



THE SECOND FLYTING

When William Dunbar's voice returned, it was not a good thing. It even appalled those residents of the Afterlife who were inured to bad language.

Of course, something had to be done. This was the Afterlife after all, and you cannot just let episodes like that go unpunished. No, that's not the right word: there is no punishment in the Afterlife – most people had had enough of that during their brief lifetimes. No punishments – but no rewards either. Just the same old, same old, forever. Small wonder, observed some objective souls, that people boiled over, lost the rag, vented a foul mouth. But what good did those observations do? What good, indeed, did the occasional unseemly outburst do? No escape, except perhaps for a brief moment of relief and release. Apart from that, everything just remained the same as it was. Hours flowed into days, days into weeks, weeks into more weeks – all the way down to eternity.

Which is where they all were. Locked down in eternity. Few had imagined that the Afterlife would be like this. Emerging into the promised lands, blinking and anxious after their own death, most arrived at one of two conclusions: either that they had been wrong all along, and that truly there was life after death; or that they had known it all along, for here before them was their reward. Of the former, not a few were paralysed by the fear that, if the Afterlife really did exist, then there was always the possibility of going to Hell. Of the latter, most were smugly confident of going to Heaven, of course they were: they'd believed in it, hadn't they?

But not one of them was really prepared for how things were arranged here.

Take William Dunbar, for example. A poet of extraordinary wisdom and foul-mouth, he died around 500 years ago, possibly in poverty, possibly not. When he disembarked, still sea-sick and breeches all covered with vomit and stains from all possible orifices, from the ship which had just spent six weeks sailing from the shores of Scotland (on a good day, with the winds pushing in the right direction, the voyage might only have taken four days. This was not a good day. As Dunbar was later to write – writing was not forbidden, although several other things were in the Afterlife – more than we can enumerate – as he was later to write: "Aeolus most fierce and Neptune, both dark and moonless, met us with wind and wave and blew us many hundreds of miles away, to Holland, Zeeland, Shetland and Norway's coast". He may be exaggerating - who in their right mind would imagine being blown to all corners of the North Sea, have exited from the Firth of Forth on a ship from Leith, before ending up ... wherever? He may have made it all up; he was a poet after all; but it was true that even the captain and crew, accustomed to the best of times and the worst of times, were looking distinctly under the weather as they moored the ship at last to dry and solid land) - as we say, when he staggered off the ship on to the slimy, weed-smearred quayside which served the Afterlife, whom should he meet but his old friend and enemy, Walter Kennedy, who had departed This World some twenty years earlier.

"Hail, Shitty Dunbar!" shouted Kennedy, waving enthusiastically from the crowd of idlers who thronged the quayside. "Dread, filthy dwarf, we welcome you! Have you come to scavenge and sponge?"

Dunbar reeled, and it was not just his trembling sea-smitten legs which gave way. Within, all hope was suddenly drained from him, leaving him empty. To travel so far and this was the first person he found? Kennedy, that poisonous Gaelic bard, that misshapen beggar dressed in rags, that "syphilitic cuckold," he managed to mutter, before slipping in a dead faint to the ground.

When Dunbar next awoke, he imagined that he was in Hell. He was wrong. But he could be forgiven

for the thought. He lay in some dark stinking hovel. A dim fire sputtered fruitlessly in a corner, flies flitted around the two poor shafts of light that filtered in through holes in the roof. Some figure was grunting an old song, and rattling at a pot. Dunbar felt bile in his throat, hawked and spat.

The figure turned towards him, then shrieked: “Walter, Walter, where are you, you maggoty mutton? The Devil-Bear awakes!” Then it turned back to its pot. A piece of sack that functioned as a door was pulled aside. Walter Kennedy came in. He had no words of comfort, beyond the familiar “Hail, crabbit, scabby, cur-faced carrion”. He gave Dunbar a tap with his foot, a straw-lined scrap of raw leather. “Up and do what you do best, shit without wit : on your knees and beg for alms.”

William Dunbar had once written a famous lament, which earned him plaudits in the court of King James the Fourth. The dark, brooding refrain of that dirge expressed his troubled spirit in the face of death – *Timor mortis conturbat me*. And soon the poet realised that he had been right to give voice to his troubled confusion. For the Afterlife was not some kingdom of the righteous idle, who fed on nectar and roast chickens and luscious fruits and what some deluded souls might describe as manna; neither was it a place where you simply lounged about, making rhymes and eyeing up the ladies, or laddies, as you saw fit. Far from it.

Timor mortis conturbat me.

There were mouths to feed, poverty and starvation to attend to (but not to cure), feet to be shod and bodies to be clad, beards to be shaved, sores to be drained of pus, and all the chores of daily existence. No one grew older, no one grew younger, bodies stayed much as they were on arrival: healing was out of the question. But so was sickening, or dying of hunger and thirst. For which reason, Dunbar found himself put to work in one of the huge communal canteens that catered for the thrice-daily needs of a thousand argumentative ghosts. He started at the bottom. Dish-washer.

Timor mortis conturbat me.

There was never any prospect of moving up the ladder to greater things. No one ever left their post. Dunbar did not know this – at least, not until Walter Kennedy told him, amid much glee that, had his ship not been delayed for five weeks, then he might have found an opening as a soutar, since, in a year of a great influx of the dead, there were more feet than ever. But the chance came and went and it knew naught of William Dunbar.

Timor mortis conturbat me.

And so, from dawn until dusk, and sometimes from dusk until dawn, Dunbar laboured in the hot steamy atmosphere of the scullery. Dirty dishes and filthier cups piled up at one end of the gloom – the hatch opened out to the cavernous dining area – and he washed them and passed them down to a hatch at the other end of the gloom – the hatch opened on to an infernal hot kitchen. All he saw of his fellow-workers were their hands, as the crockery and cutlery arrived and departed. On most days, he was cursed by his colleagues: – “Gnome, mandrake, fostered in the filth of the midden!” Or, on that famous day when, exhausted by the endless passage of dishes, he sat on the primitive toilet to take a rest: “Your arse drips with shite and will never dry,” shouted some villain, hammering on the rickety door. “It has exhausted the ten old biddies who keep it scrubbed.” There was something in that rascal’s voice that reminded Dunbar strongly of Kennedy – but he could never prove it.

Timor mortis conturbat me.

And so it went on, day after endless day, week after untallied week. Spoons, mugs, glasses, plates for soup, plates for potatoes, knives for cutting and spreading and – not infrequently – stabbing your closest neighbour. All of them passed through the chapped and sodden hands of William Dunbar, to be superficially scrubbed, carelessly rinsed and stacked in teetering piles for the next meal. Slapdash work, for Poet Dunbar had lost all sense of duty. At first, he had composed verses for himself, some of love and some of lust, others of death and others of dust, and more – far more - besides of

scurrility and slander and treachery. But after several months of this mindless labour (to be clear: we talk of dish-washing, not of versifying), his mind grew grey and all words faded into intangible, headless, tailless wisps, like a haar upon the Forth. He was left with nothing to grip but the plates and spoons.

Timor mortis conturbat me.

But at last, in the one-and-twentieth century (although few in the Afterlife, apart from new arrivals, were aware of it), Dunbar broke. The occasion, had he but realised, was the 500th anniversary of his arrival in the land of the Afterlife. He hadn't been keeping a count. But Walter Kennedy had. Walter Kennedy had little else to do. And so, at around ten o'clock in the morning, after the worst of the morning detritus had been doused in lukewarm water, when Dunbar sat blank-eyed before a cold greasy sink, came Kennedy. He was in full Highland dress and arrived in the company of a retinue of gurning, slouching lickspittles. Striking a pose at the entrance to the damp scabby scullery, Kennedy whipped out a piece of crumpled stained paper and – to croaks of delight from his followers – declaimed:

Hail Dum-bar, devil's son and disputitious dragon,
Mad werewolf, vile snake, venomous scorpion!
There stand thou, thy hands all greased in muck,
Bare-arsed, bewildered, like some unroasted duck.
A bard who drank his wages and pawned his boots,
The ravens have stolen thy black tongue's roots.
Crazy Sodomite, drop thou now thy breeks,
And stick thy snout between thy cheeks.

Dunbar seemed unmoved at first. He stood like a grey stained statue, staring upon the cold waters of his century's-old shame. And then his right hand stirred. His Adam's apple jerked. He turned slowly to face his tormentor. For William Dunbar, he who had lost all power of speech some four centuries earlier, once more tasted the words flowing out upon his tongue, bitter as treacle:

Fy! Shite-stained corpse, (said he), your arsehole sits between your lips,
You are but a black-kneed fool, with your kilted hips,
You have shat more worms, you fart-filled flea,
Than there is grass on the ground or leaves on a tree.
Jaundiced gallows-bird, with a sheep-shagger's reek,
Loathsome and lousy, stench of a leprous leek.
A stallion, you boast; but when some old hag calls,
You have but a bag of flea-skins in the place of balls.

And so began again, after a space of over five centuries, the Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy.

Now judge you - who won that war...

