

Katherine Goes into the Baby's Room, **A**llusions to

Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*

By

Nicholas North

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor ANGELA JOYNES writes...: Please don't let the title, "Katherine Goes into the Baby's Room, Allusions to Matthew Arnold's Dover Beach," trick you into thinking you must be a poetry scholar to fall in love with this story. I guarantee that it stands soundly on its own feet.*

I was blown away by North's simple but elegant prose, and the melancholic intimacy of entering Katherine Beatty's disturbed mind. The italicized words and phrases taken from the poem Dover Beach are seamlessly woven to reinforce the narrative. If you do have the time, I recommend reading Matthew Arnold's poem. It adds to the story, believe me.

Of fiction I always ask, does it move me? Does the piece stay with me, continuing to dance in my head once the music stops? The answer is YES. Thank you Nick North. This beautiful story captures the isolation and despair of a young mother, and courageously tackles the difficult issues of postnatal depression/psychosis and infanticide. Hey, I said I loved this story. I never said it wasn't dark.

Katherine Beatty feels hopeless, disillusioned, and disengaged from this world. She thinks, as many of us parents occasionally think, "If you ask me this is just a terrible place to raise a child." Similarly Dover Beach reflects Matthew Arnold's disaffection with humanity. Or should that be inhumanity?

As a writer I took particular note of Nick North's skillful and moving conclusion which dangles like the tail of yarn from the unraveling blanket of Katherine's mind. It feels like an ellipsis of emotion, heartbreak stretching to infinity. The perfect ending.

"Cannon fire will sound from her lungs. And it will all make sense.

What will make sense?

This will.

What?

This ever changing.

This ever.

This."

My hat is off to Nick North for this brilliant piece.

Unreservedly Five Stars!

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... *As previous issues have shown, I have tended to always enjoy Nick North's work – even to the point of him being the first person I interviewed for FOTD. His stories are often mind bending, deeply referential, and difficultly enjoyable to deconstruct. At some point he is probably going to have to ask me to stop writing him up out of boredom or will turn all of these reviews into a story that breaks my brain on multiple levels and I will do it again.*

It should come as no surprise then that, "Katherine Goes into the Baby's Room, Allusions to Matthew Arnold's Dover Beach," by North, is intriguingly cyclical and no less worthy of attention this go around.

Reading a story about the throes of a mother going postpartum to the point of murdering of her child is always a bit shocking/taboo, not only in opposition to Arnold's affinity for writing for his family, but also how personal of a line that tends to break in society – having recently had a baby makes this story have all the more depth that you could want to sink into.

Not only with direct allusions to "Dover Beach," I always feel like North manages to bring in these brief ghosts of Samuel Beckett in a lot of his work. The line changes with slight repetition that repeat themselves but almost never in the same order, the larger layout of the repeated images that create a harrowing, dense pallor in the environment, the use of language to describe the mental breakdowns of obsession, and the enaction of metafiction as an act and not a road sign for the use of a writer's tool, these are all elements of a story that actually create a feeling as opposed to describe a feeling – which I tend to think is at least something to celebrate in writers.

This is a dark tale, but a well-written tale, and I would very much suggest reading it.

Five Stars

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

Beds are really dry oceans and the smallest feelings go on expanding forever like a universe that never closes down. She rolled in her chains like the sea, legs above the mattress, dancing in the air as she slept, dreamt, disappeared down a dark hole, as dark as the inside of a hat, the mad hatter's hole.

KATHERINE GOES INTO THE BABY'S ROOM, ALLUSIONS TO MATTHEW ARNOLD'S

DOVER BEACH

By Nicholas North

Per amichetto mio...

(Lines from the poem are in *italics*.)

1.

It wasn't like the baby was crying. The nipper was asleep in his bed. So there was no outside 'trigger'. The 'trigger' came from inside. She could sort of feel it coming, this woman called Katherine Beatty, as she adjusted a cushion at one end of the couch before sitting down. A feeling, but also a sensation. An internal sensation that broke through her skin like a fever. She felt sweat forming just under her hairline and she actually said, 'Gosh, it's hot in here.' But it wasn't really hot. She knew this because she'd looked at the thermostat. It was March outside and April in the living room. Not cold but not warm either. 'It's me who's hot. I'm hot, not this place', she said. To herself, to her baby down the hallway, asleep in his crib, to the walls, to the furniture. It was just her and the baby.

Katherine sat down on the couch, all sweaty, and looked out the living room window. 'Good God,' she said aloud. 'Jesus'. Outside the window just the gray street, the gray and brown houses, the bare trees and the gray sidewalks. And that late winter sky, a white March sky, the sun nowhere, like the light inside a white plastic box. She truly felt, with that sky, and this small cube of a house, she was inside a box. A box is a trap if you can't get out. And a trap you can't get out of is a prison.

She got up from the couch and walked down the hall. She stepped into the baby's room and it was so quiet. Everything was so quiet it was like it snowed in there, like when the snow falls softly and silently. Without turning on the light—so as not to wake the nipper—she reached for the pillow behind his warm softball of a head and placed it over his tiny face. His arms sprang up and his little fists drummed the air and his legs kicked. Katherine applied an even pressure and pushed the balls of her thumbs into the

pillow. She could feel the baby struggle against it. Then he made a coughing sound. Or the sound of a dog barking but a dog barking in a dream. She was sweating when she took the pillow away. A drop of sweat landed on it. Her hair was wet.

It would be good to feel the horror of what she had done, it would be good to feel the crawl of devastation up her spine, a devastation that opened her lungs like a pair of cathedral doors and fired cannon shots of despair from the dark recesses. It would be good but she couldn't feel it—any of it—and after a while (just looking at the baby) she returned to the living room and sat down on the couch. She switched the overhead light on, light like a white sun. If only she could be sick, vomit into the toilet. No, she couldn't do that, either. Her stomach felt fine, thank you. But she was trembling. That was good. That was a start. She was trembling. Trembling so much she dropped the phone as she reached for it. That was good too. She picked it up and took the phone over to the window and watched the gray and brown outside; the world all gray and the street all brown and the sun a plastic light.

2

Funny thing was, she had the phone in her hand, she couldn't key in the number. Three numbers. Nine followed by two ones or one eleven. 911. Easy but she couldn't do it. Katherine Beatty walked down the hall and stood outside the nipper's room. She stood there a full two or three minutes before she looked inside. The baby was asleep. It was better for the baby to be asleep. What kind of world do we live in? What person in their right mind would bring a child, a new life, out of the purity and innocence of God's holy bosom, snatched from that bosom, into this gray world? Onto this planet of disaffection, *swept by confused alarms*, that, like the brown sidewalk has no heart?

'Sit down,' she told herself. 'Now sit.' She sat. She adjusted a cushion at the end of the couch, thought about glancing at the thermostat, didn't and sat. 'Sit and make your call. No funny business now. This is serious.' *We are here as on a darkling plain*—that is what the street outside is. *Confusion swept* through

Katherine while she held the phone and repeated the number over and over. '911.911.911.' Should she fight or should she flee? *Such ignorant armies clashing* inside her. 'Now you call and don't you dare hang up until you get through'. The night before she had a long dream. Beds are really dry oceans and the smallest feelings go on expanding forever like a universe that never closes down. She *rolled in her chains like the sea*, legs above the mattress, dancing in the air as she slept, dreamt, disappeared down a dark hole, as dark as the inside of a hat, the mad hatter's hole. On the beach of dreams, in the glimmer of moonlight, Katherine foresees her arms reach out. Her fingers encircle the wee nipper's neck and the blood rushes away from her joints and races up her arms to flee this dreadful deed, to have no part in this dark deliverance into unknown territory. 'Stark is the word,' Katherine hears herself say. The baby's hands reach up through the night and through the round pink land of its babyish dreams. The nipper has a face as soft and round as pudding. He even looks cute grabbing at her throat and when his little fingers dig into the chords of her neck, Katherine takes her hands away and screams.

3

The nipper was asleep in his bed. So it wasn't because he was crying. Katherine Beatty, the baby's mother, came into the living room with the intention of checking the thermostat. 'Is it me or is it hot in here?' But something outside caught her attention and she stood looking out the window at the gray street. It was three o'clock in the afternoon but the white sun felt like noon and looked like noon. It looked like noon but felt like the light behind a sheet of white plastic. She sat down on the couch. There was a cushion at one end and she adjusted it. She sat down. She stared out the window at the plastic light and the gray trees and the brown sidewalk and the gray street. It was like there were pins and needles moving around inside her, going from place to place. She couldn't get comfortable. 'Is it me or is it something else?' she said aloud. There was no use putting it off.

She got up from the couch and walked down the hall to the baby's room. She opened the door. The nipper was asleep. Sweat clung to her skin. She wasn't cold but she wasn't hot, either. She stepped in. The nipper had dislodged the pillow from his round softball head and Katherine picked it up and placed it over his round pudding face and pressed down. She applied pressure with the balls of her thumbs. The baby fought. He reached up and Katherine thought he might grab her throat and dig his little fingers into the chords of her neck. The baby wretched and slurped into the pillow. His tiny legs thrashed in the air above the blue mattress. His fists drummed. Then everything stopped. So that was good. That was a start. Katherine was trembling. So much March out there and so much Katherine in here and so much fighting in the baby. Thank God. Thank God it's over and I can sit down. 'You sit but you make your call.'

Katherine set the pillow by the nipper's head. She was sweating. She stepped out of the room and walked down the hall. A drop of sweat landed on the rug. Something about her fingers drawing away or the blood inside them drawing away and racing up her arms and hiding inside the hole in her heart until this dastardly deed, this dark dealing was done—they would have no part of it. In the living room she picked up her phone. She looked at it then adjusted a cushion and sat down on the couch. She was still looking at the phone when she sat down. The white plastic light outside and this trap I've been trapped in, Jesus God! Won't somebody help? If you ask me this is just a terrible place to raise a child. This earth. This hell we call earth. Who would bring a child into a place like this? *Swept by confused alarms of struggle and of flight.* She keyed the number. Then she disconnected. 'Now stop it, Katherine. This isn't funny. You key that number now and I mean it. You key it and mean it and no fooling around.' There are *ignorant armies* out there and tonight, *tonight we clash.* A bed is a dry ocean and your soul rolls bones across the dry beach sand, across its *melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.* A young mother on a dry beach rolling her bones.

She keyed in the number. 911. Nine followed by two ones or one eleven.

'Hello? Hello? Who's there?'

'It is no place to entrust a child!'

'What...?'

4

Katherine would have liked to report a murder. That's what she wanted to do. She put her hands to her face and cried. She felt her shoulders shake and her whole body sob, her whole body taking it on and getting involved and participating in this. As soon as she reaches the dark dream of beaches she will fall on her knees. Cannon fire will sound from her lungs. And it will all make sense. What will make sense?

This will.

What?

This ever changing.

This ever.

This.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *...the story as its own separate reality—an hermetic reality that does not mimetically 'represent' human experience...Then it's just Psych 101, right? ...story becomes its own experience, an 'object in the world,' ...existentially. So Katherine's going into the baby's room three times doesn't symbolize or describe her OCD or postpartum stuff... instead, a gesture, a 'mime' to lift the character out of 'true to life' experience ...position it as a purely intellectual construct...function of Arnold's poem to amplify the literary not actual relationship between story and reader. Inherent ironies...he wrote for his family....she kills hers, remain intact. Thanks to Angela Joynes and Joey Cruse for the time and attention they invested in this work.*

GUEST EDITOR BIO: Angela Joynes is a Canadian now living in Tennessee where she pursues her two passions — writing and primitive rug hooking. Yes, she's a hooker. She holds the following degrees: BA, MD, and a Certificate in Creative Writing from Middle Tennessee State University. Her story *Trout Addicted to Meth* was published in **Issue 10**. She was interviewed by fiction editor Joey Cruse in the same issue.

AUTHOR BIO: Nick North's exasperating story *3 Primary Colours* was published in **Issue 9**. He hangs out in The Big Bad (Toronto) with CP and other literary miscreants. Born in Canada, he was raised in Italy and is an English and Italian native speaker. La storia sconcertante di Nick North *3 colori primari* è stata pubblicata nel numero 9. Lui corre, va in giro in The Big Bad (Toronto) con CP e altri personaggi letterari poco raccomandabili. Nato in Canada, è cresciuto in Italia ed è madrelingua inglese e italiano.