



Fantasy in the Love Poems of Brian Patten

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ABSTRACT

This article entitled “The Fantasy Element in the Love Poems of Brian Patten” examines selected poems of Patten in an attempt to trace the elements of fantasy emerging from the volumes of his love poetry. There seems to be two divergent ways in which the poet looks at the various aspects of life, employing fantasy and reality, both of which appear to be equally significant in Patten’s poetic sensibility. Patten’s fantasies about love present the longings, dejection and yearnings of love in youth as well as the casual affairs of the adult world. Patten’s fantasy poems dealing with the theme of love suggest that love has two separate aspects- one to be fantasized about and the other to be experienced in real life. The fantasy poems seem to suggest that true or ideal love is rare in the modern context.

Key Words: Brian Patten, fantasy, love poems, poetic sensibility, reality

Significant elements of fantasy can be noticed in Brian Patten’s theme of love. His poems dealing with the explicit experiences of love seem to fall into two main categories: those based on fantasy and the ones based on his own experiences or narrations of the real experience of love.

In Patten’s love poetry too, the frustrated lover escapes into the world of fantasy in order to overcome disappointment or disillusionment. A lover begins to fantasize when his fantasy tends to make up for the absence of something in reality.

The poet fantasizes about having an affair with an angel, thereby sharing his belief in angels, in the existence of the airy, fairy creatures in “Angel Wings” (*Love Poems* 42-43). In this poem, Patten reasserts the need for bestowing faith in the probability of a miracle, belief in angels and in the existence of the ethereal world. The poet on discovering a pair of angel's wings in his cupboard wonders whether someone has planted those wings in his cupboard, for he is “not naïve enough to believe them real” (4). His beloved tells him that those are actually her wings that he has found in the cupboard.

The poet intends on proving that she is a liar, begins to pluck the wings one by one till all its feathers are scattered all over the bed. She insists that “they are real,” and that the wings belong to her. But then as he relentlessly plucks the wings, the woman’s face becomes paler and thinner and she finally vanishes into thin air.

I plucked then
till your face grew even paler;
intent on proving them false
I plucked
and your body grew thinner.
I plucked till you all but vanished. (29-34)

It is to be noted that the poet’s ignorance has ruined their lives and his disbelief has slaughtered a tender heart that loved him truly and deeply. The poet, after a few days, much to his bewilderment, finds the creature in the cupboard. It is a pale shadow of the earlier angel, as it is

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"blank, dull and too briefly sensual". But its very presence with its feathers gleaming, has made him review his "disbelief in angels".

The poet in "The Unisong, and Somewhere between Heaven and Woolworth" fantasizes about unnatural behaviour of women, brought about by disillusionment in love.

In "The Unisong," (*The Irrelevant Song* 51) the poet describes a woman's unnatural encounter with a unicorn. She has been reduced to this pathetic state due to her unpleasant and frightening affairs with her lovers in the past. She pulls down the blinds over the windows and lets in a unicorn, naked and white as a snow. Thus,

Frightened once by normal flesh
her body disallowed
ordinary shapes to entertain her,
even buried deep in dreams- (13-16)

The unicorn appears as if it belongs to that place. The eiderdown is blue, as contrasted with her blond hair and the white coloured unicorn. The woman moves towards the unicorn. Her unnatural behaviour is due to her own mental barriers and abnormal fears that made her shy away from "normal flesh" and "normal relationships," perhaps due to her bitter experiences in the past. The lady who "disallowed ordinary shapes to entertain her" seems to allow this strange union with a unicorn. The birds sing inside her brain, as she feels gratified by the unnatural sexual union with the unicorn. There is a change in the unicorn's colour from white to red after this unnatural occurrence. Perhaps the unicorn too has to bear the cross. The whole experience is perhaps a figment of her own imagination, a lonely woman's fantasy.

The poet with the insight of a psychoanalyst imaginatively portrays a woman's killer instinct, brought about by her disappointment in love, in "Somewhere between Heaven and Woolworth's: A Song" (*Little Johnny's Confession* 45). The poet presents the loss of innocence, and the subsequent disillusionment of a young girl who matures into a cynical woman as she withdraws from love because the boys were "more cruel than kind." As a result she too becomes cold and unfeeling, and her behaviour exemplified in such ruthless actions as to keep kingfishers in their cages and gold fish in their bowls and eat roses with toast. In fact she had been "open" and innocent when she was young. She was once an innocent girl dressed in denim, while her young companions were "dressed in lies" intent on deceiving and exploiting her. She is now a hardened and cynical woman who is afraid of growing old as she prays despairingly before the mirror to make her look younger than her age and her present attitude has driven her to scrawl a message on the rusty old mirror that,

'O somewhere between Heaven and Woolworth's
I live I love I scold,
I keep kingfishers in their cages
And goldfish in their bowls'. (21-24)

She has become so iron-hearted due to her bitter experiences in the past that she dreads to lead a life that bears witness to the scars she received in her youth.

The poet's fantasy focuses even on natural elements such as earth, stream and seasons such as the spring and the eternal factor of time.

In "Sleepy" (*Love Poems* 92), the poet fantasizes his beloved to be silent and sensuous like mother earth. The lover compares his beloved to Mother Earth. Just as the silent and sleepy Earth exercises its fascination, so does his beloved. Her neck arrests his attention like a silent forest, even as her kisses happen to be the caresses of rain. His beloved could exercise sensuous influence over him even in her sleep and the very silence of her sleep was more intense (powerful) than her sound or laugh. He says,

O planet face! I still smell the forest in your neck!
Still taste the stream in your mouth!
And your kiss that dropped on to my skin like rain

Still shivers there! (7-10)

Similarly Earth exercises its fascination whether it be night or day, whether it be the silence or the voice of nature.

Patten in “It is Always the Same Image” (*Notes to the Hurrying Man* 16) imaginatively compares a stream at its source to a virgin. The poet compares the stream that emerges out from autumn rivers, to a virgin woman, in respect of its pristine purity. He says that it is always the same image of water, whether it is the river water or a stream or a lake. He traces the path of the stream branching out from autumnal rivers, and which after making a path for itself mingles with the lake surrounded by ferns. The poet describes the stream as wandering naked with its body steaming in the warmth of sunlight, or covered with rain in accordance with the seasonal changes. He says,

It is always the same image of your breasts,
full of the violence of sea plants
that quiver when touched; fish
mate beneath you; your body blue, your
shadow following,
both seen like ghosts from distant promenades
by a fearful audience. (7-13)

Just as a woman quivers when touched, the stream waters quiver or tremble due to the violence of the sea plants that seem to wield power over the flowing waters by making it tremble with their presence. The fishes mate beneath the water surface. Its breasts quiver when touched and is viewed with awe by a “fearful audience.” But later when the pristine pure stream merges into the lake, it loses its nascent purity “just visible through the mist a thousand lovers following you naked” leaving no trace of its previous identity.

In “Spring Song” (*The Irrelevant Song* 55), the poet imaginatively indulges in a fantastic comparison of the spring with seven beautiful girls clad in “orange swim suit.” It is the spring that makes the trees glow, and he says that the scenic beauty during this season is as enchanting as the sight of seven beautiful girls clad in a swim wear, laughing and giggling all the while. The spring coaxes the green buds into blossoming earlier than usual. The poet imagines the spring to be lying on the ground like a naked brown girl. It is only during this season that nature is clad in her most beautiful self. The spring season, like “happy gardeners,” gathers cartload of sadness from our lives, and takes it elsewhere. The beauty of the spring season is even “more awkward” and breathtaking than that of the top most models, says the poet. The spring revives our spirits and rejuvenates us as

They are the happy gardeners;
their long backs bend to gather cartloads of sadness
and take it elsewhere.
They’ll walk among us making our touch perfect.
Their beauty more awkward than even the topmost models,
they’ll take our hearts to the laundry
and there’ll be but joy in whatever rooms we wake. (19-25)

In “A Creature to Tell the Time By” (*Love Poems* 33), the poet imaginatively presents his affair with the creature called time. His first acquaintance with her was pleasant and rosy- only sweet scented words fell from her mouth, while her eyes and paws were comforting. But after spending a night with the creature, his feelings were different. The humming of the birds outside at dawn seemed strange and he felt that his green love with the creature is dead at dawn as the real face of time is revealed to the poet after it is unmasked. He says that, “I sensed inside us both / the green love that grew there yesterday / was dead” (11-13).

The poet fantasizes the lion to be a symbol of love and hope in “Lion Which Illuminates” (*The Unreliable Nightingale* 21) as against the usual concept of lion as a predatory animal. In this poem, he fantasizes lion as a symbol of hope and love, the two factors that illuminate life. The poet hunted for that “lion,” his beloved's special lion, a golden lion, which illuminates and adds dignity to

sorrow. The feeling of love blossoms even in straitened circumstances. One can find the footprints of the lion (love) glowing soft and yellow on the pavements.

More real even than friendships
I hunted
every corner where such creatures can occur.
You mentioned once its footprints glowing
soft and yellow on the pavements;
one dimensional roses, freak night blossoms...(6-11)

Hence love blossoms anywhere and everywhere, irrespective of time, climate, or one's status. It also appears suddenly and unexpectedly like “one-dimensional roses” and “freak night blossoms”. The awareness of his love for the woman has “come upon me silently.” Yet this “knowing alone is irrelevant,” for this feeling of love proves to be elusive even as his response is thwarted by extraneous factors like “human tangles.”

The poet points out that however elusive love might be, it is accessible to everyone, irrespective of his station in life. In winter, its shadow falls even over “numb and sleepy crowds” of the pavements. Yet in whatever condition or place or season, a person happens to be, he is overcome by this feeling of love and the very knowledge of such feeling “illuminates” him. He says,

In winter we make our lion out of snow,
In spring out of flower,
Summer and autumn we make our lion
with what is at hand. (12-15)

In “Chief Inspector Patten and the Case of the Brown Thigh” (*Little Johnny's Confession* 42), Patten gives expression to his own adolescent fantasies and infatuation for a beautiful brown skinned girl. The poet assumes the role of inspector Patten who investigates the cause of his own irrevocable and incurable fascination for a brown woman. Her brown thighs keep cropping up even in a casual conversation. The poet realizes that every man seems to fantasize about the beautiful brown skinned girl, who is the very incarnation of female beauty. The image of the brown thigh crops up wherever he goes- in the parks, in parties, everywhere. But he realizes that almost everyone has an imaginary girl of his dreams, his idealised and idolised woman born out of his dark fantasies. The dream girl belongs to nobody in particular and has “Eros” (Cupid) imprinted all over her, symbolizing man's age-old fascination for female form and carnal pleasures.

‘It belongs to no body in particular,
It has “Eros” tattooed all over it,
Its investigation's
Been going on for centuries’. (28-31)

It is curious to note that at a particular point of time, the lover's fantasy girl appears to put on the trappings of a girl in flesh and blood. Is it because the absence of something makes man fantasize about it- a lonely lover's dream beloved similar to Charles Lamb's *Dream Children*?

The poet in “Something Never Lost” (*Grave Gossip* 50) fantasizes that love transforms the world into a paradise. The poet suggests that the world will be a veritable paradise when people are under the spell of love. True love will catapult them to a different place, a paradise, where raspberries shine, and all living beings, be it a bird or a beast lives in absolute peace. It is a Heaven on Earth where the trees are burdened with apples, un plundered by man. One who goes to such a place far from the madding crowd, away from the din and bustle of the city, will sing a hymn in praise of the everlasting eternal love. He says,

There is a place where the raspberries burn
And the fat sparrows snore in peace;
Where apples have no fear of teeth,
And a tongue not used to dust
Sings of something never lost; (1-5)

Such a place is not far away from this world, though it takes a lot of trust and a spell that only love can teach to reach. He says “It is a place not far away. / It takes a lot of trust to reach, / And a spell only love can teach” (6-8).

The lover imagines life after death in “When Snowmen Kiss Our Brows” (*Notes to the Hurrying Man* 51). The lover reflects that he does not know what would become of them when they are dead and lie buried under the soil covered with snow and ice. He wonders what would happen to them when snowmen kiss their brows and the tip of the world is frozen. “What shall we be?” when there is no sunlight to melt the snow nor is there any moonlight to guide them.

What shall we be
When snowmen kiss our brows
And the tips of a world have frozen?

What shall we be
Who have no sunlight to melt them,
No
Moon
To guide them? (1-8)

The poet does not know what will happen to them after death, but he wants to make full use of the days they are together and find happiness in each other.

In “When into Sudden Beds” (*Love Poems* 47), the poet presents the fantasies and dreams of a lonely lover, who seeks his beloved's company in his dreams. The lonely lover lying on the bed all alone, embracing the darkness of the night, yearns for “habit's sake some human warmth.” He dreams of his beloved, but then even in his dreams her cold, unresponsive hands seem to be “blind, ignorant” of his suffering. The lover seeks solace and comfort from his beloved in his dreams and he realizes that if he turns away from her, he would be plunged into darkness and despair. Even the beds become a centre for waging internal “wars” due to the inner conflict in the mind of the lover. On the other hand, even the thought of touching his beloved in his dreams induced pain and suffering in him, for

Whatever's touched, shoulder, thigh or breast,
With some uncommon pain will burn
When for love you're asked to pay in kind,
And find you are not strong enough to turn. (13-16)

The lonely lover in “The Ice Maiden” (*Love Poems* 65) fantasizes to be in love with an “ice maiden.” He reflects that it is the “lonely freak” walking in his head that first made him conscious of the need for love. In fact his ice maiden is not made out of snow or frozen ice or even out of any of nature's gift. He says,

NOT OUT of snow or rain frozen,
not out of any of nature's gifts
I made an ice maiden
but it was the lonely freak
walking in my head
that first shaped and loved her. (1-6)

The ice maiden refers to an unemotional and frigid woman who is an embodiment of feminine perfection. It is perhaps his imagination that conceived and shaped his love for her. The lover, thus created the ice maiden out of his “lonely freak” walking in his mind to give her a “larger than life” image. Yet he is unable to distinguish her from the rest and that “she is as ordinary as all I've touched.” She appears similar to all other ordinary women and they seem to “fall back into her.” He says, “I magnify her, make her / an excuse for the absence / of something larger.” (18-20)

The poet in “Tristan, Waking in His Wood, Panics” (*Love Poems* 94) presents the fantasy of Tristan wandering alone in the woods, broken hearted and lonely. Tristan's story is derived from Scottish legendary myth of *Tristan and Isolde*. The poet presents Tristan languishing in self-inflicted agony brought about by his separation from Isolde. Tristan, out of dejection professes that he does not

want to get Isolde back, does not want to win, for “every time a thing is won / every time a thing is owned’ and possessed, it simply vanished from him. Tristan, unable to bear the thought of losing Isolde again, if she were to join him, cries that “I do not want to Possess.” He is left to meditate on his ruins, as he says,

DO Not let me win again, not this time,
Not again. I've won too often and know
What winning is about. I do not want to possess;
I do not want to. I will not want you.

Every time a thing is won,
Every time a thing is owned,
Every time a thing is possessed,
It vanishes. (1-8)

He is vanquished by the fear of losing Isolde again. He laments that only the need is perfect. Actually it is “the wanting” that is far more satisfying than actual possession. He seems to be in an irretrievable tragic mould as he says that “Tranquility does not suit me; / I itch for disasters” (10-11). The protagonist is frozen from within, as he suffers from dejection caused by unrequited love. He realizes that constancy in love is merely a delusion. One cannot blame extraneous factors like time, climate or fashions for changing that which he thought to be constant. Tristan, chastened from his experience, confides that he has no hopes and dreams of a happier future. Tristan, pining for love, notices that, already in the woods, the light grass has darkened. There is darkness all around. Even the flowers that are withered and fallen on the ground seem to be sepulchral like a “necklace of deaths.”

Already in the wood the light grass has darkened.
Like a necklace of deaths the flowers hug the ground;
Their scents, once magically known,
Seem now irretrievable. (23-26)

To the grief stricken Tristan, even the grass appears to be dark and he takes notice only of the withered flowers due to his tragic state of mind. Even nature seems to be in tune with his present state of mind. His mind refuses to see anything beyond his present doleful dream just as it refuses to see anything beyond the ugly and lifeless aspects of nature.

Patten in “A Few Questions about Romeo” (*Love Poems* 60) through his fantasy reevaluates the feelings of Romeo and Juliet regarding their decision to commit suicide if it were to take place in the modern social context. He fancies Romeo to be lying in a chapel in Verona regretting his decision to commit suicide for the sake of love. He imagines dead Romeo, spotty and miserable, “at odds with every thing,” lying inert in his grave having a revelation from which Juliet is absent. He imagines Romeo to be peeping in through the crevices in the grave and seeing the beautiful garden nearby, “exploding” with pink blossoms that lay scattered all over the place. The poet says,

AND WHAT if Romeo,
lying in that chapel in Verona,
miserable and spotty, at odds with everything,
what if he'd had a revelation from which
Juliet was absent?
What if, just before darkness settled
the arguments between most things,
through a gap in the walls he'd seen
a garden exploding,
and the pink shadow of blossom
shivering on stones? (1-11)

Romeo in his grave would rue his decision to have sacrificed his very life for the sake of love at the prime of his youth. The poet asks whether Romeo would still have thrown away his life, had he only known that he could find Juliet's beauty in any other “common girl”:

In “Sea Saw” (*Armada* 81), the poet observes that the sailor’s affair is a casual one. At every port of call, he picks up a casual affair only to abandon it the moment his ship leaves the harbour. As a result, he purchases “an ounce of regret” at every port and a bottle of the “scent” of the place (or that of his beloved), for he would never revisit the place or see his lady love hereafter, and hence he carries the scent of the girl with whom he had a casual, short lived affair, in order to perpetuate the memory of his experience. Perhaps his mind also has become benumbed as a result of this repeated experience, which is aggravated also by his association with salt, says the poet.

Sailors landing from long voyages would
make pilgrimages to his shop, for their hearts were so
cauterized by salt they could feel nothing of their own
accord...(3-6)

The best way for him to remember the casual affair is to tattoo the “sighs of faces” of his beloved on his arm so as to bring him atleast a crumb of comfort.

“The Ghost Ship” (*Armada* 33) is a sardonic fantasy about the life of seamen who indulge in casual affairs, and once the ship departs from the port, they tend to forget all about the affair as they never have a serious commitment or emotional entanglements with the women they have relationships. The young passionate sailors who had affairs with women in the port are no longer alive and in the place of the ship there is now present only an invisible ghost ship and that the sailors and the ship have now been reduced to a part of the sea, a “single fleck foamed wave.” The poet sardonically imagines the ghost ship to have departed from the port with its seamen hot with longings and their semen hardly dry on their women's lips. He says,

Dear ghost ship,
since you left this port,
your young crew hot with longings,
their semen hardly dry on women's lips.
The years have shrunk to a single
Fleck-foamed wave;
The one who fathered me,
long dead. (1-8)

Cookson points out :

In a poem of quite exquisite lyrical beauty (its shape outlining the silhouette of a ship’s sails, rather as George Herbert’s famous metaphysical poem *Easter Wings* was laid out to resemble a pair of angel wings), Patten reflects wistfully but stoically on the tide-turning consequences of “fate and chance meetings” and bids an indirect farewell to the sailor father he never knew. (70)

Patten perhaps introduces an autobiographical element in his narrative as he suggests that his father too had a love affair with his mother, but then their affair was short lived as he deserted her. This had happened in the distant past and the years seemed to have shrunk to a single “fleck foamed wave” as the memory of the casual interlude still rankled in his mother's mind though his father is long dead. In this poem as Cookson points out:

He confronts for the first time his feelings about his natural father, who had barely been mentioned during his childhood. Patten had known only that he was a merchant seaman. Then, unexpectedly, in 1991 his mother had confided that her reason for leaving him had been the chance discovery that two other women had also had children by him at around the time of Patten’s birth. (70)

The poet in “The Almost Loveless Alphabet” (*Storm Damage* 75-76) caustically remarks that true love and commitment have become a non-existent factor in the modern age where love has degenerated into a mere physical affair, Patten vividly presenting his point of view through a jingle of alphabet.

Not many a streets away, "A" has decided to leave "B" who is brooding over her miserable state of affairs. "C" is narrating a tale of deception and betrayal as she recounts the way in which "D" has deserted "E" to live with "F". "F" is told by "G" about "H's" desertion of "I" in favour of "J". "O" a lonesome character is grief stricken and ailing, and is nursing his bruised ego, after being deserted by "K", "L" and "N". "P" is indifferent to "Q" who is gossiping with "R" about the exploits of "S". In the meanwhile "T" comforts and consoles "J" who nurtures hopes of reconciliation with "V". "W" is attracted to "X" who is puzzled over "Y's" interest on "Z" who "desires nothing." Atleast somewhere "M" is humming "a nice little tune" thereby expressing his joy and delight as he is living exclusively for himself without any entanglements. He says,

W
desires
X
who does not know why
Y
desires
Z,
who desires nothing.
.....
Mmmm
is sucking a delicious sweet
and is humming
a nice little tune. (48-55, 58-61)

In his love poems Patten's fantasy envisions his belief in the existence of airy, fairy creatures, angels and unicorns. The poet fantasizes about having a love affair with an angel in "Angel's Wings". But the lover's disbelief in the existence of angels and his doubting nature ruins the affair.

Winding up the discussion in this chapter, it is found that the poet through his fantasy and imagination has presented the plight of lonely women who become disillusioned and cynical due to their bitter past experience. The lonely woman in "The Unisong", "frightened once by normal flesh" has sexual union with a bizarre creature such as a unicorn. In another poem "Somewhere Between Heaven and Woolworth's: A Song", the distraught and lonely woman satisfies her killer instinct in such ruthless acts as keeping Kingfishers in their cages, goldfish in their bowls, and munching roses on a tulip butter toast. She withdraws from love altogether because "boys were more cruel than kind" towards her in the past. In the same way, the poet in "The Sleepy" fantasizes his beloved to be silent and sensuous like mother earth, while in "It is always the Same Image", he compares a stream at its source to a virgin. The poet in "The Spring Song" fantasizes about the spring to be a beautiful girl clad in an orange swim suit. The spring season like "happy gardeners" gathers the cartloads of sadness from our lives and fills our days with love, laughter and joy.

The poet's fancy in "Chief Inspector Patten and the Case of the Brown Thigh" speculates on every man's fascination for a brown girl. The brown girl is a symbol of every man's fantasy, his longing for an ideal sexual partner.

It is found that the poet's fancy focuses on a lion (in the manner of Blake's "Tiger") to be a symbol of love and hope in "Lion Which Illuminates". The poet in "Something Never Lost" reflects that love can transform this world into a veritable paradise. The poet's fancy takes a peep into the past and visualizes the plight of legendary Tristan walking alone in the woods, nursing his broken heart caused by unrequited love. The poet portrays Tristan as being frozen from within even as his mind refuses to see anything bright or beautiful even in the woods- an echo of the romantic concept of pathetic fallacy.

It is further to be noted that Patten through his fantasy and imagination gives life to ancient characters like Alfred Tennyson's Maud, William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and interestingly poses the question as to how their impulsive behaviour would pave way to sanity and moderation in the modern social context. The poet imagines Romeo and Juliet to be still lying in their graves, all the while ruing their decision to commit suicide on the spur of the moment. In *Maud*, the poet fantasizes Maud to be living in the present age, as a symbol of lost innocence, of unrequited love, and still in search of her medieval lover of the idyllic garden in the concrete city. The poet in "The Ghost Ship" and "Sea Saw" gives a fanciful expression to the casual affairs of the seamen who forget their women the moment the ship left the port.

Patten fantasizes with a difference. He applies fantastical thoughts to real life situation when he fantasizes about the manifold aspects of love such as infidelity, estrangements and separations, loneliness, lack of communication or sheer indifference between the lovers. His fantasy seems to suggest that love has two separate aspects; one to be fantasized about and the other to be seen in real life. The fantasy seems again to suggest that all affairs of love cannot be ideal, life-long or lasting forever. Romeo is questioned in his grave for a wasteful loss of youthful life dying for Juliet. In the same way, his fantasy of his father's love affair as a sailor loving a woman at every port of call is presented as a sort of love of convenience which is neither ideal love nor practical love in everyday life. Fantasy about love stands out as a separate, yet his own inimitable, attitude to love wherein Patten refuses to glorify or idealize love.

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