

Scattergood's Yard

*(from the Herefordshire Stanza pamphlet "In Plain Sight",
a collection of poems inspired by the historic Alleys and Yards of Ledbury)*

He's solemn is Scattergood, solemn and slow,
But he understands horses, he hears what they think.
He tells from the teeth what old terrors they've seen,
And his fingers can feel faded scars in their flanks.

He'll sell you a shaft-horse, a Suffolk or shire,
Or a hack or hunter for Tom when he's home.
He'll find you a cob for young Colin or Kit,
Or a stout Shetland pony for Sally or Sim.

He's gone is Will Scattergood, safe underground
With his brother from Bridge Street, the brazier's sons.
Yet still there are stables beside the old cots,
And old stories are stored in the whispering soil.

The breathing and snorting of beasts is still borne
On the warm evening breeze as it blows round the yard.
The odour of hay and the sweet heavy scent
Of hot horse-mash still hang in the humid night air.

You'll hear the clinking of harness and hooves
If your ears are attuned to continuing time.
At dawn and at dusk you'll detect if you look
A long sliver of shadow that's solemn and slow.

For solemn was Scattergood, solemn and slow,
But he understood horses, he heard what they knew.
They told him what terrors and times they had seen,
And he felt every flutter and twitch in their flanks.

Poems by Peter Sutton
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The Young Burns

Flow gently, sweet Severn, by slumbering hills
That weep ancient waters from undying rills.
There daily I wander at break of the day
And seek by thy braesides tae find my true way.

My spirit sae ardent still wants for a guide,
A bonnie wee Muse who will walk by my side.
There's mony a goddess I've heard play the lyre,
But oh for a lassie tae kindle my fire!

I've wandered by Afton, by Doon and by Ayr
And dallied with damsels alluring and fair,
But yet I've tae meet with a soul that is mine,
To whom head and heart I will gladly resign.

Flow gently, sweet Severn, and show me her name,
That goodly companion who'll share in my fame,
The genie who'll e'er be the theme of my verse,
Who'll make it both couthy and gawsie and terse.

Crossroads

(Homage to John Masefield)

This is the point where triple lanes converge,
mouth of the Elbe, Europe's open maw
where land meets sea in salt-crust muddy surge,
where landsmen bid farewell to shore
and seamen eye what weather is in store,
and half the shipping in the world's afloat,
from confined submarine to lobster boat.

From out the north the Freya, riding low,
a coastal barge late engined, filled with pine
for paper mills, chugs wallowing and slow.
She's following her old familiar line
from Norway to the Elbe and the Rhein
to which she carries bristles, hides and cod
and every cargo known to man or God.

From west along the busy North Sea lane
returns the Potsdam, emptied of its swell
of migrants gone to Illinois or Maine,
restocked with men who've meat and grain to sell,
its top-deck lined with folk who long to tell
their green-eyed New York neighbours back at home
of how they conquered brash Berlin and Rome.

And from the east, from Hamburg, sparkling new
machines, explosives, fuses and supplies
for mines in Argentina and Peru,
and chemicals for factory owners, dyes
and drums of acetate and alkalis,
ooze out aboard the Nora, overdue,
her master grouching at her sluggard crew.

He's dropped the pilot and, almighty now,
he stands upon the bridge, his fists clenched tight,
with lookouts on each wing and at the bow.
And yet as dusk comes down the evening light
turns all the world to so divine a sight
it draws each seasoned watcher's drowsy eye
from sea to Wayland's roaring, roasting sky.

Although they see the Potsdam full ahead,
lit up like some great kursaal for a dance,
the Freya's port light is as good as dead
against the furnace sun, and in a trance
the watchers dream of smithies till by chance
the starboard lookout looks and waves an arm
and swears and shouts and raises the alarm.

The Freya's crew are easy in their mind,
all unaware the Norns have spun their fate.
"We'll turn to port, eh Skip, and pass behind
and slip into the Elbe?" asks the mate.
"As long as that there Nora goes on straight."
But then the mate cries, "Skipper, look at that:
she's turned to starboard, what the hell's she at?"

"Then we," the skipper says, "must follow rules
and turn to starboard too, out of her track."
"Aye, aye," the mate replies, "but can't the fools
see we had started on a larboard tack?"
"They can," the skipper says. "She's turning back!
Go hard to starboard, bring the old tub round,
and head her westward till we're safe and sound."

As darkness falls, aperitif in hand,
the people on the Potsdam point and stare,
and wonder if the Freya is unmanned,
some hazy ghost ship conjured from the air,
as she and Nora tack and weave and wear,
perform a glacial rite, a sad bourrée
until the Nora stops and loses way.

But now she cannot steer and still heads straight
towards the rolling heavy-laden barge,
which struggles like an angler's wriggling bait,
before the closing huge explosive charge.
She churns the water but the task's too large,
and though the Nora starts to go astern,
there is no going back, no lucky turn.

The Potsdam does not see the ships collide
as wood gives way to unforgiving steel,
but fortune smiles for though the Freya's side
is holed abaft the wheelhouse, still the keel
is whole, the engine runs, it seems she'll heal,
and on she limps, more slowly but still game,
recording with a curse the Nora's name.

The freighter is scarce marked and does not pause
to launch a needless lifeboat or a raft.
Nor does the Potsdam stop for there's no cause,
no flare that calls for help from other craft.
She ploughs ahead and leaves the Freya aft,
where presently the callous sea creeps in
and spreads beneath the barge's tarry skin.

The northern sea is deadly, cold and stark
as five well-travelled seamen find when down
the Freya plunges in the shrouded dark.
Next day in lighted offices in town
the lawyers, dry-shod men in wig and gown,
make out the routine claims for loss at sea
of goods and men whose obsequies were free.