

## Meridians



# Jim Mangnall

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The totems stand silently about my room. The glass owl, the owls of Italy and Mexico. The little mother of all the Russias. The tower of gold from the banks of the Guadalquivir. The hunters of Altamira. Naked Marianne of the red hair. The serene madonna with the strange child on her knee. They are not sacred but they are special. They were never selected, they appeared one by one and waited about until time invested them with a significance out of all proportion to their appearances. They stand in the shadows slowly ageing with me. My heart fills with leaves. Between the silences I hear the songs of people never met, their laughing voices swept away by the wind. Lost chances to embrace the sea and bite into the soft flesh of the tomato. Eyes left undrunk on the terraces of grapes. Moons which should have been unzipped and stars that could have been unbuttoned. They disappear through beaded curtains leaving the perfume of regret.

And why, as the curtains swish to a close, don't I follow? I regard the table with its used coffee cups, its overflowing ashtray, the empty cane chairs pushed back, the flagged floor littered with discarded crisp packets. The wind freshens to drive leaves and bus tickets against my feet and I know that I would find nothing through the curtains but the draughty urinal of November.

I am far enough from the river to be insulated from the atmosphere of fading maritime grandeur but it is impossible to be totally unaware of it; most of the big houses and their spacious rooms, that make for the best parties, were originally built with money from the sea. Cotton money. Slave money.

Mirror, mirror on the wall. Whose party is this? The rooms are large, very large but although they are filled with people, the film has stopped running. In the huge, crowded kitchen the heads are still, the mouths silent, the fingers frozen to the glasses. In the large oval mirror I can see a brown dog asleep on a bed. At the corner of this still life my eye catches an impudent movement and a small black boy comes, pushing his way between the petrified legs, playing on a penny whistle.

In the second room, larger than the first, the figures sit or stand in silent groups, locked into their stations by the two nightmare wooden puppets strung on the wall. Barbaric chessmen collect dust beneath the bowls of hyacinths. The mirror shows the back of a young man seated at a soundless piano and the black boy comes walking among the shadowy tableaux beating a drum.

The third room is as dark as a slave ship's hold, the couples stand motionless, oblivious to the heavy rhythmic beat of the amplifier's bass and in their midst the small black child dances and dances.

There is a piano playing somewhere. The sounds of Andalusia come from a window high above the traffic, stringing the white-hot avenues of the south like beads on a thread of sunlight. Chords struck from iron studded doors, arpeggios like the warm wind that blows through the sun gate. The monuments assume the shapes of unfamiliar generals, and are there flowers piled on the balconies of banks? The pretty girls are dark enough to make fans flutter in the ivory arcades. The pavements hot with marcasite and filigree, ring to the step of the hunter and the high heel of the quarry. Eyes deeper than desert wells meet under the spray of stone conches and the spume of dolphins. Cool skin stretched on the burning earth.

I am like a man standing in a village churchyard with the sky heavy on his shoulders and the moss hiding the crumbling names beneath his feet. The days repeat and numbers re-occur. His pockets are full of smiles and catastrophes. His mouth full of excuses. He stands between two mirrors, drunk with the infinity of space yet imprisoned by the artful glass. I refuse to accept him as myself. I cast his horoscope taking liberties with the planets. I read his fate in the Tarot carefully avoiding the card with no name. In short I juggle, trying to keep the balls in the air, trying to fill the space left by vanished trees.

Once in Tangier, in a bar on the Rue Mahatma Gandhi, I almost succeeded. It was there that I won the North African pin-ball championship scoring 11,780, a thousand more than my nearest and only rival. I had already taken the British title in a Soho arcade and the European title had fallen to me in the back streets of Rouen, not far from Stockholm Jack's. And so I proudly wore the triple crown under the African sun, giving my autograph freely to the blind and the amputated that pressed around my cafe table.

They wanted me to have everything. With pleading voices they offered me gold rings, kif, dubious photographs, even more dubious exhibitions, young boys, pretty girls, yes, even their own sisters. I refused with dignity. In a daze of flashing lights and ringing bells I strolled among them like a benevolent giant. It was juggling of the highest quality. In those days I could have been a star. Lately I seem to have lost the knack but then it was a skill acquired so long ago, when space was still for dancing in and trees wouldn't dream of dying.



Quiet and listening and totally alone I hear the soft explosion of spring. I have taken my place beneath bell towers and breathed the flame of nectarines. I have studied antique silver embedded in an April night night. I have drunk and danced and returned to find that no one remembers me. That no one remembers my ephemeral spring.

I'll swear the same clouds are out there again. The Alpine pass, the volcanic lagoon, the large and frightening baby that is slowly becoming an ostrich plume. A heavenly Rorschach test getting the same, habitual response.

And what does it all mean Doctor? It means that you are suffering from a condition known to the profession as Spring. Primavera. Printemps. It recurs, like malaria. The clouds are the same and your responses are the same. It is perhaps significant that previously you associated your symptoms with Vivaldi and now you favour Vaughan Williams. Both V's. This line of thought leads into the fascinating area of voyeurism and vaudeville, voyages and vaccination, verandahs and volcanoes. This is a classic case of Vernalisation. A return to where you started from, to find you never left.

You don't have to tell me that the river is dry. I can see its bed, a long straight groove gouged out of the yellow earth and a lone rider on a black mule picking his way between the scattered stones. Will he make it to the next village, far away and alone, where red pimientos hang in necklaces against the white walls? And what do you suppose is in his saddlebag? A pack of cards? A photograph of his loved ones? Five hot tickets for the national lottery that could magically transport him from the back of a mule in a dry river bed to one of those comfortable cane chairs that stand outside the smarter cafes in the region's capital?

Let us forget his saddlebag. Let us consider the direction in which he is travelling. South. The sun is moving faster than he is, and before he reaches his village a vintage limousine will pull in off the road in front of the isolated taberna that stands beside this dry river and in its powerful headlamps a matador, still dressed in his suit of lights, will be seen ushering his small troupe inside to where the big black casks of manzanilla wait to refresh the night. Vaya con Dios! Summer and the south go hand in hand but the lives of strangers touch tentatively without meeting.

Manolete is buried not far from here, in the cemetery of the five lanterns. The sickly pallor of his dying face looks down at me from the wall as I drink the shellfish soup, the crustaceans clinking like pebbles in the bowl. They are so far from the sea. Perhaps they really are stones, blessed by Santiago, collected just as the cicadas fell silent and became stars. The meat is veal, cut thinly with a cruel knife shaped for spilling blood.

The wine is red and thick like blood. The fruit, peaches of yellow velvet dipped in blood. When the meal is over, the plates and glasses look like wounds on a Ribera canvas. My room for the night is off the first landing. It is simple, white and cool, protected by a black wooden crucifix but it doesn't prevent me from having the dream again.

Every five seconds a leaf is falling from the canopy of big trees that line the avenue of the entrance to the park of the Holy Ghost. I know that I promised that we should explore this park but now that I am here I find that I can go no further. It is a matter of dimension. If you consider a matryoshka, one of those Russian dolls where each little figure lies in the dark womb of the last, then I am the smallest, deepest, quietest doll, smiling a brightly painted smile in the Nth generation of silence. How could I begin a guided tour from here? The distances are too great and you haven't the time. I am the very last in line to be born and on that autumn day who knows where the leaves will be falling?

Sometimes I think that my whole life, perhaps everyone's life, is the vibratory response to a groove on a disc kept somewhere in that great record library in the sky. And sometimes I don't!

This apparent canyon of shellac (or whatever it is that they make discs from these days) through which I seem to be propelled, fills the moment with a fine resonance of sundown, a tremor of evening, a yearning yearning for lost gardens in which to drink while the stars slowly rise and the cold planets fill each glass with Aztec flutes. There is a tremendous sense of lingering. lingering until friends become shadows and their cigarettes glow across light-years and I need a telescope to hear what they are saying.

We move indoors reluctantly but the spell isn't broken. The rooms are lamplit orchards heavy with night fruit. Vines have stretched their tendrils across the walls and their big shadowy leaves dapple the ceiling. Upstairs, but who dares to venture upstairs? Rousseau's jungle may be trembling on the dark landing. I can already hear the rustling of green spears. Leave the french-windows open so that the garden can come and go. I am content to be a small piece in a summer night's collage, pasted into the undergrowth beside the vegetal clock. Now I am hurtling through the black groove. Flying

I am alone again in the long corridor that stretches between Christmas and New Year. The last five days of any year are the most preposterous, the most dreamlike, the most disorientated. Outside the year is dying while I sit smoking an unaccustomed cigar, filling the room with a blue haze of faces seen on Christmas Day and hands shaken on Boxing Day; of whisky drunk in other people's rooms. The otherness of their lamps and lampshades. The paintings that they live with. Their unique pets and their alien cutlery. The strange music distilled from their turntables, heard from the unexpected situation of their lavatories and bathrooms. Imagine all these things interlocked with Janacek and mortgage repayments, salted peanuts and telephone bills somersaulting through a Wednesday that might be Thursday and you will begin to know what the last few bones of this dinosaur's backbone feel like.

Eventually, after the ships in the river have hooted, after the tribal Auld Lang Syne and the token kisses in the strange hallway, after the dancing and the wine I cycle home across the deserted park, past the black lake of sleeping ducks, my wavering headlamp probing a frail, thin, four hour old year.

The owls are back. After a long absence I could hear them last night, out there, somewhere, haunting the fringe of things. They are the emblems of Athene the protector of cities, inventor of the flute, the trumpet, the earthenware pot, the plough, the rake, the ox-yoke, the horse bridle, the chariot and the ship. It is comforting to hear them again.

I imagine that they roost in the leafy yard of the church which is dedicated to All Saints, a grey wall and porch almost hidden by trees.

The call of Athene's owls enters the stillness of my room unexpectedly. Her metal profile glows coldly in sleeping attics, hammered silver under the vast parasol of night. Her beaked messengers proclaim her old powers, so old that the saints, even all the saints, seem like young upstarts remembered as they are in mere dead brick and coloured glass.

After a night when Athene has placed a sandaled foot on the crossroad I invariably find next morning a terrified spider trapped in the bath.

This evening there is nothing to disturb the sleep of insects. All clouds are clocks to folded wings and dreaming thorax. A resting insect stays, pressed to the window like a star, unmoved by the wind or the fading light, oblivious to me or the music of Stravinsky, locked in an ancestral sleep. An hour. A day. A month. While leaves become wood-cuts and lamps freeze to bare branches. Cities groan as multitudes invade the star, six avenues stretching out like six thin legs to the dark districts beyond the lamps. A year. A century. A thousand years. Whole belfries of time, ringing curfew above the tombs. And somewhere the sea spawns new life from the white sperm that filters down from the stars like ash.



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