

ON JOLLEY STREET *(for Les Gartland)*

As we walked into Jolley Street together,
you had slowed your customary pace.

Around the old Infirmary,
streets of houses without doors,
windows without curtains. Dust.

Forsaken rooms lay gutted of all private comfort,
and demolition smoke was in our way.

Around the old Infirmary
they were tearing down the terraces.

The old town we were born in, coming down.

It must be more than twenty years. It must!

And you had slowed your customary pace.

And strange, out there on Jolley Street

I didn't read the omens straightaway.

Your soldier's tales had drawn for me
such shattered places.

Anecdotes of war, and close escapes;
your travels, drawn so vividly
on Sunday walks,

across the years, across the town.

The annals of your boyhood days.

Much laughter, up and down, we had!

I was the little boy you entertained,

and you, the storyteller, loved a beer

and books and poetry; my interesting Dad.

Despite your ragged nerves left by the war;

your hands that sometimes shook as if before

that bygone discharge from a military hospital,

in entertaining rambles you'd amuse and you'd delight.

But something unforgotten is the sight of private tears

on those Remembrance Sundays, in our town.

The way you could flesh out their "Glorious Dead";

your mad Welsh chum who'd dance the seven veils,

dispensing army boots, a lousy shirt,

each piece of war-stained kit, in lumbering pirouettes,

each time you'd reach a respite and some wine.

He didn't give a shit

for all the King and Country stuff,

and sang odd bits of opera, like you.

In time the war swept him away,
and many others you would mourn
each time "that bloody trumpet"
(so my mother termed it) blew;
Remembrance Day.

I'd ask my childish questions and she'd stay
beside you, arm about your shoulders,
with her jaw set in that stubborn way;
just hating what the Last Post did to you.
How fierce she was; and Irish, too, those moments;
fighting hard, to keep your marching ghosts at bay.

I'm at the old Infirmary again.
While you're out in a waiting room
the specialist's pronouncing on your case.
Incurable, and far advanced, he says;
precise, discreet.
And though I speculated twenty years about it,
still, I ask if I was right;
as we walked out,
to tell the truth on Jolley Street.

But I had no closer friend than you.
And I, you see, had it been me,
would not have wanted you to lie.
I still can see your face and its emotions;
I still relive the anger
as I watched life tear you down.
Soon after you had gone I felt I didn't
want to see the place we strode about so often.
In any case, with landmarks lost,
what would I recognise about the town?
There was no closer friend than you.
In spite all the other things I'm grateful for,
that's why
I bitterly regret you had to show me,
prematurely, your ultimate example;
how to die.

John Gartland

LAURA RUNNING

Something about the concentration of glee.

My daughter running

with the other almost three year olds,

her little fists bunched in excitement.

Something about the angle of her face,

her eyes fixed on the ground,

her laughter spilling out into the headlong run

to chase, be chased.

Small shoulders, bent in eagerness,

and something, given to the unselfconscious game,

the crack, the fun.

Something about this glee,

recalled, so unexpectedly, my mother.

In the summer garden, something

with such clarity had caught her, quick again,

child conjured; and it could have been no other.

Those widowed years before her death

I had not seen her laugh like that,

but vulnerable, lonely;

each night pulled down to sleep with weight of pills.

The final cut, my father's death; too deep:
time left, a steady bleeding of the will.

The fear behind her loneliness, I'd see
no more assuaged by mass and rosary;
her mute appeal I could not answer; just
by visits bring some brief security.

Across the years our partings haunt me still.

But something about Laura running
through the garden, gleefully;
something about Laura running
through this door of memory
could resurrect my mother's laughter.
Rapt, I held them close to me.

As if I'd keep them, both,
from what came after.

John Gartland

Zootube

Outside a Silom station, on the seething street
she squats in supplication,
begging cup supported by a leper's stumps,
knotty shrubs savagely pruned in this afflicted garden
called, without apparent irony, the *City of Angels*.
Just harden the heart daily and, it tells, it tells.
Late for cocktails, evening, that same Saturday
I surface; Sukhumvit, the *Richmond Palace* condo,
where a flock of bitchy gayboys
queen it, posturing to ridicule the new tits
on an absent female friend they envy.
And "Blowjob!" is the giggling toast.
Shots of cocktail on a tray, and drunk this special
entertaining way, "No hands! No Hands!"
A drinking race.
My hostess gamely takes one in her mouth
to show the guest; throws back her head
till booze runs down her pretty neck,
and in a way I can't repress,
recalls the upturned beggar's face.
My weak excuse and prompt escape is doubtless
judged a comic lack of fashionable, social grace.

John Gartland

Horatio Grows Old

**This is getting more alone,
when ghosts, more real than people
come to gather at your home.**

**Habituation to the nag
of old scars,
breaks received and given.**

This is getting more alone.

**And all of those remembered faces
driven back on anecdote by scum of years,
to stubbornness and stoic humour,
creeping fear's old antidote,
you recognised a future
in their jawline and survivor's eyes.**

**You're getting like them,
why disguise the fact
you are no paragon or tragic hero.**

Denouement or mere anti-climax

beckons in your final act.

The fantasy of triumph fades.

Drink your breakfast tea with Camus;

and at dinner, Dionysian wine

with Nietzsche sets the tone;

heroic solitude and shades;

you started out, grow daily more,

essentially alone.

Lyric holds the elegiac future

in a dark embrace,

a tight affair, acknowledged by the wise.

Affirmatively, here's alone,

laugh, paint your giant laughter;

you escape in dancing smoke.

The rest is lies.

John Gartland

Photo-Zen

Jack was sailing to Valhalla
on Black Label from his bar.
I was working on the trick of
being invisible. Watching like
some grey duck shooter,
veiled in party noise and waiting
for a poem to break cover.
Rick put aside his camera, I recalled,
said his inspiration failed,
got bored with just recording things.
Technology's made everyone a camera,
but his art's somehow diluted, stalled,
and, Rick, without his artist, now
a rare bird with the power to fly curtailed.
In the shallows I was waiting, when
some drunken press photographer,
an ardent fan of Rick's, was showing him

his camera, as some samurai a sword.

And hoping to get lucky by sheer accident,
he set the thing to take a dozen shots in seconds;
hoping to get lucky – get a shot as good
as one of Rick’s, he meant.

But the photo-zen was gone. Did I imagine
Jack played “Losing my religion” ?

A hundred million people point their
camera-phones and, pop!

Rick drinks one more.

I hum that song.

Jack rings Valhalla’s bell.

And all the faceless disappointed
sing along.

John Gartland

Grandparents

I am ashamed

I do not visit their grave more often.

They have their ruined Norman tower,

the raucous tribe of rooks, endlessly circling,

a blanket of lichen and old grey stone.

Among their neighbour-dead

they wait, as dark as negatives, alone.

And halting on the Galway Road,

this childhood sunshine paints the trees,

sighs unconditional welcome home.

Suddenly we have no words.

I pat the granite cross like flesh

and turn into the breeze,

the stony voices of the birds.

John Gartland