

**A SELECTION OF POEMS FROM “IN FIDELITY TO SILENCE”**

**BY JIM NEWCOMBE**

*Shall the clay say unto he who fashioneth it, What makest thou?*  
Isaiah 45:9

**LOST LOVE**

Lost love  
eats through the heart  
like moth grubs through cashmere,  
the drawer of memory  
bitten through  
with woodworm.

It's not so long since he and she  
were kissing in the streets,  
as if they shared a secret joy  
exalted, obsolete.

## INTIMATION

I have come to know this flesh, this bone,  
this bomb that ticks within my vein,  
the bristling quick of every nerve.

I have learnt to love the faithless pulse,  
the calculations of the cells,  
the spine that listens for the surge.

And if flesh is bread and blood is wine  
the chalky moon of life shall wane,  
its negligence now understood.

Now, in the slow hours of inertia,  
I welcome the bacteria  
bulling heartlessly through my blood.

## **A POPPY GARLAND FOR THE CENTENARY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

Farmed out to garrison towns, the incredible  
men to whom you owe leisure waited in barracks  
to entrench England's liberty – the syntax  
of the *avant guard* breaking as they fell.

To march on, suffering gangrene and sepsis  
and see their mates mown down. Some for disposal's sake  
upended as from a kiddies' dumping truck  
dispersing a cromlech of shovelled corpses.

These rocks are eggs the weasel smashed, burst boulders  
that incubate no growth, wounds that will not heal  
nor ever speak, as burst wallets reveal  
the importance of sweethearts to young soldiers.

The lads straight out of school, son, lover, soldier,  
in whom so many roles were played, now lie dead  
where blowflies frenzy in the webs of blood  
there to lust like harpies the carrion aura.

Ploughed into ruck and loam, where poppy flames  
are blood become the viaticum of Christ,  
their sacrifice has saved you, whose spirits were released  
like bullets into graves that bear no names.

If the temporal contains eternity  
then assuredly hell is here, for here heaves  
the stench of the damned cooking in their graves.  
No fresh May sprigs deodorize such history.

Gorging the blood of tyrants will not appease  
the earth or refresh the crops. Blood will spill  
and atone for nothing. The tyrants will  
rise again, among other flames than these.

## IMPROVISATIONS ON THE THEME OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS ENGLAND

### 1. Finding Words

Serendipity:  
there is a jewel in  
the river's dark trench,  
a leyline of force  
like a netted fish  
tangled in meshes.  
Our language is like  
a quarry of stone,  
the buried bones  
in the country's soil.  
A cypher, a torch,  
in the vaulted gorge  
of a naked nerve.  
In the mother tongue  
a chamber of sound,  
a voltage of words.  
An inheritance.  
So the old bequest,  
and from the earth's flesh  
is softly unsheathed  
the brittle and eroded  
bone of England.

### 2. The Rewards

Infiltrations  
of the green kingdom.  
Militant conquests,  
the herald and parade  
regaled with trappings,  
the coiled scrolls' fretwork  
of calligraphy.  
Again the life we have  
is vanquished. Again  
we are strengthened in  
the long assault.  
Again the fouled lair  
and the addled caste  
profusing.

### 3. Not to Ring the Bell Backward

There is no funeral for  
the hackneyed paradigm;  
no belfry tolls the loss  
of what cannot be revived,  
only present failure  
to wield the plangent  
cry. Sanctity held  
in abeyance. The conch  
vacant of echoes.  
The great war-horse drawn  
by a pit pony  
to the knacker's yard.

## A TRIBUTE TO THE ANGELS OF THE LOST EMPYREAN

*Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo.*

VIRGIL, *Aeneid*

Smoke and fire's darkly charring luminosity  
glamours the hearth with silky gusts of gold,  
like liquid flags blown loose for liberty  
or salamanders hatching from the coals  
in the flap, thrash and crackle of the fire  
where all flames dance with a dancing shadow,  
each reaching skyward like a molten spire  
that glimmers with a moth-beguiling glow.  
Into the pallid ash, softly sunken,  
the wavelet flames cast a mutinous spark  
impulsively, subtle, savage, fallen,  
a cinder kindled in the formless dark.

In the formless dark, gyrating flames of light  
flash impalpably; hell-flowers unfurling  
their bright, bewitching petals to the night,  
reluctant to still their weightless swirling  
and sink to their repose. And as I stare  
I think of angels born of smokeless fire,  
of brimstone steaming in the breathless air,  
an ethereal threshold to a sphere  
of original bliss, from which arose  
the fatal cravings in us that entice  
man's damnable will to ruin, and compose  
the pandemonium of paradise.

## **A DESIRABLE SACRAMENT**

She's lost, to all but my dreams and memories.  
She no longer appears before my eyes.  
If the word made flesh, is there no poetry  
that might restore her image physically  
before me now? No welcome eucharist  
that might allow I held her and we kissed?  
The will is useless; no words are any good  
that won't translate into her flesh and blood.

## YGGDRASIL

*'We are born into the world, and there is something within us which, from the instant that we live, more and more thirsts after its likeness.'*

(Percy Bysshe Shelley)

'It was the year that everything went wrong.'  
My father's estimation says it all.  
Now, when I think about where I came from,

and how lives are formed, how radically transformed,  
it seems that family life as it would become  
was foreshadowed in the ash that Dad named Yggdrasil.

The snared sewer-roots jamming the drainage  
meant the young ash would be felled in its spring,  
its sacred, fabled, ineradicable tap

a complex of unfathomable roots,  
double-crossed, a circuitry transverse  
at the very nexus of the well-spring.

In my mind's eye it stands as it stood in life:  
the furrowed cladding of its honey-tendering  
timber, its cast mesh of delicate shade,

or with sibilant whiplash limbs aflail  
a shrill gust hissing in the rainlit roots,  
a past life pulling at the hair roots of home.

The life-tree rooted in death and detritus,  
I hung in the balances of its boughs  
and hang there still, a banquet for the crows.

To be a foetus forming as the tree  
of life's cut down, to be as yet unborn...  
(I am fixed here. I've been fixed here all my life.)

The sap of ash won't heal whatever ails me;  
the garden's raw grace abruptly disrupted,  
a destiny prefigured in its sibyls.

~

I had a dream in which I walked a path  
all bright sprigs of bloom in embryo darkness  
as if the air flickered with black butterflies,



and for an instant thought I caught  
the fetch of my own semblance in the trees.  
Then from the pale green sprinkling of spring leaves

there stepped a girl, her arms extended, saying  
'James, take my hand; do not be afraid;  
this time I will not fade, I promise,

as I have in so many of your dreams...'  
And then to remember nothing, nothing except  
the bright disguise of stripling flowerets,

the wandlike spindles of an evergreen ash,  
its yielded samaras hymning excelsior  
which, to be sure, is more than adequate.

It came to me that I myself was counterfeit,  
a mirror image of my proper self,  
the shadow of that soul which is my being.

Now the two of us walk within a garden  
that quickens with transplanted life, where clustering  
ash keys tremble with the secrets they unlock,

in which floescence the female becomes male  
and *vice versa*, or else they merge as one;  
thwart sibs of the one root: indivisible.

## **HOME TRUTH**

He would return, aflame with liquor and lust,  
to where she lay, curled up impassively,  
too cold to rekindle what was lost.

Meanwhile, outside, as the moon was rising,  
a wind molesting the leaves of a tree  
and the agitated tree resisting.

## THE BERESFORD TOMB

*Thomas Beresford fought under Henry V at the Battle of Agincourt. He settled in Fenny Bentley in Derbyshire with his wife Agnes, an heiress with whom he had twenty-one children. The church of St Edmund's contains their tomb.*

To enter that church is to pacify  
everything in you. In you everything  
resolves in silver silence, composes  
a stored quiet beneath the labouring sky;  
the lacewing window's tinted latticing  
translating light through its saintly faces.

Two lovers in their tombs lie side by side,  
sculpted like chrysalides, collateral,  
in thickly swathed and ossified remains;  
their bagged bodies unembracing. Stone dead.  
The opaque pallor of arctic marble  
like seedless hillsapes tanned with tawny stains.

What of those lips that once so wildly kissed,  
alive with love and swarming with desire?  
To conceive of them as they must have been  
in a time their tomb would consolidate, outlast,  
history's happenstance, and all that they held dear,  
is to be conscious that nothing can redeem

the caducity of their fecund flesh.  
While cradling them there, like buds before bloom,  
in the settled air, in the holy hush,  
carved around the base of that sallow tomb  
like stars lost in a layered pall of clouds,  
the faceless infants swaddled in their shrouds.

*from* A SHAKE OF THE RIDDLE

XXII

Imagine a god coeternal with  
nothing, and that we are the fruit of his  
longing; that we are his lucid delusions,

absolutes in the glass of his own being.  
We are creatures of perishable flesh,  
yet we sense in us something infinite,

as when the tree's crackled antlers exude  
the blackbird's voice in the buttery sunset –  
disembodied, beautiful, like the Creator's.

Or as we conceive of him. Can we conceive  
of such a voice, our consciousness filtered,  
altered, bound, imaginal, binary?

What is that voice? It is life's defiant light.  
It is the crown of our imaginings.  
We must listen for it, for in this dark night  
it is all we have. It is everything.

## XXIII

Imagine a god coeternal with  
nothing, jealous of the decay he has  
created. If it is anything, it is

the much sought-for, unsearchable deity leaves you  
painfully unfulfilled, and even if real,  
then unrealizable, existing only and

for ever in the silences we cannot hear.  
Still we search for reflections of ourselves  
in the chaos that created us – fetched out

from the energetic, generated clay  
the alpha of autonomous design,  
made party to some secret sacrament –

something that warrants solution; something  
that usurps us of all our love and wrath.  
Magnetic enigmas; vexed questionings.  
An immortal god can only dream of death.

## **A SEASONAL MARRIAGE**

Ripe Autumn now puts on her saffron robe  
and waits for Winter, whom she soon will wed.  
Diamonds of ice and silver dust he'll bring  
and milk-white sheets to make a marriage bed.  
His bride he'll gather in his cold embrace  
and robe and all besides will then be shed.