

NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS

Angela Kirby

On the Writing of War Poetry

‘Can civilians write war poetry?’ asked Adam O’ Riordan. It’s a fair question; one he answered by claiming that some of the finest poems on war in recent years have come from civilians, naming in particular Tony Harrison. But the right of a non-participant to speak in the voices of the victims of war, or of others who have seen active service, remains questionable, reminiscent of concerns raised in post war debates as to whether or not a gentile could or should write about the holocaust. We who experience war at second hand, as mere observers or as relatives of combatants, may find an oblique approach the only acceptable way to deal with the subject; only tangentially do we feel able or entitled to write about war’s realities. Even Paul Celan, a survivor of the camps, struggled to write directly about what he had seen and undergone. In his most famous poem, ‘Todesfugue’ (Death Fugue), he wrote

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink
we shovel a grave in the air there you won’t lie too cramped

Born in 1932, twelve years after the end of the Great War and seven years before the outbreak of World War Two, I soon became aware of an unspoken sadness in my extended family, still mourning the death of my father’s brother, killed during one of the last cavalry charges, in October 1918, aged twenty-one. Yet the war was seldom discussed and it is only recently that I have begun to write about it. Perhaps because of its centenary and the 70th anniversary of D Day, both wars have begun to obsess me.

In September, 1939, I was sitting under the kitchen table when Chamberlain announced that we were now at war with Germany, ‘In and Out of the Kitchen’ recalls this.

In the kitchen, Hilda and Nancy
are singing: Red sails in the sunset,
they sing, red sails on the sea, but
the silent child who is sitting there

beneath the long scrubbed table
floats out on the dog's red cushion
into a sky as red as the tomatoes
Hilda and Nancy are bottling, while
a man on the wireless says I have
to tell you that no such message has
been received, and Hilda and Nancy
stop singing, That's it, then, says Hilda,
and We'll be for it, says Nancy

I watched my four brothers join up; two were badly wounded, all were traumatized to a greater or lesser degree. My three sisters were also in the services, witnesses to death and suffering.

One of the first war poems I wrote was 'Early Mass, 1943'

Vere dignum et justum est ... it seems right to be
so hungry and so cold, offering Mass for those at war,
our stranger-fathers, our round-eyed brothers and sisters
gawky in caps and uniforms too large, too stiff for them ...

An elder sister made sure I was immersed in poetry, introducing me to works that most would have considered unsuitable for a five year old, including those of the war poets. Long before I could comprehend anything of the meaning, their words and rhythms became woven into me, but it was only when I began to write my own war poetry that I finally understood their tragic profundity.

'Foxholes', the first war poem of mine to be published, describes a brother's return from occupied France and his subsequent nightmares, how it seemed to me as a child.

Back from France by small boats
and night trains,
the last one stopping
to let him down in the wet fields ...

in at last to the kitchen,
where some mornings
we'd find him there asleep.
spark out on the dog-haired sofa ...

for years after there were times
when the dreams came back
till we grew used to it, waking
to shouts and screams,
to the glimpses of him
struggling naked in his damp
and foxy bed.

It was only through the memories and writings of others that I experienced the First World War, only as a child and young teenager that I went through the Second. Not until the death of a grandson in Afghanistan was I faced as an adult with the terrible truth of conflict. It was two years before I could write about this, and then only a short meditation on his funeral.

How It Is

i.m. Royal Marine Sam Alexander MC

Trestles slid away, folded
and put aside, candles snuffed
the singing stops, the music
dies, mourners drift off
and regroup by the gate.

Dear God, there seems
so little now to show for it all
nothing but a rolled-up flag
a scatter of wreaths, a bugle call
this shock of fresh-dug earth.

Later, the same experience fed into the poem 'Hellebores' in which a woman gardens as she grieves for her son

leaves push up in spring,
the waiting gets harder.
At last the down-turned
flowers-heads come. One by
one, she turns their wan and

freckled faces upwards,
picks six stems, places them
in the silver vase she keeps
besides the photograph
and the framed medals.

A newer poem also concerns, in part, the death of that grandson who, like so many I have loved, died in May, a month which should be full of life and promise.

death is lilac, hawthorn, lilies of the valley, white roses,
death is larkrise, the thrush's song, the cuckoo's call ...

Recently I saw a letter written in 1918 by a soldier servant to the wife of an officer in which he describes finding the missing officer's horse and the body of my uncle. Later, a friend told me of a letter he'd seen from a veteran who regularly visited the war graves in France. These are the roots of a poem about the Imperial War Museum. Then I found a black and white photograph of my six surviving uncles on holiday together in 1928, and was struck by the contrast between their seeming relaxation in the sun and the traces of strain on their faces. This led to the poem, 'On Anglesey'.

Certainly Rhosneigr, most probably August –
in my mother's hand, Picnic at the beach!1928.
Ten years back from Gallipoli and the Somme,
six uncles lean against Lion Rock, captured
there by her Box Brownie, seemingly at ease, sun
warmed at the sea's edge, Gold Flakes in hand ...

Four thousand years ago the Sumerian poet and priestess Enheduanna wrote of the destruction of temples, of blood in the streets., blood flowing down mountains. In 'It Could have Been Me', Clare Shaw wrote about an eight year old girl shot by US troops in Afkat in 2009. So little changes.

It could have been me on that street
with you in my hand
and my hands red and wet ...

Harry Guest

Patch Work

Poetry's written like a tapestry.
Each word's a stitch however tucked away
from text or happening as grey for cloud
or lazy green for foliage. All counts –
each article (in- or just definite)
must be considered (cut? left in? misplaced?).
The whole's a harmony, obscure perhaps
at first – what is that goddess doing? why
clauses to part the satrap from his verb? –
but not including what's irrelevant
(or forces hues and adjectives to clash)
and leaving nothing out which tells the tale
(or illustrates some gesture with a sword).
All language handed down is for our use
like tints on silk or wool, gold wire or glue.
Carpet of flowers may be a cliché but
can fill that lower right-hand corner where
the water's fringed with reeds like lashes round
a giant's eye. We keep all coinages –
a crescent moon, curved like a backwards C,
nail-paring, *sickle moon* – familiar,
available, a half-quotation, blurred,
unlocked by memory, decoded, penned –
no need to 'make it new'. Inventions more
bizarre, more striking ('*easeful death*', '*enisled*',
'*outrageous fortune*', '*gong-tormented*') need
protection in quotation-marks to guard
such one-offs from pollution and contempt
till literacy itself is lost for ever.
Kind poets sometimes re-arrange a choice
of clips from old collections and that's fun
and friendly though could be a cheapening
of filched trouvailles – not that as time flows on
that matters. Soon attention-spans will last
three seconds at the most – a haiku will

prove far too taxing. Brecht contended that
bad poets borrow but good poets steal –
an easy joke to grin at, toss away.
The fabric sewn with care has worth outside
all rules seeking the unattainable
which Mallarmé identified once as
'the flower not there in all bouquets'. Somewhere –
nowhere we know nor ever can – there thrives
perfection, words beyond our reach, a scent
unrecognisable, a chord not heard,
blooms botanists can neither find nor name.