

David Greenslade

Here's a Country

Here's a country
small enough
near enough
we can
shove our fingers in
and make it squeal
no one will ever know
not even
the body itself
conforming by word
and yield
to the probing
of our roads
our franchises
our newspapers
replacing its thoughts
with our legislation
its obedience with
our demands
its future with
our memory
its compliance
with our lust
here's a country
as dignified
as a fearless child
we can reduce it to the
degradation of a pornographic
baby
bringing it news
of our conquests

the indulgences of our King
rewarding it
with grants and
the breathing space
of schools subsidies
and special events
here is a country
close enough small enough
it can live
with all we cram into it
until it bursts
like a haemorrhage
and then we mop it
from the walls.

Border

You can't go in there
you won't like it
the country's all swollen up
bloated over-excited
exploding in civic blotches
scenic parades
there are screams groans
anthems marches
undignified complaints
if you already lived there
we wouldn't mind but
they're finishing the long job off
putting an end to all this
Cambrian nonsense it's time
for some brutal honesty
time to keep things
exactly as they are
while there's still some heat

some expiring breath
some traces of froth
in the Celtic Twilight
Welsh Arts Council
anthologists and the
Welsh Union of Writers
want a final solution
poets in Penarth and
Ogmore-by-Sea
fresh from their awards
are sponsoring the
Cardiff Festival
praising the dead breasts
of their grandmother's body
the names she once put
to familiar things
hiring staff to study her
perspective
this thread runs through
the country like a finger print
unless you were a visitor
you wouldn't notice anything
even then the disease you catch
depends on the malice of your host
we can't let you in
you expect too much
you want to know how
a self-respecting
people can live like this
swallowing ratlike amounts of
patronage
if you already lived there
you wouldn't see
but you are a curious visitor
and for our sake
we can't let your sort in.

Prayer For Abercynon

Running the field of fern
Where there are no paths
Ferns high above the head
Running blind
Skipping tussock and rock
Like a deer
Racing headlong
Down the mountainside
And coming up
Where grass resumes
Breathless above
A dry-stone wall

And years later, as adolescents, climbing
Back up to First Peak
From where you can see
Down the valley
How the river disappears
Past the small round rocks
That found a beach of cobbles
In the hook of the river
Under the eyes of the coal tips
That focus to the sea
The shaft of the glimmering river
Drawn from the quiver
Of Cardiff Bay
And fired away

I thought only of land without demarcation
No system of ownership and fences
Far from the ribbons of patchwork terraces
That so shame the valley
I could hardly admit
That I belonged to it

But now with Holland like a chain around my neck
That lush land too
Rank for the seed
With its vertiginous need
For comfort and certainty

I look back to the country
Where atrophy stares from the face of every man
Their lives on the torn streets
Of grey stone and slate
Amongst dilapidated churches, pubs and Workman's halls
Are lit only by the reflection
Of their technological
Recreation

And though each generation
Dies back
As waste flesh
Into the dark ground
Where the seeds scatter
Or the new shoots wither
It is for want of belief only
Belief like water falling
On the sleeping ground
Water untainted by the lies
Of the coin and the cross
And the sense of failure

And though the winds blow vile on the mountainsides
And on the houses below
Where the villagers shelter
Let their lives flame
With a simple pride
That the river may once again
Bring life
For this is not dead ground
This is fallow ground

Lying with Croeso

I am taking you out
and you are wearing language
like a dress. This is how you will talk
to me tonight.

You look like you can sing
and do so, as we travel over a border
to a recommended chef near an estuary.

Our pallets chatter.

After coffee you talk me through your skirts,
folds of garnish over pale limbs, tucked away limbs.
I am a moth plucking at threads.

I place myself carefully and we share
no words, only their beginnings.

Lying with Croeso II

You took me out
in silence, with a bare back
and dipping neck-line, clicking your heels
to my face for conversation.

You stared through the windscreen
all way there, tunneling through
the night to a lake I'd never heard of.

We ate there, excitedly.

I spoke about breath and about
friction, and the shapes that lips make
pronouncing vowels. You nodded.

I placed myself carefully
and we shared words but no beginnings.

Shoe

All that was left when they took a boy
away from the lush pasture filled with choirs of children
catching the ears of the vigilant for blocks around.

Worn at the heel and curled at the toe,
not even whole. Gashes through blue-brown leather,
slaver and tooth-score on the tongue.

Next to the burst ball
in an area of ground down grass
blades still falling and collecting in clumps.

Buckled, an impossible shape
sunning its sole in front of a crowd
mumbling and cursing around the object.

The item that survived
to testify, a remark,
made by a mad dog, a statement
left on the green.

it's a faultline through Potsdamer Platz
where the buildings have pushed down roots
faster than trees, binding old rifts with
steel threads and sky-high glass.

At dusk, the bridge is an apparition in the woods.
A sound like the skitting of dry leaves becomes
a shaken spray can. The bridge
is the only thing that's left to paint,
but the lone boy has no slogans, nothing more to say,
except to make his sign for himself
over and over again.

The Aztecs of Cum Llan

Light is obsidian knives, the sun in splinters
on a pyramid of slate; copper
stains the scree to sunset
from some forgotten
ripping out of hearts.

At the ruins of the temple of the cwm
Madoc's people chat in fluent Nahuatl.

Gladstone dodders on the rock, bringing
tears to the eyes of quarrymen
while everybody sings
and goes on singing, mouths
full of earth.

Rosie Dee

At it from the wrong end

If we could only walk through life backwards,
Squirm, slimy, from the muddy womb at ninety,
Your spouse ready caught and wandering by your side,
Rocky noses growing smaller
With each pace.

Then I would savour that toast, well buttered,
Knowing I'd paid for my sins. I'd do wine well
And bask in a body, uncrumpling.
Finding more voices, fuller music,
Distant horizons in every step.
Discarding the specs at forty.

Like summer my days would sprout minutes.
My thoughts, less tainted by the knowledge of yesterday,
Would sag, baggily, towards that glorious clay,
That childhood, before the inner pit is dug,
When the world outside is a collage
Of close ups: of smooth and rough.

The path, laid out before me, would have the logic,
The safety of a detective novel
Read from the last page to the first.
Maybe even puberty could be fun
If you were to go at it
From the wrong end.

André Stitt

rain foam basalt

Dog end pier

sucked into trench

plunge

tooth dog bone

friend

my end, this night

my home

The Man Whose Shoes Dissolved

Learn to play

with big sad

invisible wings

All angels navigate

your tired shoulders

eating their own lips

What do I know

we're all murderers

Splottlands

My heart and this life like
fishponds

and honeybats

hangs on all the jetplanes
that cross the mighty

horizon, the sunburnt lips

trees, buzzing satellites, and
the endurance of wisdom

that springs from the virtue

of no meaning that's delivered

from her brown eyed innocence

silver tongued style that

has kept us apart and from

being accountable

down here in Splottlands.

See me, I smoke

a big cigar, and

keep migrating, it

gets to be a habit

passing from land

to air, to land, as your

little ship, out there

on the ocean springs holes, and

you will never get to Cardiff, you say,

in a boat full of holes, though

my tears have swollen

your belly in a constant

shock of harassment, travelling,

held in detention, I will never

see your face again, and

this shame will be relived

over and over again

down here in Splottlands.

What I wonder will we all remember
at the end of our days, our life
once long ago, will it be a touch,
a laugh, a smile on a bus, that
still born child, the criminality
of love and garbage; I keep on travelling
sweating you out of every pore, and
chanting, chanting, chanting;
Fuck out the wonder
Fuck out the joy
Fuck out the talking
Fuck out the dreaming
Fuck out the meaning
down here
down here in Splotlands.

Lynne Rees

White

She tackled the flat first, painted walls and ceilings,
re-tiled the bathroom, laid a carpet – a thick
marshmallow pile that crept between her toes
and fingers. That prompted her
to remove the mauve from all her nails.
White would be her god from now.
She'd been through Designer Clothes,
Foreign Foods – she'd delivered monologues
on sushi – and then New Age.
Well, she had her own idea. An Original.
She'd be the one they talked about
in years to come. The one who started White.
She fitted high watt bulbs in every room,
bleached her hair and eyebrows platinum,
a double pack for maximum strength
and removed all other body hair.
But still she thought how positively dark
she looked in all this light, how much her hips
resembled pork against the marble bath.
She tried bathing according to the books
on purification, adding a capful of bleach
then five more, but the skin around her nails
began to peel. And even though
she'd drape herself in white from head to toe,
the colour of her hands and neck would interfere.
She began to hate the evening, the way
shadows insinuated through her room
and how the morning burst upon her
with its blue. She kept the halogen on

T.B.

I am blowing up my father's left lung.
It is huge and covered in old TB scars.
I cannot hyperventilate fast enough
the hole in it burbles deflatingly.
I've got to keep puffing harder and harder
until the doctors can invent micro-surgery.

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In the 1950's TB ward they had enormous pills
that tasted so bad the only way to eat them
was plopped into the morning's sugary porridge.

My father and his fellow patients
are hanging from the top of a door
pulling themselves up to see over it
the man who eats the pills raw
chews them and their papery wrappers
with a relished grim determination.

The other patients go out at weekends
get plastered so bad it counteracts
any good they do being in hospital.
My father is up in the morning
running around the grounds of Sully
in his dressing gown and slippers
keeping fit for his eight hour shifts.

*** **

They want to put their eye down his throat
but my father won't let them.
He wants to go home where he's safe,
where he knows he'll be okay.
"They've seen enough of my bloody innerds
and I've seen enough of them!"
My mother has started to pray again.

The Modern Poet's Fetish for a Map Poem

Philip's Mercantile Marine
Atlas of the World, 1904.
He opens it at the equator
huge pages, card-thick,
their edges worn soft and floury.
Charting oceans with equal importance
to the multi-coloured lands

it would have been splayed
on the bridge of some ship
loaded with phosphorous
nudging small icebergs
through the Magellan Strait.

He rips the pages out carefully
lays them flat, 20 by 30 inches,
the seven seas across his floor.
Placing his body patterns over them
his West German scissors start to cut
and all the cartography bends and shifts,
tectonic plates cavoring
into a warped, unknown planet.

Folding and sewing he joins new worlds.
Pacific and Atlantic back to back,
the coasts of China and Japan merging
with Europe, Scandinavia and Russia.
His feet become icy Poles apart,
the Americas span his mid-drift,
Australia a skewwiff corkless hat,
Africa and India his sturdy legs.
On a whim he uses the leftover U.K.
for a big knotted wide-boy tie.

Adorned, his map fits well.
So enchanted to be charred
he wishes to show off his new found
man of the worldiness.

At the local pub, wearing geography,
his Earth carouses in like the wind,
shimmers in a Black sea of liquor,
Karaoke's the scorched wildernesses
till he ruffles out, a looming storm cloud
to the nearest disco's mirrored globe
below which his paper planet will twirl.

Hat floating off the sweaty edge,
his latitude gyrating longitude,
his jacket full of hurricanes,
his trousers full of tidal waves
till his torrential drinking
drains the Dead Sea and his poles
global warm him to the street
where earthquakes shift his axis,
he head butts the man in the moon
and his orbit collides with the gutter.
There his molten stomach erupts
and his tie suffers devolution.

He lays moaning like the Himalayas.
Jacket and trousers totally tornadoed
their continents awaiting the ridge
of low pressure from the North
whose rain will gently
wash him mapless.

Dis is jest tuh say like

(translated from William Carlos Williams)

Dat I skoffed
duh sarnee
yoo id in
duh freezuh kumpartmunt

an wat
yooz wuz praps
kraabin
fuh laytuh like

Sorree yuhno
ir wuz jaamtastik
reelce baabaaneree
an reelce baraaas

Neuw Fuhget Yuh Kaairdiff

Fraank Fanaarkaapanz on duh mitch
inis bestest daps
onis faatest underaang bogey
like uh propuh Beano comic

Mad Motters donkeyin
raysin froo Grange-end gaardns
korzin uh woppin grate malaarkey
dodgin duh diddykoy

scraamblin kross duh daaffs
kraakin jelly froo duh chewlips
an nuh Paarkeyz frowin uh wobbley
totulley owta duh winda like

Llawhaden: 19 May 2000

Edith Thomas, 91, lies lost in the rubble
of C16 Llawhaden House. She has stumbled
once too often, this time into the two bar electric fire
and her nightie has turned her into a roman candle.

Johnny Owen, 89, the last man to see her alive,
after 68 years now unemployed, says, "she was a real lady."
PC Cowper, 25, drapes the scene-of-crime tape.
He is a police officer destined for a good career.

Opposite Llawhaden House is Llawhaden Castle
built by Bernard, the first Norman bishop of St. David's.
Llawhaden straddles the Landsker, both English and Welsh
were once spoken here. The fire fighters all speak English.

My mother, 85, fluently bilingual, fiercely Welsh
peers through the Herring fencing for an interesting cutting
opts instead for a 2 inch screw dropped by the builder
who erected the DANGER DO NOT ENTER sign.

This visit pleases my mother, scathing as she is of old
women who live alone,
drowning in their baths, burning down their mansions,
going ga-ga without style or presence of mind
while she sails on serenely.

What to say when criticising poetry

(like this poem)

The title's good

(I can't think of anything to say about this poem)
Can you read it again?

(give me time please to think of something to say)
It's too long

(never it's too short)

Lose the last line

(and the rest of it for all I care)

The idea behind the poem is better than the poem itself

(although that's not saying much)

I like your new approach to language

(are you dyslexic?)

Some of your images are truly memorable

(whose poem have you ripped off?)

Isn't this two poems in one?

(it's a mish mash)

I need to read this on the page

(It's too dense, like the poet)

You read your poetry really well

(but you write like an arsehole)

Have you thought about your audience?

(this poem is therapy - see a psychiatrist)

You could place this somewhere

(like the bin)

It's a new approach to an old theme

(it's a clichéd mess)

It's a good performance piece

(it's crap.)

Have you thought about putting the last line first?

(like this poem)

which when it came set his body alive with fire,
flames quick at his finger tips, hot on his lips,
peeling at his skin, turning his hair to magnesium strips,
which fizz, the pop, then fizz.

The car windows shatter,
shooting stars out,

glass constellations growing on the dark tamac
with each pane's crack and burst,

while Dai, head back, mouth open wide,
burns himself on his own blue breath.

Unfinished Business

We often saw him pass the classroom window,
bunking off, jumper alive with ferrets,
two thin dogs snapping round the hem of his coat.

At fifteen he bolted from a tattoo parlour,
down on the docks in Swansea;

bursting into the light before the tattooist could start the S,
sprinting down the street, ATAN still bleeding on his head.

He tried to make sense of it in biro.

appearing at the gates, the crucial letter scratched in,

and despite our fear (we knew he'd dropped
a breeze block onto some bloke's unconscious face,

attacked a teacher with a Stanley knife, threatened
to fill in his kids and fuck his wife) we still laughed;

though it was always he who provided the punch lines –
usually ten or twenty times before someone could drag
him off.

The Blue Book

"Blue Books, The (3 vols., 1847). Reports published by the Government on the state of education in Wales... the Commissioners reported that the common people were dirty, lazy, ignorant, superstitious, deceitful, promiscuous and immoral, and they blamed all this on Nonconformity and the Welsh Language." – *Encyclopaedia of Welsh Literature*

Lingen, Symons and Johnson,
their names give them away,
holding thumb-cornered text books,
not a word of Welsh between them.
Page or man.

They found their God spoken in words
that ran unnaturally in their ears,
and they wrote their decree.

Rather silence than these corrupt tongues,
the words of the father shall not be passed on to the sons.

*

*Because this is how an empire is claimed
not just with stakes in stolen land,
but with words grown over palates,
with strength of tongue as well as strength of hand.*

*

And now another blue book
this, my brother's school book
(bill-postered with bands, but blue beneath)
and inside, the Welsh in his and his teacher's hand.

It has fallen open on a half-written page,
The space beneath hos work shot across with red pen:
Pam nad yw hyn wedi ei offenn?
"Why is this not finished?"

Well, maybe it is now, if not in me, then in him,
my brother, ten years younger,
but a hundred and fifty years and one tongue apart.