

Jones

John Sweetnam

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IN MEMORIAM: JONES, DINORWIC

Through darkness in the juices of a mountain
seep the songs of Jones.

He sings of light, of men dissolved,
slate and dust, of stones.

Scaffoldings of Joneses brace
the quarry's fractured walls.

He sings of white rock, doves,
of servants not too well,
babies crying in their cribs:
ferocious nursery-rhymes to fright the enemy, who
this time, wins the battle anyway
because he's rich enough to pay the Judas wage -
It's true, there's thirty tons of spoil
for every ton of finished slate.

Sing-up, Jones ...
little saucepan, boiling on the fire
is it tea you brew? Is it warm?
Dunk the bread of heaven, feed me
'til I want no more.

In secret hollows in the hills
arrows wound the hearts of Jones,
those hearts, too,
whose carved initials pledge with his
on stubborn, stunted trees,
solitary stones ...

Sospan fach,
The cat has scratched little Johnny Jones.

In villages and towns that ride
the muscled back of Wales
loves and hurts are scored.
Where sculpted fingers raise,
admonish us 'lest we forget',
Jones-on-Jones, symmetric ladders climb.
On every rung there stands a fallen man.

Quarry hospital. In there
a book of accidents rests open
on its edge,
a pattern for the angled gallery of slate
where Jones the rockman worked upon his ledge
and fell.

like scored names on a cenotaph.
tiers of Joneses
hang upon the page.

BLACK'S COUNTRY

Bones of trees maze now,
Sunshine puzzles through,
Winds still haze where bumings flew:
Half a mountain lost its hide.

Ribbed and keeled, clinker-built,
Full-rigged fireships sailed the air,
Whole treetops, flameblown, grappled:
Sap and resin screamed.

Down a charred embankment, once,
Engines threw their shadows, strode
Paired beside themselves on smoke, while I,
Mist-man from the mountains, rode in silhouette
Smothered roofs, sooted slates.

Blackness, that's what leaves its mark,
Chimneys' carious stumps on every ridge.
Spindled children, open-cast in streets,
Scrubstones whitening steps to make

Blackened towns blacker still.
Black? My chimney makes a white house sing!
Winds spill jackdaw-pairs from south and west to fight,
Blizzard black, contest the pot. Winners face a maze,
Wire, entangled there for years.

Even if they find their way, we soon evict them ... string,
Tight, tied around a brick; a splintered nest,
Then, a fresh-cut gorse-bush,
Hauled from hearth to crest.

SANATORIUM: JONES, N., JONES, S.

Bore da, butti, sut ydych chi?

Not bad, thanks, a bit of chest
but can't complain.
And you?

Me too, except that
as we hawk our dust
it's grey I spit,
you, black.

Back and front, man,
look at your legs, your hands!
Are they rock-face scoured?
As you fell,
did you bum on the rope?

Hell, it was my only hope! Listen,
what would happen in the four-foot seam
if your lamps went out?
Is it true you never manage a smoke,
a brew?

Well, not quite, most times though, we chew.
Is there a ring to your rock as you tap,
testing? Does it say
'Not now, I'm sound today,
but wait, just wait'?

' Weight ' is what it really says:
those timbers, do they say it too,
when jacks are drawn to let
a cut and overhanging seam
collapse?

Perhaps,
but if they do
it's probably too late.
Coal or slate, it scars;
mine heal blue, yours, white.

Night or day shift. butti,
as you faced your fear,
did you say, and do you still. 'Ifferno.
Jones bach, what in hell
are Joneses doing here'"

MAP REFERENCE

Hour-high hills grow another hour,
maps grow out-of-date, but
some things never change,
Ground-birds, still on the bilberry moor, explode at a tread,
toy tractors throw fritillary gulls to the breeze,
strew paper-chase scents,
etch the world with lines not on my map.

I pat my layers, feel a shape, a spectacle-case:
without my glasses, names, heights, depths ... all fog.
I go where I feel.
This is where I stand, this 'O' in upper case,
part of the organ sound in my county's name.
Crease-by-crease the map unfolds ...
(Glam, Glamo, Glamor ... what declension's this?)

Here, on a wild crest it tries to fly, succeeds.
Over the channel it goes, away to Somerset, up
Exmoor's smudge to the rim of sight, that weld of sea and sky,
seam of a shining dome almost in my reach.
I say 'Here it is I stand, this is my place',
I mean 'I think it is.'

Not that I am lost ~ after all
here's whistle, torch, tent, a book ...
what more could a traveller want?
I mean, other than his glasses?

Once, finding my way an a forest path
I met a man with a gun.

Two pheasants, russet and green, he wore:
he paddled the sun as it lay on the floor, dancing.
He could read a road by moss on trees,
the tune of his cheek to rain or wind, by stars.
' I'm never lost' I said. Pause. ' Not even a little unsure?'

Something's changed ...
I am he who looks for glasses, words. important things.
There, a hill, those, gulls. I tie them to me with words
This summit, I must find a word,
a naming-word to love it by, or else.
how will you know where I stand?

CLAUSTROPHOBIA

When helmet-lamps that found this place
illuminated nothing but an arm.
one only, stretching forward.
following crawling fingers
while another trailed in scraping dark
to let a body through, and everything
available to sight was known already
to finger-ends. then
men were trapped within.

Darkness drowned lungs.
condemned them to a cage of ribs.
and only the slow, slow counting
to a hundred. and letting feet go limp.
and calves. knees, and the raw hips.
and all the way to emptied minds
was the only hope in the world of graves.

IN LLANDAFF CATHEDRAL

Tucked away, a room of broken things:
Pews and chairs lock arms and legs,
Jigsaw puzzles solved.
Under a woodworm sift
Patinas. buffed by years of sermons
Bloom and die.
Varnish wrinkles.
Waits the bonfire's brief repair.

Hard, now, as a low-tide beach,
Ridged by weight of prayers,
Cast-out hassocks buttress walls.
Most. like shapeless sandbags
Slushed with weeks of rain
Or, slit and spilled in all-clear times.
Stuffing knocked out of them
Cannot do their job.

Bibles,
Past redemption,
Written-off with 'Do Not Touch'
(*noli me tangere*), touch-high, tempt.
Fingers mildew, root through Eden,
Break commandments.
Stew-smells leak from kitchens, tease:
Sudden juices spurt.

Striding the nave, another sudden thing.
Wishbone-arch in concrete.
Christ in Majesty, high as a roof,
Out of time, out of place,
Wears a beaten-pewter shroud.

Bookstalls sell *Good News* in Luke and Paul.
Somewhere, from another hidden room
Spem in Alium soothes.

PORTRAITS

Mountain faces steep in clouds,
drip with hanging men.
Drills bite hands that feed them through
a pane of ice,
pierce hard-hearted rock.

Rockmen, spinning on their threads
to sow the black and nervous seeds
that germinate in thunder, heed
the urgent blasting-horn;
it rasps them down to hides
before both men and rocks are torn
to drown in dust. A red flag flies:
slow red eyes of fuses search.

Silent dust-boils leave no blemish on
a distant tailored landscape, frame
the limits of a vast and private view;
never stain the coats-of-arms
that flag a terraced mansion.

Family portraits, bought and paid for,
raised by hands and arms of men,

TAFF

Sudden waters thread a hill,
streams that leap and fall and join.
There it is the river starts,
earns a name in half a mile.
Newly-minted water snaps with trout:
they feast, they breathe.

Further down, near Pontypridd,
hills of slag and pithead dross
blind the river. Trout strangle,
drown in dust that's smothered men.
Thick as Guinness now, the Taff
sifts coal to Cardiff's empty docks.

Early morning Cardiff, here the flow
competes with climbing tides.
Thickened water slurries on,
trowels the banks of ebb-tide mud
smooth as icing clothes a cake,
black as miners' nightshift boots.

Morning flush. Below the bridge
shoals of lifeless plastic things
wrinkle mudbanks, seek the bay:
sins of valleys, come to join
spillings of a city's night-life
lie like squid in ink.

Another night of mountain rain:
the river snarls at things
riding its thunder. Wineskin-sheep
race to blood those beaks at sea:

a dog howls past, astride a tree.
I find a size· two shoe, I think
of trout, of slurry, Aberfan.

OPERETTA:BEDWAS DEEP

Dawn and darkness tune beneath the town.
Cleft and seg, heel and toe,
in·and·out·the·props the tenors go:
night·shift cages sing, days chorus down.

Milk·floats croon the night away,
street· to·street their bottles quake,
morning starts the holy·stones awake: every door-
step puts on day.

Tin baths, flannels, towels in every home
wait by kitchen fires (aprons, too, a crusted back
is hind to reach alone). Voices shine white on black:
crimping up the cobbled hill hobnailed choirs come.

Hymn joins aria, sixth joins third ... something more
to share,
laverbread·and·bacon crisps the air.

WELSH DRESSER

That auctioneer's quite wrong my dear,
those cup-hooks, set there in the dresser's bottom shelf,
they were not for Sunday-best or coronation mugs,
that's where love-spoons hung.

Carved in sinewed filigree or chain-linked captive
spheres
coaxed from heartwood, every inch remembers
weeks of walking-out.

Hearts and raised initials, too,
clasped like hands held on a stroll beside the falls,
on water-meadow paths, or where the young tups knew
soft and secret places in the hills.

In a house with many daughters
every hook would wear its spoon,
made as bait, cast and lost, become a souvenir, a scalp.

Everyone, some time ago, was talking of an only daughter
who trophied tiers of dresser-shelves that way :
a gross exaggeration I am sure.

Why do you smile, my dear Angharad,
that particular smile,
wear
that inward look?

MERSEYSIDE POETRY MINIBOOKS SERIES

JOHN SWEETNAM was born in Cardiff, taught in schools in London and went to live in Ormskirk in 1962, where he intended staying three or four years. He is still there. He lectured at Edge Hill College, Ormskirk and at Christ's College, Liverpool, leaving to work full-time at pottery, painting and poetry. These days poetry eats more time than the others put together. He lives part of each year among the mountains of North Wales.

WINDOWS

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