

No Wilderness In Them



Peggy Poole

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Them

Frontispiece by Peter Goodwin.

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A FIRM HAND.

On certain nights she seized
the poker from beside the fire
and chanting changeless incantations
brandished it aloft insisting
she would use it if we did not
go up at once to bed.

It never failed
to make us run
though at heart we knew
the threat was made in fun.

In all those years
though tongue and temper
could be rough she kept her hands
for baking bread, preserving fruit,
scrubbing the bare wood table clean
and nursing piglets, chicks and lambs.

SALUTE TO A CERTAIN COUNTRYWOMAN

(from: *Cowslips in the Chalkpit*)

Some anthropologist might choose to write
a doctoral thesis about your life:
an old countrywoman living in one
room of a cottage in the hidden lanes
of Kent: write of you as untutored and
primeval, all that they decry yet, at

times, envy. I have known you (but not known
you) since you cooked on the old black kitchen
range my first foods gathered from the garden
applauded my first steps; stood steadfast when
a brother waved his last goodbye and war
exploded mutual hopes and dreams. Now I

am past the age I best recall you, still
you are there, avid for television
after years of working to exhaustion:
you are there though my parents' ashes are
long blown away and my children have all
discarded their dear days of dependence.

Not to have been to college, read a book
or driven a, car, not to have travelled
to far countries; such limitations did
not stunt your growth nor cloud your vision. You
walk through black burnt stubble with flowers and
fruit in your palms and conquer my despair.

UNTITLED.

He buried you as Mrs. Jones
erased your vibrant personality
dispatched you anonymously
as Mrs. Jones.

The setting for the ritual
the crematorium chapel
held no feeling
like an empty lift
Yet I almost saw you
in that sterile space
standing by your coffin
a wry grin upon your face
saying "This is very strange
to be buried as a ' Mrs.'
Something Womens' lib. should change,"

The parson was not to blame
for never having known you
but all the same
couldn't he have learnt
and *used* your name?

He spoke about your father,
your husband and your children
but not a breath of you
as a person. It was
the final insult of your death,
the ultimate confusion.

O, Susan.

SALUTE TO CHARLOTTE MEW.

" Said to be a writer." Thus the press
reported on your death (spelling your name wrong)
unmindful of the depth of your quiet song.

From your ' soul's dark ditch', through raw distress
you lit new stars, heard unborn children cry,
begged Christ to give the ' parson's tags' the lie.

Blasphemous? Not so. You sought truth, no less;
you sprinkled city streets with speedwell dew
and kept the snow-capped mountains within view.

' Child that went or never came'; your words can bless
a generation cold, worn and afraid,
lost like your farmer's little staring maid.

ON THE DEATH OF STEVIE SMITH

"Not waving but drowning".
Your immortal words
will tell the future people
how we spent a life-time dying
raised our glasses clowning
lest anyone should mark
that we were lost, crying
in the dark.

Your singular voice lingers
in the wind sighing,
in the sea-gulls' call.
When finally we drown
you will not wave remotely
from the shore
but help to haul
our souls from the grasping sea
safe on board the boat
sailing to eternity.

Meanwhile
we salute and smile -

Cheers, Stevie.

on: THE INVALID by Matisse.

There is no sense of conflict,
only acceptance; life is subdued;
muted colours blend serenity
with suffering. It does not seem
that leeches have been used.
The invalid is calm

quiescent, waiting for the pain
to creep away; her eyes
focus on the vacant chair

that implores a visitor.
It could be any sickroom
of the past after the dread

crisis is resolved. The pillows
seep comfort to the heart.
But Matisse betrays our trust

the model was his wife
re-visiting her childhood home
healthy beneath the bedclothes

AT THE TIDE'S EDGE.

Midnight and an August moon
the estuary's far coast is wrapped in mist
as the tide steals slowly in.

Water pours into the moat
that surrounds some child's sand-castle
constructed over hours with care

and concentration. One wall
crumbles, but the tide turns in time leaving
the topmost turrets intact.

This walk along the silent shore
is my way of praying. A new day has begun.
It is the day when you my sister

must trust a stranger's skill
to excise the growth that threatens
your whole being.

A shell glints in the moonlight
Somewhere the child sleeps, as you sleep now;
when morning comes will you recall

a dream of sand and sea and a child
whose keen endeavour triumphed? I head for home.
The sea has given its answer.

THE 200th VICTIM.

From the Parish Register of Eyam Church:
"1666. August 25th. Katherine Mompesson."

The village wrapped its poisonous cloak
closely around itself, forcing
the festering sores to ooze within.
A desolate dance with death
performed alone, apart, for love
of those who lived beyond the hills.

Burials were swift: no prayers
no tolling bell; each Sunday
fewer climbed the steep
green slopes of Cucklet Delph
to gather" underneath the cragged arch.
Katherine was with them.

Later than August day
walking in sun-soaked fields
Katherine took her husband's hand;
she marvelled at the sweetness of the air -
surely these days of dying must be done?
Somewhere a curlew cried.

Today high on those hills
seven headstones tell
one family's sorrow to the winds,
while in the churchyard
Katherine's tomb
stands near the Saxon Cross.

SNOWFALL FOR JACQUI.

Beneath the ice the steady waters flow
Snowflakes reach the entrance of the cave
Each crystal sphere uniting joy and woe.

Uncertain is the growth of seeds we sow
How often we ignore the powers we have
Beneath the ice the steady waters flow.

Man dimly visions where he cannot go
Someone threw a snowball in your grave
A crystal sphere uniting joy and woe.

To the toll of bells your daughter (four or so)
Danced enrapt : a strange way to behave
Beneath the ice the steady waters flow.

The pattern of the journey does not show
You ventured with a spirit bright and brave
A crystal sphere uniting joy and woe.

Poetry frees the fetters that we know
You came to share the reading Spender gave
Beneath the ice the steady waters flow
Each crystal sphere uniting joy and woe.

CONCRETE ON IRON.

The idea interfered with
my sleep like the surprise
ending of a story growing
in the mind. My nights
were alive with visions of a pool
that held the moon's reflection
and water-lilies, kingcups
and sweet-scented water hawthorn.

The circular flower-bed (where
no worm worked) contained several
old rose-bushes. Could it be here?
Would they survive removal?
The gnarled roots of those ancients
penetrated deep and long
- where water-lilies, kingcups
and sweet-scented water hawthorn?

Haunted hours spurred me to move
barrow-loads of earth
I sweated long beneath the sun
desperate for proof
then sweetly came the grating sound
of concrete on spade-iron
oh water-lilies, kingcups
and sweet-scented water hawthorn!

Lotus blossoms for my children.
Soon now my busy dreams will become

reality and on her wedding day
my daughter whose home
will be by Alpine lakes may
make her love-wish gazing down
on water-lilies, kingcups
and sweet-scented water hawthorn.

A QUESTION OF EXPOSURE.

The gods who know our thoughts, although we give
those erring thoughts no voice and question not, do
punish mortals who dispute their laws;
then let them choose for me what fate they will
but let my infant son escape their wrath.
My infant son! O, babe, that you were still
within my womb. The full face of the moon
is hard tonight and cold, and hard and cold
the heart of him who left you in that place.

Why did not I, heeding my time had come,
seek some secret cave to give birth alone
trusting to Diana to plead my cause?

I could have said that you did not survive,
that I had thrown your body to the sea
into great Neptune's care that he might pledge
you as a plaything to his nymphs; to that
cave I could have gone each day to nurture
and make you warm, as free from harm as man
may ever hope upon this earth to be.

But now you, feebly wailing, wait for death
while I weep and feel the savage winds mock
your breath and sense those whining wolves incline
their heads to smell this night's sweet provision.
Your father's eyes imprison me within.
Had I not seen you nestled at my side
and felt the milk flow from my swollen breasts
drawn forth in greedy gulps while tiny nails
scratched at my skin, I might not know this pain.
I longed for him to lift you in his arms

proclaiming to the world your right to live,
Pain dares to question what I should accept;
I would endure the worst the gods ordain
if only you could live until the dawn;
then might Aurora in sweet mercy send
some gentle goatherd to make you his son.
One day, perhaps, in a far future time
mortals will greet each newborn child with love,
then may the gods themselves approve our joy
and write white words of welcome in the sky.

MERSEYSIDE POETRY MINIBOOKS SERIES

PEGGY POOLE: Though born on a farm in Kent, Peggy Poole has spent most of her life on Merseyside. Best known for her work with BBC Radio Merseyside and Jabberwocky, she also writes children's books.

No Wilderness In Them is a collection of poems written over the years as a tribute to various women past and present, real and imagined, relations, friends and strangers.

*“Haunting . . . a sense of music that a good poem employs
“Norman Hidden*

WINDOWS

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