

Poems by Adrian Blackledge

A poem for Holocaust Memorial Day

Paul Celan, 1948

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink
we dig a grave in air there you will be free
A man lives in the house he lies with snakes he writes
he writes as darkness falls over Germany your golden hair Margaret
he writes then goes out to look at the stars he whistles his dogs up
he whistles his Jews out orders them to dig a grave in the earth
orders us to play a waltz for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at evening
we drink you at noon in the morning we drink you at night
we drink and we drink
A man lives in the house he lies with snakes he writes
he writes as darkness falls over Germany your golden hair Margaret
your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in air there you will be free

He shouts at them to dig deeper he shouts at us to play
he pulls a pistol from his belt and raises it his eyes are blue
dig deeper he shouts play a waltz for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at evening
we drink you at noon in the morning we drink you at night
wir trinken und trinken
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margaret
your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with snakes

He shouts at us to play more sweetly death is a master from Germany
caress the strings darkly and you will rise like smoke
you will have a grave in air there you will be free

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany
we drink you at evening in the morning
we drink and we drink
death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue
he levels the pistol and shoots he hits you
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margaret
he sets his dogs on us grants us a grave in air
he lies with snakes he dreams death is a master from Germany
dein goldenes haar Margaret
dein achenes haar Shulamith

Background notes:

This is Adrian's new translation of a poem by Paul Celan. Paul Celan was born in 1920 in Czernovitz, Romania, to a German-speaking Jewish family. During the war Celan worked in a forced labour camp. His parents were deported to a Nazi concentration camp, where his father died of typhus, and his mother was shot. He wrote *Todesfugue* in 1948.

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Birmingham

Let voyagers come to Curzon Street
pioneers emerge blinking wide eyes
travellers wash dust from weary feet.
Let stories be told of the open road.

Let bees rattle in clapper-board boxes
ring-necked parakeets screech in green air
starlings chatter from the burnt-out Roxy.
Let the woodpecker tap out a welcome.

Let fountains in the square spin and glisten
statues allow smiles to touch their mouths
Victoria prick up her ears to listen.
Let the iron man polish his boots.

Let new light turn slate roofs silver
morning sun squint from high buildings
kingfishers skim the glint of a river.
Let patches of oil burnish like stained glass.

Let the morning hum with appreciative tweets
text messages ring like cathedral bells
facebook users settle into their seats.
Let it trend, let it go global.

Let revels begin in a hundred tongues
banners unfurl with familiar scripts
community choirs sing ecstatic songs.
Let market traders shout their cheers.

Let ticker-tape fall like Winter snow
corks fly from exultant bottles
flags stand proud on Communication Row.
Let the band strike up and play.

Let voyagers come to Digbeth and New Street
pioneers converge at Moor Street and Snow Hill
travellers kick dust from thirsty feet.
Let all the stories be heard.

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Bull Ring Meat Market

i

As if from an ancient glacier
it emerges, the head of this young goat
crystals of ice defrosting on eyelashes
and falling as tears.

Suede stubs of horns are not yet full-grown
but surely that implacable gaze
waits only for the final thaw's
long regeneration.

ii

Every Monday morning this man nods
to a plastic ice-cream tub
and holds up gnarled fingers and thumbs:
ten pigs' hearts for five pounds.

When the butcher weighs each heart in his hand
and turns it to the light
it shimmers like a creature
washed up still wet from the sea.

iii

These tongues will not speak, not now, not ever.
How big they are lying side by side
like newborn babies;
you can almost hear them breathe.

Stippled and coarse as red sandstone
heavy as stone too. Somewhere oxen
heave slowly forward,
massive, uncomplaining.

iv

A week until Hallowe'en
and all the scraps of beef mask have gone.
Each day now needles dip and dart
as the pieces join and take shape.

Bullock heads, cow heads, faces of heifers
will wander the streets for one night.
Last year a half-bull-half-devil
oozed fire and smoke from its eyes and nose and mouth.

v

Cows' feet line glass counter tops.
Each hoof, or toe, or toenail, or is it
fingernail, is painted vibrant pink
not carefully, but roughly, clumsily

as if the very last thing to be done
before the sacrifice
was the application
of a small touch of glamour.

vi

A tray eased from a beehive is like this:
pale, intricate honeycomb
waxy, rubbery, a tessellated maze
of irregular pentagons.

Scald, cauterize, boil for three hours
with fistfuls of salt until bleached
then drench still steaming and hot
with nothing but sweet malt vinegar.

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Clouds Hill

T.E.L. I.v.35

How surprised they would have been the snooping pressmen
to see us stretched on a silk counterpane
in the reading room as first light changed
from grey to yellow through a crack in the curtains.
Perched in trees binoculars fixed on bedrooms
they have chased me out three times in as many weeks.
Once again I have made a bolt for it
holing up in Westminster with a new name.

But the deadness of demob and pottery
has given way to something entirely new.
I am astonished by the arch of your back
the upward push of your breasts, your fingertips.
Tonight I'll take the old Brough and ride back to you.
It still goes like unholy smoke when I turn the taps on.

THE BEST WHISKY IN THE WORLD

'it's the Yamazaki Sherry Cask 2013'
Jim Murray's Whisky Bible

Have they gone for Ardbeg's notes of burnt toffee
Is it Talisker's dried kelp and sea spray
Or Dalwhinnie's thick espresso coffee
Or Glenmorangie, or Old Pulteney
Or Glenfarclas – horse-brass and saddle leather –
Or Lagavulin's peat-smoke and wild heather.
Let the angels visit each and every clan:
The world's best whisky is made in Japan.

Is it not 12-year-old Corryvreckan
All sticking-plasters and roast chicken crisps
Or Glenlivet, or Glenfiddich, or Glentauchen
With its elusive air of will o' the wisp
Or Glenloch, or GlenDronach, or Glenmacadam's
Prominent nose of wet tarmacadam.
No, even Auld Reekie is an also-ran
The world's best whisky is made in Japan.

Surely Ardbeg's fresh cream black forest gâteau
Or the Macallan's ox-tail and mustard
Or Laphroaig's umami and sweet mango
Or BenRiach's spotted dick and pink custard
Or Balblair's long finish of wallpaper paste
Or Bannahaibhan's copper after-taste.
You might have to travel for a decent dram
Cos the world's best whisky is made in Japan.

Don't tell Rabbie Burns or Sir Walter Scott
Or Greyfriars Bobby or John Logie Baird
Keep it to yourself, whisper it not
To Robert the Bruce or the ancient laird
Make no mention to Lulu or Black Agnes
of this incomprehensible madness.
Don't ask me how it was allowed to happen
but the world's best whisky is made in Japan.

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Moths

The last two fish of the night
share an incubator
and a single yellow light.

Nothing else left but the end
of the chips and a scoop of peas.
It is almost time to close up.

The girl in the black-and-white tabard
wings her hands and touches the ring
on her middle finger.

A cap shades her eyes
which are blue as the dust
on the shadows of her lids.

She touches the place on her chin
where a spot is about to begin.
It is almost eleven.

The door swings open
and lets in the cold.
A smile flirts with her lips.

He orders chips
and she busies herself.
He asks her how she is.

She is fine.
She asks him.
'The better for seeing you'.

She blushes
hands over the warm package.
'Later then'.

The doorbell rings as he leaves.
She watches him pick up his bike
and swing a leg over the bar.

He glances back once, nods.
She raises her hand like a blessing,
elbow cocked, palm open and waving.

He is gone into the dark.
She turns to where the curry sauce
is waiting to be emptied.

Outside snowflakes
like dead moths
tumble from the sky.

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Small Girl

Don't worry, they have never come for a small girl
Malala Yousafzai

Pencil marks drawn on her bedroom wall
say she stopped at thirteen, stayed small
despite promises of extra prayers
if she could only grow in the measured air
between thumb and forefinger.

A bus driver makes a pebble disappear
twenty girls, three teachers, eight to a bench
breath of new bread, kebabs, a stream's stench
and the regular reek of diesel.
An ice-cream boy waves from a tricycle

a chicken's head rolls into the street.
The bus stops in suffocating heat.
A man in white, a single question
his hand shaking as he lifts his gun.
Three shots, three bullets, three girls.

Three bullets cutting flesh, tearing the world
in through an eye socket, out the shoulder
travelling on into the future
from where they can never be reclaimed
never taken back, and nothing now remains

of the Hindu Kush and its waterfalls
of tea with cardamom, of embroidered shawls
of children laughing bareheaded in the light
of girls sitting down to read and write
of dances and music and songs and games

because at last they came
for a small girl with a Colt 45.
And she is here, and she is alive.

Jazz Band, Auschwitz-Birkenau

Last month I was playing in Paris with Reinhardt
now my sax accompanies the grim selection
with a Dutch clarinet, a Polish cello
two Hungarian trombones and a Czech guitar.
We pitch off key, as if it makes a difference.
Once, in the barracks, we played just for ourselves:
the music was mad, infectious, enchanting, wild.
On that Sunday each of us was alive.
They came and took away our violinist.
They came and took away our violinist.
On that Sunday each of us was alive,
the music was mad, infectious, enchanting, wild.
Once in the barracks we played just for ourselves.
We pitch off key, as if it makes a difference.
Two Hungarian trombones and a Czech guitar
with a Dutch clarinet, a Polish cello.
Now my sax accompanies the grim selection.
Last month I was playing in Paris with Reinhardt