing. The priest continued, wrapping up time and space, the now of nose-itch or wrinkled trouser leg, broken car, discreet handkerchief dab at the sniffles, into complete finality.

'Wherefore let us beseech him to grant us true repentance and his Holy Spirit, that those things may please him which we do at this present, and that the rest of our life

hereafter may be pure and holy; so that, at the last, we may come to his eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.’

This present.

Though he knew a reading came next – Old Testament, if he remembered correctly – for a moment he waited in the beat of silence with this singular notion held in his mind. It was not fragile as the vase of flowers Maureen faithfully set out on the dining room table at the beginning of the week, awaiting sure scuffles and roughhousing, was fragile; nor was it brief as the waft of cut grass darting through the window of the car when he reached the outskirts of the city, a brief delight, quickly departing. *This present* simply was. He knew somewhere beyond his day-to-day engagement with the office, the children’s adventures or Maureen’s dependable visits to her mother, those two simple words anchored him in a strange, nonspecific current of eternity.

As the hiss of the speaker drew out, then was replaced, a new voice came into his mind. He opened his eyes and looked up.

At the eagle lectern – a rather fussy item he privately felt was out of place in the austere, soaring dust-and-stone vault of the cathedral – stood a man in a rather old-fashioned plain black suit, the sort of thing his lecturers had worn decades before, taking no care to remedy shiny patches or ash-holes in the sleeves, rather than a reader in a priest’s immaculate robes.

The last time he had been to Evensong, a woman had taken both readings, and he had swiftly probed the leathery folds of his mind till he convinced himself there was no problem with a woman priest; no problem at all. But she had worn priestly vestments, and he had not been able to see beyond the blank lenses of her eyeglasses in the usual gloom. She read the lesson in grave, hushed tones, remaining cool and inscrutable until she stepped away from the eagle and disappeared.

This man, for all his strange appearance, did at least seem to have a kindly face, and despite the wavering gloom Charles seemed able to see its details without leaning forward, or squinting overmuch, anymore: a long nose and high forehead, two pouches – not quite bags, but still subtly shaded and defining – beneath his eyes, a line of receding hair still dark at the temples. He looked to be in his late fifties, perhaps early sixties, a few years older than Charles himself, and was oddly familiar. Was it the voice, rather more commanding than the priest’s suave tones, or that cock of the head as he moved to speak, a corresponding twinkle in his eyes. How could

he even see such things? Charles sat up straighter in the pew, screwed the balls of his thumbs into his eyes.

The man lingered in silence for a moment more – had he first coughed, on assuming the lectern? – then picked up the rhythm of the service, his voice low and practiced. Where *had* Charles heard it? The sensation was maddening! The man upped his momentum effortlessly, as though he did this kind of thing every day of the week, and in circumstances far more conducive to immediate challenge. Heaven and hell, the impossibility of their reconciliation, appeared to be his theme.

‘The attempt is based on the belief that reality never presents us with an absolutely unavoidable ‘either/or’; that, granted skill and patience and (above all) time enough, some way of embracing both alternatives can always be found ...’

Charles smiled in recognition; almost grinned, in fact – the man had the superlative preacher’s gift of pinning each listener to the pew with barbs meant for his soul, and his soul alone. This one could have been crafted personally: he had always striven to find ways through, all of his life, in just such a manner.

It wasn’t that there were too many children squabbling to properly referee (only the two, and though they had been out of the house and into their own lives for a few years, his heart still turned back to them at three and four amidst piles of wooden bricks on a hardwood floor, happily clacking away), or a marriage soured by lack of love or money (he still looked forward to seeing Maureen’s face when he walked through the door, and thought she welcomed his) – more that he found positive pleasure in charting a course through difficult, even contradictory paths, and had excelled at it. His smile widened and he listened intently.

But the man had moved on. Stuck on the wooden blocks, his wife’s smiling face as he opened the door after a long day, he struggled to hear the last few words. The man’s voice – with something deep and warm to it, familiar as his rumpled looks – had rumbled along in its clear lecturer’s way.

Oh!

Leaning forward, keen to hear the sermon, he soared into a recent memory ringing bells in his mind. Maureen had bought him the set, squeezed into a tight slipcase, and left it till last under the tree.

‘Robert – get that last one out for your dad!’

His son grunted, tearing himself momentarily away from some new app on his work phone he swore would never interrupt Christmas. He put it down briefly, hefted the plain brown-paper parcel into Charles's lap.

'Oof! Bit of light reading, dad?'

His sister looked up from her Chemistry text, smiling.

'Yes, yes! Give it here.'

Maureen watched as he carefully peeled away the gold bow, unwound the ribbon and popped the strips of tape like dead-welds. He did not talk, as a new book – surely she knew him by now! – was too serious, weighty and marvellous to interrupt, despite the fact it would simply be read and absorbed, then added to the hundreds already creaking on the bookshelves. Charles didn't care. The wrapping came free, and the parcel disclosed its contents.

'You like him, don't you?' she said. He simply nodded, eyes shining, and took them out of the stout cardboard case one by one – *The Screwtape Letters*, *Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain*. Signature editions, on lovely dense paper, the smell of it wafting from the pages like a burst bag of coffee. When no one was looking, he took hold of one – *The Great Divorce*, a semi-abstract blocky red bus ascending through blue cloud on its cover – and held it discreetly to his nose. It was the first one he read, almost reverently. No, he remembered now, quite reverently, by the light of a single lamp with a glass of whisky at his elbow, finishing early on Boxing Day when the family had gone to bed and even the dog given up on him.

He shifted slightly on the wooden pew, inching along the rough fabric to miss the high shoulder of the woman in front, and clear his view. The man stood there still, in his same position, hands gripping the lectern's edge, his thick fingers stopping just above the lumpen gold of its wings.

'We are not living in a world where all roads are radii of a circle and where all, if followed long enough, will therefore draw nearer and finally meet at the centre,' he said. 'Rather in a world where every road, after a few miles, forks into two, and each of those into two again, and at each fork you must make a decision. Even on the biological level life is not like a river but like a tree ...'

On he went, this botanical flight of fancy outlining the way the world flowed –

or possibly branched – out, away from unity, and on to choices that made us what we were, the ever-splintering path carrying us to our eventual destination. But the words became mumbles, soft as water trickling over stones in a brook. The hands, moving now and again, turned a leaf in the air with an audible rustle. Charles paid no heed.

It was him. It couldn't be, but it was. He dropped his hands to his knees, gave them both a sudden, violent pinch, and almost yelled with the pain. He pressed one toe down hard into a crevice in the flagstones – there, that same spot he realised he gravitated to each week, so his foot could chafe the edge of the crack in time to some deep, mysterious inner rhythm. As ever, the deep bone-coldness of the stones crept along his instep.

He moved his head, subtly but surely, and in the far left portion of his sight the candles flickered steadily in their rows. He had no doubt that if he reached out, stuck his fingers one by one into the flames, they would sear his flesh, set the nerves bounding like rills of butter down a hot pan.

Charles did not turn his head – dare not, the ghost of Maureens past settling a warning hand on his at the pause required by the service – but fumbled instead at his pocket for the offering envelope he should have completed that morning. He slid a finger between the flaps of cloth, and something stiff and papery crackled there. He couldn't be hearing such a thing; simply could not. The flames to his left crackled on, the speaker dropping the man's soft but authoritative voice onto the pews like wax.

But he was no longer sure the voice was proceeding from the speaker. With his eyes fastened squarely on the prayer cushion at his feet – St Hilda, he noticed, and a brief hysterical giggle fought to escape him as he remembered a recent holiday in Whitby; further back, notions of a swineherd bright on a cliff, the first English hymn – he strove to listen clearly to each element of sound as it broke the silence.

The man's voice? Certainly. The longer he heard it, the more certain he became of its provenance, and in consequence glued his eyes ever more firmly to the dim outline of the flagstones.

The speaker, and more widely, the rustle and creak of clothing, people's shifting weight pew by pew, stretching away into the darkness? No, he didn't think so.

The organist, choristers, even the clunking scrape of the lectern rolling on its feet as

the reader moved his weight, the crinkle of finished papers folding into a pocket?

He did not think so at all. Only the voice, and in the voice, no discernible words.

Charles thought of the man's arboreal metaphor once more. Decisions branching like the forking of a tree, rather than – as he assumed every ordinary person thought, without much examination – life flowing steadily onwards like a river. He brought a hand to his brow, and in the gloaming of the space came not the usual shadowing, but light. Under his cupped palm things became clearer. He had thought that way – was still thinking that way, if truth be told. He had spent the last few minutes, under the low wordless babble of the preacher's voice, revelling in the well-worn notion of life as a river. The office: a rippling, endless skein of cloth, unwinding with days and years towards profit or loss. His marriage, two boats yoked together in the stream, so close they seemed more like a catamaran than a small flotilla, even when two further, smaller vessels split off into new tributaries.

Through it all, he felt the truth of the flow within him: decisions edging the craft here or there, towards smoother waters, through snarls of rock where he could not avoid the rapids. It all flowed, minute by minute, year by year, and his hand on the tiller knew the truth of it.

And yet he must decide. The day had become endless, jagged as traffic, each juncture spikey and snagged with consequence. He must decide, not continue gliding forward listlessly, seeking a way through.

When Charles looked up the pew in front was empty. The man at the lectern had finished his sermon, was restoring his script to the compact state in which it had appeared from his jacket. He could see careful handwriting on the outside, notations in the margins, what looked like a time-stamp at the top of the first page.

'Charles,' said the man, nodding.

Charles nodded back, stood and looked around. He was still in the cathedral but each pew was empty. The choir-stalls, too, though the high-mounted cross still glittered in the lights of the candles. Small glints flew here and there like chips of molten-steel in a foundry. He looked down, but the hymnal was gone; the gift envelope, too. Charles turned up a wrist but his watch was nowhere to be seen.

'I – I,' Charles began, a sort of bemused but familiar joy starting somewhere in his stomach. 'I'm so sorry, I –'

‘Never mind,’ said the man, gesturing towards the wall beyond the pillar, and stepping down from the lectern. ‘We shall see each other soon.’

Charles turned in his turn to the nail-studded door, glowing now with lines of light around the height of its sides. The black nails shone as though freshly-polished. A Madonna-and-child to the right, long unremarked – so old and sooty, he had in truth turned from it in distaste – shone now as though under its own illumination. He stood, walked towards the painting. In the background was a hill, three trees reaching upwards from roots planted in its thin, hard soil.

At the door he turned back. The cathedral was empty, its glass vestibule full of small, wavering shadows, the long oak table still and silent, half-submerged in the dark. Out there, he supposed, the car would be found, eventually, and his family ... He touched his face again, his wrist. He looked up at the reaching trees, then turned to the door and grasped its heavy iron handle.



James Roderick Burns' short story collection, *Beastly Transparencies*, is due from Eyewear Publishing in 2022. He is the author of three collections of poetry – most recently *The Worksongs of the Worms* (2018, haiku) – and a short fiction pamphlet, *A Bunch of Fives*. His work has appeared in a number of journals and magazines, including *The Guardian*, *Modern Haiku*, *The North* and *The Scotsman*.