

Measure (Feather Mammy)

He sat with a measure and tried to see. It seemed like a simple act, to find the way of things through a calculation. The air was warm and loaded with water; light filled the spaces around where he sat amongst the fecundity of high summer. Between spent heads of lavender a honey coloured bee searched for pollen, two orange sacs on its legs like riding jodhpurs. As he watched the bee he thought about scale and perspective, time and place. The measure lay flat on a page beside him, one strip of clear plastic with black numbers cast into its surface. Was this the way to find the way? Out across the garden his cat was stretched in abandon to the day, above and beyond the cat purple-brown leaves stood up against the sky, dressing limbs and branches of a big beech tree. Spots of light wavered between its mass as the whole was shifted around by moving air. Out beyond, grey-blue cumulus clouds climbed, one on top of another towards a drifting patch of blue. The sound of an aeroplane seemed to fill the cavity above the clouds with a miserable song. Out over fields and trees a young buzzard whistled, banking in endless circles on rising air.

At his side an empty cup, no longer warm, and in his body still the vibration of caffeine as it agitated and stimulated. That must be a measure, of sorts, showing the passage of time, the capacity of a cup in relation to a stomach, the effect of coffee on the nervous system. He supposed that the difficulty would come in deciding what to measure and beyond that, what use the statistic might have. If he could find the measure of all things, would he understand what such information could tell him? As thoughts assembled and passed he closed his eyes for a moment. At a time later he opened them again and looked at the changes that had taken place during the intervening period. Now the measure lay on a table, wood-grain flowing behind the incised numbers, yellow light falling from above his head. A smell of cooking, a small pool of water at the base of a clear carafe, some inches ahead and further on flowers in a jug, fruit, a wall. What was this place?

Again outside, sun hot on the top of his head, a heavy air moving around the pages of his book. Children noises and a lack of focus - something like a hard ball inside his head with warts and lumps and hair. Here the measure reads his thinking and fails to understand anything. A jumpy energy hides under his skin and an anger moves out towards his hands. It is a frustration that makes the measure, he cannot see clearly enough through this moment. Shadows and colours around him, the terra cotta, moss, rust and rich greens around him are hard to see. What makes this moment unquantifiable is his inability to think and a persistent

itch between his shoulder blades, inside the muscles there that move towards action and fury.

Inside during music, legs crossed below the knee. A fly buzzed against the window and stopped in the middle of the pane: mid-landscape, with green-grass-meadow, cows, trees, and evening sky all framed behind it. His hands are shaking uncontrollably. Sounds of fiddles, mandolins, guitars and drums pull at his thoughts and dance with them while he tries to disentangle himself from the past hours. Watching his fingers as they tremble by his sides he began to measure, using time as a scale, from then until now. If size and, therefore, scale are only points or moments measured against other points or moments, if any number is only significant when there is a second number by which to quantify it then time is relative. He stopped to drift with the music.

Eyes opening, body lying on one side. The sound of water running in a stream somewhere outside, coming in through the window, the sound of an aeroplane far away. It felt like night time, he thought. Where had he been to in these last few days? He rolled over onto his back and looked up at the spines of books stacked up to the ceiling above him. Most of them he had read, many he had enjoyed and the measure was one of enjoyment, perhaps, or maybe of merit or memorability or literary acumen or plot or content, historical accuracy, beauty, age, value. He tried to remember some words from just one of the books balanced overhead, but no words came. Let us begin with the day, he decided, begin with the rising of the sun, consciousness and eyelids in that order and try to recall first thoughts and vision.

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Eyelashes made a filter, looking out through them he was neither asleep nor awake; neither inside nor outside. The green triangle of a tent roof framed his feet where they rested against the thin blue of a wide sky. He felt the abrasion of sand amongst his teeth, individual grains grown massive overnight and forcing his jaw apart. As the colours and smell of the morning entered his body he walked along a ridge of consciousness, sliding down on one side or another.

With his mind's eye he saw a broken line of light, broken across a wide reach of horizon; over his head thorn bushes shaking in a cold morning wind. Sand slipping out of his ear, one grain at a time. Time means nothing. The earth around him was full of insects; an iridescent dung beetle crossing the ground between his hands. He had the feeling that he was in motion: running, sliding and stumbling, arms thrown out in counter weight. He felt the pressure of duty, an urgency. Out across some open ground there was a line of trees and the

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dark cut of a stream. It lead up to the ridge of a rocky hill and looked like a castle; perhaps it once was. Along the sky someone was walking; they appeared small and meaningless.

He opened his eyes a little wider, past the lashes now and sent instruction to his feet. They moved, kicked weakly at the tent door, opening it further. The air was good and washed over the mess of blankets, cleaned away the dark red smell of his night. The woman beside him turned further away into triangulation. Looking up towards the apex of the tent, following a line of stitches where it made its ascent, he began to count the midges and other winged visitors that bounced against the fabric. Their sum would be the equal of his night.

Sand, in his mouth, crusted at the corners of his eyes. He felt small, a crystal of silica, part of something that used to be bigger, fluttering, barely held by gravity against the strength of the wind: too small to feel weight or to be pulled down. He was walking on a path of rocks and dust, dust ground to dust beneath his feet. The air wobbled, he fell again to his knees. Out and beyond the ground cascaded, dropping out of sight, landing and spreading somewhere below. Flowing towards water. By some harsh trees a man was running, gone, running, gone through a field of boulders.

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This moment again, the same one, a tuning in, locating, waking. He looks out from his head to where light crackles and slides on the surface of a hard, dark ocean. Clouds made from steel wool are spun high into the air, sun leaking out between the fibres. His hair is blown sideways across his face, full of salt. The round, cold pebbles of the beach send a dull pulse that rises up along the length of his bones. It was still early, he thought, and watched some gulls dance around one another above the surf. Air entered his body through his clothes and skin; ramming bars of life into nose and mouth, forcing open his chest. A ship, end on, made a solid grey rectangle on the horizon; it shouldn't float, that shape. He looked down at his hands, the complexity of their structure seemed beyond his understanding. They felt too cold to move, had turned orange and purple. His life was beyond him, outside of his body, too hard to control.

In his mind a lake was forming, deep and still and full of fish. The water was coloured yellow with dust blown in from the surrounding hills. There were towns and villages at the

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feet of the hills, boats out on the lake. The air was warm and carried the sound of a celebration, a carnival. Vivid costumes swimming along paved streets, people moving like a shoal of anchovies down the hills and out into the shallows. Kingfish and Queenfish surrounded by a shaking tornado of silvery bodies. Fishing was serious here. Strange obsessions and fascinations with worms and maggots and flies. Shops along the waterfront full of coloured lures, a thousand thousand deceptions. Beautiful feathers cut dyed and tied onto barbed hooks with delicate lines of gold and silver wire; their bodies and wings a deceitful mask across a wicked spike. Men with ten thumbs and all too coarse to fit up their own nose making things so fine and with so much grace. Such is the power of obsession. Fish and man at war, their worlds separated by a skin, a layer of molecules dividing water and air. Woolly buggers, Streamers and Discos, Humpies and Irresistibles, Hare's Ears and Bristol Hoppers; each had its season along with its live counterpart. They were made to live; to float, sink or fly. Many had tiny, moving parts and more than a few were bought with blood. A Golden Flashback needed two lines and could be steered across the surface of the lake like a kite. Its iridescent plumes of orange and purple could stand up in a peacock's tail or fold flat to the shaft of the hook to pierce rapidly. It was rumoured that the Flashback was a poacher's tool and no less than a guided missile. That was the rumour. People here lived fish, there was nothing else. Their bodies were painted and hung with hooks and scales. Lures were pushed through the skin of their faces; some wore so many hooks that feathers covered all of their surface. Gangs and carnival bands fished, drank, fought and danced along the margins of water; they formed mass migrating shoals that entered the lake each parade season in a spawning frenzy.

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He heard a footfall, somewhere off to the left and wondered if it was the girl. Consciousness slipped its cold into his mind, all dreams fading and falling apart. He saw a shadow move and could have sworn it cast its own; a shadow's shadow, extra dark. The air crackled and hairs stood on the back of his neck like a row of pylons, super-conductors. He caught a scent of something half remembered and tried to hold on to it, taking its measure, weighing it up, getting a taste for it and looking for more - a craving, need, desire. Placing his hand flat on the wall beside him he could feel the cold of stone; one hand, from heel to tip; the measure of him. He put his other hand beside it in a line and began to walk them along the wall. Each time the cold of rock was a surprise, each handfall gave a little more of his body's warmth away, warmed up the fabric of the wall a little more. After twelve paces,

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palms, slaps, caresses, his fingers curved around and away, the premonition of perspective hovering at his fingers tips. Through the side of his eye he caught a drift and froze, lost the ability to move and waited. His margins and parameters began to run, liquid on the move, to accelerate in a force unstopable. The girl was moving towards him, arms forwards, knees bending beneath a weight anticipate. Between them the air was dense, as if they already occupied the space there. Light was bouncing off the surface of the ocean and wrapped around the back of her head in sudden force, colliding with, cutting through to form a sightless penumbra. His own knees ceased to exist and the impossibility of his position, his ridiculous battle with gravity, flooded his chest, drowning the last motes of sentience.

It was cold. A small group of young men stood beneath a rotting wooden jetty with black, scabbed legs that buried themselves in sand a few feet from the line of sticks and foam that marked a storm-line. Fish-skin boots sank into sand and mud coagulate. Dark, slippery looking jackets were cut short along their flanks to show pale bellies. All of the men were feathered, mostly above their brows. One stood apart, a boot resting on the bulwark of some rotten hull. Long, braided hair a vivid red fell across dark grey leather on his long, slick legs, curving around a pearly handled knife at his hip. The group were silent, white streams of air flowed out from their mouths. They moved to form two lines, a corridor of soft stomachs. From further along the strand more were arriving to join the lines; lines rippling and flowing under soft purple sky. At one end a man with redseaserpent hair and at the other a boy, tall, thin to breaking and roundshoulderstand. The air was small and sharp, a smell of fish flesh slipping in across the water.

Hey, littlefish. Want to swim with us littlefish?

The boy uncurled somewhat, feeling the bones of his back; his arms spare, his legs not his own.....

Come on littlefish, come and swim!

..... and leaned forwards, stepped, repeat, step. No slick rags nor oiled boots, no feathers. Down the line towards the serpents, past navels; a line through all time, a cord to bind. Wind sudden in one ear, stinging sand.

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What makes you think you're a fish, butcher boy; carcass cleaver, having doubts, meat man, my heart bleeds, my tongue rolls. What's your stroke?

The boy reached an end and stepped clear of the lines, out towards the water. The one with the snakes waltzed slowly around him, into and out of shadow and the line closed shut. Clicklock. Fifty fishes with fifty rods. Clicklock. Telescoping up. Clicklock. Fibres of carbon welded into hollow tubes, stainless eyes cast at each mechanical intersection, monofilaments coiled on ratcheted spools leading up along their lengths to the thinnest, the very finest of trembling tips. Flowing out to a surgically secure knot constricting around the spade-ended steel shafts and beckoning curve of fifty decorated hooks, hooks hiding within the feathered foliage of fifty shimmering insect frauds.

You better swim then.

Understanding hit the littlefish at the base of his skull throwing him forwards into a crane's scrabble towards the water, hopping to pull off boots and trousers, falling nearly at the shallows, shirt over head and then striking out. His chest hit the water with a slap and cold fluid poured into his mouth.. The lake water had an edge to it, something metallic or electrical. As left his arm came up to swing over his head he glanced back. Along the edge of the shore fifty carbon wands bowed and shook in a growing wind. Turning back to face the waves he heard the hiss and crack of lines snapping out. As his arm and face slid into the water a Fiery Sedgehog bit into the skin of his calf. Three more hooks caught the blade of his right arm as it broke the surface. The pain was specific and intense, lines growing taught, a removal of will, but he continued to swim.

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History

Back on the street by El Pasaje de Carneceros two boys watched busy merchants and waited, sitting on the step of their father's shop. He was a butcher and as round as a body could be. From his shoulders hung heavy, smooth arms that were rarely seen without fists at their ends, fists that were rarely seen without knives in their grip. What remained of his hair was greased across the top of a spotted head and folds of flesh creased around ears and nose. His face ballooned up out of a crisp, white shirt, top button sewn with double thread. In other regions of the globe his trousers attempted the impossible in their efforts to climb over a mountainous middle. Legs whiter than tripe shone out above patent leather shoes more shiny

still. He wheezed when he walked and his voice was high, squeezed by pads of fat around his neck.

His two sons, by contrast, were scrawny: scraps from the great man's table. The first was Ruben and the second Julio. Walking spare ribs he called them, and good for nothing - much. It was their job to sort the offal and bones today, clean out the waste for the cart as it passed, confound the dogs and rats of their neighbourhood. Ruben swung a bucket filled with trimmings and guttings and cleanings, clattered it to the ground in the street. He knelt down alongside and dipped his hands into the redness, pulled them dripping above the paving and spread their rich colour out over smooth stone. He began to draw, strong lines in blood that seeped and ran with the morning's rain. He could think when he made marks, ideas and dreams and shapes that were only there as the lines flowed; his vision remained clear so long as his hands made drawings, arms like conducting rods carrying a charge of vitality. This picture was of the sun, round and magnificent, full of energy and potential, full of life. His eyes searched faraway and his movements slowed; the day travelled on without him, left him there on the ground, pinned to the moment by a shaft of comprehension.

Julio was pulling at the apron of his brother, something approached. The something was a cart at once bloated and towering, with an evil smelling engine that drank animal fat, coughing and grinding as it crawled forwards. A conveyor belt wrapped around the machine carried sacs and buckets up to the base of its crusted chimneystack. There stood Señor Sebobo, catching up the offal and casting it down into the mouth of his infernal machine. His clothes were set into permanent creases, full with the grease of ages. He chewed as he worked and leaned occasionally to spit a gobbet of bright orange saliva onto the street; his gums and teeth were stained a permanent sunset by the leaves in his mouth. There was money in death. Señora Sebobo lived in a big house on a small rise of land to the west. The house was airy and tranquil, wrapped around with fruiting vines and honeysuckle. She kept her husband in a brick shed at the bottom of the garden. Once a week she had him scrubbed and scented before inviting him to take her arm for their constitutional. The Sebobos served the city and the city served them. Their trade in offal was universal, taking waste from the fisheries and the fleshers with indifference, crossing a cavernous social divide on their suet burner. Señor Sebobo was as welcome on the waterfront as he was on the convoluted lanes the led away from the cattle market; lanes that folded in on themselves like a duodenum and were as full of parasites as any gut.

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Ruben walked back to the shop, wiping his hands on a strip of rag that hung from his belt, momentary visions of splendour undone. He stopped at the doorway and looked back. Sebobo was turning into an even narrower lane, soaking up light and pumping a cloud of incineration into the day. Julio stood talking with El Señor at the shoulder of his machine, a negotiation was being made: he was buying safe passage down to the fisheries. Fleshers were not welcome there.