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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

THE TELEPHONE, DEINCARNATION, LIGLAG, SENSATION OF ANOTHER LANGUAGE

Robert Crawford

THE TELEPHONE

"The process in its two extreme stages is so exactly similar to the old-fashioned method of speaking and hearing that no preparatory practice is required on the part of either operator."

James Clerk Maxwell, 'The Telephone' (1879)

Teetering governors feed back
Information, summoning my father,

Robert Alexander Nelson Crawford,
Cut off, except in my own voice

Rising so confidently at his funeral
Past tears, singing as he would have sung.

Bell's story helps. His Dad a dogged Scotsman
Teaching himself how to say English right,

Obsessed with voice, the lassoing of lost sound,
Bell, the belligerently beautiful,

Whose *Visible Speech* tolls out for his dead boy,
Keens to the late, loved Edward Charles Bell

Whose brother will invent the telephone.
Schooling new tones, sieving and sifting pitch,

While tuning forks research a long held note,
Yon young, experimental ear strains hard

For whispers, the medium's feedback of caress.
Not through mere making and then breaking contact,

Nor through the yell of hurt, but via two linked
Closed curves in space, an embraced copper circuit

Transmits a psalm in telephonic strength,
Present though absent, stridulating. Bell,

Father of Charles and Alexander Graham,
Heard through the Boston School for the Deaf and Dumb,

Was gone by then, but his quick son believed
Edinburgh fuelled his ghost-acoustic, sensed

Remote phoneidoscopes, a twanging harp,
Musicomathematics of loved sound.

'Hello? Hello?' is carrying and carried
Through speakers, speaker, spoken, all impressing

Electromagnet, galvanometer,
Tinned iron plate set in motion by a voice

Though itself voiceless, amenned by the faithful
Knowing, then known, just given by the air.

DEINCARNATION

Each daybreak laptops syphon off the glens,
Ada, Countess of Lovelace, Vannevar Bush,

Alan Turing spectral in Scourie,
Babbage downloading half of Sutherland

With factors and reels, inescapable
Whirring of difference engines.

Inverailort and Morar host
Shrewd pioneers of computing.

Digitized, blue, massive Roshven
Loses its substance, granite and grass

Deincarnated and weightless.
Shaking hands with absentees,

Beaters, gutters have their pockets emptied
Of any last objects, even a nanomachine,

A pebble, a lucky coin.
Skulking on Celtic Twilight shores,

Each loch beyond is cleared of itself,
Gaelic names, flora, rainfall

So close, the tangible spirited away,
Cybered in a world of light.

LIGLAG

It's sniauvin i the Howe o Alford;
Whaiskin liggars are wede awa.

A' wark's twa-handit-wark this season,
Screens daurk as a hoodie craw.

Torry-eaten databases
Yield scotch mist o an auld leid,

Bodwords, bodes, thin scraelike faces.
Peter an Major Cook are deid.

Nemms o places haud thir secrets,
Leochel-Cushnie, Lochnagar,

Luvly even untranslatit,
Cast-byes unnerneath the haar

Dreepin doon tae Inverbervie
When the haert's as grit's a peat.

Youtlin souns blaw frae the glebe.
Pour a dram an tak it neat,

Neat as Cattens, Tibberchindy,
Tomintoul or Aiberdeen,

Mapped an scanned, a karaoke
O gangrel souns I ken hae been

Mapread an spoken by my faither
I mony a cowpissed bield, a Bank

O Scotlan, or a Baltic dawn.
Skourdaboggie, auld an lank,

I key them intae this computer's
Empire by a taskit wa.

Peterculter, Maryculter.
Tine haert, tine a'. Tine haert, tine a'.

SENSATION OF ANOTHER LANGUAGE

It's snowing in the Howe of Alford; gasping violently for breath, salmon that have lain too long in the fresh water are weeded out. All work is second-rate work that needs redoing in this season, screens dark as a carrion crow. Databases that are like exhausted land give up the small but wetting rain of an old language, traditional sayings expressing the fate of a family, portents, thin faces like shrivelled shoes. Peter and Major Cook are dead. Names of places hold their secrets, Leochel-Cushnie, Lochnagar, lovely even untranslated, stuff thrown away as unserviceable underneath the sea-mist dripping down to Inverbervie when the heart is ready to burst with sorrow. Feeble sounds, like those of dying animals, come from the field by the manse. Pour a dram and take it neat, neat as Cattens, Tibberchindy, Tomintoul or Aberdeen, mapped and scanned, a karaoke of wandering sounds I know have been mapread and spoken by my father in many a shelter pissed on by cows, a Bank of Scotland or a Baltic dawn. Like the last surviving member of a family, old and spare, I key them into this computer's empire beside a wall fatigued with hard work. Peterculter, Maryculter. If you let sorrow overcome you, you lose everything. If you let sorrow overcome you, you lose everything.