

John Gartland poems

Thoughts from the West.

1 From Bangkok...

Seen from a climbing aircraft,
free and heading west again,
like some disordered mainframe,
all aglow, Bangkok - hacked into
by charlatans and magnates,
dystopian projection,
or a games programme
for madmen, sprawls below.

“Careful with that axe Eugene”.
This psychedelic feedback is
Floyd’s anthem for a faithless age.
A billion heretic synapses,
confronting supine darknesses
have fired our dangerous bonfire
of iconoclastic rage.

But see the time, my friend, *the iceman cometh*,
he comes to feel your collar while
you fret and feel your age.

New sorcery is chemistry
and our circle is an unobsequious mind;
so myths have repossessed us
and, like Orpheus, we steal the prize,
beset by ghosts and demons,
but we will not look behind.

So God and Merlin, Nietzsche and O’Neill
have left the building,
that much the cruel concierge confirms.
J. Hunter Thomson checked out stoned
with fear and loathing still enthroned.
In Toxicville, Casinoland,
a plague of bankers fiddled
and the dreaming city burns.
Bizarre, but far from Wall Street,
unwashed, unhedged and unwanted,
also Bangkok beggars understand

diminishing returns!

The prophets, Huxley, Leary and O'Neill
have left the building,
that much the crooked concierge confirms.

Behold, be sure, be scared, *the iceman cometh*,
cool as rigor mortis, and no proffered easy terms.

2 ...To Donegal

But driving
to the reading up in Donegal,
re-visiting the windy West,
as rapt as any lover,
best redeems a poet,
weaver without witnesses,
invests in me a landscape green
of ancestry and memory.
The straight road to old friendships,
and the boundless zest
of childhood wait within
the healing whisper of the trees.
So, under rolling Sligo skies,
through Drumcliffe, northward,
by Ben Bulbin's side, I'm breathless
in the land's embrace,
this stormy blessing of a place
we cried so often, leaving,
lives ago.
In Donegal, a local priest,
biographer of cardinal by the kilo,
greet me with suspicion,
sniffing out I'm spoiled by travel,
reading; enforced Catholic downloads
and their subsequent derision....
a cold eyed horseman, passing by,
a mourner at God's funeral.
Why? My alienation's on the sleeve
of an outsize Hamlet tee-shirt
badged "to *see* - or not to be".
I've stared too long into the void
and the void has outstared me.

And say...
all this flies outward to the stars,
echoes of forgotten echoes,
needlepoint of acts and dreams,
love and folly, tapestried
on galaxies, eternally.
Sixty six hundred crucified
along the Appian Way.
From fighting beside Spartacus
to rotting four years on the cross,
defeated of the Servile War,
"Pour encourager les autres,"
as Voltaire would dryly say.

The weave, the luck,
the loyalties of ordinary lives.
My grandfather, run off the road
in Galway by the Black and Tans,
my father's father, reaching
for his gas mask on the Somme,
not knowing he'd survive, be one who'd
drowse this nightmare well into
the age of Rock and Roll.
Survivors of the servile war
I marvel at, and thank,
here, in the green soul of the West.

For King, or country, or some prophet,
bombers and the *men of god*
with zeal still recreate, in blood,
Gethsemane; for Everyman.

So, say...
as this flies outward to the stars,
lend me a heretic's courage,
strength to see;
an unobsequious mind,
and poetry;

a voice to wage the Servile War,
to leave Orphean footprints here,
in each philistine hemisphere
in sand, beside the ebb tide,

while I can.

Luck and Blood

The Cyclops was out to lunch,
when a school friend sneaked me
into his grandfather's house
to share the dark secret of the
old man's glass eye.

And in a cluttered industrial terrace,
a world of loudly ticking clocks,
mothballs and photographs of strangers,
there it was, glaring out at us
from a drawer with the deaf-aid
and the military medals.

Exciting to me as Jason exploring
the Cyclops' cave! And I feared
the grumpy old man's return. I never met him,
then or after, and he's long since in his grave,
but that dread of a blinded monster's rage...
still lurks behind a schoolboy's laughter,
as awful as Argonauts for breakfast,
and cannibal giants, or any Greek myth
blood-bright on a borrowed page.

2

There were many of us then with
forbidding old-soldier grandfathers,
veterans of the First World War; and
it was no golden fleece they'd brought home.
In Fletcher Street, my grandfather
sat at the end of another terraced row.
Each day, behind his fierce white beard,
he'd scoff, in amazement at his survival,
scorn at our naivety; or that is how I see it now,
for it's intimidating silences I most remember,
and how he'd give perfunctory replies to great aunt Gertrude,
as she fluttered about, finding cheese and bread for visitors,
or rescuing a salad from their gloomy old kitchen.
But his natural redoubt,
behind that prophet's beard, was silence.

Age caricatures our faces.
I study his younger soldier's mask,
staring grimly, fists clenched,
out of World War One.
Compare it with the old man's glare
that I remember. Despite questions
I could never ask, it's clear,
in him, a soldier's son, that,
prime in all his long life's drama,
sardonic, bitter stubbornness had won.

3

And behind him twists the mantra,
like a corpse upon a gibbet,
of the battles he had been through,
Ypres, Arras and the Somme;
of some infernal triptych
Hieronymus Bosch nightmare
he'd been painted into, always,
Ypres, Arras and the Somme.

And I am an aviator struggling for height
in the freezing air over the battlefields of his life;
regiments pushed into a juicer,
the blinded screams of poison gas,
and shell holes full of wasted comrades;
wire, festooned with stiff and
pointing conscripts, coiled like
crowns of thorns around the rotting
butcher's window of the salient;
cemeteries of mud,
pennants of black intestines
waving like the flags of nations;
the stink of fear and urine,
duckboards slippery with blood.
I struggle for height and distance,
as he drinks in his indomitable chair.
Disembowelling bombardments vomit
shrapnel, corpses, body parts,
insanity and medal ribbons,
whole lifetimes of despair.

My mother told how,
in the next World War, she
nursed a baby girl alone, with
dad away on active service.
His father came, demanding dad's blue suit,
"Because he won't be home to wear it".
She knocked his hat off,
beat him from the door
and never forgave him or forgot.
So, in a lot of ways
that shaped my views of him;
that and his unfriendly silences.
An analytical chemist, and
no easy man to analyse,
I saw him through my mother's
angry, father's disappointed eyes.

All, actors of chaotic past,
whose stories, now, I'm struck, I
walk the tightrope of their fates
to tell; must marvel at the luck
that gives a voice to this rich dust.

And behind him twists the mantra,
like a corpse upon a gibbet,
of the battles he had been through,
Ypres, Arras and the Somme;
of some infernal triptych
Hieronymus Bosch nightmare
he'd been painted into, always,
Ypres, Arras and the Somme.

Hologram Heart

And those old love poems...
Yes, they're still in working order,
charged up and ready to go.
I read some the other night
and they flew me, hair on end
to the transfigured city
of our meetings, revisiting
that place apart, love's elevator,
on power spikes to the hologram heart.
And I taste the old proximity;
believe it, instantaneously
those old love poems find us.
Ozone sparks,
fizzing circuit breakers
of the illicit sea behind us;
and we're entwined together,
phosphorescent swimmers,
tangled in a foreign wind,
and time still whispering
between yesterday, and you, and me.
Whispering, subcutaneously,
on deeps,
where old love poems find us.

Miss G.

Miss Murdoch wears a shadow
like the sea
beneath her eyeshade,
murmurs of the depths
that steal her eyes.
From lights-out
till the sedatives
can catch her in the undertow
she cries aloud for.....
I never catch their names.
Meths and sour cologne and
broken memories in
antiseptic darkness;
commonplaces in
the fabric of our dreams.
So far away,
it seems,
the Easter outing to the coast.
A stranger nearly kissed me on the train.
Did I resist him
or did someone interrupt?
So far away
my staring
at his image in the window;
the nights are cold.
I never knew his name.

Miss Murdoch's lips are still.
She sleeps;
and at the place she falters
in her litany of shadows,
there,
she keeps this withered flower
from the margin of an ocean,
keeps it pressed
until the hour she awakens
and resumes;
nothing alters
in the litany of shadows;
nothing alters.
Sandstone holds the imprint of a life
for such a short time,
whispers in the winds's ear
all particulars.

Tombstones of the fishermen,
betrayers,
dumb and licked smooth
by the wind's tongue,
blank tombs.
Sandstone,
clean of every secret
has betrayed all for the wind's kiss,
whispers
in the winds ear....
I never catch their names.

A musician
from the orchestra
once courted me.
He paid for only best seats
but would leave me
while he played the second
piccolo at concerts.
Sometimes
he would smile my way;
his conduct was impeccable,
but often
I was lonely
till the interval.

Footsteps of a night nurse
passing,
song of the cold
fires
rings in grey rooms.
Does her step
disturb the dust
in each grey corner
or must all dance
to the music
of the chaste lights,
cold notes,
hanging on the bitter wind
like seabirds....
should I warn her that she steps
an endless measure,
lay the spectre of my fears,
and ask
is chance the divine
music of the spheres?

I should warn her
but the words come
like a murmuring of sleepers,
like the wind among
old effigies of sandstone
as she passes.
The nights are cold
where weeds
and windblown grasses
hide the fishermen.