

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.

Rosalind Bleach 2017/18

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 oozily 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.

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