

from *Eleven Political Poems*

for *Brian Buckley*

X

No New Thing

No new thing under the sun:
The virtuous who prefer the dark;
Fools knighted; the brave undone;
The athletes at their killing work;
The tender-hearts who step in blood;
The sensitive paralysed in a mood;
The clerks who rubber-stamp our deaths,
Executors of death's estate;
Poets who count their dying breaths;
Lovers who pledge undying hate;
The self-made and self-ruined men;
The envious with the strength of ten.

They crowd in nightmares to my side,
Enlisting even private pain
In some world-plan of suicide:
Man, gutted and obedient man,
Who turns his coat when he is told,
Faithless to our shining world.
And hard-faced men, who beat the drum
To call me to this Cause or that,
Those heirs of someone else's tomb,
Can't see the sweeter work I'm at,
The building of the honeycomb.



Give me time and I'll tell you

O how they opened the gates for me,
and the birds stood on the earth and waited for me,
and behind the barbed wire hard air
noticed we were coming. So give me
time and I'll tell you

how I nearly died for my country
and failed to: last of the big survivors.

Survival is a game at which
the incurious are best;
if they have to walk past corpses, they'll do it
with a frown of concentration.

And I was curiously incurious.
Volunteering, called up, getting the times wrong,
I ended up walking to glory between two MPs,
chiacking, my Trotskyist rag in my pocket,

innocent, cocky, doomed,
like a conman.

O sentries, will you guard the frosty river
patrolling the acres of harsh grass, so midnight
can settle into the water? I wasn't good
at sentry-go. They caught me
in the Rec. Hut, my cap over my ear,
stirring the hot coals with my bayonet.

On the parade-ground, where heavy
sun and the heavier rifle-stock
seemed slapping always on bare flesh,
I learned again the body is a fever;
my shoulders split black like figs.

For two weeks, both knees in plaster,
I was the parody of an airman
(but that was in another city)
Each day, as I shuffle-marched
into his lift, the lift-driver said,
what've they been doing to you,
eh, Curl?

playing Rugby with me, actually,
Curl.

Or deafened by a stray grenade
that rolled more nervously than usual
or falling to water-logged lungs
from the commando-rope's
sad height, or with wrist smashed by an iron hoop,

we might all have said, Eh,
what've you been doing to yourself,
Tich, Tiger, eh, Darky, Curl?

and it would have meant nothing. Then, I was healthy,
breathing the clear day of promises,
sleeping on earth or in luggage-racks,
able to bear my body's occasions.

But, later,
a pin of fire screwed every joint.
Once, when they were short-handed,
the self-conscious Wing-Commander medico
poised the needle, and missed the big vein,
and hurried off, embarrassed by blood.
Seldom have moustaches suffered so.

My veins were full of silt.
If I bent my elbow
it was like earth shifting in a tube.
I reached out, poetry drew me
like a death in the desert. I was
nearly choked, as with an evil spirit
choking with love.

When I was invalided out, I was
six stone of lightly stooped bones,
too thin to button my blue belted uniform jacket
my feet were tender as a new club-foot.

It was wartime. Yet these were the violences
of dull chance, normality, peace
follies made for the timidest of men.

from Golden Builders

VII

With the spring rains, small spiders
weave themselves into the walls
till now this one unravelling his body
climbs in a long curve floorward
towards undizzied stillness.

As I towards sleep.

Secondal the sweet bubble
comes and goes in the mouth
dying for a cigarette.

So then the nightmares
I am rolled in sleep am I
free? free to mean
something of my own? The limewhite faces
lower at each other
as if shorn from bodies. The feet in the dance
slowing down. At what speed
how deep
down does the mind
just disappear and in its turn
be dreamed its lingering?

Once

I went out into the cold mist,
two figures dragging the third body
into the lane. I cried out I put out my hand
madly fingers like a grille.
There was no lane, no bodies.



VIII

Timid and hot-tempered
all his years in South Brunswick
my uncle swaggered like a rentier,
never got to know
the city too carnal for him.
In forty years my aunt had never seen him
wholly undressed. He brushed his foxy hair
sideways on his skull, walked
from the knees, with a camel's lope,
down all streets to the Sarah Sands
sickened for hillside air. Behind
the puzzled kindness of his face
swayed his hot dreams of decency.

IX

Fitzroy, Carlton

Even in the cemetery
where the crows and magpies
stood for hours on the bunched tops
of the few trees, they've put
flat green metal shields
like shock-troops
along the railings. The highrise flats
are guarded from the dead.

Who will guard me from the dead?

Vasko, Croat Socialist, sold me his typewriter
but couldn't bear to part. He stroked it
as he talked, and laughed. Needs the money,
and wants a friend to have it. So
a man may turn his goods into effects
while still alive.

And Roman, Ukrainian,
proud as a Turk,
practising honour in Fitzroy
as if he could stare up wheat
in Brunswick Street,
died at one corner, in the slimed oil
of his motorbike. And left his two best friends
to quarrel over his radiogram.
One flamboyant commanding
the other steady and furtive
both manoeuvring to impress me, unwilling
mediator.

And Milan, counting his books
every day,
touching the spines before he would risk entering
the long sloping lines of his diary,
pacifist, dreaming of Brazil,
the words of friendship halting on his tongue.

In my country . . . my country . . . my country.
No mothers here. All deaths flat, metallic.

X

Micro-Biology I

Been here before. Through
the smart-arsed doors
two deep stairs lock. White coated demonstrators
carry their phials in front of them like tulips
and flick you with their eyes.

I've been up here before.
If you pause, just here,
halfway up the clanking stairway,
and lift your head, let your shoulders
feel them, listen at their feet

you can hear them, over and across the shallow ceiling,
the sixth floor, a floor of dogs

the sound of them
sifting out like blows; voices,
their one voice, the building
breathes them at every corner.

Think of them at the live bone
at the tender unpeeled wood
their voices crossing like the yelps of children;
think how, in any circumstances,
the body makes will make its effort.



Ceol-Beag for James McAuley

In that last hard springtime we were friends
still. I held your hand a long time, pressing
the pale erosion of the bones.

No garden
could have seemed newer, none
surprising us so much with
the Chinese green fossil at its entrance,
the sky pale and climbing,
bricks of the mellow wall unshaken
by the sun, as you sat
painfully in the wallseat
reading my manuscript. So boring.
I bent and unbent with pain, walked
in and out of the silk chill shadows
of lawn. The sea shone. We looked at it through
our pale skin, water
flashing under the long grass slopes
where we had climbed carefully as turtles.
That was how I last saw you, your fingers
crooked like wire, your voice speaking,
tissue-thin, of new experiment: 'O teaching!
We have to learn that all over again.'

For years we'd argued; *or*, I listened, laughing,
to the baroque inventions of your scorn.
Style was your art; pain, art; philosophy
an art like politics; and politics
an art, too, like drawing hair from stone.
Many a night we spent arguing
about them, boasting of our enemies,
putting them down: but always, by morning
we'd be again men of no property
and no importance, whose high-reaching jokes
could never dispossess the great.
I remember, the sunlight touched your mouth like glass.

You were a great man for a hangover;
but now, we'll drink no more, until I find
(and in your name commission them one song)
the mouthless pipes waiting, the animal skin
waiting, stretched instinctly on the drum,
to make the CEOL-BEAG, where shapes change
into music, as in the moisture of the womb.

That day the soil was melting with the first
rustlings of summer; birds dropped grass seeds.
Pound, Webb, Auden: more
and more of the immortals were dying:
with animal heads, with beautiful
cramped earth faces, while the light paled,
they faltered back into their element.
Hearing of their deaths, going from one trivial
ordeal to another,
I found the underworld journeying with me,
and heard their voices mewling in the grass.
The sea crushed into the light like ice; and you, with back
to the sunwall, feigned not to be dying.

Your letters scrape on the surface of the floor
with a long gentle sound; Rilke would have
kept them, enchanted, like a bloom on skin,
hearing and testing them with his throat muscles.
So for the small pibroch: poets,
as much as clansmen, need what courtesies
alone can kill the thirteen thousand miles
that lie between us, flat as death. I choose
a native tuning: play the first tune,
Irish. The proper music for you now.
Next, the soft second tune: the rosined bow,
a harping pipe, a round of goatskin, play

the approved lilt, and in Dundrum, with the green estate wood
opposite, I think of what you said,
'I'm terrified of the Ireland inside me.'
Her light stands in the chesnut trees: vase-shaped:
the peony leans backward, open-sided, tall, the true crimson.

Cait

First there was your dark
child-profile then your whole face
olive with breathing
then your brown legs by the ocean But
when did you last
cry, lean slumping
backward, till your face stood
dark, trembling, a muzzle
drawing up gusts of air
as the tears coursed down it?

One time, I remember: your eyes
seized up with pain, you held my shoulders
could barely whisper
through the car window.
Throat-collar opened, hair
the long braid moving your back,
you stand forward on
your flexed leg: your eyes liquid, unblinking,
always, even when you were set
like coal in your anger



A Leaf from the Firestorm

City heat, that closed noise system
is clamped on you like canvas
while you stand after midnight
in your own garden, hosing
a leaf from the firestorm.

The water sparkling in the air
like bicycle spokes
makes a new thing out of it, smooth,
artefact, glossy as enamel.
It smiles on the grass. Behind you,
sizzling, new leaves from the firestorm.

Wittgenstein's Face

The skin texture, the bones
mimetic as music,
a strict system of plans
drawn for the spirit:
traced in, for example,
to Wittgenstein's grained face
that holds its aching profile
on the book's cover
till it seems, like Menuhin's,
a life's task: Is *it*
ugly or beautiful? A face
that would draw its questions down
the executioner's blade
looks out levelly, curt

with years of remissions,
and we see it as bone and flesh
at the moment of its invention,
not yet silenced; it looks out of itself
as if it presupposed hands
wrestling and talking
though wanting also to grope for
the rough edge of coat-sleeves.

The face is a closed kenning,
a riddle: *not death but dying*
is an experience within life.
Who has encoded this?

Small Brown Poem for Grania Buckley

Paleface, small fume of fire,
flame that burns nobody,
each time you come into the room
you compose a new colour.

You have mastered the trick
of hovering in doorways
with the fury of the eavesdropper,
peacemaker, magpie at nesting,

Your cardigan worn like an argument,
your runner's legs in straight trousers,
as you stand there, being praised,
as if your whole figure had just been brushed.

Even in the rashness of the close
night, you ask questions about space,
as we watch the black spread like lava
and the stars keep their grip on it
in the pale, pale cold of Kildare.

An Easy Death

Death makes its sweep over the grass,
wind rolled in leaves, a torn wing.
An answering fickle beat
flaps at the ribcage.
Get rid of these cups and saucers,
the transistor, the pattern-rugs,
this dull heap of necessities
I saved up for once. Recycle the poems,
clean off the margins of these books,
give them back to the poor
from whom they came.

Heart jerks in its black triangle.
It's too hot for change, too late
for wills and testaments,
too dark for growing up
into the strain of the new life.

If I could go blank
as the crow's picked bones,
or burn out, quick as pine branches,
and be finished with it,
men and women,
friends, the work half-marshalled,
the squalor of deprived places,
the flayed and reeking countries,
and care for nothing
but the sun on this brass ring,
those dead breast bones.

But I've been down so deep
there's no strength to wish
anything, even that blankness;

I have let go;
already
I am falling from their picture.

Catholics, we were trained for it,
the maze of words, the candles
unrolled from years of tissue paper
for this moment, the petite firm
forward-leaning priestly movements,
necessary as the dying itself;
trained to compose the soul
for all crises: death, cancer, waste of summer,
insolence, neglect, humiliation,
the drying-out of friends,
the uncouth stroke of money,
the ordeal of home-going,
the rising mist of time,
this priest packing his cold oils.

And Thomas Hardy, dour optimist,
thought they would all be thinking of him
at that moment, murmuring like leaves
about the leaf of his passing,
quiet strong people communing, 'He was a man
who used to notice such things.'

But think of your name as something
burnt up in a moth-flight,
thrown off by a self which has learned
to seize its oblivion
for the sake of memory.

Lights glint on dust. On tussocks.
On car bonnets. On a small walking face.
He takes the note, wanders
diagonally down Main Street,
gawking, stupid as a leaf,
his eyes all hair and cheekbones,
believing in the world
that bears him up. That will go soon.
Even as he goes his messages.

Seeing Romsey

I see Romsey through a hole in the wind
as I used to in late autumn, in the southern gales,
just there, not vibrating with changes
but like a model that has grown to its full height.
The timber houses have roofs of painted iron,
the brick ones are lowering with warm tiles.
The tree near me is the one I climbed
fifty-three years ago. I smell *roses* on the fence
where once the whole air was brushed with cypress.
Proust's madeleine, nothing. Even the smell
of trains that haven't run here
for forty years. Smelling strong as they slow down.
Smell of the comics they brought each Saturday.
Proust's madeleine was nothing to this,
or Eliot's hyacinths and lilacs
or that great heap of blossom in Yeats's window.
Nothing to this. To the fire smell of the forge,
squeezing into the smell of burning hoof. Incense
through the voices singing *O salutaris hostia*
that never sing Latin any more.
I smell the printer's ink, and books,
and dust that flashes when the raindrops hit it
as it takes the rain into itself.



Enter the poem
as you came into the world,
naked, as you will leave it,
tight-bellied, crying against death,
hearing the clap of a hand.

You prided yourself
on how you'd paid most debts.
But nothing's paid at all.
Look close enough, the light
is absorbed into the wall.