

Leicester Poetry Society Members' Reading

Friday February 27th 2009

*Given at The Friends Meeting House,
Queens Roads, Leicester*

A STAPLED NAPKIN

Or

*A Few Poems by
Mr Bircumshaw*

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David Bircumshaw has been a member of the Leicester Poetry Society since 1991. Some of these poems appear in his collections *Painting Without Numbers* and *The Animal Subsidies* and have appeared in various magazines at home and abroad.

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DUST woke bleary-eyed and groggy, as if from undigested sleep, and wondering why it was that these things, these *others*, which had not heretofore obtruded, clamoured for attention, for names. He capitulated to their persistence, as one would to a headache, not noticing the pronoun which had so subtly, so lightly, dropped from the sky like a cloak onto his shoulders. Shrugged. Hummed. And then flatly intoned the first litany: 'tree', 'grass', 'sky', 'fruit', 'field', 'sun', 'cloud' and so - etcetera and then again - on pronounced and after a few thousand years, or five minutes of that morning, paused, listening for what came at the end of his voice.

And from the silence that was not there a shape emerged, slowly as the movement of mist, and 'who are you?' he cried out, ejaculating like spit his interrogative.

'I am **Breath**', she said. 'I am Other'.

And the trees detonated with green, the grass fled to the horizon, the sky flung wide its arms, the fruit ducked into curves, the fields closed in, the sun stared hard and the clouds gathered together like the beginnings of a thought.

And so it was, the bird-on-the-table-in-my-head said, that you all began, and I dropped out of its recital, like a twig from a beak, and I all began, looking rather puzzled at my hands that didn't fit, my legs that fell, and at the years that learnt to count: one, two and *whee* with a three softlanded on my mother's lap being taught how to read; then four and five into the school-play-yard as, as if to cue, written blackboard high in scraping chalk, the bullies approached, like straggling marauding men-at-arms.

Quicksilver

He shall be fleshie of nose, and spare of body, and as the Sunne is lord of light,
dry of nature though quick and crafty and subtile of Wit and Tongue and Science and will have
great love for ladies and gentlewomen yet shall have great harm by them and when he is
married, men shall not set so much store by him as they did before. He shall be a friend of
rogues and vagabonds yet be servant or carrier to some great Lord or else a receiver of his
money and will love to preach and speake faire language and rhetorick. You may denote him
by the little finger. He shall take his hue from what surrounds, he shall be unloving, loving,
unlusting, lusting. *A shepherd of thin dreams*
who brings the coat of many colours *a night-watching* and a *door-waylaying thief*.
Who lives for others. He shall be a good man of the church and not espouse the Arts of Warre.
He shall account of worth schools, jackdaws, hares, bowling greens, telephones, swallows,
fairs at WhitMonday, digital radio, foxes, squirrels, sarabandes,
the Great Western line, blackbirds, rivers in winter, curls, lavender, wine, the search for distant
planets as in those presumed about Beta Pictori or 66 Cancri, board-games, the night sky,
tennis courts, libraries, leather, lepidoptera, moorhens, weasels and all those by nature witty
and inconstant. He shall love poetrie and fear Apollo.
He shall sign on on Fridays and drink dry cider. He shall look for his soul in others' eyes.
I woke in the small hours and turned to my side. *I've been dreaming I was alive*
I mumbled. *Not now, I'm tired* she replied.

For Robin Hamilton

The squirrels in his beard were sleeping, he hoped.
The night was free of ghosts. Wild metrics roamed
Outside the fence, but surely a caesura, a tranquil
Resolution was here allowed. Red over white,
White over red, a delicate disturbance of syllables
Opened a rose in his hand, allegorical ladders
Climbed past his window, like late summer scents
Carrying sons of Plato. He thought of sharper
Forms, flints, granite, the clear waters of grain.
A dominie thought called him, a hard collar
Nabbing by the neb the dumbheid and stoshy.
Awa' ye bogles, spirits, mistwalkers, ghosts.
Nae archetypal squirrels, lost souls of quotes,
But a drey made still, and the dree told beware.

Wants Happen Amulet

The moon is heavy with the full. Broken cloud,
copper, smoky, aches across it. A smell
of burnt powder, waste, and the loosening stones
of an ancient pile, grey, its pale turretwork
of embattlements, stand inviolate bar
the crackle of a leaf turning, air's yearning,
the remote invisible sentry's tramp
and about, and a concentration
amounting to a mind. That is to say the air's
mind, the not-yet, the nuclear constellations
being born behind the eyes. The time,
delicate as a girl's waist, or a boy's,
sidles by the watch like a breath walking,
in this almost apotheosis of the dark.
An owl hatched out of a storybook
hoots at identity, fur scent blood, and a yew
creaks as if a thought's mass alighted.
Something's about, turns, and a black imprint,
a negative, a prince of all shadows, forms,
all behind scenes, childers to be seen,
of a crowd's heads, a gaggle agog a heard
of eyes. It is time to descend, prince,
you have risen to come down, speak, ghost,
from your high abstracted precipice,
your speech-plinth. Focus, prince, grasp.
While the black feathers of the raven ruffle,
ready to ply inly, and the night-tree
winces at your weight, your firstwords landing:

From My Home Encyclopaedia:

I have a vague memory of my father, pot-bellied and seemingly a torso with an assumption of legs, but led to bed, assisted by my mother as politeness would say, approximately drunk, as a swaying object somewhere about the fourth year of my reign.

In our small flat. Which appeared to possess a hall of sorts, like the illusion of perspective, bridging the between of the two bedrooms (the smaller, mine; the larger, theirs) and the *living-room* (ours) which was where, in stage terms, the language claimed we acted out our lives.

He does not then seem to appear for years, though for sure he *too lived* with us. He had to do something called *work*, by day, which was distant (sometimes two bus rides away) and alien, as unlike as Welsh, and at nights was required by the pub, where George met the Dragon, the union, and his mates. Which my mother condemned, for *the drink*. But the plain and ever-present fact of his absence she did not protest. Otherwise, he must have inhabited that same mist that covers so much of my early (and more recent) memories.

I think he recurred when I measured eight, as I recall an evening before the still-then coal-fire, a glowing snugly winter's evening, when my mother urged and urged me to mock his nose (its largeness) his tea (its undrinkability) his friends (their smell) his importance (its littleness). That fades, and I am sitting on the floor and he is high and seated above me but mumbling in a voice he tells me means that he was born *elsewhere*, not, God forbid, *here*, mumbling all his funny (unfunny) stories of *his* childhood, of crowding with brothers and sisters round a pot *yum-yumming* at the prospect of stewed peel of potatoes and apple-rind, of his trousers damp from the wash that stank, of horse-shitten cobbled streets, of fresh milk in churns, of playing with hot coals in braziers, swinging them faster and faster around in an arc from his bare knees to his head and he laughs again, his out of place, living in his own world, alone and loveless at the hearth at the heart of his family, laugh.

And I can retrieve too a Saturday and a day-trip on the Midland Red through Tewkesbury (where we stopped for toast) and Upton-on-Severn (where from the upper-deck I watched how the river looped about the houses like a noose about to close) and Evesham, with all its close-packed churches, of which I remember nothing.

And, too, I can re-stock a road by a beach-front at Rhyl (it might have been) or Weston or somewhere else to the west and on the coast again, walking between and joined to their hands and sensing people, *adult people*, (my parents) for this time at least together, smiling.

And a restaurant where we ate plaice. Or sole.

And once seeing him cry, from the numb cold of his bricklaying hands, that fed us all, in the bitter world that was his alone and winter.

Yours

"this they call the doctrine of the shattered vessels"

There is an old man locked out in the street
who shouts at no-one and dank air
as fitfully
as an injured animal
rolls on its side

and a shuttered-down store called *Rajia's*

where a dog flattens its nose
on wet red brick and slick
blue stones

and a sort of stillness like clear sky
a jolt of realisation

as in the aftershock
of someone else's accident:

like glass

the First Cause lies open
its seven-branched its broken ...

I like poetry because it has vowels and consonants too
I can write poetry because I'm better than you
I believe in poetry because it's a testament to God
They all like poems but they can't bloody rhyme

I write poems because I failed at maths
My poems mean me and they are there for all to see
I want to communicate and you'd better well listen
Our verses are our hardships and the dust in our mouths

I want to be a poet because my teacher said I should
I'm widely published and my tenure's a cinch
My poems are wallpaper they're made from my skin
God likes poems because all beetles are His friends

My work is praxis and erasure and enhances e-media
I like poems because they remind me of trees
I write from desperation against the last day
My targetted portfolio guarantees me first prize

I have to write poems for the holes in the words
Poetry it was rescued me when the shadows called
We like to collaborate and produce furtive verbs
I write for the downtrod, and certain kinds of mice

Victoria turned to me, inclining then raising her head.
What's poetry, Dave? - Shsh, Vicky, it's secret I said.

911

Tolkien is thoughtful and the hobbits perplexed
as trademarks spread to the Norse gods' shields
while *Saruman the Interview* goes Fox, cable, Sky;
Nosmo the King assaults the settle of *The Shire*.
Dwarvish, a *dip* hawks rings, cameras, DVD's.

Tolkien is thoughtful and One-Eye the Hooded One
spits about darkies with *Christ* Carl Gustav Jung.
I grew up a city boy, but I'm learning my trees
I tell him in Old Saxon as he stirs in his tweeds.
An identity crisis switches Twin Towers and Two
as he confides in a beer-stain *no inkling* and *rue*.

FRAGMENTS OF A CHINESE DIARY

i

Each night I paw at *The Book of Odes*

like a sad-eyed creature stumbled out
of an endless forest

looking at a camp-site clearing
uncomprehendingly.

ii

I dreamt I had made perfect
my rough technique
on the bamboo flute.
That my mind's web quivered
to the pauses between raindrops
or the air's troubled turns.

To the heartbeat of stars.

iii

A woman is shouting at her own locked door.
I have counted the khaki on the Great North Road.
A quartet crashes
through the silence of my wall.
There are shirts they are struggling
as the wind's brawls.

Bow low, kowtow, you caution, the Emperor's men are marching.

The Madness of King David

The servants no longer purred but barked.
The Queen Consort was plotting with France.

Slowly he picked the feathers from his skin.
That was for Wednesdays. Other days,

unlike the people in the lifts, he stayed
all the time awake, knowing that by his consciousness

the world might hold together. Not fall
apart. Not fall

until Thursdays, for instance, which were a particular kind of problem,
as the skies were never the right colour

nor the noises outside his palace
(for they had the hue of small burrowing mammals)

(And his puzzlement was presented with certain shots of Kim Novak
in *The Great Bank Robbery*, wriggling her bum

with a rather conspicuous tail-flounce perched on her dress
reminiscent of Great Ape females on heat. Disturbingly. See zoo. See cinema.)

Nor the verse forms which came to hand
for their exoticism bethought him of trade wars.

But there were other days again, not named on the calendar,
when he revisited his telescope

(the world's first, many times since upgraded and restored)
a gift, the Chancellor told him, of Johannes Kepler,

where, in his own perspective, the firmanent hung
studded with the running signatures

of those he thought of as friends.

A SALT SEA SCROLL

Abominations upon the green-hatted kind
as in a rain of frogs on time-kept Cortinas.
May the murrain rot the matrons of Uruk
but not the estimable overseers of the new malls at Shrewsbury.
To the Righteous the true, the pure ineffable light
and to the Wicked the blinding of eternal night.
Their testes shall shrivel like wizened peas
their wombs shall be blocked
like the drain-pipes of tenements
as happened unto the credit-cards of the Elamites.
So that the Lord's poor ascend
even to the throne's right hand
and the innocent be folded from furthest night
in Love's heaven-wide and open tent
So that the Kingdom come
and the Bride-Bed be saved

but not the *Pshites*, the Ebonhim, the Tasman,
nor the masticators of first-born lamb, the wearers
of hand-woven astrakhan, those who spit in a north wind,
Pharisees and Sadducees and staff of *Newholme Library*,
the keepers of matchbox labels, usurers and practitioners
of tupperware parties, *Mrs Ethel Jones* of Ystryddgwyn,
those who deal in used assegai and blackbarrelled carbines,
nor the seventh-month's High Priest on the Late Late Show,
the *tea-room dancers* and Abomonites of Cush, those whose
shadows defile the west wall at late noon, the blue-rinsed
anthropophagi all covetous of cream tea, the pity-frozen
killers

So that our souls might *bathe*
in Jordan pure
and everlasting light.

PARNASSUS ASH

Meanwhile my Lord Byron
(a tickling of atoms, dust in a peasant's nose)
writes on:
the moon threw down her silver raiment
or
of little wit gathered, and princelings scattered

under massed grey cloudbanks
(where there is here, here there)
like an English sky
(as ill-defined a mind as mist)
inhabiting

a raincoat and letter from Mr Auden,
the badleg tap of a stick
and a hollow-towered castle of looming
o'er gloaming.

It's eight bells. *Ta-ring. Ta-ring, taringaring.*
Etcetera. Somewhere
HanCheCiaoJuanGuNgZhiRaiXi
peasant sneezes.

SPECTARE'S CERTIFICITUDE

It is a tired, it is a long way of days to go. Spectare sniffs the seductions
of **Van Hougeworts** coffee, imports its tropic turning, primal steam.

Humanized, aroused, with appetite he paperknives the most delicate parts
of a boldfaced envelope: **D.Spectare's Potential Million**. Selected you
why have we? Believe we you deserve it because. True. And

no-one else owns the 7 Spectare prize seals, the unique computer-generated
Spectare number, the Spectre certificate is yours & yours & yours

alone he dreams into hot water on dark grounds, with lissom alacrity shrinks
into a small form lung-torn beneath a black sea: unconsciousness.
Morning is it night?

....life-flash, Cheese!, voice of the dull on high:

Act now, Spectare, ex Ottho Heldingstraat 666, the automaton translator extols
among thr powdering cigars and dockside warehouse bonds

as a dead tone levels
like the real plateaux
of work and sleep and work and sle

e

Pah!

Unfinished Work

It was an evening of small and unremarkable murders.
On Sherlockstrasse, as torn mapflakes imitated snow,
One observed the froidsang of closed detectives, doors.
I would write to you in poetry for the salvation of prose.

Would write in salivation as the quatrains threaten, close.

*

Consider this, old curiosity: a backstreet shop, stop, pawn.
Message not received. 1950, roughly, hangs in the air,
And distant the Empire hoots in the estuary. Fog coughs
Appreciatively, like a connoisseur, Anthony StJohn Aloysius

Has made it last. Such art on your walls, my dears, such
Feeling in the brushwork, such poise.

*

It was simply hate, love, anger, fear. And the idea of beer.
Most of the dead survived. It was we witnesses we feared.

*

A man in my head shouts on street corners. Obliquities
Brush against clothing in the distances of crowds. Slow mists
Curl from winter breaths, smokespeak bars, waitside quays.
My Bombed Pronouns, the sirens still are sounding

In secure wards, behind touch coded doors.

A Canticle for Leicester

7 o'clock. Sunday morning. Dominic, my black cat,
meows like a supplicant at the stained bays.
Farther out, a navy-rig of washing strains
its odd unlikely semaphore: *tee-shirts, underpants,*
towels.

Disturbed, like an art-teacher's hair,
some low dishevelled cloud tumbles on the sky:
in the faint, myopic admissions of light
paper-boys race against addresses like orienteers,
bored and thickening husbands elope with dogs,
lost lives trespass from white ciders and cardboards of careers,
and God's holy anglers and rambles pilgrim
to their scattered, county ways.

Even in a dull citadel,
among the anonymous friezes of its griefs,
the municipal statuary of a hard-working fate,
even in a place of flat vowels and soiled surnames
unglamorous as grudgings, grimms and grykes,
on the winds of a grey river where Lear and his Cordelia
impounded their lives in the black banks, like lines dropped
from the play, even in such wakes on moments the numinous,
littering its bronze haloes like late moons.

Semper eadem,
the motto hums. Which is to say: ever constant. Or always the same.
Like boredom, its pities claim. Or like the flat bread
of persistence, its unleavened resurrection in fact.