

# The Distemping Procedure Explained

Sally O'Reilly

*Let the shaft find pleasure in piercing the fog, which welcomes it into its loose body.*  
*Let the mud find pleasure in reaching the calves, which unquestioningly carry.*  
*Let the white handkerchief find pleasure in reaching the mud, which makes it heavy, though not with regret.*  
*Let the bag find pleasure in being clutched, for this elevates it above pockets.*

Colleagues leak into her ears all day. Their sniffs, sighs, farts and conversation trickle into her internal seas. The first sea is shallow, warm and thronged with fish that succumb to regular die-offs, rotting on the small beach where she is supposed to air her feelings before broadcasting them on her face. Only now has she begun to wonder if other people's run-off might be the cause of these die-offs. She has not wanted to think of communing as pollution.

*Let the sleeve find pleasure in wiping the nose, that dilapidated tap on the head.*  
*Let the smells find pleasure up hungry nostrils, which eat anything.*  
*Let the white blouson enjoy its distinction from the rain and mud and pain and blood.*  
*Let the fingers find pleasure in their own lacing, since they are seldom allowed to hold only themselves.*

The second sea is like a picture-book Swiss lake, industrious with all the walking, flying, swimming and creeping ones, which it is her job to audit. She is sloppiest after lunch. One, two, miss a few, ninety-nine, a hundred. On the train home, her button-eyes hook on strangers like buttonholes. They travel back with her as images she can't unsee: the squeezing of pimples on a stomach; over-ear headphones trapped inside two plaits of long and copious hair; a jumper a rash of small love hearts, plus 'sex town' printed large down the length of tracksuit bottoms.

*Let the puddles find pleasure in being paced, the official measurement of this land.*  
*Let the flames find pleasure at leaping into the cage, which is the official unit of subtraction.*  
*Let the drains and grilles find pleasure in sifting the wanted from the unwanted.*  
*Let the whisper find pleasure beneath shouts.*

The third sea stretches towards night and undulates with sawtooth alpha waves and theta ripples. She thinks she can sense the presence of spindles beneath the surface, though there are no ships to wreck on it, so assumes this doesn't matter. By the bed, a pair of tights slung over the back of a chair are air-drying over aeons into what will be mistaken for fossilised remains. Our post-historic ancestors, future entities will infer (if that's how they still do things), shed their skins regularly to purge themselves of their society's excesses.

*Let the rudder find pleasure in the sea, whose job is to keep us apart.*  
*Let the sea find pleasure in being cleaved by the rudder, whose job is to bring us together.*  
*Let the back find pleasure in its own bowing, since burden is its birth right.*  
*Let the stamping and swinging be a pleasure in itself.*

Lying down for the night, she works on the fourth sea, holding up her arm so that if she dozes off its falling wakens her. She deliberates the tiny sardine, which is said to stop a ship by its mere touch. This it does not by dint of any particular part of the thing that is a sardine, but by dint of the whole. The drain, in contrast, is a drain by dint of only some of its parts. The drain is not wholly holes, but partly holes, by which it drains and can be said to be a drain. In general, blocking is easier than initiating, she thinks, and allowing is easier than blocking. I am a drain, she thinks, that is mainly hole. This is her ego loosening.

*Let the smoke find pleasure in the diagonal, under the sway of the unassailable wind.*  
*Let the glove find pleasure in being emptied, and anticipate future pleasure at being filled once more.*  
*Let the boots find pleasure in ignoring the boot scraper, which lays claim to but in the event lacks authority.*  
*Let the drips and feathers find pleasure in cascading, for downwards is the direction of rest.*

Over the fifth sea, she hears her own name called. Her leg jerks in reply. The sound of crumpling bags or a doorbell threatens to explode her head. Then, as with a mustard seed bruised to release the sharpness that otherwise lies hidden, light is released from the dark by some imperceptible crushing, and the hypnopomps rise and get chatting about rail, mail and energy. Having been bitten in the night by the madness of her own inner organisation, her urine is a sixth sea that contains its own making.

*Let the drum find pleasure at being perforated – a blessed respite from tautness.*  
*Let the horizon find pleasure in being scanned, while hiding always just beyond itself.*  
*Let the eyes find pleasure in squeezing shut, for when open, their duties are inordinate.*

This text was written under the influence of photographs of Seb & Tom's work in progress, the experience of paradoxical insomnia and of two astonishing, detail-encrusted epics: Aleksei German's *Hard to be a God* and Christopher Smart's *Jubilato Agno*.

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