Clothes that escaped the Great War

Not the familiar ghosts: the shaggy dog of Thorne Waste that appeared only to children, the chains clanking from the Gym seat, nor the black barge at Waterside.

These were the most scary, my mother recalled: clothes piled high on the wobbly cart, their wearers gone.

Overalls caked in dung, shirts torn from the muscle strain of heavy hemp sacks, socks matted with cow-cake from yards nearby, and the old horse plodding, on the nod. Its uneven gait never varied whether coming from farms where lads were collected like milk churns, or going back with its harvest of dungarees scented by first fags, notes in pockets to sweethearts; boots with laces undone, jerseys knitted – purl, plain – around coke fires.

And the plod, plod, quadruple time. Then the catch in the plod from the clank of loose shoes, from windgalls on the fetlocks of the horse, each missed beat on the lane a missed beat in a heart. As a small girl she could see – at their windows – the mothers pressing memories too young for mothballs into lavender bags, staring out propaganda posters, dreading the shouts of telegraph boys from lines of defence and attack. As the harness creaked and the faithful old horse clopped forward and back, the lads were new-dressed in the years never to be had, piled higher than high over the shafts of the buckling cart.

Discussion points

• This isn’t the poet’s memory, it’s the poet’s mother’s memory. How many generations do you have to go back in your own family for Great War memories to be personal and not handed down? At what point does memory become history? What’s the difference between a memory poem and a history poem?
The young officer poet is one of our defining images of the First World War. How does Patricia McCarthy’s poem answer those familiar verses of Owen, Sassoon, Thomas and the others?

If this was a ‘Clothes that escaped the Iraq War’ poem, what would change, and what would remain the same? What would take on the role of the horse? What is the role of the horse?

About the poet

Patricia McCarthy is the editor of Agenda poetry journal. She is half Irish and half English. She was born in Cornwall, and brought up mainly in Ireland. After Trinity College, Dublin, she lived in Washington D.C., Paris, Bangladesh, Nepal and Mexico. She has been settled for a long time now in the countryside in East Sussex. She taught at a famous girls’ school there for fifteen years. Her work has won prizes and been widely anthologised. A small collection, Survival, was published in the US and A Second Skin came out from Peterloo Poets in 1985. A substantial collection, Rodin’s Shadow (Clutag Press/Agenda Editions) came out in October 2012. Another collection, Around the Mulberry Bush, is due from Waterloo Press in 2013, as well as a pamphlet, Trodden Before.

NPC judge Vicki Feaver on Patricia McCarthy’s ‘Clothes that escaped the Great War’

“The surprising title of this poem was what struck us initially. But, as we read it, the whole poem grew on us more and more. We loved the journey it takes – both literally, as the horse and cart piled high with old work-clothes trundles down the lanes, and metaphorically, as these clothes come to represent the ghosts of all the young men lost in the Great War. It follows on from the wonderful poems written by poets like Owen and Sassoon about their war experience, to show the grief of the women who were left behind.”

Links

- WW1 poetry digital archive, www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit
- Enter the National Poetry Competition, npc.poetrysociety.org.uk
- Agenda poetry magazine, edited by Patricia, www.agendapoetry.co.uk/index.php
- Poetry Review magazine, published by the Poetry Society, www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/publications/review

Discussion ideas devised by the Poetry School. More details of poetry reading, writing and discussion classes all round the country and online at www.poetryschool.com
Jane Draycott

*Italy to Lord*

It’s dark in here and forest green: *Britannica,*
sixteen oak trees in a London living room,
the little girl my mother in the bookcase glass.
Italy, Ithaca, Izmail, Japan, each page a mainsail turning, HMS Discovery, *none of the rivers of southern Italy is of any great importance.*

Like birds on long-haul flight, let not seas or deserts, cliffs or icy mountain-tops impede you. Jews, Kabir, Kabul, Kaffir, from up here all seems clear (all *evil in the world’s ascribed to Maya or illusion*), then home at last returned from all those navigable miles
to Lichen, Linnet, Logic, London, to find a century has passed – the forest’s cleared, the animals all bared and scorched, the gold all brought to light. I look into the glass, discover there myself in dense shade, deep and shadowy as on any wooded island.

Discussion points
- Why do you think those particular ‘I’ entries from the encyclopaedia were selected for this poem, why the ‘K’ examples, why the ‘L’s? What is the subtext to the little girl mother’s discoveries in the encyclopaedia?
- “the gold / all brought to light” – what’s going on in this image? What might it mean?
- The writer of these tips did her school homework from her father’s encyclopaedias (“Man may one day set foot on the Moon”). What’s the difference between previous generations’ encyclopaedia knowledge, and this generation’s Wikipedia knowledge? Is there any of that difference perceptible in Jane Draycott’s poem?
About the poet

Jane Draycott’s most recent collection *Over* is published by Carcanet OxfordPoets and was shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize 2009. Her 2011 translation of the medieval dream elegy, *Pearl*, also from OxfordPoets, was a Poetry Book Society Recommended Translation and winner of a *Times* Stephen Spender Prize. She lives in Oxfordshire and teaches on postgraduate writing programmes at the universities of Lancaster and Oxford.

NPC judge Nick Laird on Jane Draycott’s ‘Italy to Lord’

“We admired this dense, mysterious poem, which disclosed more and more as we reread it. It crept up on us; it moves from a London living room across the whole world, across cultures and myths and religions, through the encyclopaedia’s “navigable miles”, and comes down a hundred years later, into a strange new place where book-learning has been superseded by empirical experience, where the gold has all been “brought to light”. The poem’s quiet voice intrigued us, moved us, and finally amazed us.”

Links

- Jane Draycott’s website, www.janedraycott.org.uk
- Encyclopaedia Britannica these days, www.britannica.co.uk
- Enter the National Poetry Competition, npc.poetrysociety.org.uk

*Discussion ideas devised by the Poetry School. More details of poetry reading, writing and discussion classes all round the country and online at www.poetryschool.com*
NATIONAL POETRY COMPETITION 2012: IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

THE POETRY SOCIETY’S NATIONAL POETRY COMPETITION 2012 – THIRD PRIZE

John Freeman

My Grandfather’s Hat

Most of the time I saw Granddad indoors,
first in his dark room with blue gas mantles
and a kitchen range and one tall window
in Poplar, then in the overheated lounge
of Aunt Nell and Uncle George’s new flat
in Morden when he was in his nineties.
But he came to stay in our house sometimes,
and it must have been when he was leaving
that I saw him wearing his trilby hat.
It was grey and sleek like a new plush toy.
No one had ever made our two front steps
more like a staircase in a stately home,
not even Mum with her polio feet.
Crowning himself slowly, his own archbishop,
holding on to a handrail like a sceptre,
he turned with no more haste than one of the ships
he had sailed in round Cape Horn as a boy
in another century, approached each step
like a descent to be addressed with ropes.
Grandly he lowered one foot, then the other,
while we watched him, silently exclaiming
vivat, and the black and white chess-board
of the path to the front gate stretched out
like a long drive lined with waving flags.

Discussion points
• Two mothers and a grandfather: all three winning poems from this year’s
National Poetry Competition involve intergenerational connections. A coincidence,
or representative of a poetic movement? What are your favourite mother / father /
grandmother / grandfather poems?
• “It was grey and sleek like a new plush toy” – what does this single-sentence
image do? Is a trilby hat really like a plush toy? What do you think of the title of the
poem? What does the fleeting reference to ‘polio feet’ do to the poem?
• Is this a poem about the passing of an individual, or the passing of a generation?

Published in Poetry Review magazine
103.1, ‘The Anonymous Invitation’
About the poet

John Freeman was born in Essex, grew up in South London and studied English at Cambridge. He lived in Yorkshire before moving to Wales where he teaches at Cardiff University. Collections include *The Light Is Of Love, I Think: New and Selected Poems* (Stride), *Landscape With Portraits* (Redbeck), and *A Suite for Summer* (Worple). Stride also published a book of essays, *The Less Received: Neglected Modern Poets*. Recent magazine publications include *Iota, Poetry Wales, Scintilla* and *The Lampeter Review*. The essay ‘We Must Talk Now’ appeared last year in *Cusp: recollections of poetry in transition*, edited by Geraldine Monk (Shearsman).

 NPC judge W.N. Herbert on John Freeman’s ‘My Grandfather’s Hat’

“From a gentle start in a domestic interior, this poem builds through careful observation to evoke a strong sense of lost time, and to embody the transition between generations, resulting in a sort of apotheosis of ordinary life through the simple action of an old man leaving a house. Both poem and figure move with an almost balletic grace, incorporating, in a single subtle movement, memories and past grandeurs into a walk down a garden path.”

Links

- More John Freeman poetry, www.worplepress.com/a-suite-for-summer
- A long list of Family & Ancestor poems, www.poetryfoundation.org/browse/#subject=6
- Enter the National Poetry Competition, npc.poetrysociety.org.uk

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