

The Turnip's Return
Paul Sutton





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1. Prologue by an icy stream

Unrecognized now,
anyway all mostly dead
(the last friends from his days of twitching).

In the wind-wacked days of January,
a stranger to old Norfolk, arriving
by taxi from central London, trudging
the last few miles through quagmire and goose shit.

Settling for this.
A single chair by the fire -
his need for discomfort when writing.

Dave Turnip is falling from all our sight,
rebooting old laptops for long-lost files:
accounts of bird arrivals and car deaths,
drownings in the rivers east of Wisbech.

To swim daily in
a mushy-pea coloured ditch;
routines key to his resurrection.

2. Intimate Witness

When I first met him. there wasn't a hint who he was - or thought he was.

So many of them anyway, drinking alone (The Chequers, Wimbotsham), each at their own table, no conversation, just the minimum to order food and drink.

I'm originally a country yokel and resent these middle class second-homers - although this rather flat account makes my register sound higher than usual.

But your writer can't be bothered to be authentic. So my voice won't sound real, which is useful.

Forget anything in dialect - or chav speak, text talk, Caribbean drugs lingo - that's all bollocks too.

And forget poetry. You'd sooner read a planning application.

I think these poor bastards saw the county sign and bought the first empty barn.

Ditches here run straight as my dreary thoughts.

I'd never seen anyone so thin, nor with so curved a spine; almost like a cartoon walking stick.

He showed me some of his poetry. I couldn't read it - I mean literally; might as well have been in Albanian.

When he said he was called Dave Turnip, I thought it was apt - remembering some quote about the counties east of London.

To be honest, he gave me the shakes, with his photographing of rivers in

which local people drowned.

He used an eel fisherman - the bloke's been on *Countryfile*, a real artisan, dying breed, up at dawn, near empty nets, sole survivor - now the east Europeans have eaten all the fish.

3. All the way to The Wash

The thing about Turnip is what he knows.
For instance, the methods pick-pockets use,
from friendship with a midget Brazilian -
take: two grand a day at Oxford Circus.

Which king died from a surfeit of lampreys?
The first question in each Monday's pub quiz,
he still shouts the answer with real pleasure.
How to tell genuine from fake ruby.

Expert on house breaking. Incredible
how he learnt it. A Norfolk holiday
and he started an Agatha Christie,
mildewed copy found in the old cottage.

Stuck in Thetford, mind attacking traffic.
Who did it; vicar or "drug-fiend" sister?
He sees the book left by a brick fireplace...
Back - calm, night entry, someone sleeping. His.

And then it becomes an addiction, like
we all have nowadays. The clean purpose,
transgressive, every hatred of his class.
He was never caught, what he took worthless.

4. Interested bystander

Turnip's father was a food technologist, who rose to prominence in the world of biscuits. His Reading factory was a world centre for this obscurantist - but lucrative - trade. Many was the tirade he gave on Lincolns, Dairy Milks, Orange Puffs, Abbey Crunches, Ginger Nuts, Garibaldis.

He despised the easy charm of Jaffa Cakes and Bourbons.

When you hear of DT's childhood, it's not surprising he turned out like this.

Oh, I'm aware "this" still reads flat.

But forget artifice.

In fact, art.

What we have here is sky, pylons, the lorry swish in rain or sun. Little Chefs.

Forget the farmers' markets too. That's for the West Country, with its fake Celts and piri-piri refugees.

Emneth Hungate!

I took him to see Tony Martin's house - a near shrine for the vicious, the flatlanders, the people brought up with rain on their face.

People like me, who clutch carrier bags and can't push a pram without chipping your heels.

He fell to his knees, sobbing and clutching the sodden earth, smearing it over his face and chest.

We looked over the battered ruin - Martin long since flown, to some parched ochre hideout on the Costa.

Back in Wimbotsham, I'd never seen him happier.

Let me explain:

His project - with the eel fisherman - was producing! Somehow he'd persuaded a Cromer poetry publisher to take his grotesque photo-journal; *Fenland Locations for a-Drownin*.

Misty, crepuscular shots, alongside his tender and spare lyrics. As a sensitive man, he was disguising the actual names - which reduced the risk of lynching, by:

July Stevens (mother of "The Blob", Great Ouse).

Tim Clanchey (brother of "The Floater", The Black Sluice).

Anabelle Richards (sister of "Ophelia", Dead Rats' Cutting).

Cecelia Wake (daughter of "Weir-blocker", North Brink).

Varlid Arononvikiliski (father of "Good riddance, Drug Boy", Sutton's Culvert).

So, where do I fit in? A gofer, his bob-a-job bit of local colour, with contacts - or enemies - through this benighted land.

Turnip has no idea I'm a poet.

5. Photo-shoot

Any colder and your nose would drop off.
The river mist here falls from a zinc sky,
suddenly one's lost in the sound of drips.
Turnip launches into khaki water.

He insists on a fish's eye view as
the last thing the bedraggled local saw -
often an upshot through closing water.
If that's horrible, try reading the verse:

"Farewell to my anorexia, thin
as a whippet running over fenland.
Dear father, I can't live any longer
on a diet of two baked beans a day.

I remember my first sight of the deer,
our last holiday ever with mother.
It approached the patio doors and tapped;
so, welcome me now, maternal water."

6. Some context

Frankly (one of my favourite words) who needs this stuff?

Not even a buyer's market. No market, just a long view into an empty sky.

Yet DT recounts grizzly tales of the dynastic bloodshed swirling through the "poetry world".

He's convinced his tasteless parodying of lyrical beauty may "tap into a wider audience".

As evidence, he posits a disgraceful incident at Heaney's most recent benediction to the English plebs, in London's Bloomsbury Theatre (the very name makes you yearn for violence).

A Bolano type stunt:

Heaney is back in the bogs, some or other peat-preserved corpse dug up then washed down with holy water.

An enormous fart rings the air. The sound is like a sail ripping. It must last at least twenty seconds, with no drop in intensity - if anything, gathering into a juddering climax.

Heaney attempts humour: "Someone's been on the marsh cabbages - how I remember them from convent school."

But the spell is broken.

An outraged "Irish" American dropkicks DT unconscious.

But not before the sound of clapping softens his fall.

Subsequent blacklisting was inevitable.

Every poetry outlet in the country hauled up the drawbridge.

Even the “Back Room Poets” refused him floor space.

The Fens became his only option.

7. Why I write

So many times I sat and stared at walls.
Hearing the micro-sounds flaking away
the one thing I ever had that was mine.
And time is caught now in my case of words.

I send this stuff off anonymously,
most assume I'm playing it all for laughs -
although they could never raise one themselves.

Hand in hand walking to the coast one night.
DT and I shout remembered poems
into the thankfully unconcerned sky.

Paul Sutton, 1-3rd February 2013

Paul Sutton

was born in London, in 1964. He graduated from Jesus College, Oxford, worked in industry until 2004, then left to travel; he now teaches English in a secondary school. His work has been widely published in UK and US journals.

The collection *Broadsheet Asphyxia* (Original Plus, 2003) explores instability, corruption and repulsion, using twisted narrative voices.

His pamphlet *The Chronicles of Dave Turnip* (Original Plus, 2009) conflates poetic and other fragmentation, using parodied self-mythologizing of crime. This sequence concludes the 2010 collection *Brains Scream at Night* (from US press, BlazeVox) which gathers material from various publications since 2003.

His most recent British collection is *Cabin Fever* (The Knives Forks and Spoons Press, 2012).

Two longer sequences of polemical work are available in a Salt anthology of poetry manifestos, *Troubles Swapped for Something Fresh* (2009). A set of narrative poems feature in Rupert Loydell's 2011 anthology *Smartarse* (The Knives, Forks and Spoons Press). A collaborative filmic sequence *Voiceover* is also available from The Knives, Forks and Spoons Press (2011).

Previous publications from The Red Ceilings Press are the hit e-book *Indigo Not Violet* and the chapbook *Gemstones*, both published in 2011.



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