

Englishtown

*“They actually did shoot this in Singapore, but for some reason they shot it in
'Englishtown'. You know, we have a Chinatown in London, they have an
Englishtown in Singapore.”*

At breakfast, like robber barons, they
came: eyes they could remove and polish, solemn,
on the hems of their bad shirts. They were looking for
Englishtown. They wanted to leave Englishtown,
actually, they were looking for street signs
they could not read to say they were properly
elsewhere. Asked for directions,
a man tried to sell them dragonfruit,
kidneys. When they finally found
me, eighteen hours later, only
the cameraman was still standing. Below
his knee the black sheen of a
tripod leg. They complimented my
English, wanted to know how I'd come to
it. How I came to English, I say — in fact it came
to me. One morning in

1819: a man, who wasn't remotely dressed for
the weather, in a white shirt, cuffs. White
himself. They've made statues of him, so this
must be true: he came here and now
I speak. I am saying, all of this is
Englishtown. You can never leave English
town. It's not a place to live.

Small Gloves

I fly goshawks to let my hands know
they can go too, if they like. Small
matter — smaller glove. Hands

are without faces and so can
kill things with faces. Given meat,
the bird learns:

hole in head is for
eating with, the other two are
filled with eyes. The mouth of

a trap is beautiful for
as long as it wants you. But when
my hands go the hawk

stays. It likes my gun, they are
acquainted. Hawksfeet, gunsnout. They
are without faces: they kill for me.

Test of English as a Foreign Language

The test is if you can hold your tongue long enough
while they feed it parts of speech. If
you can point to the animal in its cage, find the right
tense for the way it has smashed : is smashing : had smashed
its snout into the bars. The test is if you can tell
me what camellia white rose green
carnation means in Victorian flower language. If
you did the right thing choosing the tongue that asks
you to prove yourself again and again. Tongue that chose
you as you chose it where as denotes coming
before, in time, rather than at once. Whereas
you cannot speak to your grandmother. The test is
there is no test any more. It's stopped making you
do jumping-jacks every time your mouth's opened. Until
it points — and there, at the end of the field,
is the animal. Run, it says. The test is if you
were real enough all along.

Strangewater

The day at the false lake. Where
you said let go and I did go, I went, I let
it, I let you. Love

wants consistency: is the instruction
to hold on or let go? I want
constancy, not

the trick of holding on by letting
go — which doesn't work, anyhow,
since if

you let something go out of
love for it there must
be no outer

limit. To let go with the promise
of return is a ball game, not
love, which

is more like swimming

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in lakes with false

bottoms,

in water that never runs out

to sea. The belief in a body

that floats.

Cowboy Country

“I’ve always wanted to see a western person, to see what they’re really like.” —

Reshma

I too have wanted this. Can you trust an
image? It moves, it seems a person. They have
many visions of themselves — a face cut with
safety scissors into light and sensation. One of their
faces smiles like she knows, scrabbling with her
fingers to find the story’s edge. So it’s true,
the blood is the same. When I say this grandmother
laughs. At me, and she points at the cowboy, presses
her fingers into the one-way glass until they
whiten, says If you let them they will make you
theirs. Laughs again. Twenty-three years
pass and I recognise this as warning not promise.

Free Body Diagram

After 40, someone said, a man is responsible for his own face.

1.

He was unaware, brushing his teeth and standing on one leg, that a small story was about to grow into a bigger one.

2.

He wasn't the story, and he wasn't in the story; it was under the sink, somewhere near his left toe, and it was becoming taller. It hummed, in tune with his humming, more or less.

3.

What heroes survive is not the adventure but the expansion of the story. Horizon receding, hills growing foothills, breakfasts growing legs and running to war: the hero lives through this, decides not to know the difference between ceiling and false ceiling and sky.

4.

Minty fresh breath: his Homeric epithet. And after that he couldn't put off brushing his teeth every morning. A name had to be kept true.

5.

He stood on one leg, and felt around the edges of the story with the other just to check.

It was usually humming, and growing. More or less.

6.

Now he had squires to carry his armour and his breakfast cereals. They were obedient, unhappy, always seeming to have an eyelash stuck to their cheek.

7.

The war made the story grow.

8.

The story made the war grow.

9.

The story needed new shoes.

10.

Did his squires only have one eye? One cheek? He double-checked; they were, in fact, sons of monsters. But they got on with the horses, and new horse-boys were hard to hire.

11.

His lover, who belonged to the smaller story, could not follow him into the larger, so became a horse-boy. He was not good with horses, but he was good with apples, and his knees were gentle.

12.

On a ten-year voyage they ran out of toothpaste.

13.

The story got new shoes. As he helped lace them up, he noticed it had stopped growing.

14.

It still hummed. The tune was new.

15.

He'd left one leg somewhere overboard, in a sea battle over the last apples.

16.

The horse-boys left to become sea captains once they had mastered the handheld telescope.

17.

At least his last horse-boy still had gentle knees. Which mattered, in riding particularly.

18.

While measuring it for a carpet, they found the edge of the big story. His lover wanted to climb in.

19.

He made the story grow.