Poems

Abstract
FROM NINETIES, SONGS FROM THE DROWNED BOOK

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FROM NINETIES

i

Let's drift again in these vast solitudes,
The beer-and-tabs Sargasso of the shore,
Anachronistic legal waterholes
Down foggy chares alleged to have two ends—
We'll make a life's work of an evening out.
Let booths and gantries frame a ruined court
That grants our bores' and lone derangers' pleas
A hearing, though the verdict is the clock's
Long boxes, six black horses, frosty plumes.
The diggers leaning on their spades to smoke.
Far overhead, a coal train grinds its way
Across the viaduct. A grimy clang
From the cathedral, echoed. Please call home.
Tonight's the nineteenth century sans crowds,
A boozers' heaven lit by blue dog-stars
Whose image in the empty river draws
Fanatics to the bridges for dispatch—
Spent gambling men we used to read about,
They seem to wear our faces as they plunge
In sequence from the parapets, as though
To cancel with a gesture thirty years
Drunk dry with infidelity and waste.
They print the water with their leader-dots...
Their's was the truly historical work,
The ground on which we are arraigned tonight—
Since we've outlived both usefulness and art—
A failure to imagine properly
Our place in the supporting cast, to move
From rhubarb to the boneyard in a blink...

As if there might be politics afoot,
The night the southside arsenal went up
The people thronged the quays like citizens.
Blood-lit in the inferno of the towns
They hailed their unimportant misery.
The river boiled red-black past walls of flame
And watermen like local Charons cried
Beneath the stairs for passing trade, their arms
Outspread like angels in the burning rain
Of lath and plaster, flesh and cobblestones
That blinded the cathedral weathercocks
And put the heat on whore and judge alike.

Or so the picture shows, that no one sees,
Crammed in beside a turning of the stairs:
Old Testament confusion, modern dress,
And on his non-existent crag, the bard
Who's too far gone to say he told them so.

ii

Your hundred streets, your twenty names, all gone.
A stink of burning sofas in the rain,
Of pissed-on mattresses, and poverty's
Spilt milk, its tiny airless rooms designed
To illustrate the nature of subjection
To its subjects. They tell me politics
And history are done: here's grease
Extruded from the dripping tar-skinned walls
Of workingmen's hotels; the ropes of hair
Trapped in the sinks; the names perpetually denied
A hearing, waiting in the smoky halls
For their appointments with an age that bred
And killed and then forgot them – names that now
Forget themselves, the air's mere allegations,
Faces that the mirrors do not hold,
Lockers with no contents, neither razors
Nor the Bible nor an envelope of dimps
Preserved against the certainty of worse.
So Billy, Tommy, Jackie – did you live?
Could it be you that Benjamin's
Averted angel is ignoring now
As once again you leave your flooded graves
Like newsreel ghosts to greet the Kaiser's guns?

iii

Blind walls and hidden roadways running down
To water. Black windows wedged with newsprint,
Morning after morning of the afterlife,
Anacoluthon of streets and bars.

The bar as survival, as figment,
Dog on the shelf and women to rights,
The Hole in the Corner where dead men meet,
The dead of emphysema
And of pneumoconiosis,
bickering
Beyond the grave like kids,

There is football, or football. Occasional boxing:
Pale-skinned Jimmy Wildes and Woodcocks
Brave as owt
    and carefully done down,
A lesson you have to pretend you’ve forgotten.

Or else there was Hitler, that flag-waving cunt.
Should have been a referee. Should have been hung
By the balls and then shot at. The Jarmans want tellt.

Eternity’s offside, a lockout.
It’s stilted black coal-staithes becoming aesthetics.
It’s the exacerbated calm,
The grey summer nights at the end of the world
Through which an old bloke walks his dog
Across that shitty stretch of no man’s grass
Because it’s his vocation,
Middle distant citizen of patience.

SONGS FROM THE DROWNED BOOK

i

In the beginning was all underwater,
The down-there-not-talked-about-time,
Deep North its drowned masonic book
And inaudible bubbles of speech,

Creation a diving-bell seeking its level
Down stone under stone, the slick passages
Fronded by greenery, flashlit by ore
And acetylene candles –

The blind fishes’ luminous ballroom,
The pillars of coal, the salt adits, the lead oubliette of the core
And the doors upon doors, all lost
To the surface long since, with the language. Now
Is there anything there, underneath? Is there more?
I can remember when
All this was manuscript:

How
Down the green deep we tipped
Law-clerks schoolmen state and church

And with them kingliness,
The night we sank the crown
Off Holderness.

Adam delved
And Dives swam
And sank, swam
And sank:
So who was then the gentle man?
Ourselves, or them
Whose deaths we drank?

Name me a river.
I'll name you a king.
Then we shall drown him
And his God-given ring.
Drown him in Gaunless,
Drown him in Wear,
Drown him like Clarence,
Except we'll use beer.

Name me a river.
I'll name you a price.
River's not selling—
Take river's advice:
Dead if you cross me,
I'll not tell you twice.

My river's from heaven.
Your river's been sold,
And your salmon have died
Drinking silver and gold.
Your river's a sewer,
A black ditch, a grave,
And heaven won't lend you
The price of a shave.

(Baucis and Philemon in Longbenton)

Hinny, mek wor a stotty cake,
Wor needs it for wor bait.
Hadaway, pet, away and shite:
you'll have to lookin wait.
Or mek yer stotty cake yerself
If yer sae lookin smart.
Aye, ah will, wor divvent need ye,
Ya miserable tart.

(From the Dive Bar of the Waterhouse)

I was dreaming underwater
When you swam into my bed:
How like you this? The tail, I mean,
And my long hair, rich and red?
A naiad of the standing pools
Of England's locked back yard,
It is because of you, my dear,
That makars live so hard.

Sherry from Kular's (see beggars; see choose)
Red Biddy, Thunderbird, non-booze booze,
Hair oil, Harpic, shit in your shoes –
It's casual drinking, it's paying your dues.

What would you give to know my name
And speak it in your verse,
And if I tell you, will it be
A blessing or a curse?
You are not the first, my dear,
Nor will you be the last –
Thousands sit for my exam
But no one's ever passed.