

ANDREW BRYANT

A CHAOS OF HARD CLAY

*The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space.*

“Darkness,” by Lord Byron (George Gordon)

“THESE ARE MEAN TIMES at Greenwich,’ he thought as he walked out from the University, straight across the Park towards the old Royal Observatory. Moving a few steps to the east to align himself with the meridian, he continued across the grass towards the hill, ignoring the disorderly people and pathways.

Usually he did not leave the University until lunch time, but today was different. Today he ran part way up the hill and lay down, staring at the sky with the observatory looking out over him. A few feral pigeons and meadow pipits flew spitefully above him, and he made his hand into a pistol and shot all the birds that entered his field of vision. He lay directly on the meridian line, so the left cerebral hemisphere of his brain was in the geographic eastern hemisphere, and the right cerebral hemisphere of his brain was in the geographic west.

“There is no end of research possibilities right here in this very spot,” he thought.

His literal understanding of language was in the east, and his numerical skills were in the west. There were political possibilities also.

“Everything can be researched from right here, politics, ornithology, astronomy, chronology”

He considered the various explanations given him today for the words ‘no, nay, never, nullity, not.’ While he considered, he killed the birds in a sky that began to darken, except for a slight path of blue along the 0 degrees 0’ 0”.

The meridian was a manufactured songline. A modern invention that did not run anywhere near the ancient natural songlines of water and oak and stone. But that was what he liked about it. The Church had always

said that Time could never be taken or given in exchange for anything else, because Time belonged to God. But this unnatural songline proved that wrong. This meridian line was Time, and it belonged to everyone, but more so to him than to anyone else.

He lowered his pistol, got up, and walked home.

He walked as far as he could exactly on the meridian, before having to take to the unmethodical streets.

In his kitchen he read the last of the letters to the editor in the newspaper, and was working on a crossword, in pen, when he looked out the window and saw that it was twilight at three o'clock. A few more lines from Byron's poem came to him.

*... and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;
Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day,*

Time and reality were out of sync, so he checked the clocks. He looked at the kitchen clock, then called the speaking clock on the telephone, checked the clock on the television, looked at his watch, and considered his inner clock. All of them said three p.m.

He had been born and raised in this house on Old Woolwich Road at 0 degrees 0' 0" longitude, and innately believed that Time had its own reason, logic and ethics. And, even though he was devoutly atheistical, he did believe in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

Time also had its own place, and that place was here, running right through his kitchen. Modern time began here in 1880, and with its beginning came the elimination of the barbarous worlds of the sundial and clocks with only hour hands; it made obsolete the phases of the moon and the solstices.

The light said that it was tea-time, but the clocks said that it was not. He finished the crossword and composed a few letters to the editor in response to other people's letters to the editor, and waited for real tea-time.

Until this morning, he'd held a research position at the University of Greenwich. This morning his funding had been cut off with all the morality and subtlety of a King Jamesian beheading. After six years of study as to whether or not a migrating bird had any concept of—and was in any way guided by—the 0 degree line of longitude, and after finally finding out that the meridian had no effect whatsoever on the bird, and after the writing of his thesis "Birds On A Line—An Investigation Into The Migratory Habits Of

The Ring-Necked Parakeet in Relation to the Greenwich Meridian and its Coadjutor, Mean Time.” After a request for a funding extension to discover why the bird does not acknowledge Time and its zones (a funding extension that had been refused), he found himself out of work and money. Also, his wife had left him due to the “appalling crawl and vacuity” of his research. So, now it was no nevermind to anyone else if the clocks and natural time had begun to distance themselves from each other.

He went outside. The sky was an uncluttered grey, uncluttered with clouds or any distinct markings but for the thin pursed line of blue that ran directly overhead. All the rest was pale grey atmosphere, evenly textured throughout. The air was such that when he held his hand outstretched he could see the colour of the air between his eye and his hand. Nothing moved but a few cars on the street. Chimney smoke went straight up, and there was no differentiation at the horizon either east or west.

He felt tired and went back inside. He turned on the lights and got ready for bed, setting the alarm for six a.m. before rolling into the pillow. The poem talked itself at him as he went to sleep.

*... others hurried to and fro, and fed
Their funeral piles with fuel, and look'd up
With mad disquietude on the dull sky,
The pall of the past world;*

He woke to the alarm, but there was no sunrise to go with it. The grey film covered the city, a shade darker than the previous evening. He did not have to get out of bed, but what else was he going to do? If he let his circadian rhythms take over his life he would become just another animal roaming the park in the daylight and sleeping through the dark. Although ‘daylight’ was no longer an apt definition of what happened when the day broke and the clock turned over its coincidental hour. From the window he should have seen the orange-shot eastern sky.

Downstairs, he turned on the television and watched the news. Floods in Asia had people standing on rooftops, their hands and faces turned to the sky. There was a drought in America with people standing in dead fields searching above them for respite. Druids wandered through Stonehenge, and rainforests burned in South America. He turned off the television and brought in the newspaper from the front step. It was the same as the television, only in greater detail.

When the clock said noon he dressed and went out, walking across to the park. He had walked in the park every day when at the University, eating his lunch while sitting at 0 degrees and watching the patterns of the birds throughout the seasons. Even in winter he sat outside, in rain, occasionally in snow, making observations and turning them into notes and turning the notes into papers. "Research?" his wife had called it, being able, near the end, to turn everything that he did into an outraged question.

He had forgotten to wear his watch.

Lying on his back on the grass with his head pointing north, he studied the heavy grey mass overhanging the world. He followed the blue line through the grey with his arm upraised, tracing the line with his hand to and fro, to and fro.

*... the wild birds shriek'd,
And, terrified, did flutter on the ground,
And flap their useless wings;*

Morning, day, evening, night—all worthless terms. Everything was forelight now, that time when the air is in black-and-white pieces. And when he stretched out his hand and waved it in the pieces, his hand became a blur.

He turned all the lights on when he got back home. He ate supper at two p.m. and watched the news. A tropical storm in the Caribbean. A riot in a city. An assassination somewhere else. The weather forecast was neutral. Outside his house not a tree moved, not a piece of paper blew down the street. The air was dead.

From his desk he took out all of his notes and files. He started at the beginning as it made sense to act chronologically. He crumpled papers and threw them into the fireplace and lit them, sending black wings swirling up the chimney. The papers burned quickly and he tore open file folders and ripped pages from his books, and then threw in the book covers and huddled over the fire, warming himself against the unnatural injustice happening outside. When every piece of his research was gone, he burned the pens that were used to write the papers. Personal photographs and letters were next, and then the camera used to take the photographs. The camera hissed and creaked and spat and sent black plastic smoke up the chimney. He ran outside to watch the smoke emerge straight up from the stack to disappear immediately into a sky that was now the same colour as the smoke. The high blue scar quivered in the chimney's heat.

*The brows of men by the despairing light
Wore an unearthly aspect, as by fits
The flashes fell upon them; some lay down
And hid their eyes and wept;*

He woke up to the alarm in a dark room. Out the window he saw a sliver of the blue light running along the prime meridian between either side of the black skies. He had no appetite and sat down in front of the television. Nations were on the brink of war. It was raining in Paris. Another animal species had become extinct. He changed the channel and watched a white-haired, purple-robed minister tell him what he already knew, that the world of Man is flawed, unjust, and that the end is coming faster than you think. Amen. "There is a time to get and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to cast away," intoned the minister. Ecclesiastes again.

He switched back to the news. People were murdering each other for no good reason. Icebergs were melting.

Turning off the existential torment, he went outside, still dressed in his pajamas. To the north, the blue sliver was closing like a rapidly healing incision. The last arc of the old blue sky was now just a glimpse of colour that split the darkness above his street and his house.

*Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless—
A lump of death—a chaos of hard clay.*

He ran towards the park. No one could see him so it did not matter what he did. No one could react to him, no one knew about him. Darkness had become a dimension like distance and Time, and he was hidden. He was something vague you might see from the corner of your eye, but that your mind would not bother to register.

He ran across Trafalgar Road, chasing the narrowing line of last light. At the edge of the park two cars swerved and collided with each other, one climbing the other like a rutting animal while tires screamed, fuel lines ruptured, and metal tore. A bright orange detonation lit up the street as he dodged the wrecks and ran from the road onto the grass.

The blue vein was closing over him. The centre of world Time and space was welding itself shut. He ran towards his place in the park, hitting shadowy people as he went, not feeling the pathways with his bare feet. He ran on the meridian, one foot in the eastern hemisphere and one in the western.

Rational—Intuitive. Objective—Imaginative.

This was where the intellectual division of Time and distance began.

As the age that it spawned came to an end, the observatory on its hill was as menacing as a fairy tale. He threw himself onto the ground and looked up. Nothing but a whisper of a blue thread remained. Faces collected above and hung over him. He attempted to make sense of, to remember the last remnant of clarity. He looked for his watch, but it wasn't there. He looked for the observatory clock, but the circle of jabbering mouths hid it from him.

And then the two hemispheres met thoroughly along their lengths, and the seam of the final sky congealed.

The poem's ending screamed at him.

*... the tides were in their grave,
The Moon, their mistress, had expired before;
The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,
And the clouds perish'd! Darkness had no need
Of aid from them—*