

Chris Mann

The Farmyard in the City

Seeing its mint-white railings, its apple-red stables and barn,
the plump-cheeked pumpkins warm to the pips on a split-pole shed,
and chuffing past varnished milk-churns, a pea-green mini-tractor,
you'd think a farmyard in a city, with glass-cased shops next door,
was much too quaint, too artificial a landscape to merit a queue.
Well, adults might think they know all about farmyards,
but children, darting round a turnstile, don't share that view.

Floating them off to sleep, from bedrooms tucked among city trees,
with a duck-pond, or cow-jumped moon, still glowing dimly on a wall,
your stories and songs, of Jemima Puddleduck in bonnet and shawl,
of Noah's deck-top poultry, or old MacDonald's musical pigs and sheep,
have eased them over a farmyard's gate, some time before you arrive.
A farmyard in a city, for those who've yet to go there,
is something like the dream-scape of a bedtime story come alive.

Tugged up to fences by firm little hands, you're helped to discover
how grey-white ducks have feet like a frogman's ribbed flippers,
that goats have teeth as big as clothes-pegs, and bulbous yellow eyes
with slits in like tiny, coal-black hourglasses tipped on their side,
which images loosen a mindset, leaving its story-book patterns behind.
Stale or cynical though you might be, children have a way
of filtering new insights and feelings through an adult's mind.

Bobbing blue and orange balloons on strings, the hip-high explorers,
like nodes of porous energy, rush back and forth in whirling hubbubs,
are threatened, hugged, stuck on toilet-seats or sky-swizzling swings
clutch the neck of sweating ponies, poke sticks at rabbits and hens,
have noses wiped, squabbles shushed, their plaits done up, and laces.
You could say, of course, it was bedlam in miniature as usual,
except for the mystified look on some of the adults' faces.

And once you've all tumbled, down ticklingly prickling bales of hay,
have chewed pink sugar-clouds on sticks, pulled at soft-serve udders
and held the nery litheness, the small-boned innocence of a lamb,
there'll be some talk, back in the traffic, as seat-belts click on,
of keeping that farmyard somehow alive, beyond that tingled hour.
Look, no one wants to make too much of a fuss about it,
but farmyards in cities do have a certain nourishing power.

There's that other farmyard, of course, the one you've always known,
with phosphates, wheat, rats and clapped-out tractors in grey barns,
where milk's sucked into tractors and old MacDonald computes his tax,
where lambs are marketed and stains hosed off the piggery's hooks.
Well, there's no wishing the hardness of the world away,
but then there're also stories and songs, and farmyards in cities,
when children release in adults the balancing freshness of play.

Kites

The kites I've flown have all been brightly coloured,
red and blue ones mostly, dangling a string of bow-ties.
Somehow it doesn't make sense to fly a drab kite.
I mean there's no one controlling the colour of kites
but who'd dream of grey or black ones sailing the sky?
There must be more to kites than meets the eye.

You need a big clear piece of breeze to launch them in,
friends and children, to make the whole business worth while,
a dog, chewing the struts, to heighten the excitement,
and squeezing your arm, a spouse to murmur kind words
when suddenly the creature dives irretrievably into a pine.
A man who never crashed a kite is no friend of mine.

Getting ready to fly them's the trickiest part about kites.
I don't mean the minor, domestic odyssey of setting a time,
dragging the unbelievers from TV and going back for the string.
That's nothing, that's different from the other, inner journey.
You won't go looking for kites in the old garden shed
if your heart's in flames or at sixes and sevens with your head.

Not that flying a kite is a turning away from the world!
If balance, if being always in reach of an inner balance
keeps your crusades and ambitions from driving you crackers,
scraps of red and blue, swooping up in a swirling breeze
help to tug such fevers back towards a cooler sanity.
Kites, after all, fly within a framework of gravity.

The way I'm going on about them, you'd think that kites
are really prayers and visions rigged out with string.
Well, I don't know, but playing a kite on a windy hilltop,
watching it dance out clear of your hand and the trees
you'd probably find some truth in that, the way kites fly.
As I said, there's more to kites than meets the eye.

John Holloway

Death of the Kestrel

The breakfasting housemouse, awake
long before people, squealed
his death-scream, seeing the whole sky
blackened with just two wings as the hawk
crashed on the window.

Mouse could not understand
thunderclap without flash. Sky
suddenly blue; and the carpet-
crumbs still his for the asking. Nor
did hawk understand—who

would, with a boneless neck, and needle
eyes thundered to nothing? It lay
across the fallen beech-leaves, russet
back a bigger leaf, blue head
peering, it seemed, further than ever before,

as what does not, at that flash of the final
window—you may see flames, the ecstatic
choirs, dust, the Wheel. . . or black space,
but everyone also can see, reflected,
a hungry terrified mouse.