Shot

Fourteen fourteen-liners,

mostly recent

J T Waterfield – October 2020

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Flood plain

over the flood, over the flood plain, skims the canoe
turning into the whirl of the flood beneath which
next month maybe meadow flowers will bloom,
an early summer haze which could hide us if we lay
among the long stems and watched the busy beetles
climb their green empire states, supermen in miniature
to the mindless rescue in their emerald manhattan.
See how this carapaced crusader turns about his business,
the interposed stalk blocking his way,
urgent upon a new task?
If only we could forget where we start and end
as easily, the weight of reason and how we got here,
where next, overwhelming the moment in the long grass
like the chthonic flood that drowns this meadow now.

Hugin and Munnin

As houses sink below their roads,
so, touchstone, my landscape settles.
Must I now claim the privilege of age,
to nurture memory and tender hope,
comfortable plots between today's
raw estates? To ripen? To rest?
What hankering else, o Faust? What folly?
Can the ravens' code still slash the easy day?
Say after me: you must not mind hope;
warm summer rain falling and falling through still air;
the weight of fruit maturing in the sun;
yellow leaves on the slow green stream.
Memory too we can manage; what the whisperers say;
the black lightening. The poison we sip: honey.

Visiting the grave of Mrs Hughes

In Heptonstall the old graves pave the churchyard.
Storms here are dangerous; first the old building,
then a new pinnacle, 'struck by lightning' – a likely story.
But underfoot the dead make a testudo with their tombs,
safe now beneath their stones from what heaven sends.
Generations of initials record nowt but shifting script
between 18th and 19th centuries; the same names
interweaving the generations, near with mason's fee,
so much per letter and enough said.

Mad butterfly, occasional, you couldn't gatecrash
this close-knit party; grassy spaciousness
in the overflow park is yours. And, despite
all that practice, Lazarus, writing your own obituary,
borrowed words on your stone – weeds; flowers too.

At Three Weirs in June

In this pastoral bowl amongst English hills
history breathes easily with the seasons,
now warm as a still summer's evening, poised
– the sheep's desultory day-long antiphone over –
as if to listen for the rise of the fish
where they gather at the tail of the long slow pool.
This is an unspoken moment like silken
knowledge, what-will-happen deferred,
the bouquet above an anticipated glass of wine,
and if soon moonrise comes huge and alien
as a judge over the moor's bare shoulder,
can we not enter tranquillity and peace,
however brief, implausibly one sided, in the ledger?
Another blank page, then, easily overlooked.

At the bastle c1605

Mungo & Cuthbert Noble of the Crewe...
disordered persons... Mungo... suspected of murder...

Holed up under the moor here, our bravado
defence enough against the world, if not the drizzle,
though who's to fetch the booze? Justice Sikes
hollers good day from the careful beckside -
he's no help, slack-jawed as his shaggy nag.

The screech-owl stalks our demesne at night,
its rusty eldritch call pulls the pith
from our long bones. Our stink
is kippered by the ill fire. Smarting Christ!
We want nothing more than wine
and a woman, we're as good as you...

A line once drawn... memory mumbles,
to cross or not? in sand? And the bog's breath
is damascene beneath the moon.

Ginger

Do thickening hands, fingers pick up subtlety
with experience? Some compensation? Or is
the instrument itself at fault – observation
not merely clouded, the universe after all
upside down, just plain wrong? How often
have we to apologise for the past,
our current appetites unchanged?
Some other recipe is required. Admiring your breasts,
and other curves tightly hidden by your dress,
what does that make me? cowed candidate
for the black hole, blood-letting, bread and water,
another Caliban; our Father's mistake, to cut
ginger bread men roughly right to the edge –
blurred mumbling monsters – same spicy taste.

The king reviews his troops

Re-setting the charge-out rate: how much
is an hour worth now, to me, to you? Balancing
the surely now-countable ones remaining,
sand grains falling ever faster, against
some arbitrary need not mine: to spend
any one of these bits of grit, black industrial
diamonds, on someone else's routine commerce
is absurd. Like a cat in the sun, the afternoon
stretching out to tea-time, I'd rather doze –
fantasising about mice that might not have got away,
or plotting a Red Army march-past in miniature,
eyes left, tiny toothpick lances and pennants
a-flutter, the little horde saluting – my heart
not breaking, but melting, smilingly.

History

Dark node in time's flow, we know the moment,
though rock or divided stream depends. Back then
it wasn't even that clear; just the usual
muddle, fumbling urges in a tangle of guilt -
the historian's claim to fame, having the last word:
weaving decision across a warp of rational thought,
a florin change from half-a-crown and bob's your uncle.
Looking back to our own birth, back
past nine month's gestation, to an unthinkable
grappling: doubtful that the stars danced, just
genes doing the usual grunt-work: everyone
was younger then. To tell the tale, evidently,
involves survival too; but do tadpoles dream
of legs? The next big thing is anyone's guess.

24 August at Crecy again

Mount joy! mount joy! we cry in the field
until it is meaningless noise mingled
with the lost, our tattered roll-call, mangled
screams, listed by their filthy colours –
up hill all the way, limbs clutching mud,
blotted horror – honour – slaughter –
laughter. The victors are forgotten too,
technology wins: the pull of the next weapon
means to try again. Blind wheelwrights,
in thrall to function, their workings turned
to unplanned purposes, are dragged off
on the tumbrel by the barrel-load, up-
tumbled down fortune's own oubliette,
the enemy jeering like scythes in the corn.

September

A new month, arbitrarily: waxing gibbous,
pale beams splash my tv; starting again,
anyway: hope – hah – hoopla: balloons
too. My defences kick-in, knee jerk
wince once more into the breech, hopping
or groping along, greedy guts, shreds
of breakfast down my bulging stomach.
This seems right; maybe; my messy biology –
bilges – binges: eat and drink now
for tomorrow – I forget: it hurts? Twist:
stochastic Socratic solecism: not that being
twenty-one again would be any good –
awkward, too: one just wishes for younger
bits, and better use for them – busted.

Testing

Another odd effect, one would guess;
our world's ills caught in tattered nets,
tests of tests calibrate our awkward selves.
Crows, clapping blackly for better purchase,
pick liver as well as fruit. The hospital
buildings are architectural history
on a budget: in some areas, scuffed PVC
curtains divide long battered corridors;
dark runs on the floor evidence use,
perhaps by night, sometime in a former decade:
deserted now, just DIY posters in block caps.
Alas our crumbling; we are dwarfed
by the work of giants, forget how to connect
one foot fall after another, fear the telephone.

305

Detached pointers chunk like rounding cubes –
it's six o'clock in my head. Signifiers branch
leafless, mnemonic rag-tags blown across the lawn,
little flames, furious squirrels, o be a fine girl –
I have ransacked my mind, the litter of dreams
scattered tasseographically. This morning
the sun split through mist around the redwood –
an age ago. Maybe that is all there is;
a finger-bone necklace of sense from day
to day, prestidigitation, all together now
you little ship of fools. Hard to keep track:
aeromantic hope, shepherd's delight – leave it
all out on the field, there'll be rain later – and
a rainbow would be glorious – stellar decay.

Now pine and paine conspire
With angry Angells wreak and wrack to frame.
COUNTESS OF PEMBROKE *Psalme* lxxviii.

The angry angels have been out again,
yipping like cats or a baby's howl,
shading off into a seagull's raucous call -
the dog-fox trotting smugly down the street
knows not the sticky salt of doubt, hot
twisted sheets, tie-dye toll and spew
of wrack, sleep's mockery. Now propped
goth pale against the glass, Rest weary
watches the bus-stop sign scroll in fake
apology, 'see published timetable':
woe to rouse again the tempests
that should lie still, when pine and paine
do now conspire – perhaps the Countess
could take the discussion off-line, thanks.

Mining the kaleidoscope

Muttering to myself, I grumble down the street,
an ageing Malvolio: if neighbourliness
is a test, I've failed. Little ill-wishes crush
under my feet, red berries on the sidewalk;
illiterate conkers wrest a wry smile, bouncing
with brief glee. Can't you predict this –
gales at the equinox, sclerotic outlook,
never-ending change for the worse...?
Autumn's bounty is certainly seasonal –
the surprise is that one's still standing here
as the great waves tide in towards the year's end,
mounting greyer and colder under a now-iron sky –
if other people are hell, what infliction am I?
Irritatingly I repeat myself; good day to you too.