

Poem in which Dudley Moore bumps into my grandmother

It all starts with a collision outside Ford's on King Street:
Dudley Moore distracted by a flickering TV in Lester & Nix,
my grandma struggling with a string bag and a pack of vests.
He is the first to apologise, introduces his wife, Suzy Kendall.
My grandmother kisses her on the cheek, grins in recognition,
pokes him in his camel coat and says, *I know who you are!*
Dudley looks around, notices an empty bench opposite
Bowmer's cake shop, signals for my grandma to sit down.
He takes her hand in his and says, *No, I know who you are!*
Dudley tells the story of her life: one of seventeen children,
middle child, old enough to mother the younger siblings.
He reminds her of the time her elder sister killed a cat,
putting it in a bag, then walking over fields towards home,
knocking it on the ground until there was heaviness and quiet.
Dudley recalls her first job doubling yarn in the old East Mill,
then later, the tickets she reeled out as a bus conductress.
They both reminisce about 80s caravan holidays to Swanage,
the Christmas the chimney coughed out a cloud of soot,
blackening everything from the ham to my mother's new doll.
She is surprised when he says he's read all of her poetry,
has a clipping of 'Bill and Ben' printed in the *Derby Telegraph*.
Of course, there are other versions of this meeting, the one
where it's not him at all, it's Timothy Dalton, or Alan Bates,
or it's just a regular guy, a man who catches the same bus.
The one where Dudley Moore smiles politely, nods his head,
places a protective hand in the small of his wife's back, hurries
them both away to visit her sister's hair salon next to The Ritz.
But this is the version I think of most often, the one where Dudley
thrills in the taste of my grandma's jumbo fishfingers, gas-cooked
baked beans. The one where he marvels at that Sunday afternoon,
me and my brother making an entire fleet of paper aeroplanes,
how she gave them all names, how every one of them took flight.

The mum man

A long time ago and far, far away
a boy sat with his mum in a café and there were two men
flicking sugar at each other –
grown men. One looked at him then his mum
and said ‘cute kid’ which made her smile,
then he asked the boy if he wanted a custard doughnut and said they’d had three.
No thank you, his mum said,
but he got one anyway.

His mum looked at her watch and at the buses
and the man asked if she’d bought anything nice.

At first he – the boy – didn’t like them barging in –
having a bun was *his* treat for a good mark in Maths,
but he liked the doughnut (it was the first custard doughnut he’d ever had and he decided
he’d *always* have custard doughnuts from then on)
and he liked seeing his mum smile,
even if it was a different smile
to normal.

An ability to recall detail is one of the few things that boy has kept
so along with that smile
I remember the man’s denim jacket, his red face and liquorice breath –
the fag smell like Aunty Barbara
and the tattoo on his wrist saying *MUM* in faded green like the grass in summer.

I remember how the waitress told them off, but they didn’t worry one little bit, that pair,
they just carried on laughing and messing around
then the one with the MUM plonked himself down on our table,
right next to my mum
and said he liked her hair.

Also,
how a second doughnut came,
at about the point I figured out when I’d seen that smile: it had been the day the car broke
down in the dark and it was just the two of us,
at about the point he asked my mum: Why don’t you come out with me one night then,
blondie?

I took no notice. They were how I wanted to be when I grew up:
flicking sugar and buying kids I didn’t know doughnuts and saying things that made my mum
smile,

telling her her name was a nice name –
fearless, like Luke Skywalker landed in Paisley.

It would be years before he – that boy – discovered what it was to be paralytic at
3.50pm on a Tuesday afternoon;
years before he mainlined custard doughnuts in cafes between pubs, having not eaten
for two days;
years before he became familiar with that laugh – bouncing unwanted off bricks in
shopping centres and bus terminals and bars,
years before he saw the smile that had been on his mother's face and realised with a
sobering spear
what it was.

Young Woman Powdering Herself

We don't know what she thought
about the painting, if she hurled
her hair brush at his head, or
threw her arms around his neck
and kissed him.

We don't know how it felt
to share a room five meters square,
starlings hopping in the courtyard, the
unmade little bed with barely
room for two.

We don't know if they argued over coffee
stains on pillows, his long hours in the studio,
or how it felt to be a secret
from his bourgeois family,
even from his dark Bohemian friends.

We don't know how she went on
living, after Georges-Pierre had choked
to death on mucus, diphtheria the likely
cause, followed by their toddler son,
a fragile fortnight blinking like an eye,

and then the second son at childbirth
(some accounts say shortly after) —
loss piled high on top of loss,
autumn leaves of Paris sticking
to her heavy boots on walks till dawn.

We don't know if she saw the painting
hanging with its cousins, "Bathers at Asnieres",
"A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of
La Grande Jatte" -- her lover's reputation
growing in the fertile soil of early death.

We only know the single work they made
together — how it seems to paint
itself, as if Seurat had used his Madeleine's
spare powder brush to tap the dots of blues
and whites and golds and browns and yellows

on the viewer's dry unblinking eye.

The *polski sklep* has closed its doors

for the last time. And this morning
in the June heat, men are hauling
the awkward empty bulk of chiller units

from shop to pavement to truck,
already sweating. Cursing in a language
we claim we do not understand

but speak too well. A lexicon
of loss and hurt and pain,
the job that disappears

a ladder climbed that turns
to snake again. Small dreams stuffed
in plastic bags in overflowing bins.

On the other side of Market Square,
where the breeze cools, we stand
idle in shade, and watch.

The lad next to me is smiling,
confusing the hammer falling
– for once – elsewhere,

with something like a win.

Swift (*Apus apus*)

What is a miracle
if not a small brown bird

that sleeps on the wing,
loops fast and high

then drops
like an anchor.

What is a miracle
if not this dun bird of hollowed-bone

that climbs on a thermal
towards a sky-trail carved by her forebears,

follows a sweep of forest
or field, then curves towards the horizon

just there – at that peak bisected
by the dried veins of an ancient riverbed.

What is a miracle
if not this bird

that would fit in the palm of your hand,
her wind-rode heart urging her on

in waterless flight across a salt pan moonscape
to the edge of a continent, to the sea,

to this marine doorway where some get lost
or drop within a wingbeat of dry land, this bird

that has steered the course of her destiny,
been shaped by her journey,

this vast, risky tangent of possibility,
this act of faith that began somewhere far away

and ended in a triumphant screech
one April morning,

in a remembered sky
above your window.

Red Light

I'm struggling with my driving instructor she looks like a woman I hate the woman my friend stood up for said *she's South American she's fiery* as if that made it all ok that was a red light but long before that happened I knew it would happen it was always going to happen so I need to be like a tiny Buddha or like the website *Tiny Buddha* that I read in bed some mornings and accept that sometimes time is more like a spiral or a roundabout than a straight line and that I'll keep coming back to the same mistakes like ignoring red lights arguing in the streets outside of Indian restaurants overtaking without indication petty revenges undue hesitation holding life on the clutch I have too much trust in people who drive cars sometimes I look at people in cars and wonder what the rest of their bodies look like when they're not sat in cars I like to be one person in a queue of people in cars it feels good to be part of something even just traffic at a red light

when the dark dives deep

my friend says wind chimes such as these most likely have been carved by holy monks from air and love high in the snow-peaked mountains of tibet. but i saw my neighbour get them in a plain brown box from amazon. sometimes my neighbour's chimes tring suddenly at midnight when the moon's a blade-sharp-sliver slung in a sky black as a murderer's heart. i start awake, stare at the shifting shadows of the dark. my neighbour is a cunt. his fists are eloquent. close by my room, his wind chimes jingle-jangle in the rising wind as if some beast is prowling in the night. my neighbour sleeps deep in a drunken stupor, far from where he hung these chimes so he could haunt my dreams, keep me wide awake. my neighbour does not like their ghostly ching & ring. he likes to hate. *wind chimes*, says my friend, who always tries to walk the sugar-sprinkled sun-drenched path of kindness, *are a common cause of neighbourly disputes. 99% of times*, she says, offering me a tiny cup of chai with cardamom to soothe, *a friendly word suffices. approach with positivity, keep it light. add a touch of humour, & a smile.* she adds a smile. but i have seen my neighbour mount his motorbike outside my door, i have seen him watch my windows as he zips his leathers tight, pulls on his helmet, tugs his mirrored visor down. i have huddled safe inside my home while straddled on his black & red machine he revs & roars & roars until the summer street is thick with fumes. i doubt a smile would do the trick. my neighbour is a prick. in any case, i tell my friend, she need not fret. he reads me wrong. for i have bonded with the midnight music of the wind, those sounds like bursts

of birdsong when the dark dives deep. i have learned to meditate on how these chimes were made by monks high in the snow-peaked mountains of tibet, by holy men with gentle hearts. the hand-carved flutes, the wind, the tiny bells that tintinnabulate & trill with ghostly harmonies all thrill my soul and calm my fears when I'm alone at 3am & cannot sleep.

Hutchie C, The Gorbals

12 September 1993

We stand among the plastics and the empties,
yellow grass to our knees:

a neglected backyard the length
of a red and white striped cordon.

It's a mild day, Sunday sunshine drizzling
on the crowd here to witness

these two raised fists, angling for a fight,
violently brought down:

twenty floors of concrete slabs held up
on skinny buttresses, balconies sticking out

like half-pulled Jenga blocks.
On Tuesdays, when all the washing's out,

it'll be like a great ship in full sail, the housewives
quoted the architects, laughing

as strong winds ripped their laundry
overboard. Today, both wait like clippers

from the docklands' heyday, set to sink.
The craic shifts like the Clyde, a shout

then laughter, the polis joining in.
In the air: sweat, fumes, vinegar, a whiff

of peppery soup from a thermos,
the stutter of a helicopter.

Suddenly a crack, a rip like gunfire,
a plume of dust as one building

sags, puffing from its windows,
a smoker's final lungfuls, a cough

as four hundred homes collapse,
cheers and whistles as the air shakes

and the two hulks founder,
able to resist the gangs, the rot, the junkies

until two and a half tons of gelignite,
six thousand detonations.

t reynolds

There is a stone here,
no embellishments just t reynolds
carved in economical
lower case script like water main

or triangulation point. There is a small
gap between t and reynolds,
not enough to encourage
speculation. It has fallen at an angle

away from the other graves
and lies against the verge
so t reynolds is the first thing
people see in this ramshackle

place. When they walk their dogs
or snog below the broken wall
t reynolds will be there quietly in the
back of their minds, when bikers

use him as a ramp his name will be
a small runway to the stars.
This is the role of the unassuming
in the memory of the world

though he would not see it like this.
His final letter to us
had no dreams or wild predictions,
just t reynolds.

Butcher, Baker, Candlestick Maker

Hard not to see the cockpit as an eye
when the tram comes past, its driver
like a pupil shrinking in bright light.
He pushes buttons, startling
pedestrians with his klaxon
but he knows – all of us know –
his job is a computer's job.
Mine too. They send the contract, I translate.
Computerise me and I am
simple as an app.
You and me, tram driver, on the wrong side
of the metal tracks between
jobs in tech and jobs as tech.
And those passengers, face-masks
dangling from an ear – work at a desk?
Step across the tracks with us. Your jobs
a trillion ones-and-zeros on a screen.
They say the end of work is coming
and we'll zoom about all day
on the perfect tram forever.
The driver scratches himself. A wire sparks.
Glass-eyed, the heavy carriage stares ahead.