

SENEX

poems of my seventy-first year

Selwyn Pritchard

For Leo Haydn, my grandson

POEMS OF MY SEVENTY-FIRST YEAR

I have an aural memory. My Welsh father was full of bits of song, punning quips and alliterative nicknames. When my brothers, who were eight and ten years older, came back from the navy and air force after the war, they spoke in mocking patter and comradely slang. At primary school, in the classroom and the air raid shelter, we sang old songs such as 'Early One Morning', 'The Minstrel Boy', 'The Lincolnshire Poacher' and recited Keats's 'Old Meg She Was a Gypsy' and all manner of things, including the catechism, and were whacked with a ruler across the back of the legs when we made a mistake. I've been hopeless at rote learning ever since.

I have written poems since adolescence, but it wasn't until I was fifty and out of Britain that I published them. Now the situation is that even if you can get a slim volume into print it will sell only a couple of dozen copies, unless you turn into an entertainer and salesperson. This can damage your poetic health. If you don't court fame or hope to make money, the web provides the best source of readers. At my age, in the honking tail-back at every poetic outlet, one ought to get out of the road.

At seventeen, I wrote this for my wife:

When sinks the sun o'er heaven's rim
And stars shine bright for all the world is dim,
What can I do but lie and think of Mim?

As the dawn wind doth waken each green limb,
And thrushes sing their early morning hymn,
What can I do but lie and sigh for Mim?

Fifty years later The Spectator published:

Domestic Interior

Red towel turban around your head,
I surprise you, naked from the shower,
caesarean and hysterectomy scars
a crucifix on your soft tum, cradling
tender tits giving way to gravity at last.

Beyond you in the bathroom mirror I loom,
bald, grey-bearded, with my dicky heart,
arthritic hips - arm out, remembering...
seeing the lissom girl: seventeen,

bare together in my bedroom mirror,
my priapic jut a joke keeping us apart,
spring rain outside, a cuckoo calling...
How lovely, lovely you were and are,
soap in your eye, stumbling, almost falling.



Penultimate

I made myself walk
Because I'm slack
Turned at the crossroads

Towards the cliff's edge
Under the dark trees
On the red dirt track

Before I glimpsed
The sea I came to a stop
Something was wrong

I felt like
A hot water bottle
Being filled to the top

A dull evening
The wind still
No one was near

As I breathed in deep
Only waves collapsing
Over the hill

Was this it?
I waited...
Turned for home

The blade in my chest twisted
Sharp under my breast bone -
Lay waiting

On my bed
Looking at familiar things
Which would not mind

If I were dead...
You see
I survived again

And it's true:
When the future's in doubt
It's smaller things –

Doves' condolences
The sea's rich blue
The photo of my grandson

Smiling on the fridge
Shadows of flowers
My wife has arranged

Her kindness and grace
That delight me
Like Mozart when I wake

Coronary Ward

The moon on her rounds
Bends over my bed
Asks after my heart
In her old way
But I long for nothing
Am content

Above my head
The screen chases
My pulse
My breath and blood
As the dying moon
Sinks down over the sleeping town

The Drunken Lord

Anon. Cviii?

Outside the door the dog barks –
I know that my lover's here.
Shoeless down scented steps I rush
But the naughty man's dead drunk.

I help the rascal into bed,
He won't remove his silken gown.
If he is drunk, let him be -
Better than sleeping on my own!

Translation from the Chines with Zhan Qiao

The White Hat Theory of History

Who was waiting for the conversion of the Jews?
Well, now they are after Lebensraum via Blitzkrieg.
A Republican cowboy dominates the news
With his Texas talk, is in the same league
As Ray Gun, as addled, but really *is* the part,
Cannot act, but has a posse of folks no vote
sullied, with no qualms, as certain in the last reel one blow
(without need to remove hat or coat)
will heroically solve all problems
and win the world's coy heart. Each state,
even the roguish ones, will come to see
the absurdity of resistance and cower prostrate...

But see our next - a shadow sneaks past,
it has a bomb marked 'megadeath' within its grasp.

Poem at Seventy

In the dark
The sea mutters
Mumbling on the land

Tomorrow I'll bow
To the mirror
An old fool

Eyes pouched
Mind absorbing
How youth's mocked

But my children
And theirs thrive
I've made them

And Mimi my love
Paintings prints
And books

All night the waves
Hush and rock
Turns to sand

The Poet and the Spy

For R.J.F.

The bitch pants
In the salty pool
White jowled as me
In my Seventieth summer

Under a violet sky
Ibis fossick
Gulls creak
Dotterel scoot
Yachts have gone
To suburban berths

Bare foot
Along burning sand
I sense the sun's
Changed angle on the Earth

Fifty years
You tell me
Since we served
As temporary gents
In Berlin

I turned to candour
You to duplicity
The world was our oyster
Now it's no more than
Crushed shells along the shore

Autumn

Autumn began
The day after you left
I sat and watched
Rainbow lorikeets
Squabble and squawk
Among last apples

And thought of you
Still flying high
Above the Mid-West Plains
Heading for a Bostonian
Blizzard and our son
And his to baby-sit
Whilst his wife's in Japan

My life
Already faltering
Now you've gone

Soliloquy

Just because
You may be there
I talk to you
Waking after lunch
In my armchair...

Just because
You may need solace
For the pitiless world's
Way with you
As I surely do
I talk to you

My little lad
With your straight bat
Fluent pencil
Sweet smiling
I'll talk to you
Until my tongue
Is also still

In the History-Bird's Beak

Among the roses
Searching for thrips
I fear it's inevitable
That by the time
Our grandchildren are old
This will be baked back to scrub

Petals fall delicate
As democracy
Soon only weeds will flower
On the bench the papers
In black and white
Say black *is* white

But like a cicada
In the history-bird's beak
Poets must protest
To the death - beyond that

Our Estate

i.m. M.H.K. 1933-99

I stopped the car, got out. An Urban hum:
the city that we went to had itself arrived!
The Clarksons' poplar trees had gone;
Our lilac bushes had become trees. Our semi
had advanced onto the lawn I mowed
for pocket-money and where each Spring
May flowers re-asserted from the tussock
and moss that had been before homes
were built for heroes, now was paved,
and the privet hedge I clipped was gone
as were the gates and posts Dad made.
At the start of the war he nailed a tin sign,
'SP HERE', which made me proud of his love
until I grasped it meant 'Stirrup Pump'.

Across the pink gravel road, where Kersh
and I collected shrapnel, the Channel where
with toy aircraft we had dog-fights (As I
was bigger, he was always the Hun and
I won) beyond their sunken rockery garden,
was a bay with leaded lights to a 'Tudor' lounge,
where a grand piano shone...All gone. Some deft
developer had sold the estate a kit for semis,
like us at seven; detached, like them at twelve,
which added garages with bedrooms above,

enlarged front rooms but maintained relative status and the owners' sense of class. Odd numbers were tradesmen, clerks and reps; evens were managers, teachers, small businessmen. come there after the war to a modern home, marching in trilby and mac to the station at eight, back at six, or like my dad, bicycle clicking off while I lay in my bed. It was the end of parishes, the Victorian family, they were deracinated, but a flexible labour force – further mobilised after the next war by credit and the family car. Two were parked where our May flowers grew.

One of my morning walks is through the garden of a holiday house – the population trebles on high days and Christmas holidays – under an oak, through ochre leaves, pungent and crisp, so that I think of Kersh and the first Autumn of the war, when at the bottom of their garden, they dug a hole for an Anderson shelter they had bought and bolted on the lawn. The last time I saw Kersh he recalled how they asked my dad for help. He stooped inside, picked it up, stepped in the hole and set down. I felt proud that they were shocked at his strength.

When I was in UK I stayed a night with Kersh and his wife in Purley at their mock-Tudor detached with leaded-lights and bays above a rockery garden up from a leafy street. It was thirty years or more since we had met, clear that we would not meet again,

and so we talked candidly and he confessed that sixty years before he had stolen my battleship, the only toy I ever had better than he possessed. Worse, that he had always voted Tory - 'for the money's sake' - pretending to be Left, duplicity which echoes with their condescension still.

He was retired from teaching, had become 'Grand Vizier' at the masonic lodge and taking on the part of 'Wise Old Man', developed a whiskery stare above half-moon specs, claiming always to have been 'the sort of chap people turned to for advice'. It was news to me and I wondered about my own self-myths.

After dinner and a scotch or two, we spoke of schooldays and he said his father gave him hell for failing to get into M.G.S., his old school. My Mum learned he was to sit another entrance at The King's School, Macc., so took me along. I remember sitting in a hall with hundreds of boys and seeing her waving from beyond glass doors. I passed. In the dead of Purley night Kersh confessed he had been parleyed in, and I recalled after our first term in the bottom stream for 'oiks' and 'scruffs', he scored one mark more yet went up two streams whilst I stayed where I was for another year. Kersh hung around older boys, smoked and played cards on the train, and when his parents went out he got at the grog and boogie-woogied on the grand, crabbing up and down the keys,

his odd stare wincing from the smoke stuck on his lip,
pretending to be Hoagy Carmichael.

I played for the First Fifteen in the Lower Fifth,
broke sprinting records, bowled fast and had to suppress
a smile at his vehemence when he told me that before
his by-pass, he'd beaten seventeen, his father's handicap.

My Dad never played anything except the wireless,
had time to do more than hammer and sing,
whistle and saw. (Kersh said that when my brothers
came back men from the war, Dad fell silent.)
My Mum expected no more for me than that I
should pass the school certificate and get
an indoor, white-collar job in Manchester.

My folks thought Kersh's father fairly mad
First thing on Sundays and holidays, black beret
on his head, tall and thin in blue striped pyjamas,
he sawed at a violin before the mirror, twisting and
flourishing his head, he got them laughing out of bed.
Now and then they would have a musical evening
when we would stand behind the curtains and smirk
at people struggling with cellos up their 'drive'.
They especially enjoyed the toot and twang, scratch
and clang of tuning up, applauded and fell about
so I was sure that they could be heard before
the instruments set off after Mozart or similar
prey. Dad always said: 'Chamber music from Poland'.

And they looked down on us. Percy never spoke to me. Nor ever did his sister. One day as I was about to knock I heard his mother tell him to hurry and go before I came. I crept away amazed. She complained, he said, that she didn't want him playing rough, but then I knew it was to my mum she had come weeping about her husband's forays up Heathbank with a typist off the evening train. In those days women patrolled the holy state with scandal as assiduously as Kersh's mother took to meeting the evening train.

They were discrete, discreet and close, but there were few secrets in a house our size: "Mrs K., you don't know how close you are to a smack in the kisser! ' " Mum mimicked, then a whining, "Percy, please come home." and they were hissing 'Vile slut!' and what they would have done to him, or any man, rattling their cups and spilling tea so that in their saucers Co-op biscuits turned to mush.

]I remember sitting on the train to Purley, watching villages and their graveyards and memorials rolling past, their generations twice-cropped. My dad was gassed in Flanders; Percy had flown in the R.F.C. I was in awe of his considered ways so unlike the singing energy of my Welsh dad, who grabbed his pension, sold up and went to Devon, saw his eightieth year, while Percy retired a month before he had a heart attack, walking home from golf. Kersh outlasted him six months.

His sister, Wendy, married a clergyman and,
years after, as Kersh's name was Michael, I inferred
that there must have been a Peter Pan. Sad.
I remember his mother told me, their windows open
to the hot night and pregnant herself, she heard
my opening aria at first light. Later, we were close.
After the Great War Percy learned Mandarin and Hindi
for his textiles job, even entertained Orientals until,
after the second war, he got on the Board at last.
They bought a big Riley. All we ever had was a three-
wheeled van that sounded like a doodle-bug.
Each year they set off via R.A.C. salutes for Devon,
Stopping en route at a hotel at Tewkesbury on the Severn.

On their 'musical evenings' in his room Kersh played
loud Jazz on his gramophone, a stroppy teen-ager,
and together we went to the British Legion dance
and hoped for co-operative girls to snog in the park.
(Once some fellow seeking more intimate acquaintance
lit his Zippo and, to screams, lost his eyebrows
and burned off her bush!) Unlike me did his prep.
and passed school cert. well enough...then disappeared.
They said he was in the hotel business;
I knew he had run off, was a waiter somewhere,
but as I had to take three buses to get to Salford
in my new suit and trilby, to a trainee salesman's job,
I never heard of him again before Conscription.
At least, he flew like his dad, while I was commissioned
in the regiment in which mine had been a lance-corporal,
and learned to ape the officer class. I stayed five years.

He became an art student, taught in a London slum
so he could play in the clubs. Once he sat in, he said
that last night, with American jazz heroes whose pianist
took ill. He played above himself, sat back gratified,
until one pleasantly asked what his first instrument was.
It cost him to tell me this. Next morning I waved my hat,
white-bearded at his gate, off to see my publisher,
“Forward to the grave!” I yelled. He got there first.
A jazz band bleated blues behind black-plumed
horses and a glass Victorian hearse up to the church
full of masons, then a stomp and rave back to the wake.
His widow said that when she found him dead in bed
she yelled “Why have you gone and left me alone,
you terrible old man?” I’ve ordered a cheap box,
no god, my children and theirs to chuck my ashes
at this alien sea...I almost forgot: I was circumcised,
he was not.

Tableau Vivant

For Emrys

The waxing moon comes
Cold and clear
Of the horizon

Low and leisurely
A rufous eagle flies
Into the keen bluster

Which makes cormorants
Crouch on poles
our bearded son and us

Hunch on the bench
Shoring up moments
Against the incoming tide

Remorse
i.m.Haydn

Stokesay Castle was it,
Where you stamped in puddles
And I gave you a smack?

Oh my boy, my son, if only
You could give it me back.

In A Strange Land

Slow as continents
Dazzling clouds drift
Over a land parcelled
In daft addresses

We can't grasp it
Don't belong
Our houses face the sea
Their dead watch
Our sporting life
From the trees

Back home
Acid rain erodes
Our names from graves
In rank churchyards

We are neither here
Nor there...

Chuck my dust
At the esurient sea

All Roads

'What is awry with the present is a structural affair,
it runs far deeper than individual folly or knavery.'
T.Eagleton

Rome was unbearable,
The earth barely covering the bones
Of the vanquished or vainglorious

Monuments sinking below
Street level: Hadrian's column?
A rocket in a silo

The succession of madmen
Immortal and infallible still haunt the hill
Down by the Tiber cormorants hang out
In trees with shredded plastic bags

Barbarians are within the gates
With weapons of mass distraction
Plebs can't know the truth
The country dies for want of kids

Cold Spring

It's a cold spring
A blizzard of blossoms
Littering the lawn

No sense of renaissance
For us now but you weed
And trim and I write

In the wisteria by my studio door
A straight black tail sticks from a nest
And I have to say "Be calm
It's all happened before."

In the Late World

'Freedom!' we chalked on our missiles,
 'Democracy!' on cluster bombs
Californicating the world for its own good

Harsh surveillance was essential for our liberty
 The Darwinian market would always fix
 The fittest price while vox populi vox dei

Sovereign voters ruled by rational choice
 Such fantasies the media massaged
 On behalf of plutocrats and military

Pumping verisimilitude into every home
 'Entertainment' in which violence
solved all problems - except the bacillus

We knew it was mad, but supposing
 We were safe we wagged the flag

La Lune

Glitsy mannequin
On night's catwalk
You've outstared
Us all since Adam

How neatly you black the sun's eye
And perturb Venus
Without you between us
And the dark matter
Of the cosmos
All would be lost

My Mum told me
To turn my money
In my pocket
Plant out
When you are new

And oh! Such plenitude
Of human solace
In your golden harvest

The Authentic Life

To William Roache , Esquire, M.B.E.

'If you want to know a man, you must know what the world was like when he was twenty.' - Napoleon

Is the colonial moon upside down?
The sun arcs around the northern sky;
Hastings looks across the bay at Rhyll and Cowes;
October leaves break on the deciduous bough
(how spring welcomes the old)
but both our days are dwindling now.
Do you still drive to the studios or does
a chauffeur swish you down the motorway
under that black Victorian viaduct?
A steam train de-railed up there made such a din
that Bert Antrobus, my grandfather, legs broken,
lay unheard for hours. It was the end of him.

That family, my mother's, have been in Wilmslow
since anything was there: 'Plumber and glazier of this parish,
-1740' says a stone in the churchyard's long grass.
The business went a while ago with Cousin John.
I used to go to Wilmslow every Friday afternoon
with Mum to see her mum. We would have gone
to Stockport market in the morning to meet Aunty Mill
and I would be left to wander while they talked,
eyeing dripping pheasants and rabbits, sniffing
the far moors and woods they came from
and hoping we would buy oatcakes to fit the frying pan.
I remember at the beginning of the war, every pane
in the glass roofed indoor market was suddenly black
and glued with net against bomb blast

Did the cobbled gutters always shine with rain?
It's what I most remember of that Cheshire town,
clemmed to the bone in shorts, the puddles pitted,
the sense that the sun may never shine again.
No, it's elsewhere I recall when hireath strikes:
the white frieze of Snowdon from Harlech
and moonset in the Celtic sea; a sudden field
of flimsy poppies beyond our Vale of Belvoir wall;

the school train's undulate shadow; Orkney
and the song of moonlit seals, the eiders' call

*

That Handforth bypass runs above a stream
down a wide clay vale pocked by meres
and ponds, hedged by hawthorn, witch oaks, ash
where I used to play. It's gone now, the brook
a culvert, and avenues, drives and crescents
of red brick semis, like our own, all look
at each other across the tidy roads verged
with cherry trees. It was a shock, going south
on the London, Midland and Scottish line
(182 miles to London) to see the replication
of identical places on either hand. That was
my England, it was England! Such humiliation
I suffered to find myself among officer cadets
who despised that world, left me distraught
with shame as I copied the accent of their caste,
found that parallel bourgeois universe
of my 'betters' where I was barely tolerated;
hated myself in that microcosm; worse,
despised my family. A temporary gent., a spy
desperate to speak the patois behind enemy lines.
(You won't recall your laugh when 'bush' came out 'bash'.)
How odd you have spent forty years getting rich, acting it,
that northern accent, being someone else.

I was orderly dog
with sword and Sam Browne in my khaki drill kit,
off before dawn to meet you at the Palisadoes,
that coral arm protecting Kingston harbour.
Sun through the green peaks lit the York balancing down
from Bermuda like a bright star - an aircraft
had failed to cross direct to Gander, vanished
in the North Atlantic with the previous draft,
so we flew to Iceland first, then Newfoundland,
Bermuda, Jamaica...
Well, there you were and I
was no longer the junior wart. We were allies
in adversity, you were a pink-kneed callow lad
and I was barely brown, not among but *facing*
stone-eyed fusiliers in whose ranks my Welsh dad
stood - he was so proud of me. (*Tel mauvais foi!*)

You overheard men call us 'them two chikoes'.
How scared we were of our O.C., a sadistic sod.

Dad had enlisted at sixteen, gone to France,
endured that bone-head butchery or cull
of the best and fittest, ending the chance
of revolutionary change *and the Empire* -
which I note you have recently
Fifty years ago we were still trying to defend it.
Now it's the empire of global corporations
and their consciousness industry, counting
only dollars U.S. and not their depredations
of mankind and Earth: pollution and melting ice;
oil wars; the 'terrorist' desperation of the oppressed;
no jobs safe; collapsing birth rates; suicidal kids
It's a tectonic shift like the yoking of the peasantry to steam,
old beliefs and values die. (Did we truly believe
'An Englishman's word was his bond'?) All things seem
dumbed down: your show I recall at first rehearsed a
realism and went to air twice a week; now five times
to gloss the lives of millions in those mean streets.

*

Recall our sexual adventures? I think not.
Jamaica, Bermuda, British Guiana...
We grew up. Seduced, we signed on the dot.
The Royal Welch Fusiliers were posted to Dortmund,
you cleared off to the Trucial Oman Scouts.
I soldiered on, full of self myth...Berlin,
Then out.

You had escaped becoming a G. P.,
your family profession; I had no idea of who
I was (nor had my mum and dad) nor what I could be.
I had left school at sixteen but the army revealed
I was not stupid. I wanted to paint. You
wanted to act. Our five years done we met
at Buxton, which was about half way
between Rutland House under
the Ilkeston Alps, and my Cheshire clay.

After that, you progressed from seaside shows
to rep. and we both got married: reality began.
It took three years to become a student teacher
and for you to get the part you have adorned

more than forty years. I taught, then got myself
to Oxford, took good honours, was not suborned
although much oppressed by that bastion.
I had one-man shows but never had the urge
to *sell* to succeed as a painter. I gave my work away
What's art got to do with money? It is pleasure.
(As a poet I won't politely entertain.) I taught philosophy,
had a Jaguar, house in the country, leisure
to write and paint

We gave it away, tried to salve
the anguish of the death of our son, find ourselves
by moving to Orkney, New Zealand, Australia -
away from ruthless Thatcher, your icon, and be free
of that contagious bourgeois cant. In exile, at last
I found that I could write authentic poetry.

I don't belong here - who does? - but try to come clean.
Your life as someone else, and working class,
makes you as famous as anyone has ever been,
and while we are gone seventy, near our ends,
you're as Tory as I'm Marxist, as sure of immortality
as I'm an anonymous atheist. We remain old, if distant, friends.

Sombre poems? Henri de Montherland said 'happiness writes white' (cf. Henry Vaughan, 'Afflictions turn our blood to ink.') In fact, to our surprise, we are happier post-seventy than we have been since our children were tiny. Old age is moderation. If you can want for little and have enough, shortening perspectives cause one to focus on the transient delight of the present. Carpe diem!

Thank you for taking a look. Please tell a friend!

*

'This is the prerogative of late style: it has the power exactly to render disenchantment and pleasure without resolving the contradiction between them. What holds them in tension, as equal forces straining in different directions, is the artists's mature subjectivity, stripped of hubris and pomposity, unashamed of either the fallibility or the modest assurance it has gained as a result of age and exile.'

- Edward Said

