– The Brazil of My Bedroom –

I've never seen a Jaguar,
Nor yet an Armadill
O dilloing in his armour,
And I s'pose I never will,

Unless I go to Rio
These wonders to behold
[…]
Oh, I'd love to roll to Rio
Some day before I'm old!

– Rudyard Kipling, 'I've Never Sailed the Amazon'

For three hundred years my family remained rooted on the windswept Pennine Edge, first working yarn on looms in Lancashire cottages and then toiling on spinning mules in sweltering factory sheds. What tied them to those rococo mills has always been a mystery to me. Perhaps we believed that by hard work, punctuality and meekness we would inherit the earth. Or was it that we were terrified of the horror of the unseen? Even when the Cotton Famine arrived, we stayed put and loyal to our roots. Common sense and obedience held us back.

My parents would be the first to make the break towards the sea. Armed with my mother's pent-up ambition and my father's university degree, they set sail down the East Lancs Road, only to drop anchor, ten miles short of Liverpool, in a vitreous, hard-vowelled place. St Helens, the town where I was born, was a maze of narrow streets lined by cluttered rows of indistinguishable slate-roofed houses. There were a few churches with square towers, an open market, and countless public houses like the Sefton Arms. Each terrace row in the tightly knit town had its own sense of community and destructive loyalties. The south-westerly winds that blew in from the Atlantic created a soulful, generous place where women were led astray by the dance and often died of love. Our next-door neighbour Miss Molyneux's box television connected us with the faraway world of Queen Elizabeth's Coronation at Westminster Abbey. The whine of the factory sirens and the purring of distant motorcycles on Denton's Green Lane would become my birdsong.

Up until the 18th century, there had only been a chapel and a few fissures left after the gouging of peat and coal, but with sandstone to the north, salt beds to the south, and the rich seams of carbonised plants, St Helens had grown to lead the world in the manufacture of glass. Shafts had been sunk through the layers of shale, the earth was bursting with fire from the coke ovens, and a stench of rotten eggs hung on the pavements. Cauldrons concealed in brick cones

erupted like blazing rose petals into the lowering sky. Blast furnaces surrounded by batteries of chimneys burned blue like monstrous blow torches. At the peak of its growth, 3,000 men floated soda lime sheets on beds of tin to create ribbons of glass, and 'pressed and blew' at the bottle factory. Even when we arrived there were six working pits all connected to the railway and the canal. At dawn columns of miners resembling common black ants returning to the nest walked their well-worn trails. At the pithead they clustered in groups waiting for the iron cage to plummet them down the shaft to the deafening darkness of the face.

St Helens was a throbbing, pulsing place full of work. Everything was for use and nothing for ornament. Salt of the earth, salt of baptism, salt of wages, salt of preservation, salt that gave lucidity. Time was spent, not killed. Its families lived from pay-packet to pay-packet, made do with what they had been given and took life as it came. Our priest was red-nosed and round-faced and never judged. The town was full of people like us who would never become rich, powerful, or important. When Sintelliners died they vanished as if they had never existed.

Sometimes, when the sun broke through the coke smoke and sulphur-tinged clouds, my father and I cycled to Billinge Lump, a beacon that had transmitted warnings of the approaching Armada in 1588. We pushed our bikes up Bobbies Lane, then on through the beech wood plantation, past a pair of bouncing

bodies, evasively referred to as a courting couple. From the old square summer house on the top of the highest hill I could see the North End shore and, beyond it, where the skyline met the surface of the Irish Sea, an island of unearthly beauty covered with trees.

Weekends and school holidays we headed for Liverpool to listen to the mutterings of the sea and explore the docks. The wharves, where we idled, were full of purposeful and secretive comings and goings. Lines of sooty warehouses, bleak railway sidings and iron bollards stood between us and the sandy river. Through a chink in the dock wall at Canning Place, I glimpsed the black-hulled SS *Hilary* being coaxed into North Queen's Dock by two tugs. After the first-class guests had disembarked, a barrel-chested seaman with two green and yellow macaws under his arm stopped to talk to my father. The birds were looking straight at me with what seemed to be a furious but inviting gaze. Soon the 'Animal Man' was rolling on his way down the dock road and we headed back into town. When I asked my father what would happen to the parrots, he replied that the sailor had told him he was going to hand them over to a representative from Chester Zoo, in the bar of the *Lord De Tabley* down by the South Docks.

As the red and white liveried trolley bus trundled through the rustic remnants of Prescot, Page Moss and Thatto Heath, I read over the names of the ships I had noted down in my Silvine exercise book. Whenever

possible, I embellished my lists with details: the yellow funnel Elder Dempster 'monkey boats' from Accra, the blue funnels of Alfred Holt that carried latex back from Sumatra, and the Harrison *Wayfarer* with its hull with red boot-topping that had returned from India through the Suez Canal.

A large hoarding advertising Beecham's Pills, 'the Marvellous Antidote for Wind and Stomach Pain, Frightful Dreams, and Nervous and Trembling Sensations', announced St Helens. By the time the bus reached Corporation Street the mizzle that had followed us all the way from Liverpool had stopped, and the sky had turned an intense violet. The fresh wind from the south now felt warmer as it blew over the roofs and chimney pots of North Road. As we walked past St Mary's, Lowe House, with the clap of racing pigeons overhead, my father started to croon 'Brazil', a song I learned much later had been recorded on the Columbia label by Xavier Cugat and his Waldorf Astoria Orchestra:

> Brazil, where hearts were entertaining June,
> We stood beneath an amber moon
> And softly murmured 'someday soon.'
>
> Now, when twilight dims the sky above.
> Recalling thrills of our love,
> There's one thing I'm certain of.
> Return I will to old Brazil.

When he had stopped singing to himself and we were close to our house on Speakman Road he turned to me lovingly and smiled: 'That tune sends me.' I know now that he was in another world.

Each Saturday we left the smoking works and foundries and escaped into the dank shadows of Liverpool. We were always on the move, gathering treasure as we walked. The SS *Hilary* was not the only steamer destined for Brazil. The SS *Raphael* was leaving on the evening tide with a cargo of pianos for Santos, and the SS *Herdsman* was bound for the chocolate port of Salvador Bahia. Cotton bales arrived on red duster ships from São Paulo, and sacks of Pernambuco molasses were unloaded at Huskisson Dock. As we waited, separated from the ships by the towering dock wall, unfamiliar scents of Brazil drifted in on the tide streams of the North Atlantic.

At the corner of Wapping and Canning was Hughes's canteen, a place to escape from the clangs and clanks of the waterfront and learn which ships had docked. It was always teeming with donkeymen, dockhands, provisioners, scalers and riggers. At the counter there was a rotating grill for toast, and the shipping forecast was broadcast on the radio. We sat down on a bench at a scrubbed table, my father with his pint cup of steaming tea and me with a glass of sarsaparilla. It was a sailor's confessional where we never saw the same men twice.