

## *Peace and Friendship*

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## Stroke

Prostrate I find you, blasted all but your cupped left hand,  
'Nil by mouth' and dumbstruck. Your distant gaze rolls over me  
and sits me down beside you—impossible to stand.

Felled, in lines of metal beds  
'Nil by mouth' and wordless  
other women lie at either hand,

two lines of limbless beds, disconnected each  
from each by a space wide as the reach of  
one, now strengthless, arm and hand.

Between two lines an aisle where white-capped nurses  
bustle by, checking charts, pumping arms,  
adjusting heads on pillows, drips on gibbet-stands.

I bow my head above your steel-barred bed. My mind  
is leaving you for dead, breathing in  
the odour of despair from disinfected hands.

But I've misjudged you, missed the gathering of your gaze.  
Slowly you turn your head, regard the woman at your left.  
You see in her your grief; you understand, you

lift your heavy arm and stretch it out.  
You reach it out across the void, you touch her,  
soothe her, urge her with your one soft-fingered hand

and suddenly all across the ward I see commotion,  
see prostrate women sit, see them reach out and clasp  
their neighbours' hands and shout and the nurses  
stop and stare and you

rise up and stand and offer me  
your large, your generous, your nurturing left hand.

## **Two-way Curve**

(for Michael)

Your beech wood stool  
stands on the landing.  
Its chamfered slats  
slope up and over, yet  
curve inward also to a  
comfortable scoop  
where I can sit, reach  
for the phone and speak  
with you. Up and over  
the curved distance  
we consider the world's  
ambivalences,  
aware that life's not shaped  
like this, your beech wood stool,  
where inclinations can  
oppose so pleasingly.

Rosalind Bleach Jan '16

## Exit

This I suppose is the end,  
the small change by the bed,  
the squeezed tube of toothpaste,  
letters and bills unopened  
by the hall window,  
your shoes with no feet,  
clothes full of your absence.  
You left in the middle of things.  
So now we collect up the fragments  
and sort them in piles, family photographs,  
school exercise books, silver cups.  
We carry you downstairs in black,  
shiny bags. You weren't here long.  
Now you are leaving again.  
In the bedroom a computer lies by the wall,  
There's a small bust of Homer,  
a framed map of Greece. Without you  
the pewter pots have difficulty breathing.  
I can hear your objects gasping like fish on the bank.  
We lay them in heaps - ties, books, cans of food,  
a monkey and bear in the kitchen  
and take out your files, pens, paperclips.  
Someone will do this for me. I load them  
into a box and carry them down.  
Your clock's stopped. Your kitchen utensils  
are no longer yours. The possessive adjectives  
are put in a sack. I exit carrying your life.

John Daniel

## **On refusing to buy an armistice day poppy**

I'm not buying a poppy this year  
I'm not going to remember The Dead

with their blood on my jacket.  
I've always bought one before

I've always gone along with the Cenotaph Show  
the Laying of the Wreaths, the Two Minute Silence

the Last Post, the Pity of War.  
I always thought some were worth fighting for

now I'm disobeying orders  
I'm not going Over the Top

I'm not offering to be shot in the head  
I'm staying down in my trench

with the rats and the dead  
I'm not buying a poppy this year.

John Daniel

## **Pissing Off Land's End**

When I was 16  
I was keen  
to bike with my friend  
to Land's End.  
The first morn  
we set off at dawn  
saddlebags, maps  
quick-release straps  
and quite soon  
by mid-afternoon  
reached Oxford (not far  
by car  
but by bike  
quite a hike)  
and visited Balliol, Oriel  
the Martyrs Memorial.  
The next day was much worse  
a 126-mile-burst  
to Weston-super-Mare.  
We thought we'd never get there.  
The third day  
we were tempted to stay  
and could hardly move -  
We had worn a deep groove  
in our arses  
not realising how far is  
one place from another  
nor how much bother  
Lynton and Lynmouth are to youth  
in the saddle  
We could only waddle  
up Countisbury Hill  
and had our fill  
of monsters like these  
on trembling knees  
but we kept our will  
hill after hill  
with the YHA  
past Minehead Bay  
until we reached Bude,  
where we got stewed  
on mead, no less  
and fell in the grass  
and slept the rest  
of that day away,  
then by the sea  
at Newquay  
and the last lap  
on our Batholomew map

through towns in a trance  
Hayle and Penzance  
until we passed  
the very last Last  
Post Office and cafe  
selling pixies and taffy  
and stood in the sun  
on the cliffs at Lands End  
and did what we'd promised  
took out our willies and pissed  
off the end of our country  
into the sea,  
Brian and me.

So that was that.

We picked up our bikes and sat  
in the saddles once more,  
no longer sore,  
but hardened and grown  
we set out for home,  
past Bodmin, Liskeard,  
Crewkerne and Chard  
and at Ottery St Mary  
where I,  
starry-eyed  
fell deeply in love  
with three girls at once  
but then they were gone  
so we pushed on alone  
across Salisbury Plain  
through headwinds and rain,  
Brian on his Dayton,  
me on my Norman,  
past Stonehenge and Andover,  
glad it was over -  
three weeks in the saddle  
with toe-clips and pedals,  
Windsor and Slough.  
We were nearly home now  
to comfortable beds and properly-cooked meals,  
We were fed up with staring at wheels  
spinning around. It was done.  
We had biked to Land's End.  
We had pissed in the sun.

John Daniel



## Two minutes silence

Two minutes silence to remember war,  
a dozen wreaths laid on a stone.  
We shouldn't really ask for more.

We've tidied up the mud and gore,  
the spattered brains and shattered bone.  
Two minutes is enough for war.

We've stood here many times before.  
Society allows us to atone.  
We shouldn't really ask for more.

Our cause was just, within the law.  
Our enemies have reaped what they have sown.  
This silence justifies our cause,

Afghanistan, Iraq, Hiroshima.  
The minutes soothe us as we stand alone.  
We couldn't really ask for more.

The Last Post sounds its sad encore  
(Remember to switch off your phone!)  
Two minutes silence at the nation's core.  
We really shouldn't ask for more.

John Daniel

## November 12th 1918

Well, it is over. They have shaken hands.  
Stilled are the guns. No longer need we fear  
Loss of husbands and sons in distant lands –  
That dread which grew with every passing year.

In Flanders, now, they whistle as they pack;  
Those boys we kept the home fires burning for.  
They will be home soon, wanting their jobs back,  
And life to be just as it was before.

How can that be now that we have the vote?  
We've shown that we can do the work of men.  
For years we kept Britannia afloat,  
But they'll be swift to seize the helm again.

If, wary of a new, more equal way  
They cling awhile to hierarchies of old,  
Bear no resentment: we will have our day!  
We owe them this, to put our dreams on hold:

For now keep mum, be generous and smile.  
No thoughtless word of ours should cause regret.  
They must believe their sacrifice worth-while.  
This land may not be fit for heroes yet,

But till it is we'll labour without cease.  
War is at bay: our challenge now is Peace.

Jill Elliott, 2018

## Peace and Friendship in the Playground

Little boy sits all alone, screwed up in the corner,  
Digging his knuckles into his eyes:  
'It's not fair! I said Pax – why didn't they stop?'  
Teacher on playground duty wearily bends down,  
Looks across at the big boys with their confident swaggers,  
Murmurs something about playing nicely and being friends.

Little girl hovers, hungry eyes fixed on the close-knit group  
With their careless laughter and secret grace:  
'Will you be my friend if I give you my chocolate drops?'  
Too late – the bell rings for classes to resume –  
'Did you say something? Sorry, we couldn't hear you' –  
As they rush indoors, untroubled by her gaze.

In a tidy world, boy and girl would now eye each other,  
Sense an ally, make a friendly move,  
Learn the comfortable lessons of peace and prosperity.  
But no – tomorrow's playtime will be just the same.  
For this is where it begins – the practice of war and peace,  
Rules of diplomacy, power and appeasement – and on and on and on.

Philippa Hardman

## Planting Roses

The garden of my childhood  
Lies between the ash tree and the Lombardy poplar,  
Bordered by neat blackcurrant bushes and raspberry canes,  
And down the end, a quartet of sturdy fruit trees:  
The Reverend Wilkes, James Grieve, Laxton's Superb,  
An oozy abundant Victoria plum.  
Around the pond, aubretia and alyssum tumble down the walls;  
And above them, the crisp buds of well-pruned hybrid teas  
With magical names – Ena Harkness, McGredy's Sunset.  
I know now these were practical plantings – disease-resistant,  
Free-flowering, 'rarely disappoints' – but still, for me,  
Rose trial grounds are gardens of wonder and promise,  
And roses' names breathe sweet notes of romance.

In the garden of my dreams,  
(Besides the vegetable plot, the fruit cage, the well-trained espaliers),  
I would plant a profusion of old roses.  
Fragrant *Zéphirine Drouhin* to dress the walls;  
Hedges of *Great Maiden's Blush* to enrich the paths;  
Beds of China roses and *rosa persica*, whispering travellers' tales;  
Or murmuring poetry: musk roses; eglantine; the damask rose.  
And where the garden meets the wild wood, I would plant  
Magnificent *Kiftsgate* to transform the trees.  
Dream gardens never disappoint.

The garden of my house has roses too.  
A dainty floribunda, climbing through the passion flower;  
A sturdy rambler, pinned along the fence;  
Roses planted for birthdays and anniversaries;  
Rescued roses, flowering out of place;  
My cherished *Rosa Mundi*, white and red.  
And one day, when I have time and space,  
I shall plant the best-loved rose of all,  
The creamy-petalled, sweetly scented Peace,  
To bloom all summer long.

Philippa Hardman

## Peace

Does peace have a place in the ceaseless  
Flexion of space and time that scattered  
Stars, colonised sea and mud, built  
Civilisations, in evolutionary indifference,  
The necessary doubt of great minds?

There is no peace in the captivity of birds,  
In rain that floods, in survival, the red  
Memory of war or the white emptiness  
Before the struggle of words. Peace is not  
Hope, and love never rests in the scars

On your face. What matters more, that we  
Fight for divinity, or find the divine in our  
Flaws? Is there peace in the absence of  
Need, or of will, in the bleeding heart  
Of the dove, the nucleus of infinity? Did

Peace part the still pause of reflection on  
The seventh day, bless our faltering way?

Leanne McClements

## Friendship

In the spring of our forgiveness I sheath hate,  
Garter trust, unbraid thorns, lift your winter  
Veil, shake blossom over mute vows; Expectant  
Boughs make rings from splintered cross,  
Murderous rope now fastens hands in hope.

Our kiss sweetly silences the damning record  
Of years of wrongs, a famine of kindness  
Become flowery. Shame falls from shoulders,  
A riven dress, blame burns in the grate; Your  
Silver dowry, overpaid and swollen with the

Fruit of suffering, returned. We mime our need,  
Press our bodies together in ancient dance;  
Song of sister, song of brother; Your greatest  
Gift ungiven. I'll wait until the end of time to  
Hear you name the seed, bequeath the word.

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Leanne McClements

## The Blue Dress

I didn't walk into your light wearing a blue dress  
we recall it differently, definitely vintage,  
never quite right. I needed mending,  
your needle held me in place for a while  
until I disappeared, unravelling, slowly, the  
blue dress you had imagined me in. The intimate  
raiments of the past, brilliance of photons firing  
beyond the static, the immense array of uncut  
cloth; we arrange them in our minds, memento  
mori daguerreotypes, painted-on colour,  
surrounded by flowers, the long exposure of  
memory, seen more sharply than the blurred  
minutiae of daily life. You are a stitch in my womb,  
moving inside me, so dear to me, roving the years  
with the thread between us, tangled up, the tow  
pulling us together again, your sword raised to  
slay my persecutors, the minotaur at my heart;  
my guard at the gate of my own darkness, waiting  
for me to step out of the tomb, my hidden shrine,  
dance with you through my wedding diadems  
set in the heavens, the bright gems of things we  
cannot undo; wearing the same face, brave  
smile, the distance between us irradiating each  
other entire, miraculously consummate  
in the blue dress, against the great night.

Leanne McClements



## Stewing apples

*(for M.)*

As cidery pulp threatened to engulf your lawn,  
you offered me windfalls,  
left a Sainsbury bag beside the door for me,  
texted to let me know.  
I found them when I returned home,  
shattered, in pieces  
at the end of a long day,  
took them in,  
later—so slowly—intermittently  
sorted the best ones into a basket,  
peeled, cut and boiled—  
the simplest act of cooking,  
familiar, but fallen out of use,  
my own apple tree gone—  
and began to have an inkling  
that memory might, sometimes, reside in the hands,  
and home—  
as certainty and safety  
now daily erode—  
might be not a place, but an act.  
Casting my mind back over our last conversation,  
it seems we might have touched on this.

Inge Milfull

*'...the Area Action Plan would remove the parcel of land bounded by the A40, the A34 embankment, Joe White's Lane and Godstow Road from the Green Belt, and allocate it for development as part of the Northern Gateway site ...'*

*(The Planning Inspectorate Report to Oxford City Council)*

*Joe White's house once stood beside the lane, which was the old green road between Wolvercote and Yarnton.*

*Although inspired by Joe White's Lane, this is not exactly a poem about Wolvercote, which has a proper common, and a community orchard. It's a poem for all villages where streets now bear the names of lost open spaces.*

### **Joe White's Lane**

We had a common. Now we've Common Close.

We had an orchard. Now we've Orchard Row.

Behind the office buildings in The Copse  
some ancient hazels still contrive to grow.

Third Acre Rise ousted the oxeye daisies  
where long ago we chose our May Day queen;  
no placid horse or hostile gander grazes

Fairacres or The Paddocks or Goose Green.

The track he lived beside still bears his name,  
the old way from the village. It can't win,  
right in the path of urban overspill.

I never knew him, or his house. But still

I think before the bulldozers move in

I'll take a final walk up Joe White's Lane.

Barbara Payne May 2018

## **Crab sandwiches**

A young couple are sitting side by side on the beach,

Gazing out to sea in the autumn sun.

The retreating sea is sighing over the pebbles.

Behind them, set against the cliff, is a café, Selling soft drinks, ice-creams and snack.

Speciality of the house: crab sandwiches.

You can have thick slices of fresh bread, brown or white,

With or without butter, stuffed with dressed crab.

They are nicely served on a plate with a little salad;

And a choice of dressings.

People in the know come to this beach

For the crab sandwiches.

A light breeze rustles in the young woman's pretty hair,

And a lanky curl flits across her cheek.

She stands up: evidently time for lunch.

But as she leans over, standing on one leg

To buckle her sandal.

Her wig falls off.

She remains awkwardly doubled up for several seconds,

Staring at the wig.

It lies at her feet, an alien, hairy creature

Washed up by the sea.

Picking up the wig, she raises her head, stands tall,

Smiling at her husband.

He looks up and smiles back,

Briefly, taking her hand.

Well practised, she puts on the wig, covering up

Her bald head.

Then she walks over to the café for their sandwiches.

Wig has grown to be like a member of the family  
Since she began the chemotherapy.  
They chose it together, in a larky way,  
To light up the dark place in their life.  
After lunch they are still to be found,  
Sitting side by side, looking out to sea.  
The horizon, hazy in the sun,  
Seems uncertain where to come to rest.  
They stay on, to cherish the moments,  
Uncertain of their future together.  
They do not speak, because there is no more to be said;  
They are just waiting for time to pass.  
Endlessly sighing, sighing, the little waves  
Wash to and for over the pebbles  
As the tide runs out.

Seamus Rainbird

## **Only connect**

“Remain connected” is the constant cry,  
Wherever you are, seek free Wi-Fi,  
The tablet and the mobile phone  
Ensure one need not be alone.  
While supping a Madeiran latte,  
Invite the whole world to the party!  
Together quaff the classless bean,  
Unite the global social scene.  
Send out a narcissistic selfie,  
To keep one’s little ego healthy,  
As, unsolicited, the texts display,  
Answer them! Eat up the day!  
Decline to marry pen to paper  
Foreswear that crude outmoded caper.  
Avoid the human tender trap,  
Send only electronic pap.  
But would you closer be to girl or swain?  
Then well worthwhile to think again.  
Perhaps it really would be better  
To hold a hand or write a letter?  
In thrall to gadgets electronic,  
No wonder some get catatonic.  
The endless loops of information  
Would drive a saint to desperation!  
Why must we all connected be?  
It sounds like virtual slavery!  
So think again, it’s not too late:  
Of what damned use is a cyber mate?

Seamus Rainbird

## If

(For Joe, with thanks and apologies to Rudyard Kipling)

If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are shaking theirs and wondering what to do,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you've  
Really got a chance of getting through;  
If you can wait and just sit through the waiting,  
Or being fussed about, don't fuss yourself,  
Or being warned, don't give in to the warnings  
And while you don't look good, still trust yourself:

If you can keep your character in action  
While all the time you're feeling like a ghost;  
If you can take your place on stage as normal  
As any sentry steps up to his post  
If you can bear to speak the lines you've spoken  
The previous three nights to great acclaim  
When all inside you feel that something's broken,  
And rant and rave in temper just the same;

If you can make your entrances on cue,  
While in between you're throwing up off stage;  
And while you're on, lose nothing of the action  
And never drop a beat of pain or rage;  
If you can force your arms and legs to function  
When all the strength in both is nearly gone,  
And still go on when there is nothing in you  
Except the will which says to you: 'Go on!'

If you can talk in character with feeling  
And keep on knocking back the apple juice;  
And take your bow although your head is reeling  
And get right to the end without excuse  
If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of all you are,  
Yours is the play and everything that's in it,  
And—which is more—you'll be a bloody star!

Gillian Somerscales

## Now is all I have

Peace doesn't have to be static and silent  
Peace can be out in the storm  
Peace can be wind, can be earthquake and fire  
Breaking through dangerous calm—

Disrupting the sly rising panic  
That whispers of passage of years  
That pins my ears back to the slow ticking clock  
That pricks me to desperate tears.

Peace can sing out through the shoulds and the musts  
Peace tells me more than my fear—  
That I don't have to run to keep up with the self  
That turns back to laugh at me here

Where I haven't achieved, I haven't performed;  
Where nothing is good enough, big enough, done;  
Where nothing is finished, no, started, no, planned;  
Where nothing is me, and I, none—

Where all that I could sneers at all that I haven't  
And all those lives harder than mine, better lived,  
Line up to present their silent reproaches  
Of all I have failed, or not tried, to give—

Where I know there is no one to blame but myself,  
No scapegoat in nature or fate;  
Only danger that nothing will turn into nothing  
And then into only—too late.

But it isn't too late, now is never too late  
And this now—this is all that I have;  
Now will never abandon me, will never cease;  
And in now, only now, is my peace.

Gillian Somerscales June 2018

## **To a friend in trouble**

I watched you as you walked away tonight  
And though you went so quietly you tore  
a part of me away that went with you.

The heart bleeds inwards, seeping silently  
from hidden wounds unhealing, deep and raw—  
made by a blade I never saw slice through you  
borne in a pain I cannot feel for you,  
grieved in private tongues I cannot speak.

You keep your courage stored far out of sight,  
under disguise of everyday control, and yet  
I know you bleed. I want to staunch the flow  
but cannot reach it, cannot find a way  
to pass that barrier that keeps you whole  
and me outside; and so I touch your skin,  
hoping some surface warmth  
will find its way into your damaged soul.

You go so quietly  
And I worry for you.

Gillian Somerscales *Revised June 2018*



## Changing shoes

Our mothers matched us  
at six  
at the corner shop

we were suitable girls  
to eat sponge cake  
ride bicycles

and when we met again  
it all came back  
the years

the stories  
laid back to back like sardines  
between bus stops

my shoes were red  
like strawberries squashed  
at the end of summer

hers were blue-black  
two large leeches  
mis-shapen from over-lunching

hers pinched  
mine sprawled  
so we swapped shoes

for a long slice of road  
we spread toes  
in new moulds

and I wore her chemist shop  
two brothers, Dutchman,  
caves and singing lessons

and she wore my lilac tree  
goatskin drum calypso singer  
and broken engagements

Jane Spiro

## Kindness

In the narrow lane between beach and road  
a man is lying propped up against the wall,  
groaning,

and in the dark two others bend over,  
cradling his shoulders, murmuring  
*viens viens*

as he flops forward in their arms,  
a grounded fish, *je ne marche pas*  
he says, *I can't walk.*

They enfold him, slung like a limp catch  
between their shoulders, whispering  
*doucement doucement,*

walking him back to the patch of land  
where he beaches, waiting for daylight  
to dry him.

Jane Spiro

## **Peace Oak**

*planted and carved 1919*

The tree has spread strong arms since its sapling start  
when you dug the tines into the earth,  
feeling it kinder by far than that other earth.

Did you feel anger at its indifference  
as you opened the earth, its mechanism  
of worms, the tunnels and paths of its inner life,

or did the earth even then let you in  
to its chance of peace, receiving the roots  
as you laid them gently into ground,

their burial mound a denial of death.  
Did you wish the century would give  
what it had taken away: time

for growing deeper into earth  
higher, higher into sky?

Jane Spiro

## **Roman wash-house, Cefalu, Sicily**

They wash feet here  
down in the damp stone below the street  
where the water runs along sluices  
unsettling the dust from crusty pores,  
cool runnels, unstoppable.

We do not know who we are meant to be  
but our feet do, the water does –  
Greek, Roman, Arab, Turkish, Portuguese –  
a thousand years of washing,  
unwrapping the layers of city cloy,  
the colours of skin, joining us all  
in its rush back to earth.

Jane Spiro