

Graham Burchell

TWO POEMS



The Chagall Window, Tudeley Church  
(<http://www.discoveringplaces.co.uk/call-to-action-hidden-art>)

Brief Encounter

She breathed through gills:  
drew them tight like cockle shells  
when on rocks in air.

I couldn't tell,  
and no this maid wasn't white nor a beauty.  
She had strap-weed hair.

When she saw me, there was no love.  
She slid, splashed fish-eyed into her sea.

When she passed, upturned,  
under and less than two metres from me,

the crimson vents in her neck were bared,  
then closed, bared then closed,  
rude then smooth,

like her breasts hidden then viewed –  
mysteries and curiosities.

Was she truly mute, like the swan?  
There was a mouth in her chin,  
that left far too much unsaid for me.

from Angels, Asses and Birds

(All Saints church, Tudeley is the only church in England  
that has all the windows designed by the artist Marc Chagall.)

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The fall of an angel is like that of Icarus.  
A bird in the stratosphere,  
holding a curve between Earth  
and infinity, looks ahead.  
It expects nothing more  
or less.

8

What falls may rise or be lifted up,  
like the sun in the east,  
like a young woman, still as a leaf  
sunk to the silt in a pool bloated  
with the tears of other's grief;  
the sharp sting of immortality  
is clear in tiny eye smudges  
and dashes of lips.

She is returned to the land,  
ridden to Jacob's ladder  
on a red ass.

The sombre shadow of a passing bird  
becomes an angel with rainbow wings.

9

Light finds a way.  
It is phosphorescence deep in the sea  
where she's an angel  
with fish fins.

She's sleek  
and slippery  
like two curves (con and vex)  
that marry into a symbol  
of sunny significance.

Graham Burchell writes of creating these two poems...

#### Brief Encounter

I'd read two of Helen Dunmore's mermaid tales ('Ingo' and 'Stormswept'), and when I'd stayed at a fellow poet's house in Zennor, Cornwall, I was also able to visit the church there with its Mermaid chair within from which I believe the author was inspired to write these stories. The imagery in these books transfixed me, but my own imagination took me beyond and opened up questions of both a practical nature, how would a mermaid breathe, and from a plausibility perspective, might they smell like fish, for example. I wanted my mermaids to still look human – hence the lines: She breathed through gills:/ I couldn't tell...

I questioned their idealised beauty however, and no this maid wasn't white nor a beauty./ She had strap-weed hair. Throughout my mind was hovering between our experience of the beauty of a land creature, and the possibility that a sea beauty may be perceived as less so.

#### *from* Angels, Asses and Birds

In following the slight narratives visualised in the Marc Chagall windows of Tudely church near Tonbridge, I was attracted to the idea of the many angels portrayed becoming something else (like a mermaid). The protagonist in the principal window in this church is drowned. Would she rise out of the water as an angel, or might she grow fins rather than wings and become something more akin with our understanding of a mermaid.

For more of Graham's work, make sure you take a look at [Graham Burchell - 'The Chongololo Club'](#)