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Narrating Wonder in Mark Anthony Jarman's Stories

Abstract

Mark Anthony Jarman's characters are often down and out, and often wandering and wondering. Using theories of wonder, this essay argues that wonder plays a key role in many of Jarman's stories—stories that are marked not by narrative or psychological closure, but by a sense of wonder as characters muse on their lot in life. After briefly considering Jarman's role within Canadian literature, including his innovative approaches to the short story form, and his odd status as an influential yet often ignored writer, the essay moves to a discussion of the various ways that wonder is at play in his works, both as a verb and a state. Jarman's characters are frequently in doubt, and the act of wondering takes us into their drifting, self-reflecting minds. However, there is also the sense of wonder as the miraculous. Jarman's narrators find optimism in the world around them, thanks to flashes of the beauty of the unlikely. Wonder, thus, has a crucial structural function.

Keywords: wonder, Mark Anthony Jarman, short stories, Canadian literature, optimism.

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NARRATING WONDER IN MARK ANTHONY JARMAN'S STORIES[1]

Confronting something wonderful or marvellous, not to say miraculous, is shocking because it rips us out of the usual and the quotidian. As philosopher William Desmond argues, wonder gives rise to three modalities: "idiocy of astonishment," perplexity, and the curiosity we experience when faced with something that "takes us beyond ourselves" (314), by tearing a hole in the fabric of the usual. Wonder exists only in communion with an individual, as an intense personal reaction to what we alone have encountered. A rainbow, setting sun, symphony or guitar solo that stuns one person may leave another cold. In Stephen Greenblatt's view, wonder refers to an object's "power . . . to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention" (20). Mark Anthony Jarman's writing often has that power.

Jarman's prose is powered by linguistic fireworks. Consider the opening of "Cowboys Inc.," the lead-off story to *Dancing Nightly in the Tavern*, his first collection (1984): "Drunk sheets of light, the ancient Volvo angle-parked in the Interstate rest area" (1). The sentence lacks a main verb, and we have to orient ourselves in a literary world where expectations are raised and then dashed as we try to find our way into the story. The phrase "Drunk sheets" leads not into *of lightning* but, puzzlingly, into "of light." We have to wait to find out what is going on in this brave new Canadian literary world. Jarman's opening sentence starts off with reeling (with its *drunk*enness) and ends with stasis ("angle-parked"; "rest area"). Motion and stasis battle each other in what appears to be little more than a description of a parked Swedish vehicle. What is astonishing is Jarman's ability to recast the quotidian in poetic shades of the wondrous.

"Johnny Cash in the Viper Room (Cowboy Asylum)" (2020), from Jarman's most recent collection, begins: "For centuries I waited inside, waited out those fierce Irish immigrants on their black Blasket rocks surrounded by waves and weird red-legged birds and Viking raiders on the horizon" (27). The narrator's claim that he has waited for "centuries" is exaggeration, sailing close to what we might extravagantly tell a tardy lunch date; but then the sentence comes alive through alliteration (*black Blasket*; *waves and weird*), before the temporal element returns, now in the guise of history. When Jarman refers to Vikings "on the horizon," he is evoking the visitors who trod Ireland's Blasket Islands ten centuries ago. A link is thus established between this recent visitor to Ireland and

[1] The author would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their careful and useful feedback. Also, thank you to Don Sparling for commenting on a previous draft of this essay.

previous invaders. Moreover, Jarman seems to be throwing a metafictional jab at how stories are supposed to begin. Who starts a story with waiting?

As I have tried to show through the examples from the previous two paragraphs, Jarman's prose is striking, and he is an outlier within Canadian literature. Though the focus of this paper is on the role of wonder in Jarman's works, the first section considers his role on the stage of Canadian literature, particularly as an unconventional writer of short stories. Paradoxically, Jarman is praised and regarded as influential, yet he remains under-studied in academia and a stranger to the leading Canadian literary prizes, not least, it seems, because his short stories defy categories. The penultimate section examines wonder in Jarman, exploring the many shades of the verb "to wonder" and how characters' wondering takes us into their drifting, doubtful minds. Finally, I look at the possibility of the miraculous and argue it sometimes plays a key structural role in Jarman's plot-poor stories.

DISPENSING WITH CONVENTIONS: JARMAN WITHIN CANADIAN LITERATURE

The Google Books preview of Jarman's 1998 short story collection *New Orleans is Sinking* labels it "poetry," which is wrong in fact but right in spirit. Jarman's stories do not easily lend themselves to paraphrases or neat plot summaries. The focus in his stories is language, not event. Steven W. Beattie writes that, like poetry, Jarman's stories have a "compression," a "linguistic concision" buttressed by "rhythms and euphony and careful repetition of sounds" ("True North" 12). Jarman's plots are stripped down, with "just enough plausible action to jump start the engine of his verbal inventiveness" (Glover 105). This paucity of plot arguably feeds into the characters' openness to wonder, since "we are most receptive to wonder when there is not too much else going on" (Tallis 6). The typical Jarman protagonist is confused, often on the road. He wanders in search of something nebulous, constantly thinking about his path in life and the many mistakes he has made upon that path, but never reaching a goal. Fellow short story writer Tamas Dobozy argues that Jarman's "stories do not end but stop," thereby "troubling the taut construction expected of the genre" (324). For example, the final line of "Pompeii Book of the Dead," the final story in *Knife Party at the Hotel Europa*, reads: "Though I can't actually dance, but you know, um, just a suggestion" (210). The resounding "um" foregrounds indecision, afterthoughts, contemplation, and hesitation, not narrative closure.

Jarman unsettles the short story form by not furnishing clear endings—a strategy that is particularly striking because short stories are

"essentially 'end-oriented'" (Lodge 225). In a review of *Knife Party*, Lee D. Thompson is temporarily troubled when describing the form of Jarman's collection, because the various stories, with their "strange, wandering, quite aimless narrative," seem to be a novel of sorts (bringing to mind how Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* was marketed both as a short story collection and a novel). Readers and critics alike generally prefer clear categories, which is why, argues Alex Good, Jarman's "unorthodox, experimental approach to style and form" "make him challenging, even off-putting, for the general reader" (Review).[2] In a less positive assessment of *Knife Party*, James Grainger acknowledges Jarman's style and agrees that it is "of higher literary calibre than" the fiction that garners leading prizes in Canadian literature circles, but argues that his "non-linear structure and stylistic tropes" are not revolutionary outside CanLit contexts. When it comes to Jarman, playing the find-the-Canadian-influence game or searching for any clear literary predecessors would be difficult. Barry Hannah, "the virtuoso" author of *Airships*, "wild-man bard of Mississippi," and former teacher of Jarman, is an obvious one (Cumyn). Elsewhere, Jarman has referred to music: "I feel like Joy Division and Hank Williams were as much an influence on me as William Faulkner was" (Interview 9). Though Jarman's works include many local Canadian references—from hockey players to Canadian bands—he is hard to slot into any specifically Canadian tradition in terms of style.

Claire Omhovère points out that Jarman, though "influential," is "conspicuously absent from studies concerned with the centripetal forces at work in the historical, thematic, or generic transformations of CanLit" (77). Indeed, the obsession with themes and thematic criticism that followed the publication of Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* in 1972 continues (Gadpaille). In that seminal work, Atwood argues that the "multi-faceted and adaptable idea" of survival is the main theme in Canadian literature, since "Canadians are forever taking the national pulse like doctors at a sickbed: the aim is not to see whether the patient will live well but simply whether he will live at all" (48). A critical tradition of looking for themes (especially that of survival) developed in Canadian literary circles. In John Metcalf's view, "Thematic Criticism dominated" to the extent that academic and popular reviewers alike allegedly "had nothing whatever to say about style or language" and avoided evaluating, saying whether a work was worth reading (*The Canadian* 161).

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[2] Elsewhere, Good calls Jarman "Canada's most exciting and original artist in the short-story form" ("Fables" 157), specifically, while lamenting his omission from an anthology of Canadian writing that obsesses over identity, instead of troubling readers with "difficult aesthetic judgements" or "critical tools and imagination" (159).

Though Atwood wrote *Survival* some fifty years ago, primarily to show that Canadian literature actually exists, the critical tradition has contributed to the exclusion or omission or diminishment of Jarman's stories which "are so difficult to circumscribe in terms of plot or mimetic intent that they can hardly be invoked to cast light on current societal debates" (Omhovère 77). John Metcalf laments that from the start "academe ignored him and placidly munched away on" more conventional or naturalistic authors (*Dancing* xi). To be fair, it is fatuous to argue that Jarman is utterly ignored yet cryptically influential. It might be best to say that he is condemned to being a writer's writer. Other authors engage most heartily with Jarman's work—Tamas Dobozy, Douglas Glover, and John Metcalf have, like Alexander MacLeod, been impressed by Jarman's "restless language play" and "searing sentences" (440).

In the Introduction to the republication of *Dancing Nightly in the Tavern*, Jarman's first collection, John Metcalf says: "His characters want something but don't know what" (ix). "Jesus Made Seattle Under Protest" (1984) has a character thinking: "I want, I don't know, something" (87). Similarly, in 2002's *Ireland's Eye*, which is part family history and part travelogue, Jarman writes: "Uncertainty is my meat. No idea what I'm looking for, but I'll know it when I don't find it" (ch. 10, "Blood Pudding"). The wanderer's hopeless journey presents a series of exclusions, not a real chance to fulfil a desire or reach a goal. Jarman's narrators are far from omniscient, and rarely are they entirely in tune with themselves or the basics of the world around them. Like the reader wrestling with Jarman's defamiliarizing sentences, Jarman's narrators struggle to orient themselves in their own lives. One narrator asks: "Why do very tiny events make me question organized religion or the actual width of a wonky life?" ("Song" 48); another: "Why do I have no faith in my own life [?]" ("Hospital Island" 68). Aware of self-delusion, aware of his libido, a lothario questions his habit of self-mythologizing: "Why do I feel my pursuit of her is not base, but is high-minded, a noble romantic quest?" ("Exempt" 138). He can recognize traditions and tropes, imagine himself a heroic knight in a literary tradition, but that veneer of nobility hardly masks his true womanizing intentions.

Almost all of Jarman's stories are told in the first person, "as monologues in the point of view of characters under stress" (Glover 105). These masculine narrators experience tribulations ranging from everyday concerns about lust and love, money and divorce, to more extreme and existential problems. For example, in "Cougar," a despairing, suicidal man goes into the woods to cut down a Christmas tree and "a sleek cougar nearly takes [his] head off" (111). "Burn Man on a Texas Porch"—which English novelist A. S. Byatt calls perhaps "the greatest short story ever

written"—introduces us to a man whose camper van explodes while he is on vacation, leaving him with a "face like a TV jammed on the wrong channel" ("Burn Man" 37). Claire Omhovère, perhaps thinking primarily of "Burn Man," calls Jarman's characters "flamboyant losers" (89). Steven W. Beattie calls them "outcasts and roughnecks" ("Appreciation" 21). Crucial to this essay is the following: despite their dour circumstances, Jarman's narrators retain a subdued hope. As one claims, "I am an optimist; I believe in so many possible worlds"—though he concedes "yet really there is no evidence" ("Assiniboia" 163). In other words, it is easier to find cause for despair than for optimism. Elsewhere, in "Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World," a death-cloaked story in which the narrator journeys to California to bury his father, Jarman provides natural evidence or a reason for optimism: "In the ravine behind our old house, birds keeps saying whatever it is, riotous and dark against the white bark, stammering over and over in their bird boroughs, alive and drunk despite the odds of a northern winter" (121). Like many Jarman characters, these birds are inebriated but fully alive, despite challenges and perils.

WONDER IN JARMAN

Jarman's narrators are often in doubt, and a search for "I wonder" in his *oeuvre* yields some dozen instances in *Salvage King, Ya!*, his sole novel, while *Knife Party* yields another two dozen. This frequency is by no means extraordinary, since the phrase is of course common enough to appear regularly in any first-person narration as a near synonym for "I asked" or "I wanted to know." But Jarman does not use wonder as a mere tag or convenient alternative to "I said" or "I think": he exploits wonder's full range of meanings. Such is the case when a narrator ponders the legal status of his Rome hotel's Croatian cleaning woman: "I wonder if Irena lives and works in Italy legally, but can't bring myself to ask" ("Exempt" 140). Here wonder means "to feel some doubt or curiosity (how, whether, why, etc.); to be desirous to know or learn" ("wonder"). The solution could be easily found were it not for the politeness that restrains the narrator. There is a tension between a desire to know and what social conventions allow us to ask. One should not make such enquiries in polite society.

Most often Jarman uses the verb wonder to give the reader insight into a narrator's association-prone, perplexed mind, as he tries to make sense of the world, pin down possibilities or reflect on matters that are beyond his ken. For example, when one narrator sees a sign in Rome that reads "WELCOME TO AN ANTI-FASCIST CITY" and is "accompanied by a hammer and sickle," he says, "I wonder if the Soviet hammer and

sickle looks odd to [his companion's] American eyes" ("Pompeii" 179). Again, he does not ask because he is shackled by a sense of decorum. He refrains from asking his North American friend, just as he refrained from asking the Croatian chambermaid, resulting in a narrative dead-end akin to a character appearing on the scene in a novel and then disappearing, or to a conversational road not taken.

For many of Jarman's characters, however, wondering about a specific question sets off a train of associative, drifting thoughts. More daydreamers than philosophers, Jarman's heroes meander from curiosity to musings about what might be possible. When reflecting on sunny Italy, the narrator thinks of a former girlfriend: "Natasha would thrive here; she is heliotropic, worships the sun, loved Spanish Morocco and Northern Africa. I wonder if her hair is still long?" ("Troubled" 123). The juxtaposed sentences seem disjointed. One moment the narrator is in Africa, the next he is reminiscing about hairstyles. This drifting juxtaposition mirrors how thoughts come to us, namely, in mysterious ways and waves. Jarman evokes the past (Natasha "loved Spanish Morocco"), drifts into the present ("I wonder . . ."), and resolves to change his daydreaming in the future: "Someday I'll stop bringing her up, her spectre, that triangle I didn't want to be part of" ("Troubled" 123). The lines are also funny because errant thoughts cannot be willed into or out of existence. Jarman's jilted hero is unlikely to forget the woman who left him for another man—"There was no warning and I was a TV left at the curb" is how he describes being dumped ("Dark Brain" 22). Voice, diction and logic come crashing together. The "someday" does not imply an imminent future, there is slight a pun in *bringing up* her memory (i.e. memories generally come unbidden), and this particular spectre appears unsummoned. Jarman also gives us a punchline: the hero has no moral qualms about love triangles, as long as he himself is the new man (he had left his wife for Natasha).

In another passage in *Knife Party*, wonder indicates a slide into self-reflection. As the narrator lounges at his Rome hotel, he sees some workers "passing by . . . with buckets of rocks and earth," and says: "They must think me a rich tourist, that I am lazy, that I am lucky" ("Exempt" 135). Here we realize that the visiting Canadian is in fact rich compared to the workers, and he is at leisure, lazing about with a beer at the ready. But the slide from "rich" to "lazy" to "lucky" is a significant one, since the third adjective implies fortune or happiness (it is no coincidence that "happy" and "lucky" are homophones in some languages—German: "glücklich"; Slovenian: "srečen"). The verb appears again, as he moves from moaning and groaning about his life—"they must think me . . . lucky" (with the implied counter *but I know that I am not*)—to reflecting on his lot in life: "Am I lucky, I wonder" ("Exempt" 135). The lack of a question mark makes

the line delightfully ambiguous. We can read the sentence as a genuine question: *I wonder if I am lucky?* And we can also read it as an exclamation or appreciation of his lot: *I wonder at the fact that I am lucky*.

MIRACLES AND WONDER

The various shades of the verb wonder fit the categories that philosopher William Desmond provides for the "plurivocal" noun wonder (312)—"astonishment, perplexity and curiosity" (313)—and this brings us to a crucial point in this essay and its argument that wonder plays a key role in Jarman. As I have tried to show at the outset, the wonder Jarman's narrators sense is transferred to the reader through his flamboyant language. Until now, the examples have been drawn primarily from *Knife Party*, a collection of loosely linked stories. Drawing all of the examples from the mindset of a single narrator would be skewing the data, because, of course, it could be a matter of a single character given to musing. On the other hand, picking examples from a variety of Jarman texts could function as a back-handed compliment. It might suggest that Jarman's stories follow a single pattern, which is not the case.

In "My White Planet," about workers trapped and isolated in a northern radar station, the narrator and his colleagues encounter a truly wondrous sight. The men find a girl washed up on the shores of the frigid coast: "The freezing girl is alive but unconscious, and our ungenerous God has delivered a delirious female to our ice garden where we look at each other in wonder, wondering about things, about our farmgirl concubine" ("My White Planet" 27). There are firm echoes of the ur-garden or prelapsarian garden as "ungenerous God" gives the men company (disturbingly called "girl" and "concubine" in the same sentence), and there are shades of miraculous survival and delivery through the icy waters. For our purposes, however, the sentence's shift from the noun wonder to the verb wondering is crucial. The external event causes internal confusion and perplexing thoughts—and the catch-all term "things" is a fine instance of under-lexicalization, of using a vague word that is semantically opaque. The men do not know what to make of this seemingly miraculous feminine appearance. Indeed, "things" could refer to wonderment at the world's mysteries, or to dark thoughts for these men who lack female company.

Even in a world that does not generally believe in miracles, the semantic proximity between wonder and miracle remains. As Yujin Nagasawa points out, miracle has vestiges of "the Latin miraculum, which denotes an object of wonder and amazement" (2). In the various stories in *Knife Party*, "miracle" appears eight times. At the beginning of "The

Dark Brain of Prayer," we learn that a cancer-stricken woman is "hoping to find a homeopathic alternative to surgery, hoping for a miracle inside her body" (11). Jarman establishes homeopathy as the modern equivalent of a prayer of intercession—that is, of asking for a supernatural intervention. The term "miracle" functions like a leitmotif through "The Dark Brain of Prayer," appearing again and again, albeit in different guises. The second time the word appears, it is within a traditionally religious sense. Natasha brings the narrator a gift, a Mexican charm: "*Milagritos*, they are called, little miracles. At a shrine you pin them to a statue of a saint or the Virgin, one of the many Mexican Virgins, and pray for help" ("Dark Brain" 11). Jarman shifts from the secular-but-not-scientific (homeopathy), to the religious-but-not-taken-seriously ("In Rome a woman sips her drink and says of my weightless metal charms, 'Yes, we are adept at mixing the pagan with the Catholic'" ["Dark Brain" 11]). Jarman's narrator then trivializes the weight of "miracle" by using the same word to describe a "stalwart fridge" that has given up the ghost—"The noisy creature dies, but comes back to life on the day of the new fridge's arranged delivery" ("Dark Brain" 15). "Is it a miracle, another *milagrito*?" he asks, sacrilegiously wondering whether someday pilgrims will "bow and pray and pin charms at this new shrine, this fridge by the roadside" ("Dark Brain" 15). He employs a mocking tone towards the imagined fridge-pilgrims.

Jarman's narrators frequently adopt the "voice of beleaguered cool" as a "rhetorical position" (Glover 106). However, as the reader soon comes to realize in "The Dark Brain of Prayer," this rhetorical position is a linguistic carapace. Using the foreign term "milagrito" adds emotional distance while allowing him nevertheless to verbalize thoughts too intimate for public declamation (like swearing in a foreign language); the pilgrims' charms may appear "weightless" but they have enormous spiritual or emotional import. Though the narrator does not directly claim that he believes in or prays for a miracle, the possibility of the miraculous hovers over the story, transmitted through dead or discarded appliances. He describes himself as a "TV left at the curb" by Natasha ("Dark Brain" 22)—just like the departed and no-longer-needed fridge that suddenly and miraculously springs back to life. Even though Jarman's world is predominantly secular, it is imbued with the religious sense of miracle (and his works are replete with references to his Catholic upbringing, especially "Catholic guilt").

As philosophers, theologians and scientists remind us (Losonczi and Deckard xii), a shift from the supernatural or magical to a more scientific view of the world has entailed a shift in how we understand the miraculous. Whereas "[i]n antiquity the spectacular in nature," including natural disasters, was regarded as *miraculous* (Parsons 84), modern science

and the scientific mindset has helped us to dismiss the supernatural. For centuries, the intellectual trend has been towards rationalization and disenchantment. In times of global warming and the Anthropocene, we no longer consider natural disasters as solely heaven-sent. And yet, we can still wonder at natural glories such as a rainbow or stunning sunset, even if we learned in primary school science class how that rainbow came to be—this is wondering in the sense of "to be struck with surprise or astonishment, to marvel" ("wonder, v."), of the sort we might feel if we believed we were witnessing or hearing about a miracle. Philosopher David Hume, famously opposed to the possibility of miracles, accounted for their popularity by saying that mankind has a "strong propensity . . . to the extraordinary and the marvellous" (89). In Nagasawa's gloss, "[p]eople tend to believe in extraordinary events such as miracles because they have a passion for events that inspire wonder" (72). This receptivity to wonder cannot disappear; it can merely be displaced. Thus defined, wonders will never cease.

Wonder appears to be etymologically linked to the word *Wunde*, that is, *wound*, implying that we are struck by an event that is beyond our "system of established and expected meanings" (Parson 85). William Desmond highlights the proximity between wonder and *miracle* by pointing out that they each are "something extraordinary or even supernatural" (313). Jarman's characters often experience what Desmond calls an "idiocy of astonishment" (314) that rescues them from the solipsism of the single wanderer. Again and again his characters are surprised, astonished and perplexed by wonder. As shall be seen, they find optimism in the world around them, thanks to flashes of beauty or of that which is unlikely. The shot of enthusiasm or optimism is more epiphany than obvious causality.

Wonder in Jarman, thus, occasionally has a crucial structural function that takes the place of plot twists and turns or causality. In "Butterfly on a Mountain," a narrator looks in wonder at the streets of Rome and asks, hopefully: "Is this cornucopia world possible?" (40) The central image in that story, however, is of an unlikely butterfly that ended up on a ski hill in Canada: "How did the tiny creature survive, map its way to such a cold altitude, flying in snow about the treeline?" (34) This is by no means a miracle, but it stokes a wonder that inspires the otherwise dour narrator—much like the birds in "Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World," who remain "alive and drunk despite the odds of a northern winter" (121). The wondrous appearance of the birds and the butterfly rejuvenate the narrator of each story.

If the typical Jarman narrator is down on his luck, no character is lower down than "Burn Man" of "Burn Man on a Texas Porch," Jarman's best-known story. In Douglas Glover's extended close reading, the tale

is about a man who “has lost his identity, his identity has become the flames” (108). After literally losing his face, the narrator recalls: “I began to refer to myself in third person, as a double: Burn Man enters the Jubilee burn unit. Burn Man enters the saline painful sea” (29). When told by well-meaning medical staff that he is “not dealing with this well” (29) and that he has “to learn to deal with [his] anger” (39), Burn Man reflects: “I am dealing with my anger, I’m dealing with my anger by hating people” (39). The entire story is on a downward, spite-fuelled trajectory. In fact, the former government bureaucrat with the disfigured face deals with (as in “trades in”) his new physique by working as a masked man. He recalls an amazing tale he once heard from a golf partner, about finding “a man in full scuba gear lying on the burnt forest floor”—“he must have been diving somewhere and a water bomber scooped him right out of the ocean and dumped startled scuba man onto the forest fire” (40). After hearing the same tale three times from different sources, Burn Man becomes sceptical about “the same false true stories” (40). And yet, in the final paragraph of a story that has focused on disfigurement, violence, drugs, hatred and lost loves, Burn Man suddenly turns upbeat, astonished: “Ours really is an amazing world” (44). Suddenly, the wondrous story of the scuba diver seems possible. The final line reads: “And a famous scuba diver rockets like a lost dark god into smoking stands of Douglas fir, into black chimneys burning” (44). The scuba diver becomes a spark of the divine re-entering the world.

CONCLUSION

Plato splendidly said that wonder “is where philosophy begins” (155d), for wonder inspires curiosity and an urge to find answers. Jarman’s characters are not philosophers or scientists; they do not move towards knowledge or cognition by turning a mystery into a solvable puzzle. They do not participate in the wonder-killing process that occurs as we age. Rather, they retain a smidgen of the child’s “fascination” as they stare “at a fire or a pussy-cat, gape-mouthed and even, perhaps, drooling” (Tallis 9). In William Desmond’s view, the child is open to being astonished, but as cognition develops, this openness rescinds or fades (319). Jarman’s characters are left wondering, pondering. In the one-two-three steps of Desmond’s “modalities” of wonder (“astonishment, perplexity and curiosity”), they dither between astonishment and perplexity. “The Dark Brain of Prayer,” another story from *Knife Party*, foregrounds perplexity in the face of the wondrous. The narrator says: “These are moments my reptilian brain becomes confused as to what is real and what is a vivid

dream, what you can talk about or keep to yourself, what is prayer and what is miracle" (30). Jarman's characters often remain in a state of childlike ignorance. They do not come to resolution, they do not generally achieve their inchoate aims, progress or develop, but they remain delightfully open to wonder and amazement, which gives them the strength to keep going, with or against the odds.

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