

Poems by Joanna Skelt

Connected Journeys for Holocaust Memorial Day 2014.

The great wheel turns
into 2014, another archway
and races on...
Each new year we stop, link hands
sweep the past aside
as if it were easy to rejuvenate,
rebuild, reinvent ourselves
as if it were easy
to forgive.

And here at the centre point of this country
we stand,
the places and people we love
so deeply sown within,
our stories passed down, carried,
at times clenched, like a hard stone,
or sustained as a minor chord by the lonely Croat
whose visions of pines and turquoise
overlay the Digbeth rush hour,
to get back to something pure
before the beauty was polluted, families torn.

I shut my eyes and from these streets
acknowledge the city's faultlines, its cracks,
a world in miniscule:
resentments of the corner shop
without alcohol or English news,
the covering (or exposure) of bare flesh,
objections to adornments, habits
the privileges of wealth and class, of colour even.

From the news streams of global Jihad
to its ramifications in Sparkhill,
mistrust and misunderstanding
neighbours living side by side
but as if epochs away,
from thread of dislike, jealousy
to the spiralling of tribe against tribe,
a daily diet of myth and superstition
passed down, the consequences multiplied ever on.

Here, around us, there are men, women -aged and young,
nursing the remnants of apartheid,
black (and white) people, hearts forever dented
by the abomination of slavery,
tormented by hangings in cotton fields,
our ancestries in feint or fierce way connected
as victims, perpetrators and for failing to act
against the orchestration of mass murders:
the culling of human beings
into pits – their jewellery scavenged
from the sludge of slaughtered skin
Auschwitz, Srebrenica, Kigali, Darfur,
even this city once colluded
in the making of slave chains and armaments.
Amongst us too, are strangers
for whom the terror of their journey
is etched, indecipherably, as a cruel map on their faces,
and men, who barely older than boys
carved out the rounded bellies of women
then watched their two-times dying eyes.
Of course, there are explanations, academic studies
but the taking of even one life
utterly desecrates the miracle of birth and motherhood.

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Yet here too, in the very same place
dwell Palestinians and Jews
side by side -the Jewish school is full of Muslim children,
there are Sunni and Shia
and somewhere in the dense fabric of Small Heath,
Sparkbrook or Smethwick
live Hutus and somewhere Tutsis too,
there are Sudanese
and Somalis with dreams of recreating Mogadishu
schooling their children in English
alongside Pakistanis, Poles, Jamaicans,
Zimbabweans and Chinese.

Each December inhabitants from every creed
and quarter marvel at the German market
all of us making what we can of it, of this time,
our mixed race, mixed heritage children
a testament to the
glorious and extraordinary
merging and transcending of difference,
a testament to peace -which must surely be the kernel
that drives us on.

And if journeys let us stand back – review the world,
let this be a turning point, a brand new year
the city all around us, these pillars, the
mosaic spectacle of tower block,
the city a kaleidoscope, a daring embroidery
spread out like spokes, a web, itself a giant wheel
encompassing, each of us carrying wrapped inside ourselves
our own threads and journeys,
each one of us an infinitesimal part
such that every wrong, tear or break
is ours too,
stitched into the very tapestry of us.

BIRMINGHAM GOLD

On Wednesday, in the middle of this hot-potch
city as if built by scattered lego blocks,
outside Symphony Hall, by the Rep
and the new library, its swirly metal chinks
as yet untested, without pulse, its circles of worlds on worlds
an ideal for now, a mosaic in the mind of a distant architect,
in the space where sometimes a wheel or ice skate spins
a temporary marquee...

Inside all manner, colour and shape
of seventeen year-olds, clad in giant bling:
trombones, trumpets and super-massive saxophones
blowing their burgeoning hearts out and over lunch breaks
and the narrow boats sleeping picturesquely by the Canalside café,
over the A38 chugging snake-like underneath,
its vast army of machines carrying this music
like aid to every quarter.

This city where kids are spun together
homes flung across the globe, daily criss-crossing
classrooms, cleavages and the jangle of not-so-beautiful-streets,
out of all this, a youth orchestra, sounds entwined,
the spangle and glimmer of instruments
momentarily chiming with July's first rays,
threading together the city's seams
into molten gold.

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1968

was an exceptional year. Bursting with ripe berry and promise, subtle,
exotic undertones - yet never understated. You cannot underestimate

these feisty full-bodied reds with a voluptuous twist on the tongue;
the kind that tastes younger on the palette each year. The succulent, slick

green fruit, crisp on the aftertaste. Straight to the point yet startlingly
audacious. Delicately balanced. Occasionally sparkling, bubbly even

on first meeting but disconcertingly so. Crammed full: juniper, sloe
and blackberry with a delectable plummy overtone. And more: yams,

custard fruit, Vietnamese Jungle honey, rosewater all merged
with a peculiar kind of yellow courgette – and toast. Hints of seaweed,

sweeping Scottish coastline, juxtaposed with an acid kick-back
of tin mine and Geordie dockworkers. These 68s are well-travelled

but hard to pinpoint. An independent bunch, definitely 'new world'
and not one for convention. Not fussy on the pocket, or for labels, but really

know how to throw a punch. Broody on the shelf but the wildest
thing at a party. A nose for a good barrel but can be stubborn as an ox.

Craves good company but not always easy to be with.
Not a quaffing type at all.
Can't stick the buffs and raincoats but quite a strumpet
when it wants to be.

68s are hard to pin down. Changes one to the next. Has its own
mind. The kind of year that leaps off the shelf, smashes on the floor

marches right up and announces itself.

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Lakes

Day four, or maybe five, and sleep?
I could bite into it, open mouthed,
suck it all in, gulps of it,
each starry morsel spinning into me
like morphine or first milk,
healing these aching arches
still flashing with surgical lights,
the last eight months (and more) coiled, winding and unwinding
around the corridors of the Women's Hospital
like a spirit running to catch up
when it has flown so far.

God, how I prayed along those corridors
sat there, at 20 weeks, retracing my steps, post Africa
willing him or (as I know now) her, to come,
closed my eyes at the ultrasound:
just tell me everything's OK is all I said.
Later, the impossibility of tracing the outline
of my child from a black and white glimpse
of a world within, and from that outline
divining an essence, a soul even?
How I willed the weeks to pass -and on,
remoulded myself,
dressed my shape in different cloth
until, finally, that last week,
last three days - those corridors again,
Mandy's cheese scones and cans of Guinness
smuggled into Ward 3, stored beside
the galloping heart machine - with its paper zig-zags
endlessly printing out the evidence of inner life,
then a crazy 3am, downstairs, behind the corridors
to rooms - the realm of gods
inhabited by hands and bleeps, the panic of machines
awash with sobs and flesh, where hours in,
eventually I succumbed, was opened
shivering and numb amidst voices, brightness
and sky-blue medical scrubs
to first glimpse of a girl, weenie, bundle-rapped,
her skin to mine, tears chasing after tears, tumbling over,
my entire self leaking, spilled, a lake
all of it bound with her, pure connection,
love is too tame a word. It is liquid now, raw form.

And noon today, along the corridors of the hospital again,
this time accomplice to what lies behind,
I traipse wounded, undone, altered
the blue metal stitches pulled out from me,
the car seat in grandpa's hands, inside my little daughter,
her miniscule shoots of hair already criss-crossed with kisses
her butterfly breaths -each one miraculous,
drain and then replenish
the lakes new born in me.

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Little boy, Homs

We lost Marie Colvin too,
the journalist who told us
only a day before
of your loss – just two years old,
another casualty in the craziness.

Syria imploding around you,
the land that gave you life
has changed its mind.

And what can I do, driving
through Stirchley, Birmingham
late, to collect my two year old
images of you erupting
through the airwaves?

I cannot repeat what Marie
Colvin told us, how she watched
you go, like so many other
innocents in the wars I study:
Sierra Leone, Liberia,
the list goes on...

All of it a damning indictment
of our times, of ourselves,
me, too, sitting here
planning tomorrow's tasks, blinkers on,
desperately changing channels
to stop the visions of you
from seeping in.

What kind of Gods, of Allahs
and international organisations
have we forged that allow such acts
to go past almost unflinchingly
in our daily lives?

Each one of us spun like dice
across continents we carve
into countries, religions, factions.

Little boy from Homs
perhaps the Christians were right,
that Eve's apple released
our serpents: tyranny, weapons, hate,
which flash out their lightning tongues
and take the best from us.

Little boy Homs
-and all those you have joined,
may we learn to be more worthy of you
the next time that you come.

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THE SWIFTS OF EILEEN ROAD

Using only leaves and bits of twig,
scrunched up sweet papers, feathers and petals,
the swifts build nests
glued together with saliva
year on year, under the eaves of our houses.

These boomerang-like birds
glide at dusk and dawn in near formation
over our higgledy-piggledy street
with its haphazard tessellations of transit vans,
skips and rubbish left out in the wrong bags,
where the kids once from Limerick, Yemen and
Pakistan zig-zag across the street, shrieking,
their lives permanently linked via satellite
to other countries and continents, climates, social codes
where somehow we jumble in,
and Rudy comes out each day on his way to Aldi
-eyes Barbadian blue,
and the polish couple come out once a week
to water their pansies and get the taxi to hospital,
above us all, the sweep of and circle of black crescents
temporarily painting our sky.

All the way from Africa they come, these flying anchors
to fledge their young from the eaves of our houses each summer,
Hidden from our eyes: first eggs, then tiny beaks open
squealing for moths and midges, ladybirds
hoovered up -mid-air- by their slick, sky-skating parents
who zoom back to nests, kamikaze-like,
their elegant bat-like silhouettes
disappearing, suddenly, as if a magic act.

I so much want these swifts to come each year,
to bring their swirling news of other climes,
their journey made beyond the politics,
eating, sleeping, mating miraculously on the wing,
accepting of it all, this crazy carved up globe
as the burka comes, recession hits, the pool closes, schools fail,
whether DR Congo's at war or peace, despite Afghanistan
still they come, their radar over sea and land
through Mozambique, Zimbabwe, to England, Sparkhill and Eileen road
like magnets they are pulled
navigating on a memory of stars
to rear their young under the eaves of our houses.

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WHISKY CONVERSION

From first shuddering gulp of Bells whisky
which ricocheted like strips of glass
and ripped my teenage throat apart,
the taste of dirty ropes lingering
amidst the guffaws of laughter,
to cheap blended supermarket whisky
obliterating bad flu,
whisky seemed a rough, hard stuff
the reserve of sea dogs returning ashore,
eyes wild from it, impenetrable like the ocean.

Yet this Tuesday I discovered
The Wine Stop, Raddlebarn Road,
an Aladdin's cave of single malts
its Birmingham blend of worldliness
from Spayside, Islay to Goa and Taiwan.

I learned about the craft of it,
the bourbon casks or virgin woods,
sherry casks creating the rusty bronzes
and caramels of this fiery yellow water.

Contained here in Selly Oak, as secrets are,
Scotland islands and highlands
dense clods of peaty earth and rain,
that I want to drink into me
enticed by the burnt, treacly toffee
dark fruits and smokiness
of a 15 year old Islay Bowmore (*beyond my budget I might say*).

My mouth begins to water
for the malt and nuttiness
of a Highland Knockando,
for dried apricot and burnt mangos,
and the paprika and papaya of
Ka Va Lan...

I can almost smell its hints of vanilla,
the sea-salt smack of Tobermory
this whisky, water of life,
distilled and triple distilled in age old
honoured ritual to liquid gold
entices me in and I am converted
without even a drop
passing through these lips!

For Burns Night Whisky Tasting and Poetry Evening, Library of Birmingham, Jan 25. 2014

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WORDS AND WORLDS

Words open worlds
to me.

Words crammed into rows of books
in libraries bringing characters alive,
histories filed away
under veil of spine and bright blue cover,
dilapidated, thumbed and scribbled in
or magic-ed to my mobile phone,
all as enticing as a world map.

The cogs of my eyes, mind
and spirit fire,
finding meaning in the a's and g's,
I am at once home
and elsewhere...

Somalia: through a veil
eye to eye with teenage boys -turned big men,
loose canons, loitering at the corner
of a Mogadishian street I need to cross,
hired for protection, paid in Khat,
eyes anaesthetised yet piercing,
searching out a fault in me
as though this were a jest,
each page I turn their education slips away,
life expectations count down.

Sierra Leone: the Portuguese face
of a dilapidated, corrugated Kissy Road,
through Freetown's writers
I feel how it must feel
to have survived the end of war,
to be exhausted, extremely free
and yet tormented, trying to suppress
the images of amputation,
which appear like a sudden mugging
in the scarlet song of the flamboyant tree.

Turkey: I whirl with Konya's
dervishes, summoning jinns,
recognise the way each one of us
divines our story from the past,
from the rivers and the winds,
from the symbols where we find ourselves
on this crazy spinning earth.

Through film, I watch Mandela's walk
to freedom, and it makes me
want to order every ounce of energy
to live a better life.

All this transmitted
through my native English language
whose words are everywhere,
on road signs: Dog Pool Lane, Cecil Road, B29'
adverts, on buses,
there are sea-side place names like Bognor Regis
painted above the doors
of terraced houses
whose million multifarious rooms,
are tied together, interlaced,
jumbled with other cities, villages
and mother tongues

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– from English to Bengali
Punjabi, Polish
to Twi, Yoruba and Mandarin... (*the list goes on*)
whose lilt and intonation
clicks, tuts and tumbling laughs
seep through the red brick
like the smell of curry
into the living room,
into my very language
which is everyone's now
ever stretched, made brighter
yet on returning home
I realise I must turn
to English –only English for
my private world too.

I find myself recording this,
write it out by hand
as small marks –forming words,
then read and savour the pages
imprinted, tattooed with ink,
the imagination reproduced
into a visible, tangible item
sent by hand, by digital sky
a route, beyond the borders,
to the very heart of us,
which brings us closer,
our world more into focus.

Words
open worlds to me.