

Alan Morrison

Giving Light

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LAST OF THE SPRAY CARNATIONS

That day, stamped through a haze,
a nervy bleach, blurred photograph
exposed before developing
like a crippled Spartan baby;
a saffron-starched, sun-blached album
family image, except it wasn't
my family I mingled with, but a stunned
white drift of sun-paled faces probing
lychee-eyes into market bargains.

As if I looked at this bustling rock-pool
speculum of life through frosted glass
or a thick honey-coloured vase.

I tripped on, lost to the fogged outside
of myself, part-deaf to the touting shouts
of the cod-eyed fishmonger, the sun-flushed
apple-shaped pink lady, lamb-shouldered
butcher with a scrag-end face, his
white coat reeking of bloody meat.

Everything, poetic and pathetic
at once, in a burst of cheap-side sunlight
scooping a pool on the scene.

Even the vivid spoils of the Florists
appeared pitiful: a cluster of pink
and white spray carnations,
green on the edges of thirsty petals
poking from a bucket; a bunch
of scrunched-up tissues saturated
with tears of mustard sun.

BEATITUDES

Today, everything's resolved: the man
with a rainy Sunday face has found
a smile's an inspiring beam of light
in his outlook; the senile lager-breathing
dragon of withered scales, forced to forgo
his habit for the day, is better for it:
sober, brave; the two middle-aged
friends have let bygones be for a change;
the doubting housewife's found her faith,
vacuuming behind the chairs.

THE BLACKBOARD

My first glimpse of oblivion:
the school blackboard, to me then
my life seemed like one scrape of chalk
smudging into the dark.

GULES SALTIRE, AZURE RAMPANT

One dark afternoon after school
you came in odorous of classrooms,
uniformed in the gold and black
of the Comprehensive, put me down
for my callow daddy-fied infatuation
with chivalry as *Imperialist*.

I capitulated, naive
to phases, present in absenteeism.

You, dissecting the chop on your plate
as if a frog's lung in Biology,
your cutlery, pilfered scalpels,
muttered you were a Socialist.

I read red into that heralding,
no inkling I'd soon share your diction:
junk cultures spawning like lab samples –

*I can't understand, on your soap-
pouf fee scratching berry-juice eczema
on nettle-rash skin, how anyone says
'I am a passionate Capitalist.'*

Back then
I just drooled for your crackling.

THE WATER SHALLOWS

While I was paddling in the water shallows
the ripples turned to waves,
the paddling to a wade.

While I tried to shallow my tumbling mind
the thoughts that swam in the water shallows
were chased as fish by the shadows of sparrows.

INFATUATION: THE FIRST

Infatuation? It didn't last
Beyond rosy, rough-and-tumble days,
Gooseberry sweet, no sour aftertaste.
Time didn't intimidate the infant; time was sky.
The love, the bond that tore our hearts
Strained too far, sighed out to die.

*Time's the face you love
but are tired of looking at.*

Bitterness of callow apples, raw,
Windfall-bitten, sour out the tongue
With immature spices to subtle in
Its un-acquired taste – sap squandered on
Those who sample before ripe; spat out;
Wiped clean by sleeves it bruises on.

*Time's a face you love
but tire of looking at.*

Time takes long to trickle on; to traipse.
Rich spit of first kisses infiltrates the rest.
He: life's not long enough for love.
She: love purses lips for death;
Familiarity and death: the same.
We tied knots in our stubborn bond; our breath.

*Time's a face you love
but are tired of looking at.*

Feelings home in unhealed sores;

In lichen ruins bonds re-build
On slippery foundations – love clings on;
No shutting off till we're told – mistakes,
Only palpable once trampled past,
Form the pattern of the human face.

*Time's the face you love
but tire of looking at.*

THE LINGER OF YEARNING

I'm left the shadow of your memory,
a linger of yearning to know
if there was no other what light you'd throw
on that room in your cramped heart for me?

FORGIVE-ME-NOT

Let go. Forgive. Forget the bitterness
That buttresses when love is dead:
Most of what's said isn't meant
And most of what's meant isn't said.

ADAM'S NIB

It wasn't a woman tempted me
into my fall, into my fall,
just some paper and a pen –
the imperfection of it all.

OBVERBS

Motto for the Mountaineer

If you try to reach the summit
You're likely to become it.

~

Age's Hill

Young Puritans of austere will
Grow cavalier past age's hill.

~

-isms

Capitalism spouts from city walls;
Socialism mutters in draughty halls.

~

Damp-Stain Angel

The vicar couldn't make it out at all:
a damp-stain angel on his chapel wall.

~

Fear of Blindness

Believing in God for a dread of death
is living in darkness for fear of blindness.

~

Death's Dress Rehearsal

Romans called asthma rehearsal for death;
life, summed up as a shortness of breath.

~

Faith & Death

Who fears death needs the crutch of faith;
who fears pain needs the crutch of death.

~

Sleepy Head

The man who looks like he hasn't slept well
has a face like a bed that's been slept in.

CHASING SHADOWS

Tipsy with nostalgia we
Miss those times of time's slower pass
When we were children trying to chase
Our shadows on the grass.

NOSTALGIA

Even in those golden days
Life always left us wanting more;
Why we loathe ourselves today
Is why we loved ourselves before.

OLD-FASHIONED SUN

Eleven years old, I tried to reclaim
the past, inspired by a cottage's gloom –
the countryside's always the same
no matter what year: I furnished my room
with my dad's dog-eared books caked in damp-stain
from *The Black Arrow* to *Allan Quatermain*.

On brumal mornings as a pale sun
lit thin curtains that filtered its rays,
I'd stick Holst's scratchy *Jupiter* on
summoning my father's schoolboy days –
Somerset, Nineteen Fifty-One,
in the ghostly warmth of an old-fashioned sun.

But there's a book-end to the shelf of time:
one can't stay absent from their age
in the fusty clutter of an historic shrine –
so I parted the curtains, tripped the page
to the post-impatient future time
where lyrics strip the Kipling rhyme.

THE COTTAGE

For all the breath-smoked nights
we shared some misty summers
drifting off to light tunes' fall
like balsam on the garden
from my brother's bedroom window
jarred with grandma's *Iliad*;
sunbathed with mongrels at our feet;
plucked blushed apples from the tree beside
the cement-filled well, where we planted
hope for rescue from this rustic lull
false as our restless wishes were,
still yet to be weeded.

Father's face hair-line cracked
as the crumbly stone of the cottage walls;
mother's nerves fragile as
the shaky glass of the greenhouse grave –
I'm sure she's shrunken in this shade
all these faded years;
given the chance she wouldn't leave
this place for ties still tested like
the trembling washing-line.

This is where we dug-up doubt
fossilized in the outhouse stone
like stories of our mythical home;
where we first came to believe
in not believing, with the countryside,
that simply is. How could we leave.

THE HOUSE OF SADNESS PAST

After this fruitless time, strife
of fifteen garbled cottage winters,
didn't bid goodbye to the shrunken shack
bribed us to sojourn for time
unmarked by ageless slate West sky.

Chance missed to lay a lifetime
ghost to rest; leave behind
a difficult friend I fell out with
but stayed close to the bitter end;
to purge goodbyes in haunted stares,
self-pity in rooms un-exorcised;
plaster-pink walls, unpainted;
a damp-aired landing half-suggested...

I reassemble that tomb of stone
in its clump of weeds; hinge-creaked gate;
blue gloss door with Piskey latch;
derelict sunlight splintering where
twisted limbs of an apple tree
choked rotten spoils – soft crinkled skins
bruising to the touch: moth-thoughts,
hovering, tumbling numberless
as pebbled beds of crouching flowers
in those imprisoning mornings.

A cow-bell clopped to the overflow;
a carcass of glass spilt stinging nettles;
a cement-filled pebbledash well
pushed up shrubs of wishing petals.

Darkest nights I'd known;
moths, grotesquely outgrown,
hand-size spiders tapping on

peeling posters, clicking time
to the clock's taciturn ticks.

Bowed by the bent beam gazing
warped books on the blistered sill
over the garden, a tumble of troubles
pouring from the mouth of the house
in tangled nettles, stinging words
sculpting sorrows from sad panes.

Sold us as idyllic, white-washed,
it was a starker face: our own
little crumbled House of Usher
obscured by prouder abodes,
confiscated from the hamlet's view –
a disgraced sight set back from the road.

Cuckoo-broken silence versed
with upstairs' floor-boards creaking
in an empty bedroom – a reassuring
ghost too shy to haunt us or
the panting scrape of earthly mother's
cobwebbed broom brushing the floor.

Some houses have souls, memories,
haunting them – this one had:
a sadness past remained, served
to feed ours with historic force.

I'll go back, through the ghostly photo
grope up the slanting path
into its blossom-grey, cabbage-white
wintry circumstance, now time's
passed trace of us there...

THE MANSION GARDENS

Shall we stroll those mansion gardens,
baize on baize of velvet grass
so well-kept and un-walked-upon?
Come on, love, we've cut the coupons,
let's see those shouting flowers
round grounds of ivy towers.

Shall we walk those mansion cloisters
verged with portraits? There's the Lords
and Ladies, and their ancestors
hanging, framed and ashen-faced.

*But why are they ashen-faced?
They were never ground down or disgraced.*

Shall we stroll those dust-still rooms?
Well, just alongside, take a little
look at them, just peep inside?
They're cordoned-off with red rope...

just like our lives...

oh, we'll cope.

Shall we pace those mansion chambers
ringed by pasty-plaited rope...

easily unhooked and disobeyed...

No – that would be to abandon
our law-abiding principles...

what's wrong is always irresistible...
Shall we recall those mansion gardens,

baize on baize of velvet grass
so well-kept and un-walked-upon?

*I'm not envious: simply a dreamer:
those lawns were so much greener...*

FEW NEVER ENVY

All I have: this shabby room
furnished grandma-style:
carpet muddy umber,
thin beige curtains pile
like luminous mosquito nets
over the draughty window-pane.
A lacquered table's centre-piece
where I eat cold meals, scrimp an aim

inkling in a typewriter.
Plastic clatter of tone-deaf keys
scores each curtained, fiction-night:
a blind mind tinkling ivories.
Breaks spent on a spineless bed;
fingers brush the woodchip Braille,
step across the blue-tack path,
trip to the creak of banister-rail.

I stare up at a blanched Van Gogh
by the toothpaste-spattered sink;
the ticking of the crippled clock
decides it isn't time to think;
I rise to wash: chalky water
chokes out to the rusty squeak
of the stiffer tap; over my shoulder
a back-to-front *Thirty Bob A Week*

reflects in the mirror that traps me.
Smoking soothes as doubts unroll.
My only other luxuries: tea
and sleeping pills when I get my dole
of hardship maintenance that feeds
my lapsed Protestant shame
(though I was born a Catholic

I'm English all the same).

Few never envy others' lives
with their ambitions in arrears;
only thoughts that telescope
help one cope – focused years
blur the edges of fogged progress.
Lungs fangled for spearmint fags
purse their pockets. Abstracts heap
like half-p's in the money bags.

MIGHT

Why did some of us come to believe
The Left is in the right
When it has a massive clumsy body
And wings too small for flight.

THE SOUND OF EATING

My great grandfather, a Fabian,
never missed a single meeting
to discuss best ways of feeding
empty bellies of the down-at-heel.

(Privately he ate his meals
in his study, apart from his kin:
he couldn't stand the sound
of other people eating.)

TALES FROM THE EMPTY LARDER

I can't stand scant catechisms
of tremors in an empty stomach;
the stench of hunger-scented breath
where a full belly's the only tonic;
the famished itch in-between the teeth
where only food can feed relief.

The stain won't shift: mean-spirited strife
spoilt my appetite for living well;
splintered my spittle with bitterness;
chipped my shoulder with its scrimping chisel –
I taste it still in weak stewed blends;
in sickly stings of singed dog-ends.

I suppose the harsh lessons I scribed
inspired in me a need to dream,
to believe in insubstantial truths,
for you need a God when you can't keep clean
and hope, when your faith overflows,
Socialism will cure most ills.

I've said to my brother, it's strange to think
amidst the dirt we found ideals,
a sense of justice in second-hand clothes
and transubstantiated packet meals –
that the glooms of a larder's empty shelves
were where we first found ourselves.

A HAMPER FROM LANDRAKE

In the creel of a slate-skied Cornish winter
we caught a scraping sound outside;
a huge mass landing, heavy as the weight
my father prayed would be lifted from
his jobless shoulders scraped and bowed –

cold wind shot through the hallway, lo!
we beheld a hamper packed with tins
and vegetables – no Christians,
just a scribbled note blown on the lino
saying from the Parish -my father scowled,
now he was obliged to let them Save him.

THE COIN FORAGERS

During days of testing means
we'd find distraction in playing games;
one comprised four players,
rules always the same:
each foraged for mouldy copper tokens
hidden about the scrimping room,
collecting as many as they could find.

Some stuffed in the crumbs
under the settee's cushions; some
stashed in the clutter of the kitchen dresser.

The winner: first to disinfect their treasure.

THE RING

No wizard there as our guide –
Poverty's spell casts all else to one side.
Father's face grey as Gandalf's gown.
He always told himself he'd let us down.

Love is its own darkness, slowly binding.

One day my mother had to pawn her ring,
But kept it secret till we'd finished eating;
Her finger as it was before their wedding.

GIVING LIGHT

When women give birth the Spanish say
They're *giving light* – and it's said
The newborn child comes into the day
Armed with a loaf of bread.

Alan Morrison

Born Brighton, 1974. He started writing poetry as a 17 year old in a cottage bedroom in a bleak Cornish hamlet, which surfaces often in his poetry, haunting him like a past self.

His first break was as one of 15 winners in the *Asham Literary Trust's First Edition Competition 1998*. A selection of his poetry then appeared in the anthology *Don't Think of Tigers*, published by *The Do Not Press (2001)*.

A resonant and measured reader, Alan has performed his poetry regularly. His long poem *Picaresque* was performed to a packed Sanctuary Cafe in 2000, only to be reprised at The Red House in the 2003 Brighton Fringe Festival. This piece has served as the blueprint for his more recent development into the realm of narrative poetry.

By the same author:

Alan Morrison, Poems, in *First Edition: Don't Think of Tigers* (The Do Not Press 2001)

Picaresque or *The Pirates of St. Patrick's and other Poems* (Sphinx Pamphlets 2003)

Forthcoming:

Clocking-In for the Witching Hour (Sixties Press 2004)

Feed A Cold, Starve A Fever (Sixties Press 2004)