

Waiting to Cross



Mary Hodgson

Waiting to Cross

Mary Hodgson Waiting to Cross

Merseyside Poetry Minibooks Series No.8.

First published 1983 by Wndows,
22 Roseheath Drive, Liverpool L26 9UH, Merseyside.

Copyright @ Mary Hodgson 1983.

All rights reserved.

ISBN 0 907950 08 6

Wmdows receives financial assistance from Merseyside Arts.

SING-SONG IN THE OLD PEOPLES HOME.

In that instant they
become each other,
the young girl singing beside the piano
which her father plays
and the old folks listening.
Their lips echo her words soundlessly
recalling that early morning
just as the sun was rising,
though Mad Mary mutters as usual -
cherry ripe has been called too often
for her to be taken in.

The Friends-of-the-Home committee,
well-meaning, mostly middle-aged,
agree the evening to be successful,
smiling upon the fair-haired child
(daughter to one of themselves)
without revealing
how far they are involved;
they keep themselves busy
collecting jumble, wrapping presents,
organising treats. .

Only the child,
her blue eyes shining with sympathy,
acknowledges the distance between
the kernel of youth inside her listeners
and
the kernel of age inside herself.

FRACTURES.

Under the impact of old age
her mind has splintered;
only his presence straps together
the frailest framework,
but in the ninth decade
nor bones nor mind will knit.
Bodies live on -
as too does his determination
to support her to the last
with the steel plate
of his endurance.

FRAGMENTS.

By digging among the past
which, with an effort,
she can focus better than the present,
he sometimes works the miracle -
the fractured potshards of her mind
are reassembled;
there lies between them
for a fractional length of time
their common life,
an artefact they worked on daily
for over sixty years,
conscious
neither of any great labour
nor of its beauty.

CHEATED.

I had expected some loss,
never this.
I had expected my hand to shake, perhaps
to grow less quick of sight
and hearing, lapse
from this world slightly
not completely
and going over past times with my wife
enjoy it all again together
without the striving, strain or bother
of current living;
savour it all again,
I, smoking my pipe ,
reviving the good past with my dear wife.

I had expected darkness, closing round,
to leave this central glow, till light
from both of us departed;
but life has cheated -
drawing time's cataract like a blind
across the window of my wife's bright mind
engulfing all
before the night of death arrives-
taking our present lives
and future days,
and with all these
the past gone, too, beyond recall,
while we live on twice cheated-
cheated by life, who's taken all,
and death, who yet delays.

CONGRATULATIONS ON THE DEATH OF YOUR WIFE

Congratulations on the death of your wife
in the prime of her sixtieth year,
whom you can mourn sincerely
as I can not
the wife I hold so dear -
but not yet dead
though life has long departed
the mind of her I love,
leaving me broken hearted
for her
with whom I live
yet have long left behind;
daily I strive
for peace of mind together
which yet we cannot find
while she lives on -
and when she dies
the motive for my eighty years is gone.

Congratulations
for you can sorrow, you who are left behind,
that death has taken your wife
in her prime;
while I, who have loved too long,
am bereft of love and sorrow,
stripped, not by death,
but time.

OLD MAN.

I am an old man, with an old man's grief.

The body of my wife
(shrunken, non-functional)
stands hunched beside the bed
making horror of each morning with her broken mind.
Her slow senseless fury of words
barbed with her terrible frailty
knives me to the quick,
but cannot button her bodice
or hitch up her stockings
which I perform for her,
frustrating the repulse
of her poor independence
with my slow fingers.

Stunned by her bitterness, I wonder
what concealed resentments
currented our more than sixty years
of happy married life,
to emerge now
released by her no-longer-conscious mind -
worn out in my service,
caring for children she
now does not recognise
though born of our flesh.

I am myself unsure, uncertain of hearing,
slowing in comprehension
and no longer proud;

SEDATION OF A GERIATRIC.

Poor, silent lady -
with your inexplicable and misguided venom
battered safely now
under medicinal hatches -
what do you really feel
through the thick walls
of hardened arteries
and obfuscated senses?

You move unwillingly
into a childhood world
distorted by lopsided images
and misconceived intentions,
propelled along its ill-proportioned corridor
from the wrong end,
shuffling towards obscurity
away from light.

Having been rendered helpless
you render us helpless,
striking us powerless
to reach and offer aid.

Unconscious animosity
has achieved its end
poor
and now silent
lady.

RETREAT.

Retired from the whirl of life, being old,
he hears the news with not too much disquiet :
earthquakes and sudden floods, surprise masked raiders,
young children trapped by fire, old women battered,
old men, slowing on foot, chance
victims of hit-and-run.

His daily violence can't be predicted either
whether an unexpected earthquake in her mind
might yet perhaps bring peace
to her trapped spirit -
whether her smouldering volcanic fires
will sour another day.

Victim of life's long hit-and-run
she shuffles endlessly from room to room
without the power to rest,
not having full control of what she does,
thinks, says, - no sense of time
nor much of place, inquiring frequently
with sudden fury
when they are going home.

He has no answer;
upheavals of the universe
have changed her world and mind beyond her knowing.
Nothing's familiar save his presence
which she demands each second, and
on which she vents frustration,
assaulting his unstinted constancy,
raiding his stores of calm.

He does not fear the news.
He has passed through all the disturbances
that' occurred yesterday, and the day before that;
he faces stoically,
changing, himself, yet changeless,
the changing and changeless microcosm
of their retreat.

COVENS OF COMPASSION.

In the middle ages
would have been branded witch -
hunted, pitched
paralysed with fear
into those all-embracing
purifying waters

Today
we clean, clothe, feed,
postponing the quick touchstone of death
for a more comfortable disintegration,
branding ourselves,
torturing our own loves
with the witch powers of transformation -
creating a coven of a different compassion.

DOUBLE VISION.

I see an aged woman huddled
thinly inside her clothes.
She knows me well, but muddles
all the other facts she knows.

My father tends her carefully,
makes tea, and washes pots,
and reads to her untiringly
from patiently chosen books.

Her memory leafs back through years
to younger times long gone,
before my sisters and I appeared
to whittle her down to bone;

before weight of domesticities
bore down to clog the flow
of awareness through her arteries
and blur the present view.

I see a woman drained by cares,
her life- stream trickling slow,
and it's still my mother sitting there
showing, still, where I must follow.

But my father sees somebody different,
someone I never knew,
somebody youthful and radiant,
with eye and cheek aglow.

So my father tends her patiently,
makes tea, and washes pots,
and reads to her untiringly
from carefully chosen books.

ELDERLY PERSONS CROSSING.

I had seen the sign many times
and thought little of it,
a bent figure on a stick, perhaps,
of indeterminate male or female lines
and general appeal to pathos.

I did not think of
that inexorable crossing
lying ahead
to be attempted hazardously
with faltering steps,
fear of the void,
sense of direction gone.

I had seen the sign many times
and thought little of it -
now it is my parents
stand
waiting to cross.

MERSEYSIDE POETRY MINIBOOKS SERIES

MARY HODGSON was born and brought up in Suffolk and moved to Merseyside on marriage. Her poems have been read on radio and published in magazines. She was a prize winner at the Stroud Poetry Festival 1979 and in the North West Radio playwriting competition 1980. She currently runs W.E.A. classes in creative writing and literature in Liverpool and on the Wirral.

WINDOWS

ISBN 0 907950 08 6