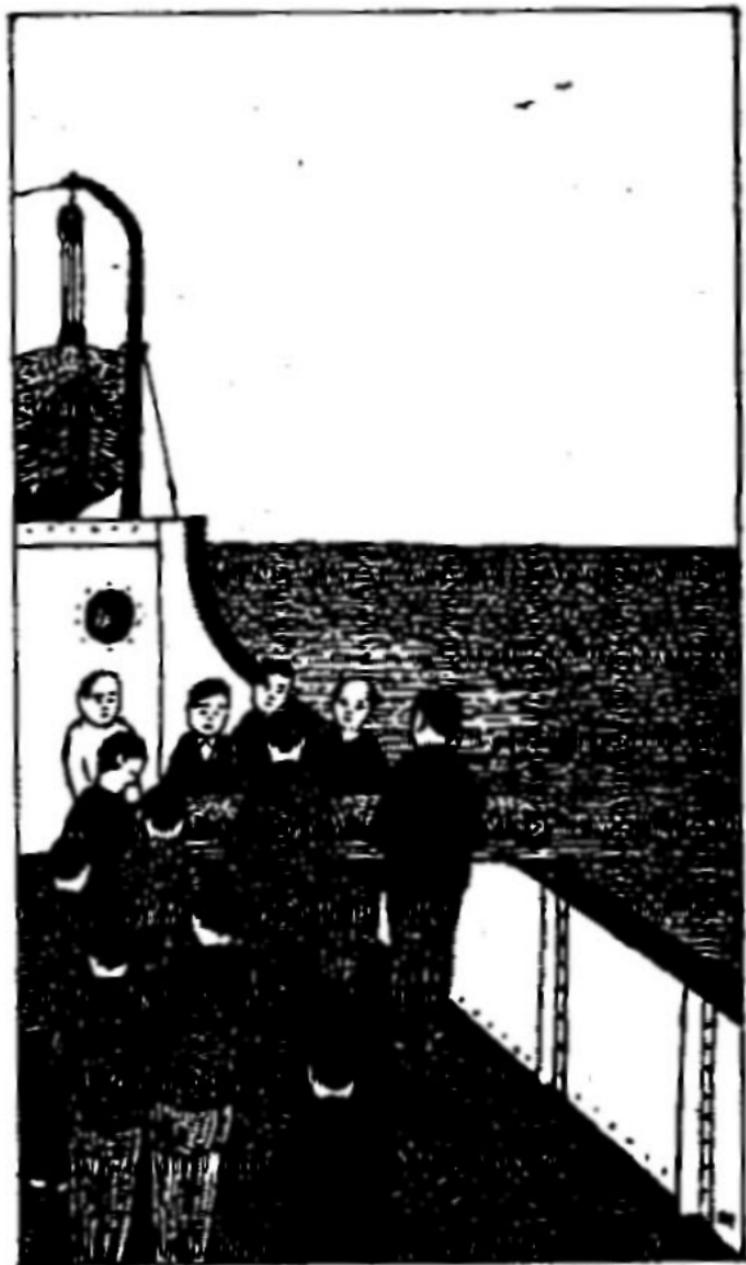


See You on the Xmas Tree, She Said



T MURPHY

Matt Simpson

See You on the Xmas Tree, She Said

For Monika

*I am the shell held
To Time's ear and you
May hear the lonely leagues
Of the kittiwake and fulmar.*

W.S. Graham

Drawing by Tom Murphy.

Matt Simpson :See You on the Xmas Tree, She Said
Merseyside Poetry Minibook Series No. 15

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

Copyright © Matt Simpson 1984.
All rights reserved.

Acknowledgements

Some of these poems have previously appeared in
Blue Cage, Critical Quarterly, London Magazine,
051, Smoke, Stride, Times Literary Supplement.

ISBN 0 907950 16 7

Windows receives financial assistance from Merseyside Arts.

AN ELEGY FOR THE GALOSHER MAN

Who pads the Bowles Street jigger now ?
Who's pacing there on noiseless soles,
breathing the bad-blood darkness in
between the sleeping back-to-backs ?

Was it a dull bull-headed thing
betrayed by its own strength that chafed
the backyard walls ? Or simply some
bewildered sad old man in pumps
who wished to keep the darkness clean ?

SEE YOU ON THE CHRISTMAS TREE SHE SAID

OK, old aunt, I will look out
for you among the evergreen.
High on turpentine and suddenness,
I'll need some time
to rub the glitter from my eyes.

I'll know you by - what else? -
that squeezebox laughter
never wanting us grown old. No cause
to miss the divilment, my dad's
owld buck in me. I'll act the goat
for you. And we will jig
the hornpipes he was famous for.

And shameless, cuddling me, old flirt,
you'll say, They got fed up of me:
they've thrown me off the oil-rigs, Matt.
And we'll guffaw for years and years.

And he'll be there, your Ernie, too,
tuned in to Billy Cotton's Band;
and when it's finished he will wink
and nudge you up the wooden hill
to do whatever you did on Sunday afternoons
while I let on you're dozing off
plum duff.

And I bet I click
with the blonde good-looker
on tiptoe there
at the top of the tree,
the one with the flimsy tutu
and magic on her hands.

COUGHING.

Like what? An old tugboat? Yes-
but solid muscle, all heart; shaped
to strain, to heave and lug, to see
great liners off. Kidding? No.
Doesn't just to think it
tense up something proud -
block-and-tackle job, white hoisted sails,
canvas with a bellyful of speed?

Marvelled at Simmo, remember? -
all that dying in a fierce room
bulked about with wardrobes - how
we whispered that his heart
was work-horse, that we knew
he'd let no mercy in, would have
no pity on himself.

Why am I
remembering that? Oh, yes -
the cockles and the muscles
of the heart. Correct.

We were on about
miladdo coughing at the bar ... and
I had got it in my skull
that you were twitting him:
tendons taughtened, memories
of effort nudged; I thought
something needed sticking up for,
wanted praise.

That's better now:
what did you say was keeping him alive?
XXXX ale ... and a young bit
about sixteen?

TAPED

In Sydney ... I tell a lie ...
in Melbourne ... one cute chick
I slipped a goldfish ... hair
it was the silkiest . . . like
cultured pearl ...
would tickle up a trouser trout
from lazy lob to hammering ...
called me her *Torro* ... never took
a penny piece.
There's others,
Maggie Mays'd nick
y' breath with half a chance ...
nothing but stewed bags of worms ...
and up-in-the-corner girls enough
in any port.

Then ...
you won't believe ... I was
Chief Hangsman in Rangoon ...
straight up! (the drop, not droop!)
Them coolies' trouser trouts ... it certainly
was hard on them ... shooting their loads
then slowly swinging ... bags of bones.

And then what? storms? ...
great Himalayan things ... But worst
was that Palermo in the War ...
some bloody job they landed me! ..

Our kid was in the War ... and in the wars ...
Atlantic run ... the .convoy trips.
A U-boat took him home with them ...
those Stalag days behind the wire
he just won't talk about. (He says
black velvet's best, those West Coast girls!)

Off Sicily ... all hell ... and men
piled up on deck for me .. well, arms
and legs more Uke. I stitched
their coffins .. simply watched
them shovelled in ... just meat.
What's that they say? Committed to
the deep? O very ceremonious!

I've worked ashore these past ten years.
And all the hours God sends. I man
the winch. .. a donkeyman ...

Is that alright? Is that enough?

HIS LONG-HAIRED ONE HAS A QUIET WORD

Him there, him with the rum and peps,
Old Tragedy Kecks himself ...
likes to think he's just stepped off
the gangplank of a Blue Star boat,
bag over his shoulder like a tent,
like in - you know - the Scouts ...
back from round the world and letting on
that he's quids-in when it's
the policy matured I scrimped for
all these years. Face on him?
Face alright ... the back-end
of a train smash. It's all codology:
him in his come-in-the-jigger suit
from Paddy's Market ... knocking back
as if he's got tomorrow, and that's all,
to go. Lived with him long enough
to know he's putty all inside ...
and, God, he's old enough to understand ...
slobbering in his mind for yesterday,
shinning up masts to spy
out landfall, st.aggering quaysides of
some foriegn port, in some flash bar,
some Lulu grabbing all his pay.
But that was donkey's years. And what's
the rest? And me? No bungalow in Wales
with roses round the porch for me ...
a maisonette with rising damp until
the cows. And her above us,
her five kids and telly blasting all
the livelong ... Look at him, he's in
another world, in Callao with all his mates.

ANCESTORS

I

Press-ganged drunks who woke in Bully Robert's hold
or one-eyed Crow's; who, at slack water when winds veer,
when gulls go quiet, scanned the windrilled heights
of Liverpool waving them off sardonically; slaving men
hearing at dusk all Africa dance, pig-tailed bucks
who pillaged Calabar, clambered out of black-filled holds,
sweat-drenched, to feel consoling winds clamp shirts
ice-cold against them - winds set fair for Kingston, .
sugar, rum - dragging with them wakes of shark.

II

One in particular - not for merit (walking upright
in all weathers is a trick of rolling decks)
and not for vices (petty, forgivable, and shared
with others who, condoning, measured him their size)
he's singled here for knowing goodness once
and meeting it as such: when booze unselfed him
to a gentler man, he spoke with love of love
which gave to failure heart and just enough
of grace to bear the sky, the sea: he told
how Kitty Wilkinson put love to work
till all the city thought it had been blessed.

Now blessings go unread, like gravestones coat
with grime. But this is still decipherable:

*Indefatigable and Self-denying
the Support of the Orphan
the Fearless and Unwearied
Nurse of the sick: the Originator
of Baths and Wash-houses for
the Poor-*

blackening words. And there's a window (you must look for it) that shows her face among the saints, where sunlight plays with colours like a child.

What comer of Heaven lets cholera in for her?
Does Kitty Wilkinson turn a mangle like
a barrel organ there?

AFTER SUCH KNOWLEDGE

He unbuckled; and the buckle end
of his swung belt floored me: worm
and foetus, getting my what-for.

And what for too? I, the back
of the air-raid shelter, had
simply unbuckled; my belt
was worm-clasped and Shirl-
from-two-doors-down had eyed
the worm and dropped her navy-blues
to show what-for-eventually.

So I was - what? -
right for a belt at seven years.

That washday Monday his long-johns
were battering the air that I,
rummaging for grown-up things
in Shirley's drawers, was sinning in.

What undid me? Mother's eye
prying into cock-eyed flies
undressing me for bed.

STICKS AND STONES (for Tony Harrison)

I

William Matthew him, Mathew William me

Something else of his, these hand-me-downs:
Helmet of Resolution, Gift of God.

I know between us that we've blessed some beds
and I've his nose:

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John,
William the Conk, 1066.

One of these I wear, not Sunday-faced
but work-a.day - flat-capped sort of name;
the other's in the wardrobe with
that last jacket that he bought
for 'walking out',

2

William Matthew him, Mathew William me

joke before Officialdom
watch chain waistcoat and grey hair

his nervous Liverpool cheek inside
Births Marriages and Deaths

embarrassment his little joke
unwelcome Matt

3

Matthew William me, William Matthew him

Bill at work and Matt at home
he biked between
two kinds of competence:

ex-bosun, foreman-rigger, ' real good skin '
inching ocean-going liners in
to Canada Dock - *Reina del Pacifico, Reina del Mar*
berthed by him, made fast; good mate of Lars,
of Pongo, Billy Molloy,
and the blundering lover
barge-booting-home to me and my mother.

4

I've had it three ways this name:

Mattie, cubscout, choirboy, grannies' lad
who lived in books, in cinemas, in church;

posh *Mathew* then, A-levelled, Hons-degree'd,
the all-his-own first bits of verse's poet; and

the *Matt* I've tried to be at home in
since he died.

UNCLE CLIFF'S LAD

Well, cousin, you of the cargo boats and choppy seas,
blue-eyed jangler of gangways, who took on board
our old men's wilfulness, their crazy need for foreignness,
choosing the swan's way, to honour them, the whaleroad,

this is something between you and me: this is,
if you'll believe it, me signed-on and voyaging;
this is ship and sailors, chugging and on course,
gulls clamouring, braving all weathers;

and this is me too, after my Master's Ticket,
responsible for horizons, walking a liner's bridge
for them to approve, earning gold braid
for them to be proud, and sailing beyond them.

MERSEYSIDE POETRY MINIBOOKS SERIES

MATT SIMPSON was born in Bootle and now lives in Halewood. Since 1966 he has lectured in English at the Liverpool Institute of Higher Education.

His poetry is well-known nationally as well as locally, and his book-length collection *Making Arrangements*, published by Bloodaxe in 1982, received enthusiastic reviews.

He writes a highly refined and honed version of a well-established oral form .. the fireside family reminiscence over a bottle of stout .. the poems are funny too ... authentically centered, coherent and warmly felt ... humanly mature

Herbert Lomas - London Magazine

What distinguishes Making Arrangements is the utterly unsentimental nature of its nostalgia, its sense that uncovering the past is an active making - a writing

Terry Eagleton - Stand

WINDOWS

ISBN 0 907950 16 7