

Stories, Myths and Legends

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Early Pruning

Vigorous, prolific, this young Pippin,
reaching out strong stems from clustered limbs,
each with its clutch of brown-tipped buds,
probing, as I grasp at
jointed twigs and elbow in between.

I have instructions:

Keep this tree in trim.

Remove

all uprights, shooting straight from horizontal boughs.

Remove

all crossovers, rubbing on their peers;

Remove

all inward-turning twigs and angled

ones that form in awkward shapes;

Remove

all high-tops, grown beyond our reach for picking.

And so, obediently, I take my double blades
and bite into young wood. Although
I see green sap is rising for the Spring
I cut away, to rein it in, this Pippin.

But near the trunk I stop.
Here, in close, I find
a stem that's curling in and twisting,
all bravado, out again and up.
Instead of cutting it I
touch its cream-grey skin
and breathe to it: Enjoy
your waywardness.
In summer I'll return one day
and find your fruit and taste the wild
sweetness at its core.

Rosalind Bleach, Feb 2017

At the Lakes of the Clouds refuge, Appalachia

All day the freezing cloud lay thick against
the mountain, blindfolding the dew-lakes,
stifling the sky.

Yet still the people came:

knots of hunchbacked silhouettes, breasted the rise,
leading halting children by the hand.
From North and South and East they'd come:
scaled Tuckerman's ravine or Odell's cliff
or toiled the wind-scoured ridge from Madison

Now they shouldered through the bothy doors,
hair slicked black against their brows,
fingers white with cold.
And all were-- huddled on long benches--
wrapped in wide, rough rugs and
offered pungent soup in wooden bowls.

They told of hand holds slipping on wet rock;
of boulder falls and vertigo; and always of the
blind, white dark engulfing them.

And then the word went out—
a whisper first and then a call--announcing
that the cloud had cleared.

And all the people rose from where they sat
And thronged out th`rough the open doors,
towards the lakes revealed ahead of them,
and turned their faces up, and saw
the rounded sky grown rich with stars.

Rosalind Bleach

With the shaman at the turning of the year

Bring two offerings, they'd said: a stick
for future time and one for time now past.
So, from our ash tree's crown I've snapped two twigs.
The past's is as it was, but I've bound fast
my future stick with cut, red paper flowers
standing proud along a plaited thread.
The guests group silent round the pit of fire
as each casts time-past to its crimson heart.
I hear him chanting...*aho aho aho...*
My future stick is balanced on the rim
...hey da dit da nawe nawe ho...
soon interlaced with others' as they come
to touch, to scorch my scarlet paper blooms
while flame-flowers dance with each—and then consume.

[A shaman chant for the calling up of positive spirits]

Hey da dit dit nawe aho aho
Hey da dit dit nawe aho aho
Hey da nawe nawe ho
Hey da nawe nawe ho
Hey da dit dit nawe aho aho
Aho, Aho, Aho!]

Rosalind Bleach

May Day, 1972

How gold it was, the first wash of sky
as voices floated from the tower
as you spun the umbrella the tourists loved,
on every spike a paper flower.

How cold it was at the day's mid-point
when tiredness kicked in like a mule
when you stood at work and the hours stretched
as sea in fog's breath, tense and dull.

How rich and dark was the crumb of cake
which came from the tin of the dancing men
in absurd white clothes: for luck, new life.
How nothing was the same again.

Alison Brackenbury
From 'Then', published by Carcanet Press, 2013

Levellers' Day

The Levellers came to Burford
They wanted land and votes.
They clattered down the small streets
With fresh mud on their coats.

Only one war was over.
They swept past Cromwell's men.
"We should have fought them by the stream."
Luck does not come again.

They fell into the inn's soft beds
As dead men sink through earth.
Then Cromwell came, who did not sleep,
Who marched them to the church.

They huddled. From the pulpit
Their General told them why
They would be shipped to Ireland
And which of them must die.

Four men stood in the churchyard,
In first sharp scent of may
One screamed out like a child,
Then tried to run away.

One called the name of Liberty
Who waits, who never runs.
One lifted up his face and turned
In silence to the guns.

The last, who had grown cunning
Recanted and was spared
To babble from the pulpit
Of how the rest had erred.

Three men sprawled in a churchyard.
Now, in their name, we would
Sing sad songs, then chew soya.
The Levellers tasted blood

But there is honour in this,
The slow song in the throat.
Three men lie in the churchyard
But we drive home to vote.

Alison Brackenbury

From 'Singing in the Dark', published by Carcanet Press. 2008.

Black Dog

Cold broods over the house, like a white stare.
Across the lamps' light, snow sprays feathers – stars –
You grind your blue shoes in my lap
All your new books are read.

But there are stories
Which drift, before we sleep, as far away
As lonely barns, from which the crumbled straw
Spills snow on frozen ground. Here is a story
Without a start or end, from the flat land
From which I came.

Now, listen – You love dogs
The lumbering St Bernard, prancing Cairn –
A man is walking up a clouded lane
Head hot with drink; the night. What makes him turn?
High as the hedge, it stands. It watches him.
Its eyes are vast as stars.

On the low road
Skimming the dips, the new, fast cycle runs.
Why does the rider brake? He hears its breath, behind,
He races on; the blurring wheels gleam.
Harshly it blows, yet it lopes after him
Past every elm and gate, mile after mile.

Then, when he rushes in, no longer hot
With clear, scared eyes, they listen; then they nod.
Almost amused, they tell him, what he saw
Was the Black Dog.

It is seen everywhere:
But where I started, grew the calm idea
That under berried hedges, padding dark
It come to keep you safe: to friend the night.

So much quick time lies wasted. So much fear –
Of wind, that cuts you, that could light you through,
Of quiet spiders spinning in the sun,
Of dark. There as he looked (though it was gone)
Over the plaited hawthorn reared the moon,
Lifted, through threads of cloud, a beating light.

You wriggle to the floor. Older than you
Stories do not stay still. They melt, like snow,
Trickle through books, to shine along my shelf.
In times of thaw, wandering inside or out,
You may meet blacker dogs inside yourself.

Alison Brackenbury

Published in 'Christmas Roses', originally published by Carcanet Press in 1988.

The Two

do not fear
the golden wings

sun lit their tips
before they fell

all lips meet the shadowed sea,
love, pity no such ends.

your pity fits the careful man
who joined soft wax with feathers well

who fell alone: on a grey shore:
on whom all love depends.

Alison Brackenbury

From 'Selected Poems', originally published by Carcanet Press in 1991.

More poems, and details of all her books can be found on Alison's website
www.alisonbrackenbury.co.uk

She is on Facebook as Alison Brackenbury, Instagram as alisonbrackenbury2, and on Twitter as
@ABRACKENBURY (because she left the shift key down by mistake...)

Mushrooms

“As a boy Lenin was known chiefly for gathering mushrooms.”

Bronze, pink, snow-white
butter-mushrooms, and birch
with small caps like chocolates,
and then the death of his father
who liked being called Your Excellency
and the brother he loved hanged
and he tried as a lawyer
and they put him in prison
where he wrote between letters
in library books using milk
from inkpots made out of bread
“Today I have eaten six ink-pots “
and was exiled to Shushu, Siberia
where snow buried the windows
and he drove in a sledge
piled with books
along snow-covered rivers
and married Krupskaya and came
to the British Museum
and took young Trotsky about:
“Their Tower – the Rich, not the English”
and attended the first of his 300 conferences
and 2000 meetings
and went fishing with Gorky
and gave 45 lectures on land
and settled in Cracow
and settled in Switzerland
and arrived on that train
handing out cards to the Bolsheviks
so they didn’t all go to the toilet
at once
and arrived at the Finland Station
with the bands and the spotlights
and no sleep for a week,
and fled from Kerensky
watching the windows
changing his name and his wigs
putting on workingman’s clothes
inventing new passports
running down shadowy roads
jumping off trains

hiding in lofts
working three weeks in a haystack
and then it all happening nearly without him
hurrying over the bridge
but arriving in time
and scrapping the War and the Whites
the palaces, law and the generals
then the nights without sleep
the retreating from Poland
the bullet lodged in his shoulder
shifting his heart,
the first stroke
the words and the muscles seized tight
but somehow warning the world,
and Stalin
then at last with his doctor,
reaching back through it all
to dart and collect up the mushrooms
he could still see quicker than anyone
under the birches,
where the father ran with the boys
searching the grass
for small caps like chocolates.

John Daniel

Marie Celeste

At 10 it sailed into my consciousness
and docked there.
I was adrift on the dining-room carpet,

exploring [Ships of the World](#).
My parents were leading their meaningless,
landlocked lives.

I was chained to their meal-times
when it hove into view on the cover,
immaculate, empty, abandoned.

What had happened?
Were they murdered by the creak on the stairs?
Lured to their depths by mermaids and sex?

There was only the silent ship, unmanned,
plunging into the future, all sails set,
finger pressed to its lips.

John Daniel

Pissing Off Land's End

When I was 16
I was keen
to bike with my friend
to Lands 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 Lands End.
We had pissed in the sun.

John Daniel

In Story-land

This is a very crowded place.

The city is awash with overflowing Art –

Gods and cherubs spill in mythic profusion from rococo ceilings;

Luminous saints and angels shed their legends in colours on chapel floors;

Emperors sprout up from pillars; abstractions pose perilously on parapets –

Everywhere you look, stories stare back at you.

It's no good thinking you can escape into Nature –

Nature is inhabited; personified; historiated – it's worst of all.

Do you see a swan in majestic flight? Or is it Jove pursuing Leda?

Is that a laurel, trembling in the wind? Or is it Daphne fleeing Apollo?

Can the rose bloom red, and never speak of Rabbie's love?

Why, every dancing daffodil tells of William's solitude.

Alice has moored her golden boat in summer afternoons;

The Snow Queen spreads her mantle over wintry fields;

Each dawn will break as Eden's glimmering morning;

Each midnight mark the dreadful sway of weird hag-sisters.

Our times and seasons are appropriated –

Landscapes and language alike, sated with stories.

Can the night be reclaimed? The city emptied?

Can we know our own minds not as pre-occupied spaces?

Is there ever an end to the telling of stories?

What would we say?

Phillipa Hardman

The Legend of Fair Rosamund. (Serious version)

“The River rolls my bones, scattered like Abbey stones,
My shade floats in the Meadow’s gloom
Searching for my long lost tomb.”

Henry of England, out hunting, caught Me.
My fate was sealed with a look of such power.
We lay down in Woodstock in Rosamund’s Bower.
I was Rose of the World, his loveliest flower.
Queen Eleanor’s anger was great as the sea.
“I am Queen of your Empire. You will not betray me.
Like poison or knives, You have ruined our lives”
To me she said:
“You are dead”.

The King, lavished gold, on my tomb, at Godstow
“It will be told how I loved, while the rivers flow.”
But when Henry was gone, Bishop Hugh said “No more!”
Move that tomb of Rose Clifford, King Henry’s late whore.
No room for such love in God’s holy place.
To honour Rosamund Clifford is such a disgrace.

And then the years rolled and the Abbey was shattered.
“Who cares for nuns’ graves? Like the rest, I was scattered.

The river rolls my bones, deep in clay, like stones.

My shade floats on the River's face
Remembering, a King's embrace.
At evening, you may hear a sigh
As I wander, as I cry."

Lorna Logan

The Legend of Fair Rosamund. (The Condensed version)

"Rosamund the Fair
has lovely hair"
Said Henry the Second.
He winked and he beckoned.
She was all that he reckoned.
"It ain't really a sin
If your lover is da king"
Said the Nuns at Godstow
"Royal dosh helps us all grow."
The Queen said "I'll not share
However much she's fair."
So it's poison or a knife.
Take Rosamund's life.

"Build a fabulous tomb"
Said King Henry in gloom.
Godstow cut quite a dash
Tourists came with their cash.
But Hugh the Bishop said NOOOO!

This is the tomb of a HOOOOE!

So it all had to go.

Now no one knows where

Are the bones or the hair

Of Rosamund the Fair.

Lorna Logan

Cradle

It felt right to hold you in the hollow

between my shrinking belly

swelling breasts

the waves of my protean body

which carried you over the fetch

wellspring of infancy

blowing a benediction of stars across

the cutting prow of your night

billowing out sails, nine moons

sealing your success

sinking into uterine waters

tiny lunulae, clinched nails of your lapstrake

delivered you safely into my embrace.

Spindle arms, harbour

heartsounds, gentle rise and fall

turning dial of our celestial conjunction

playing lullabies at measured pitch

repairing the severed mooring
twine, keeping legion time on our love
no bough above, no crow, no apples ripe
no birch-bark rocking and downward flight
no crib, no bassinet better than this
small press of flesh, no light can get through
sleeping now, the distant call of
soughing wind and restless crests
silenced by the slow ticking of my chest.

I'll weave you a crown of the greenest leaves
rive broad bones from sacrificial limbs
fill vessels staunch with sapwood
blood, your emersion from our sweet
phytotelma a bright annulus streaming
little fugitive, launching on the flow.
I will not grieve, even when you flounder;
the hand that held your first grip
balanced you expertly
on my hip will save you, stow you
shore you up on the strand;
I am your nurse, your pillow, your hearse
your grave;
I am your cradle.

Leanne McClements

Voicing the Organ

The days are turning
sun-beamed bridges fade as
Aeolian winter arrives
sweeping away our vanities
the dispossessed creep across continents, voicelessly
staining the seas
wolves, powerful as Fenrir, rise up
famished, bellowing false prophecies
the bitter wind brings the first word
hangs it on the ribs of well-seasoned trees
as paper leaves written with childish prayers
cling sparsely to twigs arranged in a darkly glazed jug
placed on the stone sill of a north aisle leadlight

They're voicing the organ today
ready for Advent carols, the Builder
laboured a long cycle over
resurrected oak, spruce, walnut
metals from true lodes piping the right tones
tin-rich and lustrous at the façade
the carved screen reflects the cinquefoil
light of the sea-shimmering Piper window
waving palms crossed
and beyond
scarlet pierces darkly
glossy shrubs, our own wolves

weave at the hollow flank as
cold rain falls from muted skies

emerging from dying thickets to
leap the bourn
the wind whoops and calls
discordant sounds gathering, pierced with the Voicer's 'Yup!'
at the console, while
the Builder tunes each pipe to perfection.

the organ breathes in,
swelling its chests to ranks
of pipes like ribs
languid mouths
brass tongues
speaking together, resultant
voices curving into the peaks on smooth waves
celestial sound colours, flooding the crossed
rafters with a deep, rich brightness
Pentecostal fires
inspiring the church to song.

The seasons are turning, purpureal
holy days and floods
we labour long hours over our
arks, while the organ's words
dwell in us richly
or perish at the heart

Leanne McClements

The Collector

Where is your mother
she's lost in the forest
abandoned to the slow
disintegration of her life,
the huntsman picking over
the debris like bones

Where is her all-good,
all-giving love, you gathered
it like flowers, as you collected
your shells, your stones, your
imperfect pine cones
feathers with broken vanes
sword-sticks, daisies and
dandelions, innocent thief
curator of flawed memories
disingenuous black-and-white
photographs, stories of your
pre-oedipal years
well-intentioned lies
painful injustices, cataloguing,
sorting them into everlasting rooms

Nature is not a selfish giant

keeping to herself all the magical
things which give her power

I make you good, I make you bad
I alone make you happy
so desperately sad, inhumanly
destructive behind my tears
a witch with candy
turning against you when you
defy me, rejecting you
holding you tight
so tight, too tight

Loving you is a patient observation
watching your gradual
metamorphoses, my little hare
my brave fox, my wild wolf
strong bear, you wear them like
skins, stamping and hollering until
they become you, until one day
a vengeful lion will scare me into
releasing you, to rescue her

when you will throw down your shell
behind you, creating a fast-flowing
river I cannot cross, your stone
a mountain I cannot climb, your

pine cone, an impenetrable forest
your feather, when you will transform
into a magnificent bird, soaring beyond
the places I had hoped for you

into a world colourful and irregular
charming
eternally new
your sword-stick by your side
and when the blade reflects
my sickness in your absence
may you return bearing
daisies, dandelions, all manner of
blooms to assuage my grief

Leanne McClements

===
Half-Read
===

The book was half-finished when you said *it* was over,
half-read by your bedside,
with a page halfway through
marked with a love-letter or a railway ticket.

It was about stories: how stories are made and told,
about how stories echo and echo and repeat
It was about old stories, of truth and beginnings
told and retold until pattern and legend blur.

It was about places. We can climb down the
burrowed mines where the poet imagined his underworld
or, burdened, cross the ancient by-roads,
our boots half-red with Devon earth.

Borrowed and half-read: The Mighty Dead.
Sirens sing across the park, and the river,
Grey as Athena's eye, flows down through the dusk
to a wine-dark estuary. We walk by ourselves.

And months after, I reach a copy from a high shelf
In the basement of a London bookshop:
See someone else's biro-ed kisses
someone else's birthday wishes.

And years from now, when we turn back our pages
We'll find a place halfway through, marked
With a love-letter or a railway ticket
And read a half-story of truth and beginnings

Jack Pritchard

Geriatric Hiccup

Lacking direction at seventy one,
I ask myself: 'Have you yet had your full quota of fun?
Are you past daring to sever the traces,
Discard the disguises and wear other faces?
Dare you show a new visage of stunning vacuity,
Lechery, guile or engaging fatuity?
Must you always be sensible, sober of mien?
Is it not time the true sinner was seen?

So I give up the franchise, cease casting my vote,
Cancel The Guardian, stop milking the goat,
Make a new will, leave nothing to chance,
Go clubbing on Sundays, am Lord of the Dance,
Camp wild in the Outback with never a tent,
Swim nude in the river – and that during Lent,
Send vacuous messages on my cell phone,
Wear pins in my nipples to lower the tone.
Take off the posh glasses which help me to see,
And put on black shades in an optical spree,
Imbibe Coca-Cola, ingest rich milk-shakes,
Eat frozen Mars bars and sticky cream cakes,
Quaff, on a Saturday, beer by the quart,
And belch as a consequence more than I ought,
Flatten my vowels, and as Estuary Man
Glottal my stops Just as hard as I can,
I'm loutish and laddish and feckless and fey
And macho and mindless the hooligan way.
My Ego was Alter for fully one year
Before I caught on: age is nothing to fear!
That New Man was ghastly, his friends were appalled
That lifestyle was comic, whatever it's called:

'Twas giddy, dyspeptic, ridiculous, ghoulish,
Frenetic and faithless, ineffably foolish.
Weeping and wimpish when not on display,
That ageing post-modern – that dog's had his day!
He's now a bit older and calm and serene;
Those follies have vanished, might never have been!
That late adolescence, that bogus esprit
May suit other oldies, but didn't suit me.
He pauses, remembers and quietly ponders
Then counts all his blessings and all the world's wonders.

Seamus Rainbird

Senior Citizen's Arduous Ride in Stormy Spring Weather

Canal towpath, Oxford, north pedalling.
Headwind blowing, clouds scudding,
Sleet stinging, face freezing,
Bike bumping, paddles splashing, mud squelching;
Eyes watering, fingers dying, nose running;
Legs thrusting, heart pumping, back aching.
Teeth gritting, ears popping, breath panting;
Strength failing, will weakening;
Bike sliding, bike stopping.
Morale sinking, battle losing.
Plough pub; exit looming!
Torture ceasing! Journey ending.
Homecoming!
Kettle boiling, tea making, biscuit eating.
Rider smiling, rider resting,
Self admiring.
Man reflecting: man ageing,
Why bus spurning, self punishing?
What point proving?
Canal towpath, Oxford: self fool-making.

Seamus Rainbird

Academic Distinction

He had no desire to offend her,
He had no intention to vex,
But he didn't know how to use gender
And he didn't know when to use sex.
So he opened his heart to his tutor
Who opened his mind to his plight
And advised that the word that would suit her
Should be quietly whispered at night.
But the girl was both coy and contrary,
And determined to frustrate her swain.
She just smiled and said: 'Sex is so scary;
Can we have gender again?'

Seamus Rainbird

Paddle Your Own Canoes, Girls

Source the river in oriental waters, there,
where your three precious lives began.
Little girls now, all three of you are bobbing along the same river.
Day by day, it seeks the sea, bearing frail craft
making the same hazardous journey.
Respect the river, steer it with care, steer by the stars
of your Oxford childhood.
The safari to the sea is yours to enjoy.
And girls: paddle your own canoes!
Never tamed, the river hurries on, following the waters.
You will find it troubled by surging currents and hidden streams, making
eddies of love and loss and longing.
Swift and confused, on it flows, heedless of what it carries,

seeking only to reach the sea. There the river disappears, swallowed up by the sea, but always part of the sea.

Boundless, difficult to know, the sea threatens all sailors
with ancient perils, presents tantalizing delights.

It has many faces: shimmering serenely in the sun; in storms writhing like a wild beast. It makes quiet bays where driftwood rests,
where shallow pools form, then vanish.

The sea's moonstruck tides may lead you on dizzy diversions,
far away from where you want to go. But far above,
your childhood stars will show you where you are
and where you should be.

They will tell you how you became the people you are becoming,
as the river meets the sea.

Then you will begin to understand the richness of the source,
the fascination of the river journey and how to steer
through the deeps and shallows of the sea.

Slowly, each in your own way, you will learn more about the sea
and yourself.

Seamus Rainbird

The myth of the single mother

Single mother, welfare scrounger—

Croydon facelift, mobile phone;

Pregnancy the price of housing

Lowering the village tone.

Single mother, Spitfire widow—

Standing in the ration queue;

Brave survivor, living just

To bring their father's children through.

Single mother, proudly solo—

Never mortgaged to a man;

One to one in bond with baby

Test-tube dad an also-ran.

Hapless, tragic, pioneer:

A simple tale will always win

against a complex truth; and so

We make our myths and lie in them.

Gillian Somerscales

June 2017

Ancient and Modern

Naked muscle, slicked in oil and sweat
Brutality and grace in every clasp
Beauty with cruelty in these games – no games –
Tangled in paradox like a wrestler's grasp

Fighting muscle, bred and honed for conquest
On display to generals and kings
The spectacle a market demonstration of
The next war's victors, waiting in the wings.

Faster! Higher! Stronger! shriek the billboards –
See the tension mount, the records fall;
Showbusiness at speed is what we're offered:
The princess shall wear lycra to the ball.

Welcomed through McDonald's golden arches
As you slake your thirst for glory with a Coke
And take your allocated seat at ringside
You may wonder: is this tragedy or joke?

The PR men have long replaced the generals
The battle now at hand's a bidding war
The heroes seeking medals no more fear for very life
But may yet wonder what they're fighting for.

*Gillian Somerscales
June 2012*

A49: a poem for my sister

Musing my way up the A49
On a mission of mercy to a sister of mine
The years like the miles roll away down the road
And I know that I'm going to pay what I've owed
For a long time.

Wrong turnings, diversions, alternative routes
Propelled us apart as we each plucked the fruits

Of our distancing lives from the trees as we passed,
Two mapless explorers, moving too fast
For a long time.

Occasionally meeting at crossroads, we'd wave—
Intimate strangers from cradle to grave;
Passengers glancing from parallel trains:
Each thinks they recognize, suddenly cranes
A neck to look back.

Too long and too far we drifted apart
Neglecting the signposts sunk deep in the heart;
No longer a question of just time and place
Emotional oceans had spread in the space
Over long time.

Then came the call, without warning, at night:
A match struck in darkness, a house set alight;
A stranger in madness, or malice, or play
Entered her home as she slept far away
And stole it with fire.

Not much time to think, not much time to pack;
A car full of petrol, a bag in the back:
Worcester to Leominster, Ludlow to Chirk—
It all flows so easily; why did I shirk
This road for so long?

A day spent in travel, a day spent in thought
Why was this journey so dearly bought?
For now she's in trouble, and where should I be
But closing the distance between her and me—
It's time.

Gillian Somerscales
22 June 2015

Arson

Was it madness or malice?
Somebody lit the match
Somebody flicked the lighter

Saw the first spark catch –

Saw the flame slip sideways and up
Eating from paper through curtain to floor
Setting a life ablaze
Killing a home with a roar.

Were you afraid of what you'd done
With a giggle, a sneer or a dare?
Did you feel the blaze on your back
As you ran from the crack and flare?

And how do you feel now, far away
Hiding your knowledge and shame
Pretending you never cared, never knew
What it meant to destroy with a flame

Gillian Somerscales

March 2017

Alight here for Victoria: an underground fantasy

Poor Alice cannot see her way ahead
Along these warm and windy tunnellings;
She pauses, steps aside, inhales, looks back, and then—
Plunges further into dust and dark.

Who is she, running quick of foot and breath
Alongside those who ride this labyrinth,
Behind the sway and rattle of the ever-passing trains,
Ahead of every quick electric spark?

Do you hear her feet's uneven pattering
In echo ricochet and back again?
Her exhalation in the sigh and seal of closing doors,
Her thin metallic scream scrape through the air?

What drives her on in panic so to flee,
or calls her through the pulsing space ahead?
Does she know the step behind her, hear a voice familiar
around above below I know you're there—

Or is she chasing safety as it slips around the bend
Pursuing something lost, or not yet known? Or is it
strangers of the mind who tread so softly in her skull
That though she run for ever they will never fade?

Is light behind the goad that sends her on,
Into the darkness past her vertigo?
Would light ahead be rescue or the blinding final end?
Will she run to open arms or open blade?

A voice, in welcome or admonishment:
Alight here for Victoria! Change for Bank!
Which way, said Alice? In the empty dark there are no signs.
Mind the gap between the words and the meaning.

Gillian Somerscales

not a poem

I promised you
there would be
no more poems
about you,

those silly shapes
made by grown-ups,
for no good reason
at all.

They are not transformers,
like your metal cars –
they don't sing
like Michael Jackson,

they would not win
a talent competition,
you can't fly them
like a Chinese kite,

ride them like a dodgem car,
they don't taste like
chocolate twizzlers, or do
magic tricks with rabbits

and paper bags. The words
do not stick on the ceiling
or make rude noises
like fart balloons.

They have, quite simply,
no point at all. So this
is not a poem, and
just as I promised, this

is not about you at all.

Jane Spiro

Bastille day

The Moroccan family restaurant
has spread its tables across the street
under the awnings, on towards
the promenade, the sea.

The concierge in her batik dress
sticks post-it numbers onto tablecloths,
arranges napkins in fans on tables
still calm, in control

but the guests are unstoppable, they flock in
like starlings migrating to Africa, cloning
tables into the far horizon. Harassed brothers
in white aprons appear from the doorway,

the father who never intended to join in, sweating
under his trays, the ten-year old daughter
with chubby knees running between the rows
holding wine glasses by the stem

and then, resentfully plucked from her planet,
the teenage daughter in tight white jeans,
teetering on heels, balancing tagines
on her elbows, they weave in and out

the family with all its branches blossoming
and the eaters, tearing at the menus,
chattering, complaining, spilling wine
until, at last, when the hour has come,

the mama appears, fierce as a mantis
in black lace juggling her cous cous
as the dark spills over the ocean and Bastille day
bursts against the pitch screen of sky.

Jane Spiro

Cleaning the wall

The old lady in the green dress
wants to sit on the promenade wall.

The old man who walks by her side
takes out a paper tissue

folds it very small
and with it he wipes the surface,

scrubs it so the dust
feathers up from the stone,

the dead cells of children's sandals
specks of sand and ice cream cones

pollen dropped from ancient hibiscus
the staining stamens of lillies

the milky spit of seagulls,
dust feathering down

from the Moors' white tower.
When the old man

has cleaned the wall
the old lady sits down.

He stands beside her,
holding her stick, he

*who would not let the winds of heaven
visit her face too roughly*

and she, in the chariot of burnished gold
that is his heart.

with thanks to *Hamlet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*
Jane Spiro

Seaside signs

Cornish coastal path

There will be no feeding of seagulls,
making of picnic noises, eating of ice cream
by children, dogs, or other.

There must be no leaving of litter,
lipstick, lovenests, shells, shingle. Dunes
must be collected before departure.
This water is not for drinking, swimming,
activity of fish that may cause offence.

If in distress contact the lighthouse headquarters
in Slough, the freefone on the Devon freeway
junction 18, the lifeguard centre in Woking,
the rubber ring heart fibulator
at the client care centre in Caerphilly.

This Tor was donated by
this cliff was bought by
this wind, this air, this cloud,
this cowslip, this cow
was the generous gift of
the Duke, Earl, Prince, Lady,
to the people of Cornwall.

Only enter sandcastles with hard hats.
The sea is closed
for vital repairs.

Jane Spiro

Gillian Somerscales
25 June 2013, revised November 2015

