

The Long Cascade

By DBC Pierre

There's a cannon in the River Wear and only I know. I know who wrestled it over the edge and I know where it went in. I've never told a soul because there probably should be a cannon in the Wear. There should be one and there is one, put in after drinks by men probably tired of war. Hoiked in by men connected to me, now gone, so only I know.

There'd have been hell to pay if they'd been caught. Merry hell.

I can say: I am connected to a cannon at the bottom of the Wear. They said it was once on display in the city centre, this cannon, before they hoiked it in. But of course it's not very far from where it stood, proudly, on display; it's still close by, probably buried in mud and silt, like an anchor, which extra ballast might keep the castle from drifting.

I want to make this cannon an anchor for a little allegory I'll build as my tribute to Durham, ancient anchored place, with its people, its castle, its cannon. A little structure anchored by stories of anchoring. And so, also anchored in our minds by this cannon, for the purposes of this structure, I want to introduce the character Gabriel Brockwell, protagonist of my novel *Lights Out in Wonderland*. Gabriel is a disaffected young man who feels abandoned by his culture, which makes him set off on an allegorical journey through late capitalism, during which he discovers that he's not as rootless as he thought; that in fact he's deeply anchored. It occurred to me, writing Gabriel, that roots are a theme in more than one of my books, if not arguably all, and this will be because roots were an issue for me. Born in Australia, I was baptised in Durham – I can swear it's my first memory, and the details gel according

to others present, though it could be a false memory. By two years old I was waving a flag in the USA and don't remember that. At seven I was attending Bow, Durham School, before heading to Mexico for the rest of prep and high school. It meant, after a time, that I gave up the notion of roots: there were too many options. Plus roots aren't easy to see that early in life, the idea doesn't compute until later. I take 'roots' to mean an event-cascade from a human place; a chain of destinies anchored by a place and a milieu that can be returned to – so now I'm going to add myself to the chain of this allegory, anchoring via Gabriel to the cannon in the Wear. Because as I wrote Gabriel's character I came to pondering rootlessness. His and mine. And as characters' journeys through a novel impose a helicopter-view on the writer – a height from which the whole length of their paths can be seen – I could use this view on my own path, taking interest in the Fate-cascade I've travelled along from Durham.

The story unfolds like this: running beside the cascade from the Wear, hiding it perhaps at first, I saw that almost every year of childhood and early adulthood had me on the ground in Tahiti at least once, Fiji at least once, Australia at least once, Acapulco at Easter, Pago-Pago occasionally, Honolulu slightly more, Miami, New York, Houston, LA, sometimes Nassau or Bermuda as well. We didn't seek out half of these places, but they were on the way to where my parents had their roots, one over the Pacific, one over the Atlantic. And if you can find yourself standing in Fiji you can find the excuse to stay for a while. My father loved to sail, he would always head for the sea; but at a certain time most years, in the midst of that life, something would happen as spontaneously and curiously as shiny things hatch in nature: I would pack a bag and accompany my mother 'home'. This in itself wasn't rare. What was rare

was that she not only meant home to a place, but home to a condition, a situation of deep psychological meaning. And that precise situation was two doors over Elvet Bridge towards the castle, in depression-era Durham City, where she had been a girl in an event-cascade from wealth to poverty to war. As if produced for theatre, our pilgrimage would even take into account the drift of time: anywhere near Elvet Bridge was posh these days, so she would find a room above a B&B somewhere further out, or a flat in Chester-Le-Street, or a pair of rooms at Neville's Cross with a coin-fed meter for the heating and lights, where the amusements were *Coronation Street* or the newsagent's, plus proper fish and chips. The American Express card she carried was not yet valid in the coin-fed meter; it came from another world, and as her cash ebbed away it grew symbolic like a dream. On one hand these choices were mystifying, there was begging and borrowing, laughter and tears, the event-cascade of her life seemed to visit like a trance track, with a live, palpable oscillation.

On the other hand I'd been here at school, there was family and familiarity: what she was knowingly or unknowingly doing was adding a deeper dimension. It caused her some shame that as a girl she had waited by the railway line for coal tossed by firemen on passing trains; but it caused her pride that they always did throw coal, because this was the north and you looked out for one another. I don't know if she found affluence incompatible with heart, but it became clear across the adventures of those times that the roots she missed and wished to pass on were qualities that couldn't be bought; yet they were as natural and abundant a resource in Durham as the coal under the cannon under the Wear. Heart, strength, humour and loyalty were what she wanted to infect me with; and she arranged a stage for it to play out in

earnest, not in the fairy-tale woods and lanes of the city, but behind brittle, stained net curtains, and in the forthright dramas of kitchens and pubs.

Years later, writing Gabriel, Durham's contribution to my own Fate-cascade grew clearer, and now forms the pattern for the payoff in this allegory. If my first memory in life was being baptised at Carville – where the demons didn't want to leave, I was howling – what grew clear as I joined up events was the importance of Bow, Durham School, in my timeline. It was a short time in reality but a lifetime in my mind, one I loved, of cricket and rugby and Ducks & Drakes, of honestly digging a tunnel to China without being discouraged by masters – and here, marching down to the playing fields for cricket, the fates put a twist in my plot. The rumour went around that somebody had come back from holidays with a case of jaundice, which I knew nothing about, but which I promptly caught. I never returned to the school as, after laying up for some weeks, we travelled to Mexico for the next events in the cascade. Although I was passed fit to travel, Mexico City sits 8,000 feet above sea level, and I was immediately climbing pyramids – which brought on a relapse to full-blown hepatitis, serious enough that I spent most of a year in bed.

And I began to draw. First tracing, then copying, then drawing from imagination. I built little rooms and alleys and towns with scissors and tape and cardboard, which I would populate with toys. And I read books. By the time I recovered enough to start my new school, I'd missed a year entirely – and never caught it up.

Instead I kept drawing and building contraptions, in a lucky enough life that no one pushed me elsewhere. Later, in adulthood, when the family cascade came sweeping through and took all that fortune away, when opportunities for employment in art dried up, when materials were far too costly – I started to write.

And in writing I found an exact combination of drawing and building contraptions, rooms and alleys and towns to people with characters.

Which marching down Church Street to the playing fields in Durham with my comrades in arms, catching not enough jaundice to be unfit to travel soon after to a place where oxygen was low and disease took hold for as long as it takes to foster a calling – had given me the tools to do, and had made the choice. Till I found myself writing Gabriel Brockwell in an allegory for the abandonment of the soul by capital, as this chain fell into place.

And under the castle lies the river and under the river lies the cannon and under the county of Durham lies the Brockwell coalfield which I mysteriously named Gabriel after.

In a book about finding his roots.

Commissioned by Durham Book Festival 2020. © DBC Pierre 2020