



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

What Gift?

by Charles Causley

I am a Cornishman, a Celt, born in the far southwest of England. Apart from the six years of the Second World War and my time as a student at a college of education, I have lived the whole of my life not only in the small market-town of Launceston, where I was born, but also within the same parish.

Cornwall is a granite country, thrusting itself out into the Atlantic, an almost-island separated from the rest of England by the boundary line of the River Tamar. To this day, traveling across the river into Devonshire, there are those who still speak of going to England.

When the Normans arrived in Launceston soon after the great invasion of 1066, they built a tall stone castle and walled the town. Sensibly, they ventured no further into the turbulent west. As a young child, then, growing up in the 1920's, my little town of four to five thousand inhabitants was a microcosm of the whole world. For me, a child of working-class parents, nowhere else existed. London was an impossibly distant city. It might have been on the moon.

But what was sown in my mind and imagination was an almost overpowering sense of the past. Cornwall is a country rich in myth and legend. To me, every other farm and field, stream and well, every stretch of moorland with its mysterious piles of sculpted stone — sculpted by whom? — had, and has, its own history or fiction or fable. The Cornish were,

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and are, great storytellers, and I now see that I was lucky in my teachers and in my tellers of hearthside tales.

I was an only child. My father, a young soldier-volunteer in France in the First World War, had returned a hopeless invalid and died in 1924, when I was seven. I remember little of him. But rereading my work across the years, I see that — without always being entirely conscious of what I was doing at the time — I have made various attempts to rediscover him, to recreate him. He appears, if not in the text, in the subtext of what I write. I'll give you an example.

Ten years — “ten feasts of fire” — after the end of World War II, and after my own naval service had ended, I visited for the first time Normandy, in northern France. Here some of the bitterest fighting had taken place after the D-Day landings. And here, too, were ancient fortified towns the image of my very own. At Bayeux, I came upon my first British War Cemetery. It was neatly laid out, in that then rather ragged Norman farming landscape, in the form of an English garden. Here is what I wrote.

I walked where in their talking graves
And shirts of earth five thousand lay,
When history with ten feasts of fire
Had eaten the red air away.

“I am Christ's boy,” I cried. “I bear
In iron hands the bread, the fishes.
I hang with honey and with rose
This tidy wreck of all your wishes.

“On your geometry of sleep
The chestnut and the fir-tree fly,

And lavender and marguerite
Forge with their flowers an English sky.

“Turn now towards the belling town
Your jigsaws of impossible bone,
And rising read your rank of snow
Accurate as death upon the stone.”

About your easy heads my prayers
I said with syllables of clay.
“What gift,” I asked, “shall I bring now
Before I weep and walk away?”

*Take, they replied, the oak and laurel.
Take our fortune of tears and live
Like a spendthrift lover. All we ask
Is the one gift you cannot give.*

As a small boy, entranced by the written word, I never had the slightest desire to drive a locomotive, pilot an aircraft, captain a ship. The supreme achievement seemed to me to be that of one who had written a book: any kind of book. All through my teenage years I struggled with the short story, the novel, the play, the poem. I was like the man in the story who leapt on his horse and tried to ride off in all directions. Another difficulty lay in finding something to write about. I looked at the circumstance of my small-town rural life and decided, with supreme snobbishness, that it didn't match up to my literary ambitions. Unfailingly, I wrote about worlds I had never known. Poetry—and poetry was becoming my principal interest—was away and somewhere else. Nobody told me that the raw material of poetry, like the raw material of all art, resides quite simply under one's nose. Certainly, this didn't become plain to me until my experience of the Second World War.

Poets are often asked, in a dauntingly high-flown phrase, how and when they are “inspired.” For myself, too often at such moments a deeply superstitious Celt, this is a word best avoided. If you ask me why I write, I would say that I write because I must. It's a compulsion, and—with luck—a means of resolving inner conflict. Poetry, for me, has been a particular form of autobiography. The general theme of one's work becomes self-evident, I think, in its early written stages, but the subjects may be many and various. And there's a certain danger in a too-active search for a subject. In my experience, a subject consciously sought is rarely found. It was Samuel Taylor Coleridge who warned us, wisely, that the writer's greatest danger is impatience. “We must be right by nature,” says Coleridge, “so that good thoughts may come before us like free children of God and say *Here we are.*”

Again on a visit to France, to Normandy, wandering in a great gloomy cathedral, I came quite unexpectedly on a short prose inscription, dated 1762, on a stone crucifix. I scribbled down a rough translation; later found myself almost inexplicably haunted by it. But the prose I found flat and unsatisfying, and I couldn't rest until I had tried to develop it into a formal poem, a sonnet, in English. Here it is.

I am the great sun, but you do not see me,

I am your husband, but you turn away.
I am the captive, but you do not free me,
I am the captain you will not obey.

I am the truth, but you will not believe me,
I am the city where you will not stay.
I am your wife, your child, but you will leave me,
I am that God to whom you will not pray.

I am your counsel, but you do not hear me,
I am the lover whom you will betray.
I am the victor, but you do not cheer me,
I am the holy dove whom you will slay.

I am your life, but if you will not name me,
Seal up your soul with tears, and never blame me.

I think it important always to remember that there is—or that there should be—more to a poem than what actually lies on the page. We must be sensitive to its resonances, its intimations, its reverberations. All poetry is magic. It is a spell against insensitivity, failure of imagination, ignorance and barbarism. We may return to a masterpiece again and again—however familiar we may consider it to be—always for refreshment, always to discover something new. Poems are not clocks. If we dismantle them, they may give no reason at all why they tick, nor should they. For it's a fact of their existence that all genuine works of art should keep some of their secrets in order that they may go on giving out what the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca called *sonidos negros*—black sounds. These black sounds, he said, and said rightly, accompany all imaginative creations whether in words or paint, music or stone.

Given the manner and place of my background, perhaps it was inevitable that when I came to write I should find myself at work in the central traditions of verse in English. The set form, the lyric, the narrative poem, the ballad and the rest have always held a strong attraction for me. And it is the subject that must dictate the particular form—the delicate and difficult choice inherent in deciding on the architecture of each individual poem. Whether the final piece of work is in rhyme or is in free verse, my intention has always been simply to match as best I can the form with the content.

The most valuable of anthologies, naturally, is the one each of us carries in our head. For myself, I find it difficult to remember a poem or a fragment of a poem without the rhythm of a line or the lifebelt of a rhyme for the drowning memory to hook on to. As for the rhyme itself—that dangerous creature—it must never be, so to speak, merely the chime but also the exact and only word appropriate to the occasion: a nice problem always for the writer.

Because I have spent most of my life virtually on the same spot, I think it is true that I have little difficulty in identifying my roots—though it was not until a seven-year absence following 1940 that it was borne in on me just how deep those roots are. But living for great lengths of time as part of the same community presents its own difficulties. An over-familiarity is all too prone to blur and blunt the senses. And one also tends, as often as not, to look backwards in time. But here, the last poem in my most recent collection,

“Eden Rock,” is a look forwards.

They are waiting for me somewhere beyond
Eden Rock:
My father, twenty-five, in the same suit
Of Genuine Irish Tweed, his terrier Jack
Still two years old and trembling at his feet.

My mother, twenty-three, in a sprigged dress
Drawn at the waist, ribbon in her straw hat,
Has spread the stiff white cloth over the grass.
Her hair, the colour of wheat, takes on the light.

She pours tea from a Thermos, the milk straight
From an old H.P. sauce-bottle, a screw
Of paper for a cork; slowly sets out
The same three plates, the tin cups painted blue.

The sky whitens as if lit by three suns.
My mother shades her eyes and looks my way
Over the drifted stream. My father spins
A stone along the water. Leisurely,
They beckon to me from the other bank.
I hear them call, “See where the stream-path is!
Crossing is not as hard as you might think.”

I had not thought that it would be like this.

After I had been writing and publishing for some years, I
noticed that a number of my poems, never aimed specifically
at the young, were — and I know no other way of putting

it — being taken over by children: this through their introduction into school classes or their appearances in anthologies of verse for young readers. What is “children’s” verse? My conclusion — shared with W.H. Auden — is that there is no good poem solely for children. Clearly, a piece of work that earns its keep as a genuine poem must work for the child *and* the adult. Such poems, written in registers meaningful both to the young and the older reader, shouldn’t be capable of being discarded as though at a certain age we have outgrown them. As children, we include them in our body’s luggage and carry them with us for the rest of our lives.

Here I have tried to tell you something of myself and through this, perhaps, something of what I have tried, and am trying to do in my work. The final poem in a book of new nursery rhymes I published in 1984 is an attempt to do just the same thing, and also to define what I believe to be the essential role of the poet in society. The rhyme is called simply, “I am the Song.”

I am the song that sings the bird.
I am the leaf that grows the land.
I am the tide that moves the moon.
I am the stream that halts the sand.
I am the cloud that drives the storm.
I am the earth that lights the sun.
I am the fire that strikes the stone.
I am the clay that shapes the hand.
I am the word that speaks the man.



New Year’s Eve

by Frederick Feirstein

“So here we are, slightly dead in a dying city,”
You sing, as the millennium rushes in.
B. thumps at his shiny black piano.
“But we don’t care. We’re getting drunk on gin.”
You stand silent at the picture window,
Gaze fifty floors below at the maze of lights,
Squint into time for your childhood building,
Your decimated block, your red brick school
With its surreal Spanish courtyard,
You shaking your windup wristwatch stopped at noon.

You might as well be in *fin de siècle* Europe
And the lights foreshadowing the sparks of war.
These figures dancing like primitives — you abhor
Them, their frantic flirting, their in-unison guffaw.
Will you flee to the streets, to “the masses,”
Murderous for crack and crank, any anti-depressant?
You sit in an armchair with a glass of champagne.
“Happy New Year” you toast, though no one’s hearing.
You absurdly start singing *Old Lang Syne*.