

Black Eyed Peace



David Atkinson

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for Andrea, Jack and Lucie

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Printing by
Peninsula Print & Design

I'm not lost
for I know where I am.
But however,
where I am
may be lost

Winnie the Pooh – A.A. Milne

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CONNSWATER

Our river wasn't
a clean river,
a mountain stream,
a babbling brook,
or a silver girl.
It was a filthy river,
a city river,
forsaken, neglected.

Long gone, the glory days,
when it was thick with trout
and where, according to my father,
King Billy watered his horses
on his way to the Boyne;
and later barges sailed
up and down, laden with
flax and jute, rope and linen.

As boys we played there,
we built bridges from
rusting bikes and shopping trolleys,
and wooden palettes,
and plastic bread trays
stolen from the Sunblest bakery.
We sailed boats
made from waxed paper,
always keeping an eye open
for rats, as big as cats,
whose jaws would lock
when they bit your leg,
and you'd have to kill them
to get them off.

Once we tried to trace
its source, where it bubbled
clean and pure
from the Castlereagh hills,
but we lost it
under a housing estate
and couldn't find it
on the other side.

Brimming with youthful optimism
we went there to fish
in its black waters,
thick and slick with oil,
with nylon fishing nets
on bamboo poles,
brought back from
a Sunday school trip
to Ballywalter;
and once, I caught a fish.

A sprick, my father said,
that's what it was called.
I brought it home
in a jam jar, with a string handle,
and put it clean water.

Two days later it was dead.

Spricks don't like clean water.

SUPERNOVA STAR DUST

You are supernova star dust,
remnants of a sun
turned inside out;
born anew.

Elemental matter
from swirling nebulae,
drawn together by gravity
to form a rocky mass,
at exactly the right distance
from another star, itself
formed in precise proportion
to shine for long enough,
with just enough warmth,
for elements to randomly
collide, forming molecules
that spark to life, and self replicate,
and thicken, and grow, and evolve
into living beings.

Beings, that, by an improbable
sequence of happy coincidences,
survived disease, and accident,
and war, and famine, and all forms
of pestilence and predators,
and mankind's best efforts
to destroy itself.
To survive all that, to live
long enough, to meet
and bear children that would, one day,
be drawn together in a Belfast bar,
and fall in love.

Your love is constructed
from the stuff of stars.

You are supernova star dust.

YOU CAN TAKE THE MAN OUT OF BELFAST...

Whilst the French class
absorbed the culture of Paris,
the Geography students
went on a field trip
to Craigavon,
New Town.

There were some
interesting murals in Parkmore,
the Central Business District
was definitely central,
and some of Brownlow's buildings
were of such architectural interest
the town fathers had boarded them up,
preserving them for future generations.

But, perhaps the day's
most salient lesson
was that shite,
shovelled from one place
'til the next,
is still shite.

GROWINGS PAINS

Bones knit, and stretched,
and grew, and tendons tightened
to the point of breaking, but,
for all the pain, I never
seemed to grow,
much.

My father whet
his hands with olive oil,
from an old bottle,
corked with cotton wool,
and rubbed my legs
until his hands became hot.

It was a trick
learnt from Geordie Devlin,
who trained boxers
in his spare time,
and cured minor ailments
in his meal hour
in the Shipyard,
on a joiner's bench,
between the bible class
and the card school.

Perhaps if it hadn't been
for Geordie Devlin
I could have been
taller.

THE GLASTONBURY WALTZ

She shut her eyes
and danced on her own
in a crowded field, alone,
in the Vale of Avalon,
before ten in the morning
on the Sunday after solstice.

Amber on her finger,
daisies in her hair,
shells on her wrist,
hands sculpting air,
boots that didn't
mind the mud,
blue dress, a wave
searching for a shore,
and a rapt smile
that found something more
in the space
between the notes.

She danced alone
in a crowded field,
no music
or partner to hold,
that I could see,
but she heard the beat
and held him tight,
and danced,
and danced,
and danced.

NAMING OF PARTS

Ten toes,
*this little piggy
went to market;
two skinny legs,
run, run, as fast as you can,
you can't catch me
I'm the gingerbread man;*
ten fingers,
*here's the church
and here's the steeple
open the doors
and here's the people;*
two hands,
*round and round the garden
like a teddy bear;*
two arms,
*one step, two step,
tickety under there.*

Eyes,
two big blue eyes,
*twinkle twinkle
little stars.*

Then I counted
them all again
just to be sure.

HOURS OF DARKNESS

Shortly we shall be dimming
the cabin lights.

You should not be alarmed,
this is a normal procedure
when taking off and landing
during the hours of darkness.

Those of you who wish
to continue reading
can use the overhead
light provided.

I continued reading
until distracted by a voice behind.
They do that, he explained
to his companion, because
most crashes occur at take off or landing.
It could take your eyes a minute
or two to adjust to the darkness.
Those minutes
might be the difference
between life and death.

I decided
my book could wait.

As a boy, when travelling
by bus at night, in Belfast,
drivers turned off
the interior lights
when passing through
certain parts of the city.

I suspect their reasons
were different.
But in their own way, I'm sure
they saved a life or two.

BLUE

Blue is the colour of the sea,
except it's not,
blue is the colour of the movie,
except it's not,
blue is the colour of grass,
except it's not,
blue is the colour of the boys,
except it's not,
blue is the colour of the collar,
except it's not,
blue is the colour of royal blood,
except it's not.

But, still,
it might be interesting
to spill a little,
just to prove a point.

KINDNESS

'Kind' is German for 'child',
so 'kindness' is 'childness',
giving without motive.
Like the smile you gave
me when I came through the door
making me forget the frown
I had been carrying around
since lunchtime.
It's the half sucked lollipop
you wanted me to finish.
It's your gentle breath on my face
in the morning when I wake
to find you beside me
having, in the night,
slipped between the sheets,
softly, so as not to waken me.

Kindness
is not writing a letter to Santa
because you want him to take your
toys to the boys and girls in Africa,
because they don't have any money
to buy paper or pencils
to write letters with.

Kindness.

Childness.

FALLUJAH BIRTHDAYS

When you were given to us
I gave you my name,
I rubbed the inside of your mouth
with a soft date,
I sacrificed two sheep for you,
and we feasted.

For you first birthday
I gave you a stuffed camel,
for your second birthday
I gave you building blocks,
for your third birthday
I gave you a drum,
for your fourth birthday
I gave you a jigsaw puzzle,
for your fifth birthday
I gave you your favourite book,
for your sixth birthday
I gave you prayer beads,
for your seventh birthday
I gave you a puppet,
for your eighth birthday
I gave you a football.

For your ninth birthday
I gave you new clothes,
I gave you an empty box,
I washed you clean
and kissed you,
and we wept.

For your tenth birthday
I gave you flowers,

for your eleventh birthday
I gave you flowers,
for your twelfth birthday
I gave you flowers.

TWENTY SEVEN

Johnson
Jones
Hendrix
Morrison
McKernan
Cobain

Nine years a child
nine years a boy
nine years a man
swept away
leaves before a storm
leaving us living
among the remains
of the dead.

*Lord, that I'm standin'
at that crossroads, babe,
I believe I'm sinkin' down.*

CREMATION

for Derek

Eyes smarting with smoke,
and lips black with newsprint,
we cooked potatoes in BacoFoil,
in the embers of our fire,
snatching them out
before they were done:
skin burnt black and crisp,
the centre as cold and hard
as a famine winter.
We juggled them
in scalded hands,
doused them in salt,
and wolfed them down,
regardless.

The sharp sulphurous
snap of Swan Vestas,
the crack of ignition
on the sandpaper strip,
the first lick of flame.
We burnt anything
that would burn,
paper, wood, leaves,
empty crisp packets,
and plastic bags,
and once, the carcass
of a black bird, watching
as maggots writhed,
and sizzled,
and popped,
until all that was left
was a small white skull

and empty beak.

Bellies full,
but not yet cramping,
we stared at ghosts
in the flames, and smoked
rolled up pages of the Tele',
two feet long,
until we couldn't
get a breath.

Derek liked the sports,
I preferred the deaths.

POW CAMP 161

It was where I learned to read,
and write, and count;
I counted the days.
It was where I realised carrying
a cello was harder than playing it.
It was where I engraved my name
on the playground wall,
beneath Rudolf Schwarz 1945,
and was caught and frogmarched
to the headmaster's office,
and punished between puffs of pipe smoke.
It was where I gave my first poetry reading,
aged eleven;
watched the space shuttle launch:
and where I passed, in order of priority,
my cycling proficiency test
and eleven plus.
It was where I learnt the words
of sectarian songs,
and how to hate fenians,
and the importance of adding
sugar to petrol bombs.
It was where we played football,
and pretended we were soldiers
killing Germans,
always Montgomery and Rommel,
it was where I first kissed a girl.

It was also where the prisoners learnt
English, accountancy and shorthand,
where they formed a choir
accompanied by violin and cello,
and where Father Muller

celebrated mass each evening,
and Chaplin Richter
led Sunday worship,
(the Catholics being more
devout than the Protestants).
It was where Josef Haeefe
practised dentistry without
“Radiotherapy and X-ray Technology”
by Zanker, despite having requested
the text on several occasions.
It was where the prisoners
passed money through the fence
to children, to bring them
fish and chips from Ritchie's,
and where, on 7th March 1945,
Wilhelm Thone hung himself
in his room.

By December '45
The prisoners had gone home.
I left in the summer of '83.
I returned for the final time
fifteen years later,
to put a ballot in a box;
the beginning
of forgetting
the past.

*Orangefield Primary School
was a POW hospital
from January 1945 to
November 1945*

IF ANYONE SHOULD KNOW...
for Frank Casey

When her cardiologist
enquired about her health,
she told him she had a bug.
I explained that the bug
was a secondary infection,
occurring subsequent to recovery
from the primary illness.
Its symptoms included
an inability to consume food
other than crisps, ice cream,
sweets, and fizzy drinks;
retinal discomfort,
apparently only eased
by the Disney Channel;
a profound sense of melancholy
induced at the mention
of the word “school”,
and without sympathy
her condition appeared
to deteriorate rapidly.

I asked,
if, in his expert medical opinion,
anything could be done,
but there was no known cure.

Like love.

WAVES

A train that once shipped sugar,
from field to port, rattled,
slow as a slave ship,
through Antiguan hills,
with elderly Americans,
old money, all pearl chokers
and Pringle sweaters,
filling the front seats
of the open top carriage,
and I, relegated to the rear.

They didn't notice fields of cane,
old plantation houses,
windmills and barracoons.
They were more interested
in the complementary rum punch
than the tour guide's lilting patois
history of the island,
and missed entirely the irony
of the calypso choir singing
the songs of their grandfathers.

They didn't see a flock of herons,
startled by the bone rattle of the train,
take flight from a tree,
white slashes in the sky;
and beyond that, by a broken windmill,
a boy playing barefoot,
who stopped kicking his football
made from rags, to wave,
a black hand against the blue.

I waved back,

and he skinned his teeth
smiling diamonds,
stars in the night.
I watched him wave
to every carriage
until the train had gone,
and wonder
if he noticed
only one person
waved back.

SATURDAY NIGHT AT THE MOVIES
for John McBride Neill

There was the Savoy and Lyceum,
the Majestic and Colosseum,
the Regal and the Roxy,
the Tonic and the Troxy,
the Princess and the Pallidrome,
the Alhambra and Hippodrome.
Great picture palaces,
art deco and glass,
velvet and brass,
where the poor of Belfast
could feel like stars
for a night.

And the Strand,
sailing up the Holywood Road
like a great ocean liner,
where my grandmother
took a flask of tea and sandwiches
to *Gone With The Wind*,
and my father watched
Flash Gordon and *Roy Rodgers*,
and rode an imaginary
Trigger the two miles home.

Now the Lido is a chapel,
the Metro sells fried chicken
the Apollo, a Chinese supermarket,
and the Alpha, a loyalist drinking den.

But the Strand,
where my father
saw Flash kiss Dale,

and my grandmother
saw Rhett kiss Scarlet,
where I kissed a girl badly
in the back row, five minutes
before the film ended,

the Strand
still stands.

ABERCORN

Between quadratic equations
and trigonometry
we found time to snigger
at each squeak of her leg
as she limped back to the board,
and we thought nothing about
her regrets.

Lingering for a second cup
that afternoon,
because the craic was good.
Or how she sat down first,
on a seat near the window,
while her friend sat by the door,
and didn't walk away.

With each squeak,
with each snigger,
regrets.

Wishing Chair
(photograph by RJ Welch)

She was,
what would have
been described in Belfast as,
a hard ticket,
sitting there on the stones
like she owned them.
Scarf wound tight;
and beneath her shawl
enough layers to keep out
the North Atlantic chill.
In the corner of her mouth
a black pipe unashamedly
clamped firmly in teeth,
which,
although one cannot tell
from the photograph,
one assumes, are sepia.
Beside her, but not too close,
is another woman, ugly
enough to be her sister.
And there they sat,
like a couple of McCool's pixies
scowling for the camera,
and, no doubt,
scaring young children
and Victorian ladies
with delicate sensibilities.

I wonder,
a century later,
what
she was wishing for?

LADIES FOOTBALL

During the war,
while the men were away
killing Germans
my grandmother played in goal
for a ladies football team.
They won the cup,
she got a medal,
had her picture in the paper,
and, according to my father,
she once broke a player's jaw.

Years later I sat with her
watching the Two Ronnies,
and laughed at her,
laughing at the audience,
laughing at dirty jokes
she didn't understand.

She would ask me to check
that the Germans weren't hiding
in a trench at the end of the garden,
or that the Morrows weren't looking
over the wall, that it was safe
to go to the outside toilet.

I blushed to hear her recall,
word perfect, sixty years later,
whole conversations she'd had
with the girls from the mill;
and sometimes, just sometimes,
as if as a reward,
she would dig deep
in her pinny pocket,

take out a tissue,
unwrap it
and show me
her medal.

NATURE POEM
for Shimah

A nature poem
should be about
snow hushed woods late at night,
a rainbow's refracted light,
counting rings on fallen trees,
glades full of honey bees,
autumn's harvest, summer flowers,
the sun, the earth, the moon, the stars,
a nature poem should be about
clouds and daffodils.

It should never be about
beaches without children,
oceans without boats,
dawn without birdsong,
sunrise without hope,
bedtime stories by moonlight,
digging holes in the sand,
lives measured in days,
never holding her hand.

Shimah, nature.

STARE

It was the stare
of the Big Issue seller,
a give me a home stare,
a give me a break stare,
a give me a pound
for a cup of tea stare.
A thousand yard stare
that met you
as you rounded the corner,
a stare that spanned
the width of the pavement,
a stare that could engage
a dozen people at a time,
a stare accompanied
by an innate ability
to match each lateral,
evasive movement,
a stare complemented
by the words
“help the homeless”,
pitched in a perfect
Derry accent.

That stare
with the Reeboks,
the French Connection jeans,
that stare that I returned
when I saw him later,
packing his unsold magazines
into the boot of his BMW,
as he made his way home.

SMILES

for Joan

There was the smell,
the smell of film,
as I popped the lid,
removed it from
its plastic canister,
and loaded it,
all fingers and thumbs,
threading the leader,
winding it on,
praying it had caught,
but scared to open the camera
for fear of spoiling it.

I guessed at focus and exposure,
each click captured a slice of light,
but I never knew for certain
if, by skill or luck,
I had caught that Kodak moment,
until weeks later when I opened
the envelope,
like a Christmas present,
hoping that it wasn't
blank, or blurred, or beheaded,
and was rewarded
with a smile
that I valued enough
to write the name
of its owner on the back
and stick it
in an album
full of smiles.

BROTHERS IN ARMS

They were boys of Carson's army,
sons of Ulster, loyal and true,
marching off to France for glory,
fighting for the red, white and blue.

*Description of T Atkinson on enlistment
height 5'7", weight 122 lbs,
chest when fully expanded 34",
complexion fresh, hair fair,
distinctive marks – broad scar
on bridge of nose, pulse 72.*

In shattered stumps of Thiepval Wood
Tommy helped the dead and dying,
above the thunder of battle
he could hear his brother crying.

*You are hereby warned that if,
after enlistment, it is found that
you have given a wilfully wrong answer
to any of the following questions
you will be liable to a punishment
of 2 years imprisonment with hard labour.*

He picked up the broken body
of Ulster's brave defender,
holding on with all his strength, said
"remember, Bob, no surrender."

*Private T Atkinson has undergone
a course of training at this depot
and is now qualified in first aid
and ambulance work. He has been*

*well behaved and has shewn
an intelligent interest in his work
Aldershot 20/11/07*

Bob held his brother's hand and said,
"Sure, there's no winners in a war.
In the end all you've got are those
that lost, and those that lost some more."

*Men joining Section A Army Reserve
will be liable to be called out
on army service under the provision
of the Territorial and Reserve Forces Act 1907.
Mobilized at Cosham 5/8/14
Posted to 9th Field Ambulance 5/8/14.*

The next morning Bob still hung on,
though he was very close to death,
he whispered this to his brother,
the smell of rum thick on his breath.

*I certify that I am unmarried
and that my next of kin
is my mother, Mrs L Atkinson,
Hyndford Street, Belfast.*

"Tommy, take me home to Ulster,
to the old church in Killyman,
mother can visit me with flowers,
please take me home Tom, if you can."

*Transferred to Section B Army Reserve
on demobilization 16/3/19*

Tommy wept at Bobby's graveside,
in the hushed trees of Aveluy Wood,
two years later he was sailing home,
but Bobby never could.

*I do not claim to be suffering
a disability due to
my military service.
Place of examination Cologne 6/12/19*

He carried Bobby's last words home
to a broken hearted mother,
he carried his memory
to his grave, soldier, friend, and brother.

*Tom Atkinson, Field Ambulance, R.M.A.C. 1890 – 1971
Robert Atkinson, RIR 1892 – 1916*

VISITING TIME

When you are old
will you remember
the day I took you
to the zoo
and you ignored
the lions and monkeys
and elephants?

You fell in love with
a golden poison dart frog
(*phylobates terribilis*)
from Colombia;
whose skin contained
enough toxin
to kill a small town.

For ten minutes or more
you blew out your cheeks
together, and croaked,
and hopped,
and hopped,
and hopped.

Just before we left
you raised a small
chubby finger
and touched his
through the glass.

ON FOLLOWING A SEVEN YEAR OLD BOY AROUND THE
TATE MODERN

He examined, thoroughly,
the expanding crevasse
in the Turbine Room floor
before deciding that
*it's nothing more than a big crack
you could get your foot stuck in.*
Giacometti's bronze bust
of Diego was greeted thus
hey look at flat face.
The Rothko was
boring because it's all green;
and he felt strongly having seen
Fontana's 'Waiting': it
should be removed from display
because it has a hole in it.
He liked the Miro
because of all the pretty colours;
and I heard him say
that Bacon's Triptych
is gross in a cool sort of way.

If he had been privileged
enough to see
Hirst's 'The Physical
Impossibility of Death,
in the Mind of Someone Living'
(the shark in formaldehyde
to you and me),
I imagine it would have been
greeted with similar glee.
I doubt though, if Emin's bed
would have been seen as

‘A deconstruction of sexual politics,
homelessness and displacement
at the end of the twentieth century’;
but rather as a bedroom
almost as untidy as his own.

What does a seven year old boy know?
would he enjoy a foie gras terrine
on a samphire bed, or prefer
to tuck into a Big Mac instead?

MIRROR MIRROR

My mirror
is forty two years old.
It does not see
a bald spot growing,
crows feet crowing,
grey hair breeding,
or a fool that’s leading
a life that belongs
to a man
half his age.

MUSEUM OF THE WELSH SOLDIER

He gave Jack a musket
to hold, to feel its weight,
and demonstrated how to load it,
charge, ball, and wadding,
and the damage
a musket ball could do
to a steel breast plate.
He let him try on an officer's helmet,
complete with flowing plume,
hair cut by soldiers
from horse's tails,
to keep them clean,
and, to prove a point,
showed him an oil painting:
horses charging into battle
with neatly trimmed tails.
He told us, with a sense of irony,
how the first VC
presented to a Welsh regiment
was given to an Irish man.

He told me that Ireland
is a beautiful country.
He had been twice,
Tyrone and South Armagh,
and he hoped to go back,
for a holiday this time,
now that things were better.
I said that he should,
and hoped if he did
boys as young as my son
wouldn't throw stones at him,
and that women my wife's age

wouldn't spit in his face
and call him
"a murdering Brit bastard",
and that a man the same age as me
wouldn't shoot
his best friend in the back
and leave him to die in his arms.

*We're off to Lanzarote this year.
But maybe next year,
if I can convince the missus.*

ORCHESTRA

Gut and hair,
ivory and skin,
wood and reed,
and breath:
such harmony
out of death.

MONEY BETTER NOT SPENT

I was underwhelmed
by the Titanic exhibition.
I don't know what I expected,
but I didn't get it.
We've had one hundred years
to get this right, for god's sake.
It only took three years
to build the bloody boat,
(and an Englishman
four days to sink it).

I didn't think I would get
a guided tour by Captain Smyth,
or original colour film
footage of the sinking.
But they could have done better
than story boards,
and artists' impressions,
and scenes from that bloody film
playing on a loop.

The only thing worth seeing
was in the entrance hall,
a porthole from a third class cabin,
recovered from the bottom
of the Atlantic,
mounted so you could look
through the glass, so you could
see what they saw.

So you should go,
but don't buy a ticket,
all you need to see is free,

and you'll be five pounds richer;
an amount equivalent to
a trans-Atlantic crossing
on White Star liner,
RMS Titanic,
one way,
third class.

Footnotes

1 – A 3rd class ticket cost £5, about £250 in today's money. A 1st class ticket cost £870, about £44000 in today's money.

2 – 74% of 3rd class passengers perished compared to 38% of 1st class passengers.

3 – It is alleged that the significant difference between 1st class and 3rd class fatality rates was due to the gates on the most direct route from the 3rd class cabins to the life boats remaining locked. Many of the 3rd class passengers drowned in their cabins

THE COLDEST YET

That's the coldest yet,
the words on my father's lips,
each night from October to spring,
as he stood at the back door
shaking the East Belfast rain
off his coat, and stamping
the mud off his Shipyard boots,
before coming in, setting
his piece box on the counter
and kissing my mother.

That's the coldest yet,
he set his wet gloves
on the hearth to dry
and stood by the fire
to shift the cold that had
been bound in his bones
from a day on the gantries,
where the east wind whipped
up the Lough, sleet slashing
the Island until blue knuckled
fingers could barely feel
billy-can tea through a tin cup.
He stood, back to the fire,
steam rising from his trousers,
until I thought he might catch light.

My sixteenth summer
was the coldest yet,
no piece box on the counter,
no gloves by the fire,
his new bicycle lying
in the garage since Christmas,

and funeral tea, in china cups,
would never warm my hands.

It was the coldest yet,
but too cold for snow.

SYMPHONY FOR THE DEVIL

When Mick's in the ground
one hundred years,
will crowds queue outside
the Albert Hall,
and pay a week's wages
to see a cover band
recreate the greatest
show of all?

Will they throw their bras,
flash their tits,
and jostle for position
twenty rows deep,
will they feel what
I felt, when Keith
Richard's guitar
made me weep?

MAKING SODA

She made her soda
by the handful,
three handfuls of flour,
a pinch of salt,
a pinch of soda,
a half pint of buttermilk,
from an urn,
not a carton.

She made her soda
by the handful,
one hand that threw
dirt on the lid
of her sister's coffin,
the other holding
an orphaned son.
Hands that raised him
as her own, and never
a ring on their fingers.

She made her soda
by the handful,
baked in a range
until it was done,
and we ate it, oven hot,
and thick with butter.

She made her soda
by the handful,
a recipe I have been
unable to follow;
I have different
sized hands.

THE LORD'S DAY

On a Saturday evening,
before retiring,
my grandfather laid out
his Sunday suit,
pressed his shirt,
and polished his best shoes.

On a Sunday
the shops were all closed,
except for one,
owned by an Italian,
who was, presumably,
less devout than the Irish.
The pubs were closed too,
although drinking
on any day of the week
was generally frowned upon.

At some indeterminate time,
on Saturday,
between sunset and midnight,
the council employed a man
to visit all the parks
and chain up
the swings,
the roundabout,
the witch's hat.
I believe
if they could have found
a way to chain up
the slides
they would have done so.

Honour the Lord's day,
Darkley;
and keep it holy,
The Bogside;
that thy days may be long,
Enniskillen;
upon the earth.

WHAT I NEED

I need
my walking shoes,
a flask of water,
a loaf of bread,
my coat.

I need
some sticks,
a length of rope,
a flint,
a sharp knife.

I need,
a God to guide me,
a faith to drive me,
a son to trust me,
a son to love me.

*What you really needed
was to be a father.*

GRANDFATHER

i

She just told me, one night,
casually, over dinner,
slipping it in, like a palate cleanser,
between main course and dessert,
“You know your grandfather
isn’t my father”;
which, by implication,
meant he wasn’t my grandfather,
either.

It was as if a tree surgeon
had hacked off a limb
from my family tree,
and nailed on another branch
from a different tree,
entirely.

ii

He is a bird who flew south for winter in June,
He is a song whose words I’d never been taught,
He is house on wheels pulled by a horse,
He is a valediction, without a thought,

He’s the King’s shilling in the bottom of a glass,
He is snow in October and hail in July,
He is the name that’s absent from our family bible,
He was, from before he met you, saying goodbye.

He is the broken link in my chain, the reason I am
He was

Abraham.

HUNTING

Last night the harbourer
tracked the stag to his resting place,
and at sunrise made a close inspection
of the perimeter of the wood,
to ensure he had not escaped.
When the Master heard this,
and was satisfied,
he ordered the release of the hounds
that had been barking at our heels
all morning.

Then, a moment later,
from where I lay,
in dew damp grass,
I saw it
break through the tree line,
a flash of royal red,
and I followed it, panning;
hooves thundered above barks,
until it reached the river;
where it stopped and turned
and faced down the dogs.
In the cross hairs I saw
every hair on his neck,
counted each of his fourteen points,
I looked him in the eye,
and could not,
in all conscience,
pull the trigger.

Valentine's Day 1945,
lying in the nose of a Lancaster,
8000 feet above Dresden,

my heartbeat drowned out
the roar of four
Rolls Royce Merlin engines.
I lined up the burning city
in my Blakett bomb sight.

I never heard
the children running,
or saw the hairs on their heads,
or the whites of their eyes.

FUCKING DISTURBED

No matter how late it is,
no matter how drunk your are,
no matter how horny you are,
no matter how willing
your ex-girlfriend is,
no matter how big
a coincidence it is
that you bumped into each other
one night in Belfast, even though
neither of you have
lived there for years,
no matter how deep
a sleeper your mother is,
no matter how stiff
the suspension
in your mark I Golf GTI,
parked in the garage adjoining
your mother's house,

it is not,
most definitely not,
a good idea.

Even if you sleep
late enough
to avoid breakfast,
conversation at Sunday lunch
will be strained,
to say the least;
and she will
always
be
an ex-girlfriend.

COMPOSED UPON THE QUEEN'S BRIDGE

Behind me,
beside crumbling Victorian walls,
rise river view apartments,
hotels and concert halls,
built on the bones of Belfast.
Behind them, guns hidden
under floorboards, bodies
buried too deep to find,
and the past buried deeper
still.

Before me
the rail my brother walked
along, gripping my father's hand,
while I hugged the kerb,
away from the water
slipping beneath, to the sea;
and the stinking mud;
hidden now by the weir,
only hidden, still stinking,
just below the surface.

Scrap yards have gone,
and the Shipyard too.
But the docks where
young men left for war
or fortune, or fled for their lives,
the docks from which
famine ships sailed
and the Titanic
steamed away,
are still there,
still busy selling

one way tickets.

Above me
smoke clouds
of starlings blow
in to roost,
and above them
only sky.

GIFTS

After she spent almost all she had
on candy floss
and chips eaten from the paper
and a net to catch crabs
and a stick of rock
and the helter-skelter
and the bumpers cars
and two rides on the ghost train,
because the ghost train was best,
her friend's mother hoisted her up
to stick the rest in the slot,
helped her heave on the handle,
and with her final pull
three bells fell on the win-line
and ten shillings clattered out,
in brand new pennies.

She scooped up her winnings
with trembling fingers,
filling her pockets
until her coat was heavy
with good fortune.
She chose to share it between
the two people she loved most:
half on a gift for her grandfather,
and the rest for her mother,
because she needed the money.

She bought him a New Testament,
King James Version,
much smaller than the big,
well thumbed bible
he read each night

in his chair by the fire;
small enough to fit
in his coat pocket,
small enough to carry God
with him wherever he went.

Her mother kissed her
and thanked her
and put the money in a jam jar
she kept on the top shelf of the dresser.
Her grandfather, a devout man,
knowing no good could come
from the devils money,
left his gift, wrapped, on the table.

HANGING THE PINATA

The kids wanted a piñata,
so we got them one;
but I must stress
that it had no religious significance.
It did not have seven points
representing the seven deadly sins,
and it was not an allegory
of man's temptation in the struggle
between good and evil.
But I must confess,
we did blindfold them,
with a balaclava back-to-front,
(most Irish families have a balaclava
tucked away in a drawer),
not as a test of their faith,
but just to make the task harder.
We did spin them round,
not thirty three times,
once for each year of Christ's life,
that would have made them sick,
but just a couple of times,
for our own entertainment.
Our piñata was not,
as tradition dictates, an ass,
which I'm sure also has
some biblical relevance,
the bible being full of asses.
No, it was a big, round, orange
pumpkin, complete with smiling face,
filled with sweets and hung,
not on the first Sunday of Lent,
but on the last day of October.
If there was any metaphysical significance,

it was not as they blindly flailed
a brush shaft above their heads,
but earlier, as I stood in the garage
on a wobbly stool, alone,
and looped a length of rope
over a beam, and swung on it a little,
to make sure it wouldn't break.

MARITAL ART

It is an art,
whose sole purpose
is to defend oneself
from physical threat.
She is a skilled practitioner,
black belt, 10th Dan.

Her Sifu taught her well:
self-control, determination,
concentration, respect
and justice.

She trains daily,
practising each discipline
until she attains perfection;
she breaks bricks
with stubbornness;
she reads my mind.

We circumnavigate each other,
wrestlers about to make the first grab,
we lunge and clinch and grapple;
she is an expert in the take down,
always finishing on top,
beating me into submission.

Her approach is sumo,
her words a nunchuck,
her look a shuriken,
her smile a switch-blade,
her tongue a sai,
her memory is a suruin.

Sometimes she prefers
less traditional weapons,
such as pans and plates
still laden with food,
and all manner of cutlery
and kitchen utensils

And occasionally,
if necessity dictates,
she will use
the Five Point Palm
Exploding Heart Technique.

Footnotes

*Nunchuck - is two sections of wood connected by a
cord or chain*

Shuriken – throwing star

Sai - is a three-pronged truncheon

*Suruin - a weighted chain or leather cord. It is a
weapon which can be easily hidden prior to use, and
due to this fact can be devastatingly effective*

FALLING DOWN PARTY

On old square rigged ships
the royals were flown
immediately above the top gallant.
Set very high, above the royals,
the sky sail, and above that
the skyscraper;
a small triangular sail,
only flown in very light winds.

When the Tower Building
was constructed,
after Manhattan was cleared
of hills and trees,
crowds would gather, even at
the slightest sign of a breeze,
to chat, drink beer
and smoke cigarettes,
while they waited
for it to fall.

If they had enough patience
to stick around for a little
over a century,
they would have got
exactly what they wanted;
and my oh my,
it would have been
worth the wait.

WHORING MYSELF FOR JESUS

My Sunday school teacher
was a devout man
who could recite
the King James Bible
chapter and verse,
the beat of each word
accompanied by a thump
of his fist
on the well-thumbed testament
that sat on his knee,
its size a symbol
of his faith.

He promised us ten pence a verse;
I set to work,
the following week reciting,
word perfect, John chapter three,
pocketing thirty six pieces of silver.
Next was to be Psalm 119,
but he suggested I read
Matthew 19:24 instead.

With hindsight I am glad
I did not sell my soul to Jesus
in exchange for a mansion,
streets paved with gold,
and an incorruptible crown.

I kept it
for someone
worthy of it.

STATUS UPDATED

(Facebook verbatim poem)

I had an amazing Valentine's Day with Andrew
and am looking forward to my party tomorrow,
we'll be hitting the Buckfast soon.

I woke up just there, really hungover,
and turned around to notice,
that even in my drunken state,
I left three massive glasses
of water beside my bed.

I got a surprise for my sixteenth birthday,
a late gift, four weeks late.
I suppose that would have made it
New Years Eve, if I could remember,
not that it makes any difference;
sweet,
sweet sixteen.

We'll never drift apart.
Where have I heard that before!
Facebook status changed
from in a relationship to single.
If you would not make her a wife,
do not make her a mother.
I wish you could experience
this with me.
Your choice.

I'm being a solider
and fighting the morning sickness.
I fucking hate being pregnant;
I don't mean to sound ungrateful,

but it's rough.
I'm eating for three, not two,
and boaking for Ireland.
Two Kinder Buenos,
four bits of toast and jam,
two Terry's Chocolate Oranges,
my feast of a dinner,
about eight cups of milk,
and I'm still waiting on my McDonald's...
what the fuck.

I'm dying to get out one more night
before the plum gets any bigger,
and, no, I won't drink.
Anywhere decent to go
where they won't ring the police
if you have no ID?
When you're pregnant
hormones go up the left,
at the moment they are,
and I'm craving cock.

Getting the baba's first baby grow today,
and actually cannot wait
for my first scan with mummy and Chloe.
My due date is on my Dad's
thirty sixth birthday,
happy birthday Granddad.
I'm still attempting
to stop smoking,
this baby better love me.
If I could go back in time
I would change a lot of things,
being pregnant isn't good craic.

I can't wait to meet you,
twenty weeks will be so slow.
You know all you need is me.

Just sixteen, with life to go.

SHADOW BOXING

It feels like I've gone
eleven rounds - the shadow
is winning on points.

ODE TO MY CHILDREN ON THEIR WEDDING DAY

What will I dance to
at your wedding?
I didn't learn to
foxtrot or waltz,
like my grandparents.
I will ask the DJ
if he has some oldies
and I will embarrass you
with the *Birdie Song*,
or *Las Macarena*,
or the *Timewarp*,
or *Y.M.C.A.*

If you're really lucky
you'll get to see me
play air guitar
to *Smoke on the Water*
or head bang
to *Ace of Spades*.
I might just chill,
and take a pill,
and raise my hands
to *Voodoo Ray*.

Or perhaps
I'll just grab
your mother
by the scruff
and pogo
to *The Pistols*;
"Oh, we're so pretty,
oh so pretty..."

GHOSTS

for Mary and Margaret Patterson

Finally, after much pleading,
I took you to the old graveyard,
not at night, but in broad daylight,
and still you clutched my hand
without a word, not worrying
if anyone noticed you.

We tripped over tussocks
and hidden rocks and hollows,
pulled back curtains of grass
to look at stones,
old and weather worn,
words lost to wind and rain,
and you asked me if dead people
minded us standing on them.

We walked through a window,
into an old church with no roof,
birds nesting in beam sockets,
and walls, wound tight with ivy,
that had no business still standing
after seven hundred years.

We stood where people preached and prayed,
where the new born were welcomed
into the world and the dead carried from it.
You worried more about warning signs,
“Danger, Falling Masonry, Keep Out”,
than you worried about ghosts.

Leaving, we happened upon
a grave of a mother who died
three weeks after the birth
of her daughter, who survived her

by only eleven days;
long enough to see
her first Christmas,
but not a New Year.

I clutched your hand without asking,
and considered a father
who carried his grief, like a stone,
another forty years.

BLACK EYED PEACE

It was a marriage of convenience,
a gun shot wedding,
of sorts, coerced
for the sake of the children,
for better, for worse,
but it wasn't love,
it was bitterness
that bound them together,

They fought,
eye for eye,
tooth for tooth,
tooth and nail,
to have and to hold,
by the throat,
and impale each other
with whetted words.

Bruised and battle weary
from going over old ground,
they have found themselves
back where they began,
Belfast confetti still on the streets,
blood stains on the sheets,
and poison between the lines
of their Valentines.

Too much water has passed
under bridges that have been
built and burnt so often.
All they can think to do is make
another pot of tea and sit in silence
on the same side of a round table

drinking from half empty cups,
and ignoring the herd of elephants in the room.

They lick the wounds
of their irreconcilable differences,
and agree to differ.

HUNTING FOR THE AURORA

A coronal mass ejection
caused me to wake my son
at a quarter past midnight,
on a school night,
and wrap up him carefully,
to shut out the cold,
to keep an cosmic appointment
with electrons, plasma and protons
that had travelled a hundred million miles
to meet us.

At Magheracross
we huddled for an hour,
hats pulled down, coats zipped up,
squinting at the horizon
for green, and red, and blue
arcs and curtains spiralling to the pole.
The groundswell of a distant
Atlantic storm, searching for a shore,
slammed onto the cliff below,
and we saw nothing.

Then we stopped looking north,
and looked up, and I gave him Orion,
and he gave me the Plough,
and I gave him Jupiter,
gifts that had travelled more than
one hundred million miles.

His last words
before he fell asleep,
"If it was easy to find
it wouldn't be so special".

