



Knock
on this
Door



HANNAH

KNOCK ON THIS DOOR

Knock on this door,
inside there is a phrase,
a fish to catch you on its barb.
Each dart of colour reels you in.
Swim with it, around and in and through.
Pour it out on paper.
Poetry.

Knock on this door,
for inside there are walls,
smeared with paint, cake crumbs and treacle,
coal dust, cobwebs, fire and mud.
Roll around the inside of this childhood.
Dance across the ceiling.
This is art.



FELIX

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A PLACE TO WRITE

A single-storied building, flint and stone.
No windows looking out onto the world.
A rustic door with just a simple latch.
Inside the rooms surround a cloistered walk.

Seen clearly through the archways in the walls,
a garden, where the sun's light gently plays,
among the Penjing trees in Chinese pots.
The only sound a solitary bee.

I AM PAPER THIN

Today I am paper thin.
There is nothing inside me.
I have no muscle, bone or flesh,
except for the hand that holds this pen.

It moves and I follow.
Sometimes I wonder
where it's going, but mostly,
I give the pen its freedom.

When it wants to speak, I listen.
At other times an idea or a phrase,
drifts through my mind,
but never reaches the page.

Only the pen knows why.
Sometimes it struggles forwards,
doing its best to listen to me.
It waits and it waits and being a pen,

gets bored and dries up.
How do I trap an idea
into a line of ink,
if the pen cannot hear it.

Sometimes it is still,
as if waiting for the right thought,
the right words to express,
the inexplicable.

AN OFFERING TO THE MOON

She arrived with her dimpled hand tightly clenched.
Opening it, she whispered. *It's a present for the moon.*
The head of a daisy lay uncrumpled in her hand.
Clutching it again, she ran and she squealed,
hurling her fist towards the morning's lingering moon.
The ceremony over, she gave the flower to me.
Now I wonder – and wonder at the instinct of a child.
I have taken, never given to my mentor in the sky,
for I had nothing worthy for one who means so much,
before I had this daisy from a two year old child.

SIX HOURS SPENT IN OXFORD

Lost or not? Was this still St. Edmund Hall? Such a new building, such an old wall, yet living in complete harmony, each complementing the other.

A solitary bird adds music to the scene. It is as if I had never heard the song before. I sat down on a bench to look and to listen.

The scene changed. Two women dash out of the building. Very important people, no doubt, but I will remember them for a long time, and they will have forgotten me already.

Would they have asked me to leave? I doubt it, even if they had known that I was only a woman growing older on their bench.

The bird is now silent.

I wondered if I would have dared to sit on this seat in any other part of England, for certainly, it was not a public bench. In every way it belonged to the people in the area in which it had made its home.

Never have I seen freedom and sharing so well expressed as in Oxford. Although it must be said, in defence of other places, that I have not been to many. I wondered how often the wall had seen rules observed and broken, freedom given and taken.

I imagined the courtyard on a rainy day. The people running across it laughing as rain pelted down on the newspapers that sheltered their heads. And the grumbling and swearing as others hesitated before making a dash for the rectangular opening which led to a staircase.

Two fingers of creeper hung over the entrance. One touching the ground. I watched it dance about their faces on a windy day and cling to their wet clothes in a downpour. I secretly hoped it would be allowed to grow like a bead curtain across the hole in the wall. Thick enough down the sides to give pleasure to the outstretched hands of those who loved it, and clear in the centre for those who didn't and to light the stairway.

All around me was now silent so I left the wall to continue with its history. The bird could come here whenever it liked, but I would have to get lost in order to find it again.

Where am I now? A church that was, that is a library. A simple green painted bench, padded behind and at the sides by large leaves that hung from above.

Why didn't I sit on it? Was it a pity to disturb it?

If I had sat on it, would I have wanted to return to it over and over again? Will it look the same if I go back or was it just a moment of magic?

Maybe if I had sat down I would have lost all sense of time. Not realising I had a train to catch, until it started to get dark.

Why didn't I sit on that inviting bench? I am a fool to have missed such a golden moment. The opportunity to be outside the scene and inside it.

I climbed the wooden staircase to a small room tightly packed with multi-coloured summer people. Claustrophobic views but not of Oxford. Then down again into the sunshine and fresh air.

A paper tissue danced in the hot wind outside the Holywell Music Centre and I saw the humour of it. To watch a tissue dance above a waste bin would have amused me at any time, but to look up and find that the building was a centre for music added to my pleasure.

Walking over the stone slabs of Magdalen Cloister, my admiration went out to the men who placed them under my feet so many years ago and the patterns that were revealed by an eroding ocean of footsteps were like the wet sand of my childhood.

I travelled around the Cherwell by electric hover fly being overtaken by walkers, rowing boats, punts, ducks, a swan, and a dragonfly and eventually by time itself.

A woman in the station sat comfortably breast feeding her tiny baby. As I sat wound down on the train, I smiled to hear this tiny scrap behind me uttering such funny little noises. Telling us all "I haven't yet learned to cry."

Such a perfect end to a lovely day. To finish my day with a glimpse of a child setting out on its journey, first stop Paddington – then all the years to come.

I was unable to wipe the smile from my face as I drew nearer to my own family. I was carrying my day in a small notebook and ready to restart my life where I had left it that morning.

I kicked off my shoes and replaced the golden bracelets that I wore around my wrists.

WANDERING AROUND OXFORD

I am the paper tissue that dances,
in front of the Holywell Music Centre.
I am the hot wind, the unseen choreographer.

I am the stone slabs of Magdalen cloister.
The pattern of waves that I lose myself in.
I am the ocean the footprints eroded for me.

I am the church that was, that is a library.
The green painted bench cradled by leaves.
I am the baby who is learning to cry.

I am the crumbling wall that has seen rules,
observed and broken, freedom given, taken.
I am its history, its present and its future.

I am the solid wooden staircase to the Camera.
I am the multi-coloured summer people.
I am the hidden view from every window.

THE RUSSIAN SNOWDROP

The snowdrop's leaves,
piercing the snow,
leave a perfect, circular hole,
through which its head,
peeps.
Hanging,
like his life,
by a single thread.

His eyes,
staring now,
see nothing.
The battle continues,
in silence.
His iced remains,
trap the snowdrop's perfume,
in a hollow,
while its dancing head
hangs on to the joie de vivre.

.....
My thanks to Michael, who, when he heard this poem, pointed out that in
Russia, a Russian snowdrop is a body found after the snow has melted.

So there are two Russian snowdrops in this poem and one of them is
French.

JACK WOULD HAVE TURNED IN HIS GRAVE

I should have worn black to the funeral,
but, how was I to know.
I only found his orders,
while searching for the will.
I put it in the litter tray,
and waited for the cat.

He left me so much money.
I'd always thought us broke.
We'd never had a holiday,
and couldn't afford a car.
I left to go on a shopping spree,
and smiled at the man next door.

The dress I bought was cherry red.
The shoes were powder blue.
They had high heels and wobbled but,
I got used to them. Eventually.
Then I went on holiday.
So did the man next door.

The man next door's a builder,
and a very good one too.
He put this door through,
our bedroom walls,
so he could come to tea.
Which he did. Often.

It was a dreadful accident.
That's what the papers said.
Jack was with the postman,
and they were both in drag.
It really came as such a shock,
I thought he couldn't drive.

THE MOON, THE HONEYSUCKLE AND ME

He didn't sit down. He just stood there. His words froze inside my head.

He turned and left, but only just in time. As the front door closed, sorrow overwhelmed him and then I understood.

The gravel cried out too as he ran towards the car. Then silence...

I don't know how long I have been gazing at this flame. There is such pleasure in blowing out a candle, but tonight, I can't do it. It lit up his face, watched him when we laughed at ourselves, each other and the world. It separated us and yet, it also drew us closer together, uniting us until...

His car burst into life. I listened as the sound faded away.

So it is all over. No tears should be shed, no regrets, nothing to blight the memories I have of him.

I blow out the candle. The flame disappears but the smell of sandalwood remains. It makes its way across the table, curling in and out of wine glasses, skimming across the plates of untouched food.

Now I am sitting in the garden. I lift my head and lose myself amongst the stars.

I cannot see the honeysuckle, but it is there, waiting like me, until the dawn appears.

It comes too soon.

And so we say goodbye to him, we three, the moon, the honeysuckle, and me.

I hold him in my cupped hands and gently blow, giving him the freedom that he had asked me for.

The dawn lights his way, but it does nothing to lighten my darkness.

I will never search for happiness again. I will just wait until it looks for me.

Somewhere inside my future, it is there.

TO DAD

Come back to me for just one hour.
The next generation's here.
Hold this tiny baby in your arms
and rock him off to sleep.

Tip a whisky back to wet his head,
tell him stories of long ago.
Show him how to dance an Irish jig,
then sing him Tura Lura.

I'll get Gigli back to sing for you
and John McCormack too.
You'll sing along to the soulful songs,
and remember the friends you knew.

I'll make you a garden and fill it with Peace,
the name of your favourite rose,
with cushions of violets to warm their roots,
and a seat, for you, in the sun.

And you'll sit yourself down quite seriously,
and you'll take my hand in yours.
"The moving finger writes." you'll say,
as you take your leave of me.

BAREFOOT IN HARLEM

Spat out of the womb and into Harlem.
Born into the gutter – one step up to
the street. Bare feet tappin' out the rhythm.

M' black ass peepin' out m' hand – me – downs.
Blues time hangin' from m' old man's shirt tails.
Swing just bouncin' off m' mamma's hip bones.

Battered horn it wails, and we weep with it,
but then it blows the wind that makes us fly.
Jazz escapin' flows across the sidewalk.

It's tellin' what it feels like to be me.

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

The sunset today was just a straight line. I was hoping for more. I needed more but the sun like me was too tired to fight back. The line got thinner and thinner. The dark clouds were so heavy you see. The sun didn't have a chance. I blamed them, as they crushed, what behind the scene was a joy.

I sent the strength I had left towards the sun, but it arrived too late. My gift bounced back with a thank you note before it waved goodbye.

It was dark again and the blackening clouds gathered across the sky. Moving and bouncing into each other. Massing together in anger and hatred as they threatened rain.

Suddenly it arrived. Beating off the window. Desperately trying to get in, to smash and destroy all I had left.

Then there was silence. It arrived as suddenly as the rain started. I opened the window and there it was, the unmistakable perfume that rain carries with it, after a very hot day.

I wrapped myself in a black sheet and laid my head on a pillow, and left the window open – to welcome the dawn and the birds that sang to it.

I will always remember last night. The night when I walked away from the words, I didn't want to say and sent my feelings into the sky and watched them float away.

Black clouds are not our enemies. Without rain there'd be no life and there's nothing wrong with tears, when they leave a smile on your face.

GRAMPY

I was eleven when I killed him.
It was nothing physical, of course.
No – I simply thought – if he dies
they will be sorry – and he did –
and they were.

He just had a bit of a wheeze
and couldn't get out of bed.
He'd been to a funeral, that's all.
I didn't know he was dying –
neither did they.

It was my first dead body.
I didn't know death smelt sweet,
or that his face would be covered.
There was nothing but stillness
and me being brave.

It was my first funeral.
I wore my navy school coat,
with brown lace up shoes,
and a wonderfully soft,
black angora beret.

RECIPE FOR A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

Place roll of wallpaper, pattern side down in the hall.

Strip two small children and watch them slowly coming to boil, as saucers of red, green, blue and yellow paint are randomly arranged, over surface of paper. The children are now ready to be added.

Make sure they understand how to proceed with recipe.

Stand back and watch them transfer paint to paper, using only palms of hands and soles of feet.

A damp cloth will be useful here to mop up lino.

The recipe will last longer if action and/or sound are recorded.

This can go down very well with grandparents, but is optional.

Meanwhile refill the saucers with paint as and when necessary.

The painting is ready to be dried and hung when saucers look identical.

Take one child each and carry them to pre-prepared bathroom.

Listen for squeals of laughter and delight as first bars of soap and then water change colour. Lift children from bath.

Encourage them to jump up and down to keep warm.

After removing scum, re-fill bath and rinse children thoroughly.

Wrap them warmly, feed, read and then carefully tuck them up in bed.

This last step in the procedure can only be carried out if they are yours.

Any children borrowed from neighbours should be returned at this point.

OVER THE TOP

A white bird flying overhead.
A sign of peace carrying orders,
for some poor souls to climb,
the wooden ladders into memory.

Not for me, this time, thank God.
For some of the brave, not me.
I bounce from one order to another,
trying not to think or feel.

While I live, I will never desert them,
though my home is only a trench,
cold my constant companion,
my bedfellow thoughts of home.

In my bunk, I block out the sound.
Take myself back to the Dales,
under a patchwork of snow.
Climbing the dry stone walls.

I am able to walk once more,
through mile after mile of freedom.
Breathing in all that silence,
cocooned in the glow of life.

BINDWEED

Seven Wild Flower Stories



Livelong – Old Man's Beard – Brandy Bottle – Eyebright.



Lady's Mantle – Touch-me-not – Shaggy Soldier – Rape.



Sweet Alison – Woody Nightshade – Billy's Buttons – Snake's Head.



Penny-royal – Good King Henry – Lords-and-ladies – Meadowsweet.



Ragged Robin – Jacob's Ladder – Shepherd's Purse – Policeman's Helmet.



Lady's Bedstraw – Gypsy Rose – Gallant Soldier – Wild Thyme.



Violet – Deadly Nightshade – Forget-me-not – Corpse Flower.

IN SEARCH OF PARADISE

My father was not an ambitious man. But there was one thing he wanted more than anything else in the world; he wanted to be a beachcomber.

You would think that his living in Bournemouth would have helped him realise this ambition. But it didn't. It was the wrong sort of beach and it was littered with people.

We all laughed at him but he never cared. He was a man who lived comfortably in his own skin.

In his dreams he walked along deserted beaches gathering driftwood, pebbles and seashells. He wore his trousers rolled up to his knees and a knotted handkerchief on his head.

Unlike Bournemouth, it was always hot.

Then one day, he disappeared, along with his copy of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.

Mum sent Tommy to the Police station to report his missing father, but the policeman gave his ear a tweak and told him not to tell fibs.

We weren't worried about Dad anyway. After all he had taken the rent money and his National Savings Book so we knew he had enough to live on for a while. We thought he would be back as soon as his money ran out.

Nobody minded when he wasn't.

Then one Christmas, out of the blue, Mum received a package. Inside was a long string of pearls and a photograph of a man she hardly recognised.

He wore a sunhat; a multi coloured short sleeved shirt and baggy shorts. He had put on weight and had grown a beard. His arms and legs were muscular: his skin tanned to perfection.

One thing was the same though; he had a glass in his hand which was raised in a toast. He was looking at the camera, so the toast was not to us, nor was the smile he gave to the person taking the photo.

Behind him two children were playing on the deserted beach.

On the back of the photo was a message in his familiar handwriting.

"I have found Paradise. Wish you were here."

There was no return address.

LIGHT IN SWAY (A photograph by Miho Akioka)

Light swirls across a photograph,
vanilla rippling through blueberry ice.
Shivering I enter. I am surrounded,

not by paper but by silk.

A sandalwood fire burns unseen.
Smoke rising, drifts past me,
leaving only its fragrance.

I switch off the light.

All I see now is the camera,
pointing at me,
accusing me.

Shooting.

WORDS ARE NOT ENOUGH

How do I say I love you in just words.
Writing a book on you would be easy,
but the feelings would spill from the pages,
refusing to be trapped on one surface.
Words are not enough. They stand still, don't grow.
Love is always flowing, always changing.
It needs freedom, highs, lows, and space to breathe.
Even death won't stop its constant movement.

How often I have strayed away from love.
Abandoned you, without a trace of fear,
knowing I was moving in a circle,
away from you, then round and back again.
Foreseeing that each time I would return,
to love made stronger by this same freedom.

THE WINDOWS ARE OPEN

The windows are open drawing sound into an empty room. The breeze wanders in and out lifting the pages of a book. It doesn't matter if the bookmark has floated down and come to rest. He will never finish it but the book refuses to be closed. The book knows how important it is to him, so it doesn't believe he will never finish it.

Beside the book is a pair of glasses, arms open wide to greet him. The lenses catch movement and looking up they see the door handle move down and then spring up again. The door doesn't open and they are disappointed.

His slippers wait patiently for the warmth of his feet, not knowing they will be cold for the rest of their lives. They will never carry him across the carpet again or leave his weight upon the pile.

The alarm clock rings and then runs out of energy. No one bothers to come to turn it off.

The sun goes down and for a while the room is in darkness. Then through the window, a lonely streetlight does its best to illuminate it. All it leaves are shadows, dark corners and confusion. The radiator clicks on, warming the sadness that is beginning to soak into the room.

Maybe tomorrow things would be better. He would come in and lift the bookmark from the floor and the book would open at the page where it should be.

He would lift his glasses, breathe on them and polish them with a freshly ironed handkerchief. Then he would run his fingers across the suits in his wardrobe and lay one on the bed, then change his mind and put it back again.

"Now where are you slippers?" He would kneel down to look under the bed and find only an odd sock that he couldn't reach. The bed would do its best to help him rise again and the slippers would shuffle towards him to help him find them.

Then he would dust the photos and rearrange them. Then sit down in his favourite chair in front of the window and fall asleep. That was when the photos would come to life and enter his dreams to set his memories free.

*“Wee, sleekit, cow’rin’, tim’rous beastie
O what a panic’s in thy breastie”* Robbie Burns

TO A MOUSE

When it is all over, I will kiss
my prince, hang my dress,
in the box marked Oxfam,
and scurry to my bed.
Then I will remember,
faces beautified by laughter,
gowns and black ties,
all appearing to enjoy themselves.
When it is all over, I will sit
in my nest of blue jeans, nibbling
cheese, instead of haggis, listening
to silence, instead of bagpipes.
Then I will enjoy the evening,
for the first time. Every second,
that I missed while living timidly,
in someone else’s life.
Until then, I imagine myself,
sitting at a banquet, watching
other people, growing more important,
as I disappear under the table.
I scuttle to a dropped napkin,
build a refuge for myself in its folds,
listening to the music of voices,
for the sake of “Auld Lang Syne.”

PUT THE NEWS ON PAUSE

Put the news on pause,
rewind back to yesterday,
an hour before she died.
I'll find for her a sunlit glade,
deep in an ancient wood.
Place her on a bed of down,
rust leaves and dry green moss.
She can hear the timeless tales,
of birds and pebbled streams,
then watch the changing patterns,
branches weave against the sky.
Let a summer shower unlock,
the fragrance of the earth,
while the warm breeze whispers,
the things I want to say.
Put the news on pause,
rewind back to yesterday,
so I can say goodbye.

RAIN DOESN'T STOP PLAY

Waterproof pockets collect water.
Rain creeps down my neck, up my sleeves,
into my shoes. Jeans cling to me,
hugging my calves like two small children.
Men run, hunched over fireworks,
sheltering them, until they are lit.
The guy topples over. Sizzling sounds
draw eyes back to a listless fire.
Burgers and hot dogs in rain speckled
rolls smelling of onions and sauce.
The fire is out, the last firework lit.
Squeals over, we squelch home in silence.
Peeling the clothes off a girl and a boy.
Lifting them into a deep bath of bubbles.
Then hot drinks, stories and sleep, while we
creep, down the stairs, in wet jeans.

ROUEN PARK

A solitary pine paints shadows with tapered fingers on the sun-baked grass. Beyond the cool water – a paper theatre backdrop – layers of shadow, light and dark, shrubs, bushes and trees, in flowing movements, layer overshadowing layer, with the sunlight strategically placed by a man, many years ago, who knew the true nature of life and growth. The waves high in one overhanging tree prove the black water ripples in this fresh-breezed heat.

Words on a scrap of paper beg for money. Why still so many beggars in this medieval city?

The waterfall rolls forward, slapping its sides as it drops, but fails to erode the constantly beaten, green-padded rocks or wake the sleeping swans who have never known silence. Only the long-shortened toddler drowns the water, as he flies after the fat pigeons, waving his solitary feather and screeching with delight. But the child grows tired before the waterfall and there is no other sound as the sunlight world sits listening, motionless as it plays there in the shade.

WHEN I WAS A CHILD

When I was a child, I seldom spoke.
Even my shadow couldn't find me.
I lived in a cave behind a curtain of vines,
at the top of a mountain that nobody climbed.
Far from the world of people and the sound,
of girls groaning, every time I read aloud.
I read slower than the trickle of stout, dribbled
from the tap, in an Irish pub that had no name.
Far from the world of nuns whose skirts,
hovered above their lace-up shoes, and beads
that clicked and clacked, as they taught us,
about 'Fear of the Lord' and things like that.
I have found my cave inside the house I love.
I sit and write, then see what I have said.
Checking each word is where it wants to be.
Each poem that I write, I read aloud. Slowly.

THE BIRTH OF A POEM

It's wonderful to be here,
sitting in an armchair,
warm in the sunshine,
contented as a word
waiting for a line.

It is February. Red kite skate
across the crisp blue sky.

The hours and the houses
are empty, waiting patiently
for their cars to come home.

Suddenly there is colour,
movement, but no sound.

Two pushchairs climb the hill,
following a school girl,
happy as a rainbow.

Hidden from their sight,
a school boy dawdles,
dragging his bag behind him.

Tired as the waves
after the storm has passed.

CAITLIN MACNAMARA'S HUSBAND

They come here to see where the great man drank his whisky. They expect a dolly of a bar maid and instead they get me.

How he would have laughed at what they say. These tourists, these so called poetry lovers. He would have seen through them. He was very good at that - seeing right through people into their minds and souls. He told me once that the real poetry lovers were the ones who stayed at home reading other people's poems.

Sure I served him, but I keep quiet about it. I keep the real man hidden, that was due to him - even if he didn't do the same for his fellow men when he had a pen in his hand. I sometimes laugh to myself and wonder what they would say if they knew how often he had pinched this old arse of mine all those years ago.

He was nothing to look at. A blubbery sort of face with a fag dangling out of his mouth. Not that it mattered for the radio. I used to see him sitting in his favourite seat and wonder who was right. Were they right about him or was I? He seemed so much at home in this pub. Was he ever as happy with them?

During opening time he was drunk more often than sober. It was his way. Many a row I've had with him when he stubbed his cigarette out on the floor. We had no carpet in those days.

I once said to him, "You miss the ashtray with your fag ash. You miss your mouth with your glass and I've heard tell you can't even hit the wall in the gents. You may be a great man in London but you need a nursemaid in this town."

I was that upset when he died, although I knew it was coming. It was as if something was missing from the room. Never knew I would grieve for him so much. He was like a stone I could sharpen my wit against and for a while these words left me.

It still upsets me when someone he wouldn't care for, sits in his seat.

NAKED TRUTH (1960)

Here I am again, which surprises me.
I thought last week's session would be my last.
Two hours I spent looking at the same piece of floor,
electric fire burning my legs, while my back froze.
At least I can see some of them this week.
That's a lovely pair of boots. Good figure too,
knows how to stand, makes the most of herself.
I fancy there is something going on between her
and the tutor. They stand too close, without unease.
They all make me laugh, they take themselves so seriously.
Yet if you see their paintings when they've finished,
well, they all look so different.
Nothing looks even remotely like me.
Still I don't blame them. Nobody's going to want to hang,
a painting of this old skin and bones on the wall.
Why do they need me. What do they see in me.
That one with the long hair and glasses,
studies me as carefully as his canvas,
yet I've seen his nudes before,
got both eyes on one side of their heads,
pointed breasts and bulbous arms and legs.
Couple of months ago it was them laughing at me.
They stuck fairy lights all over my body.
Hands were touching me from every direction.
I'm a woman of the world but I didn't like it.
It was then I realised I wasn't one of them.
I wasn't their equal, helping with their studies.
I was a model, a doll with nothing in it.
I had to walk up and down the room
lit up like a Christmas tree.
I wonder what the time is.
Perhaps I won't come next week.

ART THERAPY

Why do I come to sit with her each day.
She never looks at me but she's not shy.
How can so few lines tell me who she is.

She moulds herself into the hidden chair,
supports her back against a single line,
relaxed as one who never had a care.

I give her mine and watch them melt away,
absorbed into the empty space that's her.
Mine is a different journey every day.

I follow the red as it snakes along.
Loosely it coils itself around the black,
carrying my darkness into the past.

BORN WITH INSIGHT

Does a blind man know the colour,
of the skin that he touches.
Are there pictures in his mind,
more spectacular than ours.
Is each detail that he feels,
etched on everything he sees.
Are there colours of his own,
that an artist would die for.
Is he a better judge of age,
than someone who can see.
How much can he tell,
from the voices that he hears.
Can he measure my resistance,
as his hands read my face.
Does he see our secrets.
Can he smell our fear.
Does he know us better,
than we know ourselves.

MOVIN' ON

If you wanna meet a loser, shake my hand.

Man, if you were to stand at the bottom of my family tree you wouldn't see one leaf, not one single leaf. It's all bare wood up there.

The dead don't matter much, but some of us are still alive. Alive and kickin' our heels. Bangin' our heads against closed doors.

I might've been born in the gutter but now I'm movin' on.

Gonna start a new family tree and I'll be right at the top. And when I die, I'll look up from my grave and watch the buds growin'. I'll see the blossom hangin' down above my head and there'll be leaves to shade me from the burnin' sun. There'll be fruit so heavy it'll test the strength of every branch. And the taste man, it'll taste as sweet as suckin' sugar cane.

How am I gonna do it? I'm gonna write a book. The story of my life. I'm gonna dish up everythin' I can remember. But I ain't gonna say what I did, or what I thought, or what I said. I'm gonna write what I should've done, what I should've thought, what I should've said.

And when I finish the book, I'm gonna sit right down and read about this new man I've become. Then, all the feelings that I used to have, will shrivel up and die. Jus' like my old family tree.

Then I'll stand in the middle of the crossroads, with this book in my hand, and whichever road I take will be the right one.

THE RUSSIAN HARVEST 1915

Scent of the fox, bird song from the forest,
hay carts set out in search of the battle,
led through the trees by the boom of the cannon.
Soldiers we find growing in trenches,
shrapnel singing over their heads.
We wait for dusk alongside the brave.
A cigarette glows in a hand with the shakes.
When dark we set off on our search for the dead.

Patient they wait, alike in the moonlight,
with no complaint, they silently watch us.
We gather them in and load up the carts.
The landscape explodes as we walk towards darkness,
taking the bodies to places of safety.
Risking our lives to harvest the dead.

*Hugh Walpole, Mobile Hospital Unit with the Russian
Army in Galicia. (Reportage)*

WE DON'T SHRINK WHEN IT RAINS

This is no ordinary bench. What first caught my eye was the beauty of its curves. My feet were drawn towards it and I followed.

The tips of my fingers glide over the surface of the pale, untreated oak. It is as smooth as a sculpture.

Squirrels are searching amongst the leaves, stirring up my thoughts. They are so busy, while I just sit here, watching the leaves change colour.

So it is autumn. It must have arrived while I wasn't looking. I suppose other things have changed too, as the world moved on without me.

Since it happened, there is only one thing that I have noticed that has changed. That is the sky.

Before, there were never such cloud formations, as there are now. How long have I spent watching them crossing the silent sky.

Surely there must have been dull, miserable days with dark, threatening clouds. If so, I don't remember them.

I know exactly who I am now. I am so strong you wouldn't know me. There is the me before it happened and the person I am now.

The world I see is so very different. It is a place of wonders and beauty and bright light shines from the centre of every tree.

BLITZ

Nov. 7th

I looked up and saw you buried Charlie, by the collapsing wall of that blown up, burnt out house. Last night we shared our last Woodbine and now you're dead. Dead. Full stop. Amen. So be it.

Nov. 8th

They're saying you were tired Charlie, that you didn't react in time. I told them you didn't have a chance. It fell. The whole bloody lot just fell.

Nov. 9th

I've been standing on the edge of pain all my life, but last night I jumped in, diving straight through the middle of a silent scream.

Nov. 10th

They buried you again today, Charlie. Somehow it lacked the dignity of the first time around. I knew there would be no box of swan in your pocket, no photographs in your wallet, not even your lucky silver sixpence.

I sheltered a Woodbine in the palm of my hand, cradling this symbol of warmth for you, as I listened to people prove they didn't know you.

Jan. 14th

Today in the garden of a bombed out house I saw a snowdrop. I blew on it and it was real and it was perfect.

Jan. 19th

I found another child in the rubble today, Charlie. You would have been so angry.

I miss your anger. I can't find my own.

Jan. 27th

Tomorrow we're leaving for God knows where. Tonight my boots feel as if they're made of lead, but looking down I see only my well darned socks, standing to attention on this freezing night.

Wherever they lead me, I will follow.

TIME TO REMEMBER

If I could hold time in my hand and gaze,
into it's depth in search of what is past.
I'd visit there the wonders I have seen.
Searching for triggers to my memories.
I'd swim around the treasures that I find,
loading them on my back, to carry home.
So much, too much, already overwhelmed,
I swim to the surface leaving them behind.

I do not need to hold time in my hand.
I will reread instead, these words I write.
"The finger nails of every new born child.
A shell so delicate the sun shines through."
Life and the wonders of the natural world.
Build me a raft to help me weather storms.

I THINK I AM IN DANGER OF BEING HAPPY

I think I am in danger of being happy.
It crept up on me, when I wasn't looking.
I am no longer the pinball, that I used to be.
I have searched, but cannot find a single bruise.
I had made my bed and then laid on it.
I must have gone to sleep. I don't remember.
When I awoke the bed had disappeared.
So had the things I used to hide beneath it.
I know I am in danger of being happy.
The door to another world is open wide.
I wipe my feet on the mat that says 'Goodbye'
and smile at the notice 'Welcome Home'

A BOWL OF CHERRIES

I am sitting at the table in front of a bowl of cherries.
I should be searching for an idea for a story, maybe even a poem.
Instead I'm thinking only about what I am doing now.
There is no one to see me as I slowly bite into each cherry.
I work the stones towards my lips and open them,
but only enough to let each stone fall, once more, into the bowl.
Now I lie beneath the tree that they were growing on.
Cherries hang amongst the leaves which sway,
dancing with the flicking lights that fall from the sun, onto my
eyes.
Where should I begin? Surely there is no better place than here.
Where am I going. I have no idea. All I know is
that I will just sit and write, and each time I write,
I will be starting at the beginning.
It will be a journey but to where. A journey
from one experience to another, or maybe a string of pearls.
I thread them onto some fishing line. They slip down and escape,
into the world at my feet, for there is no knot to hold them fast to
me.
Read them if you like or throw them away. Understand them or
not. It's not important. I watch them as they roll away from me.
If you want them, they are now yours, for they are now my past,
and what I want to write about is now.



RYAN



GABRIEL

COVER ILLUSTRATION
CARTOON FOR WOODCUT
BY JIM POOLEY